

How Civil is Our Civil Society?

India has slowly and steadily been growing as a modern state. However, we are still far from being a country that our forefathers visualised, a vision aptly enshrined in the lofty ideals of our Constitution. The most sacred document of the Indian Republic envisaged India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic which would secure to its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. We have all these traits in the extant Indian state, but given the state of affairs today, cynics find each of them to have been hugely compromised.

As citizens of the largest democracy, we desire them all but flinch from doing anything as are expected of its people. While government, politicians and bureaucrats are the favourite punching bags of almost everyone, we definitely lack the character to deserve the honour of living up to our Constitutional ideals by repeatedly engaging in conduct unbecoming of a 'great nation'. Many observers hold poor value education to be the parent reason for a poor national character which focuses on self-aggrandisement at the expense of the community. A sense of duty is conspicuous by its absence in a predominant majority of our civil society. People are usually apathetic when it comes to their duties vis-à-vis the country.

Today, venality and crimes as rampant in our society definitely don't offend our sensibilities. This is very much reflected in the iterated returns of many lawmakers with criminal background as they are supposed to be treated as such till proved guilty. People see absolutely no problem with the same. In fact, such people are often admired and idolised. There is a general love for mediocrity or easy success which leads most of us to seek refuge in short-cuts through reservations or nepotistic politics as the movements of *Jats*, *Gujjars* or *Patels* demonstrate. While the Supreme Court, in a welcome judgement, recently quashed as unconstitutional section 8 (4) of the Representation of the People Act (RPA) that protected the membership of an MP or MLA if he or she files an appeal within three months of conviction, there still remain many grey areas which compromise the said landmark judgement.

While the common citizens often excoriate the powers that be for their involvement with various public wrongs, there are innumerable instances where citizens themselves have been found to be engaging in dubious acts given an opportunity. There are several instances

where citizens unduly pocket wages under the employment guarantee scheme without any work, where government grants for housing are not utilised for the original purpose or where people granted government funds for a particular purpose seldom used the same for the purpose allotted. We regale ourselves by indulging in vandalism of government properties or by enforcing a crippling strike or '*bandh*' to finagle a demand.

Today, a mob of ten to twenty persons are sufficient to sabotage a positive initiative. There are organised cartels of middlemen who flourish on these systemic weaknesses by masterminding encroachment of government properties. They also ensure sabotage of a well-conceived government initiative in connivance with the entrenched vested interests. The system being opaque and byzantine, the common citizen has to run from pillar to post before s/he gets her rightful due but definitely not before a few palms have been greased. A common citizen still finds it difficult to get her way through the complicated mumbo jumbo in a government office to obtain a particular service. However, the same citizen would not forgo an opportunity to tweak the system if s/he has an opportunity.

We have internalised spitting, littering, open defecation and urination as our birthrights. Someone rightly said, tongue firmly in cheek, that an Indian can't resist the sight of a wall though observers would also point towards the dearth of sufficient number of public conveniences across the length and breadth of this country. But even where they are available, we resist using them to save a penny or two. As a nation, we don't want to be subjected to any regulation to prevent us from indulging in these civic improprieties though we are usually at our behavioural best while abroad.

We admire better hygiene and better traffic discipline abroad, but would breach the same back home at the first instance. We condemn our system for churning out unemployed youths, but don't like working hard to acquire knowledge. There have rather been numerous instances where students have demanded their right to copy in an examination. It is the same discards who later become a burden as they fail to acquire a skill with employability. Rights are forcefully demanded, but duties are detested.

As citizens of a functioning democracy, we love populist policies and government bounties. Free electricity, free Wi-fi, free water, free books, free housing, free transport, free health facilities, free education, etc. are some of the things we always desire the state to be providing its citizens and we take them for granted. One does not mind as long as they are provided to the deserving, but problem starts when undeserving segments try to corner these benefits through devious means. Not only that, after we get these government-provided benefits, we care two hoots for using the same responsibly. So wasting water, electricity or misusing any free service is our favourite pastime. It is this want of deference for public resources that come back to haunt us through poor infrastructures as symptomatic of a backward country.

We want the State to be prompt and efficient in its service delivery but as conscientised citizens of the same State, we ourselves would not do our bit wherever applicable to ensure the same. We forget that it is the people who make the country and not the other way round. We resent nepotism and favouritism in government service delivery, but would not mind peddling influence to seek undue favours through communitarian favouritism or in other

inappropriate ways. The proposed plans to develop smart cities would prove still-born if we don't have smart citizens willing to make expected sacrifices for a dignified living.

We underreport our income and consequently underpay our taxes but we resent it when the government complains of resource crunch to provide for basic amenities. Digging the road for a private purpose, piling building materials or shop stuffs on public roads, tapping of water sources or electricity is a common sight in this country but the same people would complain of congested roads, contaminated water or load-shedding without realising that it is their selfish actions which are affecting the qualities of many of these services.

Observers feel that notwithstanding a huge number of laws and rules, the corresponding enforcement continues to be problematic. While you pay a hefty 1000-dollar fine for littering in a developed country or for a traffic violation, you can get away without any penalty in India through influence-peddling. Sometimes, the systemic imperfections also hamstring the functioning of rule of law in this country as the law-abiding citizens have no ways to get their rightful dues. Today, hundreds of thousands of applications for a fire license or a building plan are allegedly pending in different government offices for aeons, unless you decide to pass on the speed money.

Many services in the government today are rightly being outsourced for the inability to deliver the same to the citizens in a timely, transparent and efficient manner. Similarly, many other critical services with substantive time and cost overruns including passing a building plan or issuance of a statutory license should also be outsourced with detailed oversight mechanism. Information technology need to be suitably harnessed for provisioning of most of these services as already being done for various types of government services. E-governance is definitely the way to the future.

Till the citizens understand and appreciate their responsibilities, as a country, we shall continue to grovel in the dust. One only hopes that we shall soon awaken as a nation by acting as responsible citizens of a great nation that we want to be otherwise the time may soon run out on us.

Salient Points

- A sense of duty is conspicuous by its absence in a predominant majority of our civil society.
- Crimes in our society don't offend our sensibilities, reflected in the iterated returns of many lawmakers with criminal background.
- Citizens engage in dubious acts given an opportunity like citizens unduly pocket wages under the employment guarantee scheme without any work, where government grants for housing are not utilised for the original purpose, etc.
- We have internalised spitting, littering, open defecation and urination as our birthrights.
- Indifference attitude for public resources come back to haunt us through poor infrastructures as symptomatic of a backward country.
- Problem starts when undeserving segments try to corner benefits meant for weaker sections through devious means.
- We forget that it is the people who make the country and not the other way round.
- E-governance is definitely the way to the future.
- we shall soon awaken as a nation by acting as responsible citizens of a great nation.

Glossary

Flinch: to shrink under pain

Venality: openness to bribery or corruption

Excoriate: to denounce or berate severely

Regale: to entertain lavishly or agreeably

Byzantine: complex or intricate

Greased: fatty or oily matter in general

Hoots: to cry out or shout

Hamstring: to render powerless or useless

Aeon: one of a class of powers

Grovel: to lie or crawl with the face downward and the body prostrate