

The dilemma of increasing citizen dependency and declining Parliamentary democracy?

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Primepost, Sep 27, 2021

For 28 years I have been going from New Delhi to my native village, Mudunur in krishna district, at least once a year to visit three schools and interact with children and teachers. When I also visit atleast 2 or 3 other villages around and give away scholarships to girl students in particular. One of the primary school was built by me three decades ago in Harijanawada. Much earlier I had built Mahila Mandal in my mother's memory and had set up children library both in high school and elementary school in memory of my father. At a time when many are migrating out of villages, I have decided to do the opposite as I cherish my origins. I am building now a modest house in the village pulling down a hundred-year-old one. From my these long years of grass root connections, I sum up the current moods of people which do not get reflected in electoral outcome. These include frustration based anxieties, decline in trust and confidence, a feeling of helplessness and uncertainty. Such feelings are wide across in a bandwagon way. That is how many young are seeking to get away from origins exploring opportunities elsewhere, far away.

Covid times made me to go beyond this simple assessment and recapitulate insights from gross roots and introspect what it all means in the country. An overarching trend has been **expansion and rise of the state, decline of citizen and dominance of political parties**. Even more devastating is sweeping **dependency** that citizens are lured into. This trend has been an undercurrent for many of the issues and ills of the country. This phenomena is not new or limited to any one state. Yet this **citizen dependency syndrome** is not talked about as if it is not realised or is being pushed under carpet.

This citizen dependency phenomena is getting renewed and rooted each time there is an election to choose peoples representative, as if the more the better. If people vote going more by external push and pulls, how the hopes of citizen ever make a difference. This trend is gaining ground. Six months before the 2022 election to State Assembly and before ECI's bugle, for example, parties have started poll campaign with fresh round of lures. Last week, AAP party which was supposed to have set some good examples in Delhi, offered free electricity to all in Goa and Gujarat and job to every family, guaranteed allowance for job loss and jobless. No sooner the other party announced free water to every household and made even more tempting promises if

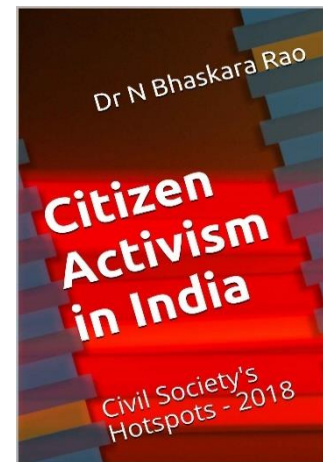
voted to power. No wonder why Vice President Venkaiah Naidu, described this phenomena recently as "competitive populism". It is now seeing no restraint and rational!

Poll campaigning has become an on-going affair with promise of schemes targeting every segment of voters such a way to consolidate citizen dependency. These lures are now described as "welfare schemes", or as "welfare weapons". Instead of activating citizen, these lures are making them passive and prompting dependency. These offers are based on belief that by segmenting and making dependents, citizens could be easily swayed and controlled. Our political masters now are doing better than the Britishers did refining "divide and rule" strategy. Our leaders have been justifying these as "development initiatives". Do we have any evidence that inequalities in the country have declined recently with so many such schemes in many different ways? On the contrary, going by government statistics the differences are on increase. And yet we continue to use "reservations" bogy all across and take to periodic surveys or census to further fragment or divide people and deepen their dependency on government. "Cards" of various kind (Ration, health, loan *mafi* and the like) being introduced and their eligibility criteria are changed as and when with discretionary provision so that people are under a grip.

I was happy when two judges of Madras High Court two months ago condemned as never before by any court the way the parties are luring voters with all kind of gifts immediately and promises if comes to power. The judges felt that such offers amount to corruption and asked the ECI to take it up and noted that this trend is making people lazy and unproductive. And yet we see state after state, leader after leader and party after party proliferating the trend as if they are not interested in the values, legalities, and concerned of the future. My often referred example for "good governance" is how citizens of Switzerland responded a couple of years ago to a proposal of their government to grantee basic income for every family. Since 1,00,000 voters under their constitution could call for a referendum, that proposal was put to vote. Two-thirds voted against such a dole offer. They said they do not want to be under the mercy of the government, become lazy and lose their individuality. They reminded "**Work is Worship**" idea. Can we expect such a Wisdom here?

To further that process and as if more is merrier, Governments are proliferating as never before in so many different ways such a way that a citizen cannot do anything on his or her own without reaching out to Government. Even though population of

village, for example, remained around 5500 over three decades and its annual revenue only doubled to around a million, number of government offices have become four from one Panchayat office and number of paid employees has crossed 15 from two, not counting hospital, school and library. This is the extent of proliferation. This is the kind of decentralisation being talked about. This is the extent of proliferation of Government all across. My study earlier had indicated that more the proliferation of Government at grassroots the more the corruption that a citizen is driven into.



Deepening citizen dependency and sweeping curbs on citizen activism spells disaster to the fundamentals of any modern state of “We, the People”.

How do you get out of this citizen dependency syndrome? Is that possible without our realising what all this means? Instead of enriching a civilisation of great heights, we are eroding the very fundamentals of Individual and institutions pushing citizen as if helpless. The Checks and Balances is expected to save the country from such self-destruction course. I can remind ten different measures that help restrain this trend. First of course has to be allow and avail citizen activism and revive Right to Information Act to their original stand. Also, reposition Citizen Charter, Social Audit of public services and take service guarantee provisions seriously. Grievance Redressal mechanism has to be evident. Ideas like Election Watch should be active for public schemes, mandatory Complaint Book should be availed at public services, make citizen organisations like Residents Association, Senior Citizen Groups, Consumer Groups and the like participatory. Academics should take proactive initiatives to study ground realities.

I am prompted to write this column by a Twitter put out by “**PMO India**” on Saturday stating that “**Poverty cannot be fought by making the poor more dependent on governments**”. A good and timely observation indeed. But what are we doing about it!?

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<https://www.primepost.in/making-citizen-dependent-on-doles/>