

“Government of the people”

- V.S. Pandey

Henry David Thoreau in his famous essay titled "Civil Disobedience" wrote, "that Government is best which govern least, and that government is best which governs not at all, and when men are prepared for it, that will be the type of government which they will have. I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step towards obtaining it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong but conscience? In which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable?" None can dispute the formulation. The problem arises when in the name of a government which governs the least, a system is attempted to be put in place where people are to be governed, not by governments elected by popular vote, but by monopolies, corporations, organized groups and moneyed people who are accountable to none but still want to determine the future of the country.

By raising the bogey of governmental interference, incompetence and the prevailing corruption, sustained efforts are being made to transfer an increasing number of functions from its domain and place them under the control of monopolies, oligopolies and to establish that the collective wisdom of the Cabinet/Parliament is unable to do justice to the public interest. What happens when the government is weakened and individuals and autonomous bodies become omnipotent in decision-making? Clearly, the poor man becomes weaker and democracy ceases to be "of the people".

Is it justified to express a lack of confidence in the actions of the elected government as compared to a set of people who have hardly any accountability towards the masses. It may be good for the rich and organized and the powerful but the common man exercises his authority only through the government that he elects and tries to influence the course of his life and that of the nation through the power of his vote. By usurping an increasing number of functions, by removing them out of the government's purview, under various guises, the common man is made increasingly irrelevant in the process of deciding the future, as his vote is no longer going to influence the course of action in most of the important spheres of his life. The common man would have preferred that things move in a particular direction whereas powerful lobbies have other vested interests - in the absence of any public scrutiny, the latter will fulfill their own agenda whereas the interests of the common man will be relegated to the background. How can one advance an argument, refusing to trust a group elected by the people of the country to run the government in comparison to a group of people who have no accountability towards the masses? More than 80 percent of the population with minimum financial resources, may not be unduly interested in the foreign policy of the country, but issues like rising prices, employment programmes, direction of policies in the health and education sectors - all of which determine the pattern of development - are all very crucial to him which are gradually being moved away from the elected government's purview.

How can we argue for handing over our future into the hands of the affluent in place of those elected through our own established systems? How can a system be labeled corrupt first then be made to divest its legitimate functions instead of making concerted efforts to rid the system of its malaise? Can one claim that the monopolies will be less corrupt than the politician? Does the common man know, what goes on there in the name of business? Put them also under the scanner and there will be likelihood that the revelations will surpass the misdeeds reported against any of the politicians. This is

not to defend the corrupt politicians or bureaucrats. They ought to be punished for their wrongdoings. But their corruption should not be allowed to be used as a handle to weaken democratically elected governments by making governments more and more irrelevant to guide the course of future for mass of people. If that is allowed to happen, soon people will start feeling the sense of powerlessness.

With the growing influence of money at all levels, those having no accountability towards public have started having greater say in all matters directly concerning the common man. The popularization of phrases like “user charges” , “no free luncheon”, “ total autonomy to institutions”, “Government to get out of ---”, “subsidy raj to go” etc., are the handiwork of these lobbies and they have succeeded to a very large extent in making these slogans as the last word in any kind of policy decisions. Clearly these slogans are going to affect the common man’s interest but has any one bothered to know from the mass of men/women, whether they at all agree even a percent with these decisions. Unfortunately the medium to influence public opinion is also dependent on the moneyed. Hence, barring a few exceptions, the media is controlled by business houses. In the name of the people, they propagate the thinking of the group that controls them. Vested interests join hands to further their ends in the name of “Vision India” and the like, and the common man is helpless despite being aware that the kind of policies that have been put in place, he, as well as the constitutional government, have become mere spectators. Today masses look towards the new demi-Gods of the present era, who under the guise of impartiality, willfully ignore the interests of the common man. Any suggestion to them to heed to the advice of the elected government is termed an infringement of their autonomy and their refusal is hailed by vested interests. Where there are so many conflicting interests - including their own, can these new varieties be more impartial than the Government?

There is also an interesting debate thrust upon the public by certain vested interests that the various State institutions should be granted complete autonomy by providing them enough permanent funds (corpus) so that the institutions are not forced to come to government every year for funds, and to answer questions, which in the opinion of these reformers compromises the autonomy of the institutions. How fallacious these arguments advanced by the vested interests are, will become clear from an interesting experience narrated by Gandhi ji. While in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi desired to secure for the Congress a permanent fund, so that it might procure property of his own and then carry on its work out of the rent from that property. Accordingly, the property was purchased and then leased out and the rent was adequate to meet the current expenses of the Congress. The property was vested in a strong body of trustees but the arrangement of a permanent fund became a source of much internecine quarrelling. The result was that the rent of the property began accumulating in the Court. This was Gandhi's first experience of managing a public institution. Narrating this experience in his Autobiography, he wrote,

“This sad situation developed after my departure from South Africa, but my idea of having permanent funds for public institutions underwent a change long before this difference arose. And now after considerable experience with the many public institutions which I have managed, it has become my firm conviction that it is not good to run public institutions on permanent funds. A permanent fund carried in itself the seed of the moral fall of the institution. A public institution means an institution conducted with approval, and from the funds, of the public. When such an institution ceases to have public support, it forfeits its right to exist. Institutions maintained on permanent funds are often found to ignore public opinion, and are frequently responsible for acts contrary to it. In our country we experience this at every step. Some of the so-called religious trusts have ceased to render any accounts. The trustees have become the owners and are responsible to none. I have no doubt that the ideal is for

public institutions to live, like nature, from day-to-day. The institutions that fail to win public support have no right to exist as such. The subscriptions that an institution annually receives are a test of its popularity and the honesty of its management, and I am of opinion that every institution should submit to that test.”

Clearly, it does not serve any public interest to allow, in a democracy, the shrinking of the domain of operation of governments in favor of self appointed custodians of public interest - be it an NGO or corporate body or autonomous institution or individuals. The solution lies in improving the system, not in allowing people totally devoid of accountability, to run affairs and to unleash any kind of propaganda to further their embedded ends.