**Cartelisation of opinion**

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The courage of conviction is an idiom that signifies a distinctive quality – a quality that has been depleting at a rapid pace. It can rightfully be termed an endangered trait, if not an extinct one. Much cause to grieve, but does anyone realise the tragedy?

In the past, honesty was considered akin to sincerity and an inherent constituent of one’s character building. It was part of the routine training of individuals to inculcate in them the courage to speak their mind. It is anathema in contemporary times which have transited to producing chameleons which change their spots to suit specific requirements of different occasions. It causes no pricking of conscience, no loss of face and, certainly, no forfeiture of association and relevance.

From morning to night to the next morning, statements are made in cyclic monotony about one claim or the other with conflicting accounts coming from the opposite side. Each such claim is studded with the challenge of the inviolability of the ‘truth’ that they speak. So does the other side with equal, if not more, assertiveness. In this maze of claims and counterclaims, it is hard to find the actual truth.

The matter does not end there. The truth that individuals claim only they are speaking takes precedence even over institutional decisions and judicial adjudications. In the event where one side of the case is not upheld, the institutions which dared give decisions contrary to their version are criticised and their integrity lampooned. It goes on until another such case replaces the previous one and the diatribe of claims and counterclaims begins anew. The spectacle gets uglier with every new sequence that stages an entry into the arena.

On the one hand, this sordidness is a reflection of the institutions that have lost their credibility, but, at the core of it, this symbolises the corruption of individual character. It is so because, at the end of it all, it is a question of moral fibre on which the edifice of the state should stand. If there is no substance there, the state would be wobbly as also the institutions which operate within its domain.

It is not the architectural magnificence of the structures which stamps the power of the state. To ascertain that, one will have to go to its foundations and sift the ingredients there to learn about the sustainability of the structure.

The cartelisation of opinion is an ugly manifestation of this depletion of character. Denouncing opinions and suggestions without first learning their various facets is indicative of granting preference to individual interests over collective benefits.

For example, if there has been a controversy over election procedures with virtually all political parties questioning the transparency of the electoral process and if the government recommends to sit together to formulate mechanisms to eliminate the causes of this perennial controversy, there is absolutely no harm in doing so. In fact, the proposal should be welcomed. But such has not been the case. The opposition parties have not only refused to talk to the government in the matter, but have also rejected the proposal outright, alleging that this is another trick to rig the next elections. Such a negative state of mind remains an enigma to deal with. It blocks the path to moving forward in alleviating the issues that apparently plague the system.

This approach, in turn, emanates from an individualised presumption that only one party or person can win an election. Whenever that does not happen, it is because the elections were tampered with. There are cases of many political parties that secured power through non-democratic patronage, and yet they remain unwilling to accept this. Instead, they only blame others, rightly or wrongly, for taking this route to secure power. Principally, this is tantamount to a patent display of unwillingness to accept the fundamentals of democracy which is not meant to keep only one party saddled in power. A party’s tenure in power depends on what it does for the people and whether it lives up to delivering on the promises it makes. This notion of perceived invincibility at the hustings suggests that only one party can lay a hierarchical claim on power, which it remains unwilling to cede to others.

So, on the one hand, given the tarnished history of elections in the country, the political parties are dissatisfied with election procedures in the past. But, at the same time, they would not agree to engage with the government in an earnest endeavour to improve the system so as to eliminate the possibility of tampering. This is not the only contradiction in their self-defeating stance. On the one hand, they accuse the powers that be of having influenced the results of the elections in the past, and yet they appeal to the same powers to ensure free and fair elections in the future.

This is the worst mental logjam that one can ever imagine to be locked in. This is what the opposition parties have brought upon themselves, and they appear adamant to remain stuck there which, incidentally, will not resolve their original demand of holding transparent elections in the country – a demand that nobody will disagree with including the government. Expressing bitterness about their electoral defeats in the past is not going to make things any better in the future. For that to happen, they have to sit with the government to discuss various proposals to move forward to cleanse the system of all possible caveats which may impact the outcome.

In this regard, the use of electronic mechanism in elections should be approached with an open mind, and not through a cartelised viewpoint. After all, many countries in the world have used this system with success, and they continue to do so. Rejecting the electronic course without considering its pros and cons is akin to establishing subservience to a mindset that is interested only in playing politics to win some brownie points, and not undertaking the task seriously to improve the system that would benefit all.

No system is without flaws. The effort should be to keep improving it as new technologies become available. The first step in that direction is to employ the weapon of intellectual and moral integrity and remain open to all possibilities that would deliver the objective – free, fair and transparent elections. If that be the conviction of the opposition parties, let us also see the courage that must accompany it.

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