

## **The Declining Standards In Public Life**

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For many years after Independence, the expectations of the citizens from the political system remained high. It is not as if no crime was committed by the politicians in the fifties and sixties. Some scandals did take place, but these did not lead to frustration and cynicism on a wide scale. They were dismissed as individual aberrations.

All this has changed. The process of criminalisation of politics has been gradual, marked by events and policies which led to the curtailment of inner-party democracy, concentration of power in a few hands, devaluation of political and administrative institutions and dismantling of value-based politics.

The first major event in this context was the Congress split of 1969, when a call was given to vote according to 'conscience' during the presidential election. The next major event was the proclamation of Emergency- and the subsequent unbridled misuse of authority by persons in power for self-aggrandisement. This was the period when the culture of sycophancy reached its peak, when the bureaucracy became absolutely supine and started crawling before its political masters. This was the era of commitment-not to the principles but to the principal actors on the political scene, not to ideals but to the idols or cult figures.

Caste has always played an important role during elections in India. Selection of candidates and distribution of party tickets have often been governed by caste considerations. However, the manipulation of the caste factor for political gains on a wide scale reflected in the attempts to 'Mandalise' politics by creating caste animosities added a sinister touch to the political scene. The next important milestone in the history of criminalisation of politics was the deliberate use of religion to promote fundamentalist attitudes and practices. It is this factor, which led to the emergence of a Frankenstein's monster in the form of Bhindranwale in Punjab, the demolition of Babri masjid in UP, communal riots and bomb blasts in Bombay and other places and intensification of terrorist violence in J& K and other States.

During the early years after Independence, it was hoped that the virus of casteism and communalism dividing Indian society would meet its eventual end once the modern liberal institutions and value systems took root. This has not happened and, in fact, caste and religion have emerged as stronger dividing forces. It is mainly the manipulation of these forces for narrow political gains which has reinforced caste animosities and unleashed religious fundamentalism.

In the recent debate on criminalisation of politics, one argument was heard quite frequently. It was pointed out that the problem was not peculiar to India and that scandals involving Presidents, Prime Ministers and other politician have occurred with regular frequency in many countries. This reminds one of the famous observations of Indira Gandhi that corruption was a global phenomenon. Nexus between politics and crime may exist in other countries too, but there is one important difference. In other countries, politicians have been forced to leave office and even been convicted on charges of having received kickbacks or of being associated with mafia gangs. This points towards the

existence of an alert and enlightened public opinion and an effective criminal justice system in those countries.

In our country, the influence of public opinion as a potent instrument to regulate the behaviour of the politicians appears to have declined considerably. The politicians have become brazenly indifferent towards allegations of corruption and other crimes leveled against them. More than the failure of the system to prevent crime, it is its ineffectiveness in dealing with those who commit crimes, particularly when they happen to be influential persons, that is really responsible for the loss of public confidence. The tendency to release persons, even those who are involved in non-bailable cases, on bail, becomes more liberal when the accused happen to be politically influential. Most of them, in fact, succeed in obtaining anticipatory bail. This explains why so many legislators have numerous cases pending against them.

In the absence of strong public opinion and an honest and effective criminal justice system, it is not at all surprising that no important politician occupying a seat of power in this country in recent times has even been forced to resign, what to talk of being proceeded against in a court of law. They have continued to commit their misdeeds with impunity.