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Are you worthy of good governance?

In a democratic nation state, citizens rely on their elected representatives, together with many public institutions, to help ensure a good quality of life.

But when our individual aspirations rise higher than their collective capability, we sense a crisis of governance.

Yet governance, no matter how you define it, is about more than government and its institutions. As citizens, we have to cocreate good governance, we cannot outsource it and hope to be passively happy consumers. Like everything worth its while, good governance must be earned.

While we often and quite indignantly feel entitled to good public infrastructure and services, do we feel as passionately responsible to our duty to be a bit more governable? When too many people begin to believe that the rule of law is for someone else, and that they can be the exception, there is an eventual system-wide breakdown.

Clearly, we are going through a governance crisis at many levels. Equally clearly, we cannot afford to waste a good crisis. Now is the time for all right-minded people across the ideological spectrum to come together and act. If our sarkaar (government), or the bazaar (market) in some of its forms, is not delivering value, it is only the samaaj (society) that can start to set things right.

This, to my mind, is the big lesson of the past century and the hope of this still new, defining human century.

Poor governance affects us all—entrepreneurs, homemakers, farmers, labourers, whatever identities we might have. Individually, we are helpless when a crippled ecosystem prevents us from realizing our own potential. But collectively, when we demand adequate water supply, or the right to information, or better prices for produce, sooner rather than later, change comes about.

Citizens coming together in diverse institutions of the people, such as neighbourhood societies, self-help groups, legal, political or economic associations, can deepen the discourse, and figure out ways to improve the well-being of their communities. This movement then escalates and spreads. Eventually, people can hold the sarkaar and also the bazaar accountable to the public good.

This is how good governance is sustained in a country. There are no alternatives and no short cuts. For some time, we can, as citizens, forget about our dreary duties and enjoy an economic boom, or a time of relative peace. In the past few decades, the upper classes got lulled into a belief that they could secede from the public sector. We created our own little islands, with off-the-grid solutions in education, housing, energy, water, and health services.

Now, the flip side of that secession is coming into view. Having our own children in good schools does not inure us from the ill-effect of others having theirs in poor schools. Having great roads within our gated homes and offices does not help when our fancy cars spill out on to poor public roads. The examples can go on and on.

Like a silent heart attack, a system breakdown gives the body public a nasty jolt. We realize everything is connected to everything else in this complex and wondrous system, as it is in our bodily organs. And we have to change our thinking and our lifestyles again. That is the opportunity for a healthier tomorrow.

To enable this change, we have to support those who have a head-start. Luckily, there are many organizations in India doing tremendously good work to expand the space for citizens' voices. As we can, we need to support them with our time and energy, and our monetary resources. Even though many of them are driven purely by their vision and passion, all institutions need continuous financial support for their core functioning, to attract and retain good talent, and to allow them flexibility in the face of rapid changes in ground conditions.

There are organizations working in areas of social justice, of access to the courts and the legal system. Others help build the capacity of elected representatives, or improve environmental stewardship, advocate better policy and law; some have partnered with the state on implementation of public service goals, or have built an ecosystem for entrepreneurs. Some are trying to create more independent media, or to improve the transparency of government reporting on its own functioning. All this work helps to build up the quality of demand from the citizenry. It forces a response from the supply side, from government, from market institutions, and helps restore a better balance of power. It prevents the erosion of credibility, and builds trust between people and institutions

This sort of work is truly political in nature, in the best sense of the word "politics", which is about processes and mechanisms towards a more judicious balance of power in a society.

It is not easy work, not pretty stuff. It can be ridden with conflicts, as the interests of one group might not overlap another's. It requires leadership skills in mediation, and in reconciliation. And for forging solutions and models that can be taken up at scale.



For decades now, foreign donors have supported such crucial work in our country, be they governments or private foundations. It is high time that more Indian resources are poured into this sector. If we ourselves don't commit to the change we cry out for, who will? In our freedom struggle, the support of industrialists like Jamnalal Bajaj and the Tatas made a big difference. Today, Indian philanthropy is at an exciting stage, where many new donors have come in and are ready to experiment and take risks, to create more equity in the system. What excites me personally is that I have encountered many young people who are determined to help create the kind of society that they would like to get older in. It has been my privilege to support some of them. They have new ideas, they use appropriate new technology for social change, and they get behind the root cause of the problem to build out innovative solutions. They are unafraid; they are not in it for small change. This is absolutely the right time to go out and meet them, engage with them, and best of all, support them. Then we can co-create the good governance we all crave.

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