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**Beyond The Spoils System**

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| Shailesh Gandhi  |
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﻿**Why can't we select governors and key public servants on merit rather than patronage politics?**

There is considerable debate underway on whether various statutory heads n the country should be replaced because of a change in political dispensation at the Centre. It is therefore the right time to discuss whether these highly paid public servants deliver significant value and how their selection process could be changed to enhance their value.

While there is an active debate about whether present governors selected by the UPA government should be retained or pushed out, we hardly discuss whether they perform any useful functions. It is an accepted fact that most members and heads of various commissions and corporations are appointed as a consequence of their closeness to political leaders in government, and not because of their suitability for the job.

Governors and lokayuktas among many others, who head regulatory functions, are beholden to political masters who have gifted these jobs to them.
There is rarely any evaluation about their merit or suitability for the job.

Democracy operates at various levels and in a wide variety of ways. Apart from the legislature, executive and judiciary, it is felt necessary to have various other institutions to take care of special needs and to act as checks and balances in the system.

Most of these, whether created by the Constitution or by statute, have very important functions to perform. But the majority of those appointed to these positions are retired senior citizens who are physically and mentally incapable of working even 40 hours a week. They do not feel the need to be accountable and look at their jobs as sinecures and rewards, for having served some political masters and keeping them happy .

We have a peculiar situation where a police constable, driver or peon is employed by a due process of selection and evaluation for the job. When these are violated and selection is done arbitrarily we protest and sometimes get courts to intervene. On the other hand, at the highest levels of public office, jobs are doled out based on arbitrary political recommendations.

This writer's selection as a Central Information Commissioner was a random occurrence rather than a consequence of any process or evaluation. If some governors, lokayuktas, regulators, commissioners are good it is by chance rather than by design.

There are many senior bureaucrats and other power brokers who spend considerable time and effort to get the right recommendation to bag these jobs. Usually on offer is significant proof of personal loyalty in addition to political loyalty , as well as an implied promise of being willing to do the master's bidding when required.

Under such circumstances, these institutions have become largely ineffective. Even bright or honest people capable of working hard do not deliver because they have often been rewarded with a position for which they are not suitable.

It is time to demand a transparent process of selection for such high positions. It should generally start six months before a vacancy arises and should be an invitation for applications/nominations of persons along with a set of criteria for the relevant job.

Drawing up a list of requirements and suitability for different jobs ­ including that of governor ­ is not a very difficult task. Candidates could be shortlisted by a panel based on seeing which of them meet the objective criteria which are laid down. Such a shortlist of persons should be interviewed before people and media by an eminent pre-selection committee.

If this is done citizens would be able to see if the persons were basically competent, suitable and committed to the job they wanted to take up. It would act as a check on completely arbitrary choices made on the basis of patronage politics.

The pre-selection committee would recommend a panel which could be three times the number of persons to be selected.
The final selection from this panel could be done by the same political system which now operates. If this is done properly those occupying such positions would draw respect from every one and also have the required moral authority .

Besides a transparent process of selection it should be incumbent for all such bodies to display the work done by them on their websites. Citizens should be able to evaluate whether the various statutory bodies are delivering meaningful results in a satisfactory and time-bound manner.

This could be achieved by having a satisfaction evaluation of those who have approached these bodies every six months.
We must get the right persons willing to be accountable at the highest levels of public service.
Concurrently , distribution of plum jobs as political largesse must stop.

Once we do this we won't have the unholy spectacle of our governors and other authorities being shunted out whenever there is a change of the party serving at the Centre. The present practice is a reminder that these positions have been given as largesse and do not deliver any significant value to citizens and democracy .

The writer is a former Central Information Commissioner .





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