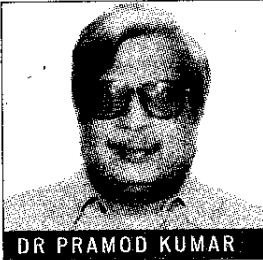


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Crisis of governance

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Guest Column



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The crisis of governance is all pervasive. It is reflected in the economy, practice of democracy, relation with India's neighbours and the crumbling social value system. The crisis is holistic. Governance is the 'rules of the game in a society that regulate human interaction with political, social, economic and cultural domains'. This exchange leads to crisis as rules of the game do not protect the rights and entitlements of the poor. Rather, doles are given as rights to the privileged and rights as doles to the poor. As a result, doles are always under the scanner.

Rules become over-violative due to corruption, high transaction costs and lack of transparency. The foremost issue in citizen-centric governance is the mistrust of the government in its own citizens. Even after more than 60 years of Independence, citizens have not been conferred full citizenship. For every interaction with the government, they are made to prove their identity, claims and declaration. The most visible is the filing of affidavits for almost every interaction with the government. These affidavits are required even for public utilities such as new connections for electricity, sewerage and water supply. Besides adding to the

citizen's harassment and corruption, it has perpetuated the dichotomy between the state and the nation. It is, therefore, urgent to replace the practice with self-declaration, a step towards bestowing full citizenship on the colonial subjects.

Further, the administrative fragmentation of the population is not diversity-sensitive and, instead, produces tensions and reinforces social cleavages. In the '80s, the Punjab Government initiated a programme to empower women's groups to facilitate education of the girl child. A scheme was introduced to advance seed money to mahila mandals (women groups) to build assets such as utensils, shamanas etc for generation of income. The thinking was that the residents of the village could hire these on rent to celebrate festivals and events and, the returns on this investment could be used to empower girls. However, in some villages, Dalits were denied access to these assets. Consequently, Dalit women set up their own mahila mandals to cater to their needs. This initiative activated dormant social cleavages. A good administrative initiative became the victim of lack of diversity and sensitivity.

The recent decision of the government to conduct caste-based census is an example of this insensitivity. What purpose will it serve? The stated purpose is also flawed as it intends to use caste as a category to distribute resources. In the case of Dalits, it was justified as they were socially stigmatised and economically deprived. And of course, the unstated purpose is to keep people divided to garner votes during elections. The government's

oft proclaimed inclusive growth will become a prisoner to the exclusive caste categories.

Political interference, which has become an accepted part of the political culture, has produced glaring distortions in the practice of governance, particularly, in administrative recruitments, postings, allocation of works etc., leading to dilution of hierarchy, dysfunctional internal accountability mechanisms and patronage-centric governance. For example, in Punjab, the average tenure in 2009 of an SHO was six months, which was about seven months in 2004. In the case of a DSP, the same was 10 months, and one year for the district police chief. Political interference in transfers of police officers at the cutting edge has distorted justice delivery. Therefore, it was suggested that the tenure of police personnel may be fixed as per the Police Act and a performance report may be considered as the basis for transfers. An institutional mechanism should be in place to provide a forum for political interventions to apply correctives to the distortions in police functioning.

Governance becomes tardy as a fragmented diagnosis produces a tunnel vision. In 2004, fiscal management became a cardinal principle to run the affairs of the state. The then Punjab Department of Finance, in its overactive commitment to impose fiscal management, came out with a scheme to contract untrained 'teachers' from the same village to cut government expenditure. As a result, the quality of teaching further deteriorated and, later all contractual 'teachers' launched a protest and

demanding they be trained as teachers and their services be regularised, while the state had a large number of trained B.Ed. teachers unemployed. Social security programmes such as pensions and Shagun are given as doles to a large section of ineligible population. This has become a routine practice with successive governments. It leads to wastage of Rs 220 crore and Rs 40 crore in the case of old-age pension and Shagun schemes, respectively.

Governance has also suffered as there is a tendency among departments to abdicate their responsibility. In the '80s in Punjab, when the political process produced a crisis, the overactive administration armed itself with TADA. In view of the failure of the administration to contain the crisis, the police was unleashed. When the police produced a bigger crisis, the judiciary was called in. These overactive institutions produced distortions equal or worse and also prevented the factors behind these distortions from coming to surface. As such, it should be understood that if the civil administration becomes non-functional, the remedy is not to unleash the police. The remedy must be sought to make the same functional.

The tendency to empower institutions with ad hoc licence has a clear message i.e. to kill poison with poison and let the patient die. This has made governance less a matter of politics and more of an administrative policy with discretionary political interference.

(The writer is Director, IDC, Chandigarh, and chairman of the Punjab Governance Reforms Commission.)