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**Developing Social and Cultural Capacities for
Corruption – Free Governance**

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Let me straightway put before you my basic proposition which I have formulated in the context of my experience and the study of social and cultural forces that shape the contours of a civilization and determine the quality of its institutions. And this proposition is: 'As long as the Indian mind is not reformed and the people remain what they are, no administrative, economic or constitutional reforms would save the country from the ever deepening quagmire of inefficiency, corruption and malpractices'.

Let me at the outset also make it clear that, according to my definition of governance, its span extends to the entire canvas of the life of a nation. It involves not only administrative or managerial capacities but also the social, political, intellectual, cultural and moral capacities of a system in its entirety. And the best governance machinery is the one which harnesses all these capacities and directs their focused beam on the resolution of the problems that confront the nation. If, for example, the intellectuals provide no fresh or creative ideas or if the culture of a nation is not generative of values of honesty, dedication, compassion and the like, the quality of governance would suffer, no matter how perfect its institutional arrangements are.

I had the opportunity to serve the country on several occasions in different arenas of public life in different capacities. I have held several assignments in the civil service, from the junior rungs to the top. I have worked as lieutenant Governor/Governor for about ten years. I have functioned as a member of Parliament for about fourteen years and assessed the proceedings of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, both from the opposition and treasury Benches. For about five and a half years, I had the privilege of being a Union Cabinet Minister, holding a

variety of portfolios – Communication, Urban Development, Poverty Alleviation, Culture and Tourism.

During this long journey in public life, I had a close look at contemporary Indian society, to peep into its soul and to probe into its inner layers. I came in contact with a wide spectrum of people, from the lowest to the highest, from the *jhuggi* dwellers to the Prime Minister, from petty vendors to top businessmen, from the simple and dedicated civil servants to power drunk bureaucrats. I passed through several cold desserts as well as green pastures. I viewed different scenes from different pedestals and from different angles.

In all the experience and perceptions that I gathered, one common factor has stood up: there has been a grave national omission in attending to our fundamentals. The consequence of this omission has not only been a colossal casualness and corruption in public life but also an ever- increasing incapacity of the country to cope with manifold challenges that have arisen during the past sixty-four years and many more that are bound to arise, in a still more complex form, in the coming years.

Now, a crisis of governance has overtaken us. And we seem to be overwhelmed by it. We do not know what tools to pick up and which technology to apply to set the matter right. For the crisis is not merely structural; it is rooted in the rusty irons of our souls. It is a crisis of character, of commitment and of conscience – a crisis that is in-built in the spiritual and inspirational vacuum that we have caused and the poor moral and social order that we have brought about.

When, in the early nineties of the last century, songs in praise of the new economic reforms were being sung at their loudest and an impression was being created that a key to solve all the problems of the Indian economy and administrative had been found, I had, in the fifth edition of my book – *My Forzen Turbulence in Kashmir* – which was being written at that time, commented on the superficiality of the entire approach as follows:

It is being argued that new propositions would pull the country out of crisis. This argument ignores the nature of the crisis and its roots which lie embedded in the social ethos and cultural forces that govern the life of the country – the forces that have seeped

into its bloodstream and made deep inroads into its polity, its business, its industry, its administration and other institutions. To proceed with 'economic reforms', without reorienting these fundamental forces and without infusing new spirit in the institutions, would only amount to pursuing a mirage.

Today, the country is abandoning its adherence to the concept of welfare state by transposing its own faults – faults of its ethos – to these concepts. After a few years, the country would once again transfer its own infirmities – the infirmities of its current culture – to the concepts of free market, liberalization and globalisation and denounce them. A new man with a new portfolio, a new 'package', a new 'action-programme', accompanied by a new set of drumbeaters, would arrive. All the while, the country will go on sinking deeper and deeper in trouble. The malady is in the heart; attending to the periphery would not do.

For instance, it is being claimed that, with the deregulation of the economy and dismantling of the public sector, an era of progress would dawn and corruption would decline. Soon, the hollowness of the claim would be discovered. Because nothing is being done to change the ethos, the cultural and social traits, which breed corruption. In the absence of internal cleanliness, malpractices would merely get transferred 'from one sphere to another.

Whether type A or type B of economic system or approach is more suitable, is not the issue. My basic contention is that the recent measures, apart from being faulty and risky in many respects, would not yield any worthwhile results. Under the new dispensation, the plot of the story may undergo a change, the stage may have a different setting, the actors may speak in different languages and adopt different styles of acting, but the drama would end essentially on the same unsavoury note.

Would anyone who is willing to look dispassionately at the post-reform period of twenty years seriously dispute the truth of this contention? If he does, let him answer a few basic

questions. Have the institutions of governance started functioning more efficiency and effectively? Has he incidence of corruption in our public life declined and have