

National effort needed for further strengthening democratic foundations: Vice President**National effort needed for further strengthening democratic foundations: Vice President****Releases the Book 'Loktantra ke utsav ki ankahi kahani'**

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu has said that a national effort is needed to further strengthening country's democratic foundations. He was addressing the gathering after releasing the Book 'Loktantra ke utsav ki ankahi kahani' authored by Dr. S.Y.Quraishi, here today. The Chief Election Commissioner, Shri A.K. Joti and other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

The Vice President underscored the need for people to vote for candidates based on the four positive Cs – 'Character, Calibre, Capacity and Conduct' and not on the basis of three negative Cs – 'Caste, Community and Cash'. He further said that there should be a debate on electoral reforms that can transform India into a more vibrant democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy, he added.

Following is the text of Vice President's address:

"On this International Day of Democracy, let me extend my warmest greetings and good wishes to all of you and all the people of India who are shaping the largest democracy of the world.

I am also very happy to release, on this occasion, **Loktantra ke utsav ki ankahi kahani**, the Hindi version of Shri S.Y. Khuraishiji's book "An undocumented wonder: The making of the great Indian Election".

It is a very lucid account of the extraordinary manner in which elections are conducted in our country. The Election Commission of India has rightfully gained worldwide appreciation for its extremely professional conduct of elections in a complex and vast country like India.

The author has shared his insights and experiences in a gripping narrative that captures the challenges and achievements of election management. It is a book that can provide valuable guidance to those conducting elections as well as enhance general awareness about the systematic and systemic way in which the Election Commission of India addresses all the key challenges. It also reflects the agility and responsiveness of the Commission that keeps innovating to respond to new challenges. Transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of a functioning democracy. The proposal to introduce Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) in all polling booths from 2019 elections is another step in the direction of strengthening our democracy, which has to be nurtured and preserved by constantly reforming the electoral system.

I compliment Dr S Y Quraishi ji on this excellent publication and the National Book Trust for bringing out the Hindi translation. I wish and hope that the National Book Trust will make this book available in all other Indian languages so that the information and ideas contained in this book reach a wider public.

Conducting elections well is an important and integral part of democracy. Each citizen must be

able to vote for the candidate and the party she or he likes without any fear of intimidation. Nor should there be any inducement. Each individual is important in a democracy and each vote is important. In a robust democracy, the voice of the people is heard and the choice of the people is respected. The transfer of power takes place peacefully based on the popular mandate.

Brothers and Sisters, we should be proud of the fact that we are not only the largest democracy in the world but also that we are constantly striving to make it more meaningful. We gave universal franchise right from the time we became independent and decided to adopt a democratic form of government. As compared to many fledgling democracies, we have been able to hold elections to the national Parliament and State Assemblies as well as to the local bodies fairly regularly.

However, a little critical introspection and honest review of the past and current electoral processes makes us realize how much we all collectively need to do to improve the system. Clearly, there are a number of areas in which we have to bring about changes.

On this International Day of Democracy, my thoughts turn to the **quality of our polity**. How well are we nurturing and nourishing this plant of democracy sown with great expectations by the founding fathers of our constitution? Are we living up to those ideals? Are our thoughts and actions breathing life into the constitution we gave ourselves in 1950?

India has committed to the United Nations Charter that aims to build a world on the values of 'peace', 'justice', 'respect', 'human rights', and 'tolerance' and 'solidarity'.

India's glorious cultural heritage is also dotted with a number of thought leaders who have eloquently espoused these values for over a million years. The village republics and the Bhikshu Sanghas of ancient India, as Dr.B.R.Ambedkar points out, functioned on democratic principles.

The essence of all religions is the quest for peace and harmony. A few days ago, we commemorated the 125th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's historic speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In that speech, Swami Vivekananda touched upon the essence of Hinduism as "a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman."

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had forewarned against the temptation to break up our world into fragments by erecting narrow domestic walls. But we are still grappling with the divisions based on caste, creed, religion, sex and language. It is, however, heartening that the youth of our country is aspiring to see a new India where these distinctions become irrelevant. We are trying to create a new India where key democratic principles are actively practiced in daily life.

The India we want is a democratic, developed, inclusive, peaceful, harmonious India that **celebrates** diversity and plurality not merely **tolerates** them.

I want each citizen of our country to strive continuously through thought and action to transform our country into a vibrant democracy. A democracy in which leaders should be elected on the basis of character, calibre, capacity and conduct and voters should choose the candidates who have discipline, dynamism, dedication and devotion. Politics of caste, community and cash should be totally rejected.

Elections are the touchstone for a democracy. The regularity and the fairness of elections is an indication of the health of any democracy. Elections are an expression of individual freedom and potentially give each Indian a sense of participation in the governance of the country.

We must deepen this bond between people and leaders through a respectful responsiveness to public opinion. We must enhance the trust and confidence in the citizens that the political executive will deliver on the promises made during election campaigns.

All this requires a rethinking about our electoral processes. I would suggest that we, as a nation, should engage in this collective reflection and ponder over five aspects I wish to outline.

First, I feel the time has come to take a serious look at the possibility of conducting **simultaneous elections** for the parliament and various Assemblies. The current practice of conducting elections in one State or the other at different times tends to focus the attention of the country away from development and slows down progress.

As the former President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee had stated:

“Throughout the year, some election or the other is happening and regular work comes to a standstill with the code of conduct being implemented. The time is also ripe for a constructive debate on electoral reforms and a return to the practice of the early decades after Independence when elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies were held simultaneously. It is for the Election Commission to take this exercise forward in consultation with political parties.”

Second, if the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have to be implemented in letter and spirit, we should ensure that **elections to local bodies** should be held every five years. Ours is a three tiered democratic polity and we must strengthen democracy at the Union, State and local body levels.

Third, I would suggest that we should have a time limit to dispose of election petitions. If necessary, special election tribunals must be set up for disposing of election petitions.

The fourth aspect and perhaps the most important of all is the need to **curb the influence of money power** in elections to set a truly level playing field. Various solutions have to be thought of including State-funding. In addition, the new trend of paid news has to be completely eliminated.

The fifth aspect is an imperative need for revisiting the Anti-Defection law. We must examine as to what extent it has served its purpose. If needed, it has to be amended further and made more stringent.

We are at the cross roads of our country's history. The citizens, especially the youth, are looking for a future that guarantees them the freedom to grow, to contribute to and be a part of the new India's growth story. The country is looking for a new paradigm in governance that focuses on achieving tangible development outcomes. The direction set by the government seeks to make a collective effort to transform the development trajectory encapsulated in the overarching principle of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his closing speech of the first Constituent Assembly said:

“If we wish to maintain democracy not only in form but also in fact, what must we do? We must make our political democracy a social democracy. It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life”.

Free and fair election process is the foundation for a political democracy. The ultimate purpose of democratic governance is social democracy, to ensure inclusive development and improvement in the quality of life of all citizens; especially those who are the poorest of the poor and those who have been left out of the democratic processes.

I do hope the book will stimulate further thoughts and action. Inspired by the Prime Minister's mantra of “reform, perform, transform” as the guiding principles, the people and their elected representatives have the ability to transform our largest democracy into a more lively democracy that welcomes people's participation in all spheres of nation building. Let us accelerate this process by moving from precept to practice and collectively shape the India we all want.”

KSD/BK

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