

The Republic is dead and no point blaming BJP-RSS.

We need a new political language

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The Republic is dead. Long live the Republic!

Let this adaptation of the British adage—"The King is dead. Long live the King"—be our national call this 26 January.

On 22 January 2024, the Republic of India, which came into being on 26 January 1950, was fully dismantled. This process was going on for a long time. I have been speaking about the 'end of the republic' for some time now. But now we can put a definite date to it. Now on, we live in a new political order. Those who seek opportunities within the new order will rapidly adapt to the rules of the new game, if they haven't already done so. We who commit to reclaim the first republic have no option but to radically rethink our politics. We need to craft a new political language that can offer a more robust and rooted defence of our republican values. We must also shift our political strategies and rework political alignments, from old-style parliamentary opposition to a politics of resistance.

Let there be no mistake about it. The consecration ceremony in Ayodhya was not about the statue, or Lord Ram, or the Ram temple for that matter. It was not about maryada (norms), astha (faith) or dharma. It involved multiple violations of constitutional, political, and dharmik maryada. It undoubtedly involved astha of crores of believers, but only as an object to be hijacked. It has led to an inversion of dharma and its relationship to rajasatta (state). Indeed, this represented the political colonisation of Hinduism. In its background, its design, the nature of its mobilisation, and in its impact, 22 January was a political event, meant to anticipate, precipitate, and consolidate a political triumph. It was, in essence, a consecration of a "Hindu rashtra" that is neither in line with Hindu ethos nor a rashtra as defined by Indian nationalism.

A new order in place

We have a new constitution now, not in the form of a fresh document, but by way of a fresh arrangement of political power that crystallises the changes that we have witnessed over the past decade. The original Constitution recognised minority rights as the limit, so as to define what democratically elected government could not do. The new one institutes the will of the majority community to draw a line of fire that no organ of the government can cross, no matter what the text of the original Constitution said. We now have a two-tier citizenship: Hindus and associates

are the landlords while Muslims and other religious minorities are the tenants. The original compact of the “union of states” has been replaced with a unitary government that delegates some administrative functions to the provinces. The fast-fading fiction of division of power between executive, legislature, and judiciary has now been repudiated in favour of governance by the all-powerful executive that lays down legislative rituals and demarcates the arena where the judiciary is permitted to adjudicate. Parliamentary democracy has given way not to a presidential system but to a rule by one — an elected king — a system where people elect their supreme leader and then leave everything to him.

This imposition of a new constitution does not yet enjoy the legitimacy of a constituent assembly. The Cabinet resolution might claim that the spirit of India was liberated on 22 January 2024, but it is not yet the official date of birth of India’s second Republic. We still have a battle on our hands to prevent this de facto abrogation of the Constitution. The coming parliamentary elections are the first front in this battle. But whatever the poll outcome, we cannot wish away the reality of this new political order. We cannot push away any further the challenge of radical rethinking.

We must be conscious of our own culpability in the demise of the first republic. It is pointless to blame the RSS and the BJP for doing what has been their *raison d’être*. The onus must lie with those who pledged their allegiance to the Constitution of the first republic. The gradual degeneration of secularism from the politics of conviction to convenience has contributed to this dismantling. The sheer arrogance of secular ideology, its disconnect with the people, its refusal to speak to people in their language and idiom has helped the delegitimisation of the very idea of secularism. We cannot forget that this death knell came thirty years after a full-fledged warning was announced by way of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. For thirty years, secular politics prevaricated, from a lazy assumption that this disease will disappear on its own to the cynical belief that caste politics can counter it. If secular politics is in shambles today, it is the outcome of its own sins of omission and commission.

What was lost through politics can only be regained through politics. We don’t have many options today. We, who stand for the Constitution, can either live like a beleaguered ideological minority in our own country, offering token opposition occasionally, when not trying to fall in line. Or we can forge a bold and energetic republican politics.

Two-pronged affair

This republican politics has to be a two-pronged affair. First of all, it has to be a cultural-ideological battle to be fought over the next few decades. It must begin by reclaiming Indian nationalism, our civilisational heritage, our languages, and our religious traditions, including Hinduism. And it must go on to articulate a new vision of India, redefine a new ideological equilibrium, in line with the aspirations of the bottom of the pyramid. Some of the ideological battles of the 20th century — between communists and socialists and Gandhians, for example

— are irrelevant today. We need to draw from all the liberal, egalitarian and anti colonial strands to forge a new ideology for our times, something like Swaraj 2.0.

This has to be accompanied by a new kind of politics. Politics of opposition has to give way to counter-hegemonic politics of resistance. Electoral contestation may not be pivotal to this politics. Republican politics has to rethink its strategy. The old lines dividing different parties may not be relevant in this new political world. The present crisis calls for a tectonic reconfiguration in politics. Those who are true to the spirit of the Republic will have to practically merge into a single political bloc. As elections turn into a plebiscite with a pre-decided outcome, electoral politics will have to take a back seat. Movement politics and street opposition would be more efficacious in this new situation. But that too would come under pressure as the space for democratic protest would shrink. Politics of resistance would need to carve new and innovative ways while remaining democratic and non-violent.

There is a joke doing rounds on social media inviting us to celebrate this Republic Day well, lest this be the last one. The irony is that it was already dated before it was shared. This 26 January can either be a day to commemorate a Republic that is now dead. Or it can be a day of national resolve to reclaim the Republic.

Happy Republic Day.