

Civil society organizations' demands



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Now the stage is set for the parliamentary elections with April 19 fixed for the beginning of the ballot battle. New government will be formed in June this year. In these circumstances, the demands being raised by civil society organizations functioning within the Constitutional framework are worth serious attention.

Generally, the civil society organizations are engaged with the task of making the people aware of the Constitutional rights, concessions, and duties with the intention of ensuring that all Indians down to the man in the street enjoy legal rights and benefits. They have also been raising demands pertaining to various sectors.

Economic demands

The civil society organizations want priority to the public sector, saying that the major role in the country's economic growth should not be entrusted to the big corporates. They seek measures to give a new lease of life to agriculture and to ensure proper prices for the manufactured goods. The prices of essentials should be kept under check, they say, insisting on reduction of diesel price, rail, air and electricity tariffs and provision of concessions for senior citizens.

As road tax is collected from the buyers of motor vehicles, the current practice of collecting tolls from the users of National Highways should be stopped forthwith. The looting of natural resources, mountainous regions, and coastal areas in the name of development should be given up, say the civil organizations.

Social demands

The evil of honour killing, and other forms of violence perpetrated in the name of casteism should be dealt with sternly. Dalits' dignity should be safeguarded by bringing to justice those indulging in caste violence for political and personal gains, say the civil organizations.

They want the government to reconsider the move to grant reservation and concessions to the economically weaker sections (EWS), particularly the upper castes, which will negate the basic Constitutional concept aiming at creation of an egalitarian society based on social justice. A caste census must be conducted at the national level to ensure better implementation of reservation. The reservation system must be followed in the High Courts and the Supreme Court too.

All forms of harassment and atrocity perpetrated on women, which militate against the ideal of women's freedom, must be stopped and stern action taken against sexual offenders. For women who constitute half the population, 50 per cent reservation must be introduced in all sectors, say the civil organisations, expecting the resolution on 33 per cent reservation for women introduced in Parliament to be implemented with immediate effect.

Demands pertaining to religion

Slamming the general tendency to divide the people in the name of religion, the organisations want the syndrome to be stopped forthwith, saying that the livelihood and security of the minorities, small racial groups, Dalits, tribals, women and marginalised sections should be protected.

The organisations have been emphasising that communal propaganda should be banned and that religious clashes and attacks should be declared as acts of treason and the offenders penalised sternly. The illegal activities of obstructing and oppressing the minorities' rallies, meetings, practices at their places of worship and living in their dwellings should be stalled.

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 should be implemented in letter and spirit. The Act has the provision that the places of worship should be protected in the same condition as they were on August 15, 1947. This provision should be brought into effect.

All languages and cultures should be given equal opportunities. The religious and racial discriminations should be weeded out in north-eastern states including Manipur and in Kashmir as well. Facilities should be created to pursue cases in the High Courts in the languages of the states concerned.

Political demands

The union and state governments should uphold and implement the concepts, values and rights guaranteed by the Constitution. India's fundamental principles of democracy, secularism, social justice, liberty, fraternity, and federalism should be implemented, giving no room for discrimination. The argument holding aloft 'one country and one language' should be given up and the 'unity in diversity' principle upheld.

All organisations functioning illegally and taking law into their own hands should be banned and their activities considered as amounting to acts of terrorism. They must be penalised sternly, the civil society organisations affirm, adding that government institutions should not function based on religious and racial fundamentalism.

Officials and organisations functioning without fear or favour, hardly bowing to political pressures should be protected. Moreover, the state autonomy should be recognised, federal principle upheld, and all state governments allowed to work for their states' growth. Undue pressures should not be mounted on state governments democratically elected.

The legal amendment recently brought in for choosing the Chief Election Commissioner without any role given to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has put the credibility of the Election Commission at stake, triggering doubts over honesty and transparency of elections. Such legal amendments should be withdrawn, say the civil society organisations.

All doubts aired over the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) should be cleared. The tendency to view as anti-government and anti-national the civil society's criticism, discourses, advices, and opinions shared in public domain in the spirit of democracy should be given up.

The civil society organizations and human rights outfits' role in the country's growth, ensuring the people's welfare and rights and the diversity of culture should be understood. Their contribution to the formulation and implementation of government policies and programmes should be ensured, they say.

Translated by V Mariappan.