

INTERVIEW | ASHWANI KUMAR

# 'There are glaring inequities in our social system'

'Caste, religion, money and muscle continue to determine electoral outcomes... debilitating our democracy'

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*Former Union Minister and Rajya Sabha member (2002-2016) Ashwani Kumar was witness to "some of the testing moments" that unfolded in this period and which "resulted in transformational changes in the political landscape of the country." In an interview with The Hindu, he talks about his new book, 'Hope in a challenged democracy: An Indian Narrative', in which he reflects on the momentous events of this period, his personal experiences as a Minister and the challenges before the Congress and the nation.*

**India is a resilient but faltering democracy, you say in your book. Is the Congress, too, responsible?**

■ I haven't held one or other party responsible for the aberrations of our democracy. I've tried to objectively analyse the fault lines of our democracy... I can establish ours is a faltering democracy with just one example. In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, Dr. Manmohan Singh lost South Delhi; (former dacoit) Phoolan Devi won Mirzapur. Most commentators in the world, including the late Khushwant Singh, asked whether this was the best image of Indian democracy.

The repeated use of caste, religion and regional sentiments in the selection of candidates, the pervading influence of money and muscle power.. continue to debilitate our democracy... Parlia-

ment's work is being taken over by the courts, the courts' credibility is increasing in comparison with the decrease in the executive's credibility. This upsets the constitutional equilibrium. Our political discourse has "become coarse with rancour"... not conducive to an atmosphere that can produce the critical consensus needed on vital national issues. The media, supposed to be the custodian of freedom and democracy, has been hijacked by corporates. There is a question mark on the stability of institutions that have so far underpinned India's democracy.

**Dr. Singh's defeat was unfortunate, but Phoolan Devi, who represented an oppressed community, added to the Lok Sabha's diversity for, democracy is also about the widest possible representation.**

**And caste, religion, will remain factors in Indian politics till greater social justice and economic equality are established.**

■ There are glaring inequities in our social system. I've spoken of the growing insensitivities in our society... of a man carrying his young son on his shoulders for want of a stretcher in a hospital, of three sisters having to pull down their roof to make the funeral pyre for their mother... But caste, religion, money and muscle continue to determine electoral outcomes... debilitating our democracy. The best representatives don't get elected... I agree political representation is the key to democracy, but what needs to be highlighted is the kind of representation our system is throwing up.

**You write: "In these challenging times.... (The) nation demands leadership that is daring and humble, caring and wise such that can summon the national will to foster national renewal." Would you comment on the leadership of the Congress and the BJP?**



**It's equally true RTI became one of the principal reasons for paralysis in decision-making**

■ I won't comment on individuals. But, yes, the quality of democracy anywhere in the world is linked to the quality of its leadership ... We've seen what has happened in America, in Brexit, in our own country... People discover their leader... Leadership in a democracy is about bonding, the ability to bind people to a cause, communication, empathy, espousing the popular sensitivities at a given point in time. That ability is the measure of democratic leadership everywhere.

The 2014 elections here were fought on the question of a strong leadership; the Trump presidency is clear testimony to the fact that the felt sensitivities of the people

have to be factored in by anyone seeking to lead them.

**The Congress, you write, is "facing an unprecedented challenge to its relevance in the scheme of national politics," and that as "a party of the freedom movement that has been living off the reflected glory of its heroes, (it) must now find many more icons."**

■ The Congress must create a strong group of leaders across the country who can serve as icons to the millions of Indians ... looking to politics as a means of public service. Leadership at all levels has to be created and cultivated. The process of rejuvenating the party must begin with an honest and loud introspection of why our processes haven't been able to throw up as many leaders ... as required.

**There is little room for multiple loyalties in a political party, you write.**

■ I've spoken of a profoundly political and philosophical question that's not specific to any one party. When loyalties get divided,

questions are raised about loyalties. But the more important point is that reciprocity in loyalties... between a leader and a worker is a function of the power equation: you cannot will the leader to be as loyal to you as you are to the leader, because the leader is in a position of domination.

**The Right to Information (RTI) Act, you write, led to a paralysis in decision-making... now this government is trying to defang RTI.**

■ RTI was a revolutionary step forward in the process of empowering the citizen, a great achievement of the UPA government.

But it's equally true RTI became one of the principal reasons for paralysis in decision-making in the government. Officers would find several excuses not to express their views on files (out of) a fear of being hounded later even for legitimate policy decisions.

At a meeting with the Prime Minister and other Planning Commission members, when I was MoS for Planning, I said we have no right to question the silence of the officers. At that point,

even ministers would think several times before writing their notes.

...Maybe the CIC, or the courts can give some guidelines, maybe the rules can be amended without denuding the RTI of its efficacy.

**What was the UPA's objective in introducing Aadhaar? What do you feel about the present government's efforts to make it mandatory?**

■ The UPA, actuated by the noblest of considerations, saw Aadhaar as an instrument of targeted delivery for services and subsidies for the people deserving of them. This government has carried it forward, and that's a good thing. My objection is with respect to privacy concerns, an objection I had even when we were in government.

I was appalled when the Attorney General recently told the Supreme Court in the context of the challenge to the legality of Aadhaar that privacy was not a fundamental right. Anyone familiar with Constitution jurisprudence would see that the courts have treated privacy as fundamental to human dignity.