

Constitutional Values and the Indian Ethos^{*}

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I feel deeply honoured at having been invited to deliver the 1996 Kale Memorial Lecture. The Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics is an Institution of great repute in the field of social sciences and I am grateful to its Director, Dr. D.C. Wadhwa, for granting me the opportunity to be in your midst today. The Lecture series, which has been consistently held since the year 1937, has featured eminent stalwarts from every walk of Indian public life and I must confess to being in the grip of an overpowering sense of diffidence at the prospect of being counted amongst them.

The topic on which I wish to share my views with you today is :

Constitutional Values and the Indian Ethos

Some time ago, I came across a quotation which endeared itself to me for the beautiful truth that it sought to express :

"The good or bad fortune of a nation depends on three factors: its Constitution, the way the Constitution is made to work, and the respect it inspires."

Georges Bidault

At the turn of the century, the Constitution of India, which has the distinction of being amongst the longest written Constitutions in the world, will complete 50 years of existence. Amongst Constitutional scholars, there are those who will point out, and rightly so, that as Constitutions go, this is not an unusual occurrence. They will draw our attention towards the Constitution of the United States of America which celebrated its bicentennial a little less than a decade ago. However, other scholars would remind us of the experience of nations like France, which has, since the French Revolution in 1789, changed its Constitution as many as five times. The Indian experience becomes noteworthy because of the political uncertainty that is so characteristic of the times that we live in. A decade ago, the Soviet Union was one of the two superpowers of the planet; today, the many small independent States that formed part of the erstwhile Soviet Union are tussling with immense uncertainties in their social, economic and political arenas. The Republic of India will celebrate 50 years of its independence next year, the event will be a fitting tribute to the sagacity, wisdom and foresight of the Framers of its Constitution. Those great visionaries succeeded in engraving into one document, the values and policies that enabled the diversities that abounded within the many small states that comprised the territory of nascent India, to be blended into one single nation.

Having said that, it must be noted that the efforts of the Framers, and the results thereof, have not always met with unanimous approval; the *grundnorm* of our nation has been criticised on several fronts and, any serious attempt at evaluating the Constitution must address these criticisms. Every now and then, scholars publish articles and treatises exhorting the need for setting up a new Constituent Assembly.

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