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January 01, 2015

First Published: 22:01 IST(1/1/2015)

Last Updated: 11:17 IST(2/1/2015)

 Print

Food for thought: Parties should reward their foot soldiers amply

Mamata Banerjee and Narendra Modi, the ultimate didi and dada of Indian politics, should really commiserate. They have a similar problem — chelera, “boys”, didi calls them, indulgently, though an increasing fraction of them are actually female, and a few of them might be pushing 60. These are the foot soldiers of every political party, those who get out the vote, man the rallies, shout the slogans, laugh at the stupidest jokes. They are the ones who might be needed to capture booths or keep others from capturing them, who break up Opposition rallies and threaten potential voters, but also show up with help when there is a celebration or a tragedy. The MLAs and MPs can promise the earth and drive away, but the boys have to be there to face the music when it does not show up and try to do something about it.

The question for every political party is how to compensate them for the useful (at least to the party) work they do. The Communists and the RSS actually used to try to pay them enough to live on — the so-called full-timers — before rising prices and expectations about living standards made that unaffordable. Now it is more a combination of ideological rewards, old-fashioned extortion and rents from political office.

Ideological reward is of course what the Communists and the RSS primarily offer — the opportunity to work for a nation shaped by your own beliefs.

Extortion is simple: Builders in West Bengal claim that unless you are close to the party in power you must buy your sand, bricks or cement from the boys. At a mark up, of course. And then there is the worry that the cement is actually more sand. The same goes for shopkeepers and factory owners — the local boys need to be kept happy, ideally by hiring a few of them.

This is not new; it started somewhere in the Left Front years, maybe even before. But every time power shifts, say because the municipality shifted hands, the previous set of claimants need to be thrown out, and given the political culture of West Bengal, inherited from the Naxal years, this often means somebody getting badly hurt.

The ability to keep these benefits flowing by getting the relevant authorities (such as the police) to look the other way is, of course, one of the rents from political power. But there is a whole variety of others; control of local governments means control over who gets construction projects. It is no accident that everyone I once interviewed in a particular Trinamool Congress campaign office, from the office boy to the district head to the actual candidate, was a contractor.

There are also jobs — Mamata Banerjee as railways minister hired a bunch of her boys, probably not on the grounds that they were the best qualified (think of that when you trust your life to the railways). Then there are bribes — from the defaulting PDS shop owner, for example. And there is straight theft — of MGNREGA money and the rest.

From the point of view of the parties these are just currencies to pay their boys; but the culture it creates leaves nothing untainted. The assumption that the law is just an inconvenience and that might is right creates people like Tapas Pal, and an environment where Muslim families in Birbhum turn to the BJP for protection from the local Trinamool Congress goons.

For someone like Banerjee who came in with the very heartening slogan of “badal chai, badla noy” — the alliteration does not work in English, but the words are “we want change, not revenge” — all of this poses a real dilemma, just as it must for Modi. I don’t doubt that Banerjee wants change just as I don’t doubt that Modi wants development, but both change and development take time and in the meanwhile what do you have to offer the front-line workers for their hard work leading up to the elections (I am told that in Uttar Pradesh during the Lok Sabha elections someone was tasked to reach the latest message from Modi to every household in his neighbourhood, on a weekly or even daily basis)?

Under the law the government is simply not allowed to do anything special for the winning party’s workers. But defaulting on these obligations is not an option either — if the boys feel betrayed this time around, next time they won’t show up. This is why both Banerjee and Modi end up repaying them in the currency of indulgence — by looking the other way when the boys stretch the limits of their new-found power to impunity and well beyond. This is why rapists can be “naughty boys” to Banerjee and Modi remains silent about the many recent excesses of the VHP and their brethren, despite the fact that in both cases it undermines their ability to deliver on their broader agenda. This is also why I think both Banerjee and Modi are fated to keep disappointing their admirers in the chattering classes.

My wish for the new year is a more rational way of organising political parties. We need parties that pay their boys decent salaries for being the professionals they could be — which will require reforming the way our parties get funded (more about that in the next instalment) — rather than the proto-criminals they end up becoming because of the way the system works. This does not mean that there will be no goons — it will take time to purge the violence in our system — and it does not mean that there would be no ideology. People will still join the parties they like — but they could now focus on the job of serving the people better and thereby building support for their party, rather than trying to figure out a way to turn their political connections into a living. And hopefully for many of them who join politics because they are not qualified for other jobs, this will be an opportunity to build skills and get ahead in life, instead of being doomed to grow old, forever a boy.

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