

People Power

Fruits of Freedom - for Whom?

A large-sized district in India is larger than about eighty (80) nation-states in the world in terms of population. Most of our larger states would be among the large nations of the world. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and West Bengal - each would be the largest nation in Europe if independent. Even a truncated Uttar Pradesh would be the world's sixth largest nation!

Given these mind-boggling demographic realities, coupled with unmatched diversity, our centralized, somewhat imperial style of governance is archaic and ineffective.

An incident during British Raj some 80 years ago illustrates the absurdity of over-centralization in a democratic polity in the 21st century. Chittaranjan Das (CR Das), the great Bengali patriot, was elected as Mayor of the newly constituted Calcutta municipal corporation in 1924. Das argued with the then British authorities that as the head of the elected local government he should have the right to appoint the chief executive officer (commissioner) of the city government. The British offered him the services of any ICS officer he chose. Das declined and won the right to appoint his own official. He then picked a bright young 27 year old as the commissioner. He was none other than Subhash Chandra Bose!

The story did not end there. Bose did an outstanding job as the city administrator and gained wide recognition in a few months. Several months later, he was arrested as a suspected terrorist and detained in Alipore Jail. CR Das again insisted that Bose did a great job, the charges against him were unrelated to his work as the city official, and the elected local government could not be denied his services. Amazingly, the colonial government relented, and directed that Bose should continue as the commissioner even while in custody! Files were sent to him in jail, and his orders were carried out. This extraordinary practice continued until Bose was exiled to Mandalay in Burma. Bose went on to become Mayor of Calcutta in 1930, and later Congress President in 1938 and 39.

One hesitates to recount this story for fear of giving ideas to our political and bureaucratic masters who, based on this precedent, might insist on continuing in office when jailed for bribery or murder! But the episode does illustrate the strength of local governments even during colonial days. Today, even a 'B' grade municipality has no authority to appoint its own civil servants, or enforce accountability.

A friend in the suburbs of Chicago told me that he pays \$8000 per year as school tax to his county. Once there is a clear link between taxes paid and services rendered, tax-payers will demand better quality services and hold public officials to account. In the absence of such a link between taxes and services and because most public services are of appalling quality, our tax compliance is low and resistance to taxation is high.

A republic is judged not by the pomp and pageantry, nor by the display of power on state occasions. The quality of water supply, access to public health, functioning of schools, adequacy of storm water drains, sewerage and sanitary facilities, and traffic regulation and order on the streets - these determine the greatness of a republic. Thanks to over-

centralization, most public expenditure goes down the drain. The services and public goods we get do not account for even a fraction of the total public expenditure. All the basic amenities and services that make life worth living are in a state of disrepair. Look at education, health care, water supply, drainage, roads and myriad other public services. As a rule, if we can afford we choose private alternatives – like in education and health care, we opt for them at high cost. Where private goods are not possible, like roads and drains, we suffer in silence and fume in impotent anger.

The link between our taxes paid and services rendered is non-existent. No wonder, we all made tax evasion and avoidance a highly creative national pastime!

There are those who argue that local people do not have enough knowledge or skills, and local governments tend to be corrupt. When the British argued that we were not fit for freedom, our leaders pointed out that good government was no substitute to self-government. They had to grudgingly admit that the British did give good government, and yet we fought for our freedom. Today, centralized government has become a repository of corruption, incompetence and misgovernance. What we have in the name of governance is constitutional brigandage and legal plunder. The struggle today is plainly between centralized bad government and local self government.

The notion that citizens have no capacity to understand their self-interest and are incapable of taking charge of their own lives at local level is absurd in a democracy. And yet, we extol the virtues and wisdom of voters when they exercise their franchise in electing state and national governments. Many of us admire China's rapid economic growth in recent years. But we often ignore the fact that the employment and exports in China are powered by the millions of town and village enterprises (TVEs) with the support and active participation of local governments. One of the ironies of contemporary history is authoritarian and communist China is far more decentralized than liberal democratic India!

It is true that locally elected governments are likely to be as decent or corrupt as centralized governments. There is no greater morality in municipal governments. But as the government is local, and people understand the links between their vote and public good, and taxes and services, they will assert to hold the government to account and improve the quality of our democracy.

On April 5, 2002, Prime Minister Vajpayee and Opposition leader Sonia Gandhi addressed the Panchayat sammelan, and both promised to amend the constitution and make it mandatory for states to transfer powers, functions and resources to local governments. As the Urdu saying goes, if Bibi and Miyan both seek the marriage, then who is the Kazi to stop it? It is time that ruling coalition and opposition delivered on their promise and allowed little republics to flourish all over. Only then will fruits of freedom reach our people, and our national holidays will be occasions for genuine celebration, instead of meaningless rituals.

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