

I was an MP

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I was an MP not very long ago. I loved those six years. Everyone called me sir, not because of my age but because I was an MP. And even though I never travelled anywhere by train during those years, I revealed in the fact that I could have gone anywhere I liked, on any train, first class with a bogey reserved for my family. Whenever I flew, there were always people around to pick up my baggage, not because I was travelling business class but because I was an MP. And yes, whenever I wrote to any Government officer to help someone in need, it was done. No, not because I was a journalist but because I was an MP.

The job had many perquisites, apart from the tax free wage of Rs 4,000. Then the wages were suddenly quadrupled to Rs 16,000, with office expenses of Rs 20,000 and a constituency allowance of Rs 20,000 thrown in. I could borrow interest free money to buy a car, get my petrol paid, make as many free phone calls as I wanted. My home came free. So did the furniture, the electricity, the water, the gardeners, the plants. There were also allowances to wash curtains and sofa covers and a rather funny allowance of Rs 1,000 per day to attend Parliament, which I always thought was an MP's job in the first place! And, O yes, we also got Rs 1 crore a year (now enhanced to Rs 2 crore) to spend on our constituencies. More enterprising MPs enjoyed many more perquisites best left to your imagination. While I was embarrassed being vastly overpaid for the job I was doing, they kept demanding more.

Today, out of 543 MPs in Lok Sabha, 315 are crorepatis. That's 60%. 43 out of the 54 newly elected Rajya Sabha MPs are also millionaires. Their average declared assets are over Rs 25 crore each. That's an awfully wealthy lot of people in whose hands we have vested our destiny. The assets of your average Lok Sabha MP have grown from Rs 1.86 crore in the last house to Rs 5.33 crore. That's 200% more. And, as we all know, not all our MPs are known to always declare all their assets. Much of these exist in a colour not recognised by our tax laws. That's fine, I guess. Being an MP gives you certain immunities, not all of them meant to be discussed in a public forum.

If you think it pays to be in the ruling party, you are dead right: 7 out of 10 MPs from the Congress are crorepatis. The BJP have 5 MPs from some of the smaller parties like SAD, TRS and JD (Secular) are all crorepatis while the NCP, DMK, RLD, BSP, Shiv Sena, National Conference and Samajwadi Party have more crorepatis than the 60% average. Only the CPM and the Trinamool, the two Bengal based parties, don't field crorepatis. The CPM has 1 crorepati out of 16 MPs; the Trinamool has 7 out of 19. This shows in the state-wise average. West Bengal and Kerala have few crorepati MPs while Punjab and Delhi have only crorepati MPs and Haryana narrowly misses out on this distinction with one MP, poor guy, who's not a crorepati.

Do MPs become richer in office? Sure they do. Statistics show that the average assets of 304 MPs who contested in 2004 and then re-contested last year grew 300%. And, yes, we're only talking about declared assets here. But then, we can't complain. We are the ones who vote for the rich. Over 33% of those with assets above Rs 5 crore won the last elections while 99.5% of those with assets below Rs 10 lakhs lost! Apart from West Bengal and the North East, every other state voted for crorepati MPs. Haryana grabbed first place with its average MP worth Rs 18 crore. Andhra is not far behind at 16.

But no, this is not enough for our MPs. It's not enough that they are rich, infinitely richer than those who they represent, and every term makes them even richer. It's not enough that they openly perpetuate their families in power. It's not enough that all their vulgar indulgences and more are paid for by you and me through back breaking taxes. It's not enough that the number of days they actually work in Parliament are barely 60 in a year. The rest of the time goes in squabbling and ranting. Now they want a 500% pay hike and perquisites quadrupled. The Government, to buy peace, has already agreed to a 300% raise but that's not good enough for our MPs. They want more, much more.

And no, I'm not even mentioning that 150 MPs elected last year have criminal cases against them, with 73 serious, very serious cases ranging from rape to murder. Do you really think these people deserve to earn 104 times what the average Indian earns? □□□

[courtesy : Brig Mahalingam]