

Politics of 'Package'

Congress is struggling hard to both project itself as a national entity which it is no more and preserve its hegemony at the centre at any cost. So a package to the tune of Rs 45000 crore for Uttar Pradesh, totaling about half of the demands made by the Samajwadi Party government! Whether this much benevolence of Sonia Gandhi's Congress, just on the eve of presidential poll can send a wrong signal or not matters little to the Gandhi dynasty and the sycophants who think Indian democracy cannot survive without a dynastic rule. What they mean is business—give and take. And they would like to win presidential election by any means, fair or foul, albeit this constitutional supreme authority has very little to do in governance. A few weeks back Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself announced a package for Assam which again is his home turf. The people of Kashmir are familiar with package deals that are being announced at every critical juncture to pacify the aggrieved. So is the case with the people of North-east that has been an ethnic cauldron for long with no signs of discontent abating. That Samajwadi Party extended its support to the Congress-sponsored presidential candidate well in advance is not without reason. Support is always conditional whether they admit it in public or not.

But this package money is being looted by local satraps all in the name of development. The Centre has evolved over the years this dole-disbursing mechanism to perpetually keep the states on toes so that they are being forced to knock at the doors of the Centre all the time, with begging bowls. The hard reality is that states generate revenues only to get deprived of them by the Centre. Centralisation of power at the centre has reached such a stage that federalism as envisaged in the world's longest written constitution, now at worst a mockery of constitutional democracy. Most regional parties came into existence as a defiance to the central authority and its continual efforts to concentrate all powers at the centre, reducing states to greater municipalities. Not for nothing left parties, including communist parties, once raised the issue of colonial treatment of states by the Centre and it got wide support particularly in Bengal. This way or that the British colonial legacy is being systematically replicated in managing Centre-State relations. And they think package can wash. Given the present state of affairs, federalism cannot fall from the sky. Then regionalists look too clever by half in their quest for sticking to the idea of true federal structure. These parties don't even raise the question of how the Sarkaria Commission report has been buried once and for all.

The issue of Centre-State relations is as old as the Indian constitution. So is the arbitrariness in delineating state boundaries as the 'States Reorganisation Committee' was an unfinished agenda of the Centre. This unfinished agenda gave birth to numerous smaller states that again face further atomisation at the district or sub-district level on ethnicity grounds. Ironically enough, these autonomous councils are being treated by their respective states in the same way as the Centre treats them. They are at worst their small colonial outposts, both in terms of decision-making and its execution.

For one thing regional parties in most cases have lost their relevance when judged against their dubious role in articulating regional aspirations. Congress—or for that matter its main opposition rival Bharatiya Janata Party—has learnt and perfected the art of assimilating local lords into their fold over the years. Initially they used to accommodate regional politicians into their elite club using carrot and stick as well to crush regional movements for more autonomy. And now they just make regional parties their sleeping partners in what is called coalition culture. Regional satraps too look satisfied with the arrangement as they have at least limited access to central corpus. Autonomy Movements in some parts of the country seem to be developing as secessionist tendencies. It can't be otherwise in a situation that refuses to dilute this unitary model of administration. Regional parties cannot unite on a common issue against a common target and their fiefdom-mentality continues to preserve old principality status under a democratic facade. So package-deal works and Congress succeeds in tiding over immediate crisis.

As regional politics as it is in today's India, has failed to break the shackles of unitary and authoritarian set up at the centre, local aspiration for more federalism is bound to find itself expressed in secessionism. Despite brutal repression by Indian military and para-military forces, secessionism continues to flourish in the North-East. Unless states are re-organised on the basis of true federal polity, secessionism will be the logical outcome. Package won't be able to buy peace all the time and in that event mass upsurge is inevitable.

People want to live with a semblance of dignity free from tyranny and continuous anxiety over the future. But regional parties are no less authoritarian in their approach to popular protests. As a result they are defeating the very purpose for which they were created in the first place. For all practical purposes, regional politics has gone berserk, devouring its friends and foes alike, not so much because of fear of the central stick but because local lords want to steer the destiny in their own direction, ignoring popular demands and expectations. As a consequence an environment of chaos is being deliberately incited and people are being led to believe what all they can achieve is 'package' and they are losing belief in freedom as a collective endeavour while their urge for the change for the better is disrupted or misdirected.

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