

Elections and freebies

A common practice observed by political parties on the eve of elections to the State Legislatures or Parliament in a democratic state is that they issue manifestos highlighting the main trends of their policy if they are returned to power. It is called election manifesto or poli manifesto, and a copy of the same is forwarded to the office of the Election Commission. The essence of a democracy is majority vote and all political parties try to win larger sections of society to their side and the ideology they want to pursue. Generally speaking, the purpose of election campaigns undertaken on the eve of elections is to inform, educate and convince the electorate on what the concerned political party would be doing if returned to power. The tasks they set forth for themselves usually have the main component of public welfare because this is what the common people are mostly interested in. In other words it means that the voters are expected to vote according to the type of service the party promises to render and the facilities which the party would be disposed to offer if returned to power.

But looking in retrospect on the nature and contours of election in our country, we find political parties have been deviating from the recognized principal of playing a fair game. They vie with one another in announcing freebies to the voters in their constituencies. A freebie is a free gift intended to serve as a sort of allurements or attraction for the voters. And politicians know fairly well what the immediate requirements of the voters are. Very often, freebies are attractive and alluring, and most of the people would not like to lose these. Being an illiterate lot or not being really interested in understanding what priority requirements of the locality or the constituency are, voters make themselves happy with the freebies and the candidate giving freebie happier with a vote in return.

The practice of political parties giving freebies on the eve of elections has come under severe criticism from the civil society. It says that such announcements tantamount to violating the election rules. Many a time prospective candidates and parties announce freebies that would result in imbalance to national interests. Things like the party would give just one rupee a kilo of rice for the poor or a free laptop to each student of the constituency, or other perks which national economy is unable to bear.

Realising that freebies violate the impartial and free elections, the Election Commission convened a meeting of various national and regional level parties to discuss the question of disallowing the parties the freedom of announcing freebies on the eve of elections. Interestingly except Bahujan Samaj Party, all other party representatives to the meeting opposed Election Commission's perception of banning announcement of freebies. 'But on the other hand, claiming that it is the right of parties to announce poll manifestos, the Congress, BJP and Left parties are on a common platform in opposing the EC move in the wake of the Supreme Court judgment asking the Commission to frame guidelines on poll manifestos to regulate freebies. It is noteworthy that two regional level parties namely Nagaland Peoples' Front and Mizo National Front, besides BSP, expressed their support to banning freebies on the eve of elections. The ground situation is that in the light of the verdict of the Supreme Court, the Election Commission has to define the freebies and the areas of freebies that could come under a ban.

Political parties and the Election Commission have made their stand known on the issue. Major national mainstream parties have rejected the suggestion on the plea that it means restricting freedom of political parties. They further argue that political parties are well aware to what extent they can go in announcing freebies and no curbs should be imposed on them. How can a democratic system thrive if the political parties are disallowed from making public commitments in large gatherings?

However, there are many who would not buy this theory and this line of argument. In a multi-party system, what may be suitable for the electorate from the perception of one party may not necessarily be the perception of other parties? Democracy is a highly competitive political enterprise and in such situations there is likelihood of stakeholders going to any length, rational as well as irrational in a bid to woo more and more people. The fact is that our voters have to do more to come up to the standard where they can without error decide to vote for the right candidate. In rural India, the culture of caste, class and community considerations is still intact and wields enormous influence. People can be sensitized on any local issue because the rural India is essentially conservative. A political leader struggling for majoritarian vote in his constituency can go to any length of touching the sensitivity of his rural audience. In the process he can make unrestricted announcement of freebies which the unsuspecting masses area ready to buy. This is not a healthy trend and it will not help in bringing prosperity to the nation. The people have to be educated on the value of their vote.

We would appeal to the leadership of all national mainstream parties to keep the nation above their party. They must think in terms of the nation and not just the party that might be under focus. Announcing freebies on the eve of elections is a sign of poverty of confidence. People are sensible enough to evaluate each public functionary's intentions and methods. Therefore the time of political gimmicking is gone and the era of harsh ground reality has emerged within our sight. Freebies are a corrupting method of sorts and people, by and large, dislike it. Let there be further discussion on this important subject on inter-party and intra-party basis and come to a unanimous decision. If an agreed formula is hammered out, it would be a historic decision that will strengthen our democratic system enormously.

Happy Independence Day?

Independence Day in Mumbai always makes me sad rather than happy. No uplifting images from the freedom movement fill my head, they are blotted out by the sight of malnourished, barefoot street children selling flags and tricolor brooches at traffic lights. Some of these children I know well because I feed them breakfast every day through a small programme I started long ago called 'Nashta'. When I see them on the eve of Independence Day standing in rain wet streets, trying late into the night, to sell those drooping flags and metal brooches I am reminded of what I believe to be independent India's greatest betrayal: the criminal neglect of her children.

Surely in 65 years of freedom we should have succeeded at the very least in giving every Indian child half a chance at leading a relatively healthy life. It would not have been too much to ask if we had not always followed the wrong policies. We have come up with such schemes as the 'world's largest children's welfare programme', the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) that has been mostly useless but instead of coming up with new ways of dealing with the problem political leaders in Delhi have simply gone on to give us more of the same.

This year I found the sight of these children particularly poignant because unbeknownst to them their leaders are planning to spend hundreds of thousands of crore rupees in their name on a food security bill that will make no difference to their lives. Even if their homeless, and wretchedly poor families manage to find a way of getting the grain they are entitled to they will continue to be malnour-

ished because the problem is more complicated than our policy makers appear to realize. How do I know this? Because of 'Nashta' and because some of the children I fed ten years ago, when the programme began, now have children of their own and their problems are to do with not getting the right kind food rather than not getting enough food. Some months ago Surekha, whom I have known since she was ten, rang me in a panic to tell me that her two year old son needed hospitalization because of what appeared to be

ON THE SPOT TAVLEEN SINGH

an attack of whooping cough. When I spoke to the doctors who were treating him they said that the reason why he had the persistent cough was because he was severely malnourished. 'All he gets to eat in the day is 'pao' (bread) and tea and what he needs is upma, vegetables and milk.' It made me restart 'Nashta' which had lapsed temporarily in between. So Surekha's son now gets one meal of upma, vegetables and milk every morning as do a group of about twenty children who live with him on a pavement off Mumbai's glittering Marine Drive.

If Sonia Gandhi were really interested in the health of Indian children, half of whom are officially malnourished, what she would be spending money on would be the sort of soup kitchens that churches run in European and American cities. But, she wants a big, dramatic gesture that she hopes will help her son become prime minister after the 2014 general

election so we are landed with an expensive food bill that is almost certainly going to be as much of a dud as the anti-poverty programmes successive Congress prime ministers have invested in since 1947.

It is India's bad luck that no State Governments or opposition leaders have challenged the new food bill on grounds of efficacy until last week when Narendra Modi took up the cause. From excerpts of a letter he has written to the Prime Minister that the Indian Express carried on the eve of Independence Day, I learned that he has warned the prime

minister that the new law will not be able to provide food security to the poor. He said, "A meeting of the chief ministers of states needs to be called before the matter is finalized by Parliament, a step which should have been taken on such an important Centre-state issue, and which has not been taken so far."

Hopefully if this meeting does happen chief ministers will point out that instead of vast, centralized, unwieldy schemes what India's hungry children need are smaller programmes run by NGOs like Akshaypatra which has shown in Karnataka how much difference one square meal can make in a child's life. After Akshaypatra started their programme of supplying midday meals in Bangalore's schools statistics showed a dramatic improvement in school attendance and a simultaneous improvements in results. All that Akshaypatra does is provide one nutritious meal a day

in which children can eat as much as they want. Often these are children whose parents can afford to give them no more than a cup of tea in the morning before they come to school. There are other NGO's who run similar programmes that are funded by big private corporations, religious trusts and charitable organizations. It is something that every Indian who has enough to eat could do in a small way in their own neighbourhood and if they do not it is mostly because the leit-motif of the kind of India we have built since 1947 is that of a paternalistic, omnipotent, all-embracing state. The dynasty that has ruled India for nearly all of the past 65 years has taken full advantage of this and taxpayers money has been used for welfare programmes that bear the names of one or other member of this dynasty.

Sonia Gandhi now hopes that the food security bill, when passed, will make voters believe that it is her generosity and her personal intervention that has gone towards providing cheap food grain to seventy percent of the population of India. It is our misfortune that she has been backed publicly by an eminent economist like Amartya Sen who seems unable to see that the new law cannot work.

So we are likely to see many more Independence Days when in the mean streets of our cities small children will stand around selling cheap versions of the national flag and cheap tricolor brooches in the hope that they will make enough to buy some food that day. Forgive me for not having thoughts of honour, glory and national pride on this August 15 but I can think of almost nothing to celebrate.

Minister in 2009 was only with a hope to have the change of heart of the Pakistani rulers with intent to establishing peace, man borders in de - escalated atmosphere, stopping of terror activities in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and resolution of disputes and problems through talks, dialogues and conversations. Even that too did not work at all. At the start, when it surfaced that Nawaz Sharif, even before assuming office, was extended an invitation to visit India as "I had a call from him (PM Manmohan Singh) yesterday (May 12), a long chat on the phone", the Chief of the staff of Pakistan army, Gen. Kayani called on Nawaz Sharif and "advised" him not to take any hasty steps in an air of over enthusiasm for bettering the relations with India and that he should not go over board in this matter. In any democracy worth the name, never shall an army chief try to influence political decisions of the elected chief executive which are of very important nature and that also when not concerning army or defence matters. He very impliedly conveyed to Nawaz Sharif the unwritten but very much prevalent practice of Pakistan army, to meddle in the political affairs of the country and most of the critical decisions to be moulded as per the wishes of the army there. How can otherwise the sudden spurt in intrusion, terror and other aggressive activities from Pakistan against India be accounted for, ever since Nawaz Sharif "settled" himself as Prime Minister of Pakistan early this year?

The encouraging statements initially given by Sharif and the gestures of friendship shown, have proved to be proverbial "all that glitters is not gold" and there appears to be no change of heart, no aspirations to have a flexible approach free from prejudice and malice in both the top brass of the army or the powerful ISI there, who matter the most in the Pakistan polity. India wanted to go ahead, putting aside the feelings of the severest damages suffered on account of the obnoxious proxy war of terror and hate launched by Pakistan for the last three decades against this country, only to restart the dialogue process and contribute towards confidence building measures but even a simple step of according India the "most preferred nation" status for economic and trade considerations could not be taken by Pakistan, let alone keep contentious issues in suspended animation for a couple of years. That has not happened and is unlikely to happen in comparison with the series of border violations by Pakistan tearing apart the agreement of 2003 followed by martyring of our soldiers in addition to trying hard to push infiltrations of ultras and other criminal elements indoctrinated to create disturbances and keep Jammu and Kashmir simmering, not only the valley but shockingly, now, even the areas of Jammu division. That as many as 28 terrorists have been eliminated during the past less than two months while crossing to this side or inside the hinterland with full facilitation from the Pakistan army, speaks how much seriously can India take the commitment to contain infiltration activities by Pakistan or stopping its soil for such activities against this country.

Exposed internationally, Pakistan has now contributed in a big magnitude towards frustrating, rather undermining any efforts of Indian government to talk, discuss and dialogue about peace and friendship with it only to have an alibi and legitimize its brazen and bizarre involvement in the state of Jammu and Kashmir by creating disturbances and keep the area in a perpetual state of trouble and strife. The National Assembly (Parliament) of that country has passed a resolution against India accusing it of "unprovoked aggression by Indian military forces across the LOC, and also (that it) condemns the attacks on the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi". It remains a mystery as to when and where has Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi been

Tension at borders

Dr Satish Misra

Ceasefire violations at the India-Pakistan border and killing of five Indian soldiers on August 6 by Pakistani Army are indeed intriguing as they belie all hope that had been aroused after a democratically elected Government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assumed power in June this year.

For almost a week, tensions have been mounting along the Line of Control as Pakistani troops violated the ceasefire twice on August 12 and again on August 13. In total, Pakistani troops violated the ceasefire eight times in the last four days.

At the same time, intrusions by People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China into the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in April this year and thereafter aggressive patrolling also defy normal logic. It also raises some vital questions like if there is a collusive understanding between Beijing and Islamabad or there is something more than meets the eye.

Reasons for an unexpected aggression on country's northern and western borders are possibly rooted in not only a close Sino-Pak relationship but also in the nature of the new regimes that have assumed power in China and Pakistan. Mixed with the coming of new power equations prevailing and evolving in Beijing and Islamabad, is the India domestic situation.

While the two new regimes in our immediate neighbourhood are trying to redefine their relationship with their respective Armed Forces, prevailing political uncertainty in the country invites inimical forces to fish in troubled waters.

Both in China as well as in Pakistan, military establishments are the most powerful institutions in policy making as well as decision making. Relatively young leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang assumed charge as the president and prime minister of China in March this year replacing the old leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

Similarly, Islamabad witnessed a democratic change when an elected Pakistan People's Party led Government was replaced by another democratically elected Government of Pakistan Muslim League (N) in June this year.

Power struggle for supremacy between the Government and Military is but natural and its manifestation at borders with India may have been one of reasons for more frequent military tensions.

Another reason for Pakistani aggression on borders is the impending withdrawal rather draw-down of the US forces in Afghanistan. Pakistani Army, particularly its powerful ISI which had developed into a powerful institution over the years, has always considered Afghanistan its backyard and removal of Taliban regime by the US-led forces in Kabul in 2001 has not gone well with Pakistan military establishment particularly the ISI.

While it could do very little directly in Afghanistan in the

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presence of the US-led international forces, it did all it could to support Taliban-led militancy that was aimed at destabilising civilian regime of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. ISI left no opportunity to trouble the Government in Kabul and it never liked India's role in Afghanistan. India's developmental aid and establishment of strategic ties between New Delhi and Kabul was deeply resented by Islamabad in general and its military establishment in particular.

Emerging security and political uncertainty in the backdrop of impending presidential election in 2014 possibly has emboldened Pakistani military to take recourse to adventurism and what has facilitated this approach is deep domestic discord in India.

The Congress-led UPA Government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh entered fifth year in office in May this year and country has to elect a new Government in early months of the next year. The political uncertainty has further worsened by scandals and scams. Economic problems like falling rupee value in international markets and decelerating industrial production along with rising prices of essential commodities has further compounded the political situation.

Aggression displayed by Pakistan and China at border results gives birth to jingoism where political parties compete with each other demanding retaliatory measures against so called enemies without making a cost benefit analysis of such an action.

Decision taking capacity of a Government awaiting elections in less than nine months is further constrained by the absence of a consensus on foreign policy issues. Country's foreign policy has become the worst victim of the erosion of consensus on major foreign policy issues. Two national parties-the Congress and the BJP-have abandoned bipartisan approach on country's foreign policy which used to be India's strength.

It began in 2005 during the first UPA Government when the BJP opposed tooth and nail the Indo-US nuclear deal. In subsequent years, every single foreign policy move, whether country's ties with its neighbours are at stake or with major powers are concerned, has been opposed by the opposition particularly by the principal opposition party-the BJP.

Relations with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and other neighbours have thus come under serious stress and strain as an elected Government in New Delhi is not able to stand to its promises given to friends in the neighbourhood. Land border agreement and Teesta water accord with Bangladesh and bilateral strategic cooperation with Sri Lanka in forms of military training to Sri Lanka forces are few examples of the prevailing chaos in the field of country's foreign policy.

Statements coming from the opposition that if it came to power decisions of the earlier Government would be rolled back have not helped the country's cause or for that matter furthered vital national interests. Government's commitments being no more sacrosanct, which foreign Government would like to do business is a question that is haunting the country's foreign policy?

If country's present friends are dismayed with New Delhi's inability to honour its word then countries harbouring historical animosity are bound to exploit India's domestic weakness and this seems to be happening on country's two borders. [IFS]

Of peace and resolutions

Shiban Khaibri

While China should continue to be our immediate concern looking to its continued efforts to increasingly develop the best infrastructure in the most vulnerable Himalayan region close to Tibet and its spate of incursions in strategic Ladakh region to the extent of even attempting to prevent our army from patrolling our posts in this sector, there seems to be a conspiracy to stagger India's attention towards the continued aggressive postures by Pakistan in the shape of border violations, infiltrations, terrorist threats, firing at our posts and even killing of our jawans in cold ambush by its army. This phenomenon has got spiraled since early June this year when the change of guard in Pakistan took place ostensibly democratically for the first time since Pakistan was created. India never expected this especially when Nawaz Sharif made "peace with India" as one of the main poll planks. That was taken on the simplest face value by the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh who in the best Indian traditions of ushering in and tangibly working for peace, welcomed it in such a way that while the counting of votes was underway in Pakistan, he congratulated Nawaz Sharif in advance conveying "India's desire to work with your government to chart a new course and pursue a new destiny in the relations between our countries." Without going into the merits of choosing time and text of the message, let the intentions be analyzed and no body shall dispute the inherent sincerity and seriousness of Indian government and the people to have lasting peace and intimate friendly relations with that country.

After Nawaz Sharif's taking over as Prime Minister of Pakistan, the emerging ground realities proved that we were merely hoping against the hope. The flexibility, even unaffordable and not warranted under any circumstances, shown at Sharm-el-Sheikh by the Indian Prime

Minister in 2009 was only with a hope to have the change of heart of the Pakistani rulers with intent to establishing peace, man borders in de - escalated atmosphere, stopping of terror activities in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and resolution of disputes and problems through talks, dialogues and conversations. Even that too did not work at all. At the start, when it surfaced that Nawaz Sharif, even before assuming office, was extended an invitation to visit India as "I had a call from him (PM Manmohan Singh) yesterday (May 12), a long chat on the phone", the Chief of the staff of Pakistan army, Gen. Kayani called on Nawaz Sharif and "advised" him not to take any hasty steps in an air of over enthusiasm for bettering the relations with India and that he should not go over board in this matter. In any democracy worth the name, never shall an army chief try to influence political decisions of the elected chief executive which are of very important nature and that also when not concerning army or defence matters. He very impliedly conveyed to Nawaz Sharif the unwritten but very much prevalent practice of Pakistan army, to meddle in the political affairs of the country and most of the critical decisions to be moulded as per the wishes of the army there. How can otherwise the sudden spurt in intrusion, terror and other aggressive activities from Pakistan against India be accounted for, ever since Nawaz Sharif "settled" himself as Prime Minister of Pakistan early this year?

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Role of youth

Sir,

In order to play an effective role in nation building process, youth of the country should remain in touch with their culture heritage. It may look strange that some youth in this State do not know about their local heroes like Baba Jitto, Comrade Dhanvantri etc and are unaware of their roots.

They have a great responsibility to preserve this heritage. Besides, they should work for empowerment of women and eradication of evils like child labour and beggary from the society. The youth today is no doubt tech savvy, but at the same time they should not shun moral and ethical values which is core of Indian philosophy.

Yours etc.....
Nek Chand
Reasi

Yours etc....
Ashutosh Jasrotia
Hiranagar

Readers Write

RTI Act amendment

Sir,

Amendments in RTI Act would make it ineffective in making political parties accountable to people of this country. The proposed amendment will make it clear that the definition of public authority shall not include any political party registered under the Representation of the Peoples Act.

Time and again, it has been proved that any Bill in which political parties have their own skin involved leave no stone unturned to get it passed or rejected. Regarding RTI Act, there is near unanimity across the political spectrum on the issues of keeping political parties out of the ambit of the RTI Act, and it will take them no time to get it amended in their favour.

It does not matter them whether they pass any other bill. Women's Reservation Bill has been pending before the House from so many years.

Yours etc.....
Radhika Sharma
New Plots, Jammu