



Policies & Perspectives



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When Privileges are Demanded as Elite Rights

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*Is democracy in India a rule through the rights of the privileged, by the privileged and for the privileged This may sound hyperbolic and even facetious. After all, when the nation gained independence seventy years ago, all its citizens regardless of class, caste, religion or socio-economic status, became equal citizens. The Constitution of India, which was adopted in 1950, codified this spirit. And everyone had the right to vote. Like for the Soviets in late 1980s and early 1990s in a different way, freedom had come to us all of a sudden. The 2015 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Svetlana Alexievich, writes in her book, *Second-Hand Time* “Freedom had materialised out of thin air everyone was intoxicated by it, but no one had really been prepared. Where was this freedom Only around kitchen tables, where out of habit people continued to badmouth the government.”*

But the Indians were prepared despite the suddenness, unlike the Russians for whom Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev appeared from nowhere to turn the good old Soviet nion topsyturvy rewriting old rules and framing concepts of freedom and economic liberalisation which were as distant to the citizenry as the stars, to be looked at and secretly longed for but never to be imagined as being gained. Our freedom-fighters drawn from the Left, Right and Centre had been straining against the shackles of colonisation for decades, and everybody knew it was a matter of time before the British left. Even the colonisers knew, and so they drew out plans for interim governance with representation from Indian leaders. When they finally left in August 1947, though not before partitioning the country into two and leaving the Indians and the Pakistanis to sort out the human tragedies the divide brought with it, barely an Indian must have experienced what Alexievich says, as having “bowed under its (freedom’s) yoke”.

To argue that Indian democracy has become a handmaiden of the privileged sounds even more unbelievable in the contemporary context where a party worker of humble beginnings and shorn of any entitlement economic or family has risen to be the country’s Prime Minister. He is not the only one years ago HD Deve Gowda, who called himself a “humble farmer”, was catapulted to the post much against his and the countrymen’s surprise Charan Singh, albeit Prime Minister for an embarrassingly short period, also was a farmer like million others. Their case, though was, different from incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s The two became Prime Minister by a generous bit of political sleight of hand while Modi got it fair and square through a massive public mandate. A good majority of our elected representatives in Parliament and various State legislatures too derive from non-privileged backgrounds, having come up the hard way, savouring victories and defeats along the journey and being out there among the



people in summer, winter and rain. Besides, there is the robust local self-governance models the panchayati raj where privilege as we understand it is even more a rarity. Therefore, why should we even raise the matter of Indian democracy being manipulated by a small and select bunch of the entitled class Surely, this is an aberration insofar as it exists and does not in any significant way influence the larger spirit of Indian democracy. Besides, class divides are a reality and they are to be found in all democracies around the world the advanced nations being no exception. Not even the intellectual might of Karl Marx, whose theories on class struggle in which the villain is the ruling class (bourgeoisie) that control the 'means of production' and the victim is the working community (proletariat) which is marginalised, could bring about lasting and positive changes. Marxism's relevance today rests more in academia, where it is a must-read for students of political science. In political set-ups across the world India included Marxism is increasingly becoming a footnote.

The issue at hand has less to do with the rise of a majority of our representatives from the grassroots and against all socio-economic odds. Their success is to be lauded and has been. The problem lies elsewhere. It's to do with the conduct of those who, having acquired a position of power, often admittedly through difficult means and by way of praiseworthy tenacity and toil, decide to turn on their new-found status to demand (and get by force) what they consider are their 'rights'. There is of course a difference between a right and an entitlement, and the best that can be said is that certain people in positions of power have legitimate entitlements such as free domestic travel by air or rail, furnished official residence, the use of a car, office staff, expensive medical care, retirement benefits and so on. One can quibble on whether they deserve all of it or should some of those benefits get curtailed, but that line of argument, tempting as it may be because it promises a heated and certainly acrimonious debate with the political side cutting across party lines and uniting against what we, for want of a better term, refer to as 'civil society', calls for separate treatment which is beyond the scope of this article.

What needs underlining is that while entitlements for those in power or positions of influence set them apart from the rest of the people, their rights remain the same as that of anyone, indeed exactly the same as those of the poor farmer in a nondescript village who toils in a field for a few rupees or the beggar on the street if that beggar were to so decide to exercise those rights, neither the legislature nor the courts can come in the way of such audacity. So, rights cannot be confused with privileges (again, it needs to be emphasised that privileges don't exist without strings attached). It's when the demarcation between rights and entitlements is sought to be blurred and, worse, entitlements that don't exist are demanded, that the conflict arises and apprehensions emerge on whether we as a nation are dictated by the 'rights' of the privileged. Let's take three recent incidents to carry the argument forward. Though by no means do they constitute a representative character of the Indian polity, they are indicative of the rot that has set in, and which, if not stemmed, can spread with cancerous speed.



Few Indians who are tuned in to political developments even in a cursory way, will have missed out on the recent Ravindra Gaekwad episode. The Shiv Sena Member of Parliament had last month assaulted a senior cabin crew on board an Air India flight because he was upset at not having been given a business class seat. Once outside the aircraft, he boasted of having delivered a couple of dozen blows to the staffer with his footwear. The business class seat, he claimed, was his right as an MP. When his name was put on the 'no fly list' and he was blacklisted by half a dozen airlines, he tried to skirt the problem by trying to fly under different names but was caught every time in the act. He then said that the ban on him was affecting the deliverance of his duties as an MP. His party members in the Lok Sabha disrupted the proceedings of the House on the matter, with some of them even coming close to assaulting the Union Minister for Civil Aviation. Not seeing a way out, he tendered his regret, though not an apology. The Government intervened and the airlines struck him off the 'no fly list'. Nobody denied that Gaikwad was not entitled to a business class seat the problem was the flight he took did not have a business class segment. It was a small detail for the MP he wanted to demonstrate his 'right'.

The second instance of an influential's rights and privilege came from Trinamool Congress leader and Member of Parliament Dola Sen, even as the Gaikwad issue was still simmering. Sen created a scene on board an Air India flight from Delhi to Kolkata, refusing to shift her wheel-chair bound mother from the seat near the emergency exit. According to news reports quoting airline crew members, the MP "shouted and screamed", although the crew explained to her that security protocol did not permit a wheel-chair bound passenger to be seated near the emergency exit door. When the crew offered to shift her mother to business class, Sen insisted that she and another passenger accompanying her too should be accommodated. It infuriated her no end that the crew expressed its inability to comply with her directive. Like Gaekwad, Dola Sen too flaunted her right to be favourably adjusted.

The third incident is more street-level. It was on the day of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election result. Samajwadi Party leader and senior Minister in the Akhilesh Yadav regime, Azam Khan, was in his constituency, Rampur. His car was stopped by the district administration from entering Rampur Mandi and he had to walk a small stretch to reach the office where he was to collect his certificate of being re-elected as an MLA. Azam Khan lost his cool over the muddy patch he had to take and asked the Sub-Divisional Magistrate to not forget that he (as a Minister) had got him out of "dirt" and brought him to Rampur. Not content with that, Azam Khan pulled up the officer for "changing colours" and wondered whether Prime Minister Modi had directed that he be made to walk. All through the outburst, the official remained quiet, even when Azam Khan reminded him that he was still a Minister until the new Government was formed. Here was an MLA out of his way from power, playing the rights card. The sense of



entitlement was so deep as to be offended by having being made to walk on a muddy path which thousands of ordinary voters across his constituency would be enduring without a murmur.

The three examples do not exhaust the list of tantrums, but they should suffice to make the point about misplaced rights that the influential seek to exercise, and when they do not get their way they can get violent and abusive. Such conduct is reminiscent of the era when the rise of the elite across Europe came along with demands for more liberty and democracy, as opposed to the rule by monarchies. The elite, which included not just the educationally privileged class but also the moneybags traders and assorted merchants who funded the political activities created a system of democracy which primarily served their interests. The crux of a democracy is 'popular power' in other words, power flows not from the purse or from family or the barrel of a gun, but from the people. The elite twisted this precondition to 'popular but selective power'. The likes of Gaekwad, Dola Sen and Azam Khan appear to be clinging on to a dated version of democracy.

Theorists of democracy have had clear ideas on the constitution of rights, though the meaning and the scope of rights have expanded over the three centuries since the concept came into vogue. Political thinker Harold Laski defined rights in the following words "Rights are those conditions of social life without which no man can seek, in general, to be himself at his best." Leonard Hobhouse, another prominent political theorist, said, "Rights are what we may expect from others and others from us, and all genuine rights are conditions of social welfare." And, Bernard Bosanquet, late 19th century and early 20th century British political philosopher, noted that "a right is a claim recognised by society and enforced by the state". It is evident from the positions adopted by the above three political thinkers that rights are basically social in nature, that they have to have a social mandate, that they must be legally enforceable, and most importantly, they must not be confused with privileges which too come with conditions.

While democracy has evolved over the centuries, changing course, absorbing new aspects, discarding a few old ones and shifting the emphasis from 'power from the people' to 'power to the people', and setting into context rights and privileges, the effort has not always brought about the best results. Playwright Oscar Wilde, in one of his despairing moments and even in such troughs his wit did not abandon him remarked that "democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people". Winston Churchill was too headstrong to be a real democrat, but he held a less pessimistic opinion. Equally quick of wit, and scathing one at that, he once stated, "Democracy is the worst form of Government, except for all the others." For India which is culturally so diverse, democracy is the only option because others are worse. But when democracy becomes a route for the enforcement of entitlements as rights, then it's time to throw the rule book at the offenders. Public mood is clear enough It does not regard the entitlement-as-right demanders with respect. The political class needs to appreciate this anger



and change its conduct. Meanwhile, those who make a mockery of the power by turning it against the very people who gave it to them, must be made examples of. That is sadly not happening enough, and swiftly enough.

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