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Folly of Bandhs

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A Bharat Bandh was staged by most opposition parties on July 5, 2010. Such an extent of opposition unity in staging the bandh was acclaimed as an unprecedented victory in pressing for the accountability of the Government on the decontrol of petrol and consequent rise in prices. The bandh disrupted normal life in all the Opposition-governed states and Maharashtra. It resulted in large-scale stoppage of road, rail and air transport in a number of metropolises and major towns from dawn to dusk. Schools and educational establishments were closed as a precautionary measure in many states. Daily wage labour could not earn their livelihood for the day in the affected states. Shops were forced to be closed and large demonstrations blocked roads and created traffic gridlocks for hours. Patients needing urgent medical attention could not reach hospitals or receive proper medical attention. Public property was vandalized and public buses were burnt in a number of places. Politicians courted token arrests knowing full well they would not be as inconvenienced and harassed as the thousands of car drivers and bus passengers trapped in traffic jams created by bandhs and confined for long periods of time without access to toilets. Ironically at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century some politicians are still under the impression that courting token arrests impresses anybody. They only evoke derision.

There are various estimates of economic costs of the bandh ranging from three thousand to thirteen thousand crores. The indirect costs deriving from wrecked business schedules and interrupted supply

chains were incalculable. The worst-hit were the unorganized daily wage labour and the people in rural areas whose bus and train communications were disrupted. Since they are not in a position to voice their criticism, their feelings are ignored by the Bandh sponsors who attribute the criticism against the bandh to the middle class standing to benefit from the proposed income tax liberalization. The unorganized labour and the rural population are not likely to remember the price hike in the next few months when the expected good monsoon will bring the prices down to some extent just before the impending state elections but they will remember the deprivation of their livelihood for the day and disruption to their lives caused by the hoodlum and violence. That will surely be reflected in the State election results which is a better organized and truly genuine way of holding the Government to accountability.

What disturbs an impartial and unprejudiced observer is the totally counter-productive nature of calculations and political behaviour of parties whether holding power or in opposition on whose responsible behaviour the country has a stake. The 2009 elections proved the calculations of some political parties on the anti-US mood in the country was a monumental miscalculation. If political parties cannot look after their own interests effectively can they be expected to look after the national interests? The idea that Bandhs pay political and electoral dividends is an outdated traditionalist idea like that of Khap Panchayats' views on honour killing. Bandhs as a political weapon made sense when there was no NREGA scheme giving millions daily wage labour, before our urbanization increased to the present levels, before our road, rail and air transport expanded to the extent they have, before the Maruti and small car explosion took place and the television reached the hundreds of millions. Now Political parties have effective channel to reach the people and put forward their arguments and persuade them to vote against the Government in respect of unpopular policies. That is how politics is conducted in mature democracies. By inflicting unmerited suffering on the poor and the lower middle class these political parties and their leaders, prisoners of outdated ideas, are shooting themselves in their foot and alienating the voters. Anti-social and criminal elements which are present in some parties as musclemen to intimidate aam Janata enforce the bandh against their wishes and no sensible voter likes public property vandalized and buses burnt. When Political leaders subscribe to the idea of enforcing a bandh through intimidation they need such anti-social and criminal elements. It is height of hypocrisy and insult to the

aam aadmi to claim that the bus burning and vandalism are the results of the spontaneous anger of the people. It is analogous to justifying communal, caste and terrorist killings as an outflow of anger and feelings. The key to the enforced bandhs are such criminal and anti-social elements whether they are party cadres or hired professionals. We see this very prominently in ethnicity-based and linguistic–chauvinistic fascist politics. Though no bandh-calling party can do without them. Let there be a public opinion poll to survey how far the aam aadmi endorses bandhs. Resorting to bandhs with its inevitable violence is a clear indication that our politicians and political parties are still to learn to use the media, especially electronic media effectively to mobilize public opinion.

More dangerous from the national security point of view is the legitimization provided by such enforced bandhs and accompanying violence to terrorism in the country both externally inspired and indigenous. Two days after Bharat bandh the Maoists declare a bandh in six states. Those who indulge in daily stone throwing and frequent bandhs accompanied by violence in Srinagar and other Kashmiri towns justify their ‘nonviolent stone throwing and bus burning’ to the endorsement of major political parties of similar practices. We may not be far away from the Maoist justification of ‘nonviolent’ express train derailment. Since 1994, the United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly condemned terrorist acts using the following political description of terrorism: "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them." The enforced bandhs and the violence that invariably accompanies it fit in with this description of terrorism. Parliamentary democracy has no place for violence. A political party endorsing either explicitly or implicitly such violence in the streets against the public wittingly or unwittingly legitimizes terrorism.

Such bandhs and endorsement of street violence indicate that many political parties have not matured to steer India as a twenty-first century democracy. A charitable explanation has to be that these leaders do not fully understand the implications of their actions. Jesus Christ was reported to have said, as he was dying on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are

doing.” Many Indians would have told Bharata Mata on Monday July 5 similarly about the Indian political parties and politicians, “Mother, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

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