

The Wages of Patronage Democracy

In the context of the recent state assembly elections in five states, the election analysts and observers have pointed out that the distribution of free ration by the central government was one of the important factors that contributed to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral victory, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. One may even consider the role of such a factor in converting the voters' judgment in favour of the party that is reaping the fruits of such patronage. It may be hypothetically possible to arrive at such a conclusion. Put differently, in the electoral victory, the distribution of free foodgrain or other assistance to the people may or may not have been the crucial contributory factor. In fact, the language of patronage that was unambiguously articulated in the election speeches of the leaders, particularly from the winning party, should be taken as the basic premise on which the patronising character of Indian democracy could be delineated, in fact, interrogated. Democracy, which is being regularly pushed into the modalities of a patron–client relationship, can be interrogated by providing the following grounds.

First, the language that is spoken in communicating to the voters, claims that a leader or the party is doing a favour by distributing the foodgrains, as opposed to suggesting that they are performing their constitutional obligation to protect the lives of the people as enshrined in the directive principles of state policy in the Constitution. It is in this sense the constitutional idea of welfare cannot be collapsed into patronage on the grounds that the former is to be achieved as a constitutional duty, unlike the latter that is defined in terms of a personal favour done to the voters. Thus, the concept of welfare does not go against the constitutional directive principles of state policy. Those who are motivated by welfare as a constitutional responsibility are expected to eschew the language of doing favours that necessarily create what could be termed as the “sedimented authority” of a person or political party. Conversely, those who are covered under the welfare schemes are also supposed to identify themselves as the rights-bearing citizens and not the passive or humble recipient of such schemes.

Second, however, the language of favour tends to convert the citizens into a passive, dependent receiver. This language of favour necessarily presupposes a pliant response from those who are at the receiving end of the “patronage.” Those who carry in their minds a humble attitude towards a party, its leaders or the *annadata*, consider supporting the benefactors as a

moral obligation to the latter. Ironically, in the current scenario, the farmers cease to be the *annadata* for the *yachak* or the receiver of free foodgrains. This moral significance is denied. Instead, such a consciousness that is loaded with the moral pressure of obligation prevents the passive receiver of patronage from betraying their *annadata*. Such a “public” articulation of loyalty, by implication, creates a sedimented authority in a particular leader of the party. It is sedimented on the grounds that its legitimacy rests at the level of the subconsciousness of the receiver who then is ever-ready to submit to such authority as and when the *annadata* requires. What remains as the indivisible part of this subconsciousness is an element of loyalty.

Loyalty towards the leaders effectively feeds into the consolidation of sedimented authority. Such authority, with the advantage of being in control of enormous resources, places itself in a position from where it can control the patron–client relationship. In the present context, given the chance, the opposition parties in India, who currently lack such resources, would aspire to wield a similar control.

Third, the nature of the authority sustained by the patronage deployed by the political leaders, however, does not seem to be influenced by a sense of altruism—altruism that dissuades the benefactor from extracting public acknowledgement for the help they have given to the needy. Altruism means a patron, who is driven by an altruistic intent, and may not expect anything in return from the receiver. Patronage that demands either loyalty from the receiver through a public confession that one is the beneficiary of help from an *annadata* is essentially constitutive of moral coercion. It denies the voters the freedom of making electoral choices, which is why it necessarily militates against the language of rights that inspires its holder to exercise their freedom without any burden of being loyal to any benefactor.

Finally, the right to exercise freedom, including financial independence, can be realised only in conditions where one is guaranteed full-time employment and support for independent small-scale livelihood opportunities to the most vulnerable. This would help them stay away from the patron–client relations that essentially undermine one's sense of self-worth as an active agent.

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