

Is corruption not an issue?

The results of the assembly elections in Tamilnadu, which has seen the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led by Jayalalitha sweep into power has come as a surprise only to the pollsters and the chatterati. Months before the elections, the portents were clear. Now that the results are in, the same analysts who got it all wrong are busy explaining why the DMK led by Karunanidhi lost. One of the important messages of this election, according to them, is that the electorate no longer cares about corruption. Jayalalitha is facing a number of cases on various corruption charges in special courts set up for the purpose. She was also convicted in one of them (a decision which she has appealed against), which prevented her from contesting the election. If, in spite of all this the people have voted her in, the only explanation the analysts can find is that corruption does not matter. There is however another dimension to the situation. There is a widely held perception among the people of Tamilnadu that it was the DMK which systematised corruption from the top to the bottom. Thus the party apparatus, a legacy of the self-respect movement, became an instrument for patronage (an euphemism for making money illegally). Although the party leaders have never been convicted of corruption, for the people this is a legal nicety. In short, it is precisely because corruption is an issue that they have voted Jayalalitha in. It is a moot point whether the hope that she has learnt from her earlier stint will be realised, but the hope exists nevertheless.

Take the example of the health services. The DMK government was fond of acquiring expensive equipment. They installed CT scanners in every district hospital, many of which work only intermittently. Although there is no proof as yet, it is commonly believed that bribes are an integral part of all such acquisitions. On the other hand basic services were being neglected. Dressings and suture materials were always in very short supply. Government hospitals have virtually abdicated their role in so-called tertiary care such as heart surgery and neurosurgery. It is nearly impossible to get any heart surgery or neurosurgery in a government hospital. As private care is very expensive this means that a large section of the population has no access to such services. India has one of the largest motor vehicle accident rates in the world, and Tamilnadu is no exception to this. Trauma services are very poor and patients with fractures have to wait long periods for attention. Mortality and morbidity are high.

A small example will show how far the rot has gone. The neurosurgery block in the Government General Hospital in Chennai, the most prestigious of the state government institutions has been malfunctioning for nearly a year now. There is no ramp. This means that patients have to be carried by stretcher up and down several floors. The hospital employees who perform this task demand hefty amounts for this. In spite of repeated reports in the press the

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government never bothered to rectify the problem. At the same time it was building flyovers all over Chennai!

Soon after the election, a hotel in Chennai refused to renew the license for a discotheque 'Hell Freezes Over' which is run by a son of Murasoli Maran, the Union Industries minister who belongs to the DMK. It is also well known that this family runs a snow bowling alley in sweltering Chennai. Obviously such recreation can only cater to the well heeled. It is a sign of the times that these are the kind of activities that political families now indulge in. All pretence of working for the uplift of the poor has been abandoned. Is it surprising then if the poor abandon them at the ballot box?

The situation of sanitary services is exemplified by the fact that malaria and leptospirosis are endemic all over the state. In Chennai, the Cooum has become more and more polluted and is now slimy and stinking. Just three decades ago there was enough water in it for a former DMK government to consider introducing boat services and jetties were built all along the waterway. Water is a major and perennial problem in Chennai. No significant move was made to solve it. Tanker lorries supply water tapped from underground reservoirs and the ground water table has become dangerously low.

The point is that the people were unhappy with the government and with legitimate cause. This is not to suggest that the previous government of Jayalalitha did a lot of welfare work. But as a famous philosopher said, people move not from experience to experience but from hope to hope.

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