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Pay them well, not in perpetuity

Taxpayers must not foot the bill for ex-lawmakers' perks

A beginning of a new financial year is a time for appraisals in the private sector. Now the Rajasthan government seems to be following suit. On Wednesday, the BJP government increased the salary and allowances of the chief minister, ministers, legislators as well as the pension for former lawmakers after the assembly passed the Rajasthan Minister's Salaries (Second Amendment) Bill, 2017. The proposed increase in salaries is estimated to involve a recurring expenditure of about ₹1.55 crore per annum. The basic salary of an MLA has increased from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000; travel allowance from ₹1.5 lakh (annually) to ₹2 lakh; secretarial allowance from ₹20,000 to ₹30,000; daily allowance from ₹1,000 to ₹1,500; sumptuary (in other words, food) allowance from ₹30,000 to ₹45,000; and vehicle allowance from ₹20,000 to ₹30,000. "Looking to the present level of prices, the existing salary and sumptuary allowance payable appears to be inadequate. Under these circumstances, it has been considered expedite to increase the salary and sumptuary allowance..." chief minister Vasundhara Raje said.

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Even if we take these as modest raises, what is galling is what the state has decided to give former CMs: They will get for the remainder of their lives a government residence, a car that family members can also use, a telephone, and a staff of 10.

In no other modern democracy do public representatives get perks in perpetuity. In India the scene is different: Lawmakers are entitled to houses in the toniest of localities, vehicles and personal staff, free travel and telephone calls. This sense of entitlement is so deep that some lawmakers—and their families after their deaths—refuse to leave official accommodation or give up other perks. This penchant for squatting in government bungalows has also started afflicting bureaucrats. In 2014, the government had to disconnect power and water connections to the houses of around 30 former MPs who refused to vacate their bungalows in spite of several eviction notices. There is nothing wrong in paying lawmakers well according to market rates, but there should be no perks in perpetuity.

No enabled playing field for India's disabled

Callous airline staff's attitude reflects our apathy towards the physically challenged

There's more to it than just racism. On Wednesday, cricketer Harbhajan Singh tweeted about alleged racism by an expat pilot from Jet Airways. According to Singh, the pilot abused and assaulted two travellers flying to Mumbai, one of them a person with an orthopaedic disability. When the flight landed, he had to allegedly wait for 25 minutes for the wheelchair to be brought to the seat. On top of it, the pilot screamed at him for checking-in the wheelchair and delaying the flight. This was done despite the airline allowing them to check it in at Chandigarh from where they had boarded.

This is not the first time a wheelchair-bound traveller has complained of misbehaviour by airline crew. Last year, Paralympics silver winner Deepa Malik filed a complaint against poor handling of wheelchair-bound passengers by the staff of Air Vistara. "The wheelchair handling is so poor that you do not know how to shift a person from seat to cabin chair. The entire staff stands and looks at each other for 10 minutes," she had said. In 2015, disability rights activist Javed Abidi was forced to get off his wheelchair at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport. Ironically, in 2014, Abidi was part of a panel of activists who had helped frame guidelines to ensure there was no discrimination on the basis of disability in air travel.

According to the 2011 Census, the number of disabled in India stands at 2.68 crore. India's built environment is infamously inhospitable to the disabled and the elderly, confining them to their homes. Most public buildings lack ramps and even ATM machines have steps leading up to them. The recently passed Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2016, promises barrier-free access to buildings to the disabled, but implementation is lax. Merely de-rostering the pilot, as Jet Airways did, won't be enough to change the ground reality on discrimination. We need to inculcate a culture of sensitivity towards the physically challenged.

beyondthebite

RAJDEEP SARDESAI



AAP must go back to its roots

To rediscover itself, Kejriwal's party must once again become the voice of the powerless Indian

On the day the exit polls for the Delhi municipal elections were predicting a BJP landslide, AAP spokespersons were in a defiant mood, blaming the EVMs for a looming defeat. But how can you blame an exit poll for potential tampering of an EVM since the pollster is sampling voters, not the machine, I asked? The AAP representative paused and then blurted out: "Sab mile hue hai". Conspiracy theories abound in India but by blaming EVMs for their debacle, AAP runs the risk of deepening its credibility crisis.

Truth is, rather than throw up unproven EVM conspiracy theories, the AAP leadership needs a reality check: Why is the middle class feeling let down by a party it supported so overwhelmingly just two years ago? If even the extravagant promise of waiving house tax didn't cut with the voter in middle-income colonies, then it clearly suggests a widening trust deficit. It was the middle class, after all, that had embraced AAP in its original avatar as an offshoot of the Lokpal movement, as an idealistic force driven by moral power.

When Arvind Kejriwal was given a second chance by the Delhi electorate in 2015 it was premised on the hope that he would provide an alternative political culture to the 'corrupted' national parties. 'Hope' is an idea that

stitches together dreams: For the salaried middle class, 'hope' makes life worth living. When hope is killed, it translates, first into disappointment, and then anger.

Instead of providing wholesome governance, AAP saw its USP in confronting the Narendra Modi government and Modi in particular, a kind of David versus Goliath battle, which AAP as the quintessential 'outsider' revelled in. While the Centre has been often unjustly hostile to AAP's emergence, when a combative attitude becomes an end in itself, it only breeds negativism. You can be anti-establishment as an oppositional, activist force challenging the status quo; you can't survive on accusatory politics once in government.

While efforts like mohalla clinics and school education reforms were welcome steps, the good work being done was overshadowed by the noise created over Kejriwal's repeated run-ins with the L-G, the Centre, and former colleagues Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan. The optics were clearly wrong: Far from building a bottom-up political structure based on a spirit of voluntarism, Kejriwal was perceived as being his own high command: A small coterie seemed to replace the thousands of volunteers who had helped create the AAP phenomenon in the first place. The raw courage Kejriwal had shown in



Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE

taking on traditional elites was now seen as self-righteous conceit and the same media which had once glorified him was now looking to pull him down.

The scale of AAP's 2015 victory along with the failure of the Opposition to throw up a strong alternative to Modi, convinced Kejriwal that he could fill the national leadership vacuum. In the process, he made the mistake of many an ambitious start-up: Attempting to expand without consolidating. The move into Punjab and Goa sent out the message that AAP was taking Delhi for granted. By contrast, the BJP sensed the voter mood astutely.

Corruption has been endemic to civic bodies with many councillors becoming crorepati overnight: For 10 years, the BJP was seen to have presided over an ineffectual and corrupt local body. But by denying tickets to all its sitting councillors and revamping the campaign around Brand Modi, the BJP changed the narrative. The promise of a 'new BJP' was seductive to urban voters still mesmerised by the Modi charisma. The same middle class that cheered Kejriwal when he exposed the Congress appeared reluctant to endorse him when he challenged Modi, a leader who has cleverly appropriated the pro-poor, anti-corruption plank post-demonetisation.

Ironically, it is the BJP's obsessive Modi-centric approach that provides parties like AAP an opportunity for course correction.

The opportunity lies in raising citizen's issues even where the electoral benefit may not be immediately apparent but where a sense of people connect is restored. The next time there is a dengue or chikungunya outbreak, AAP must offer an imaginative alternative solution rather than cruelly blame 'divine intervention' and the BJP for the mosquito menace. Why not spearhead a volunteer-driven mass awareness campaign on the state of public health and sanitation in Delhi? To rediscover itself, AAP must go back to its original identity built during the anti-corruption Anna agitation: A public spirited movement that becomes the voice of those who feel desperately powerless in the India of today.

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VALLEY OFFLINE



■ If the security agencies were monitoring online feeds in certain areas of the Valley, by blocking web traffic, they have deprived themselves of a key information highway

Banning social media in Kashmir is utterly useless

By restricting access to these websites, the government is encouraging people to find alternative ways of resistance

VIDYA SUBRAMANIAN



In a move aimed at blocking the spread of images and videos from strife-torn Kashmir, the state government has blocked 22 social media sites for a month. This comes in the wake of increased student protests across campuses in the valley, and the barrage of criticism faced by the armed forces for using a civilian as a human shield on an army vehicle. Internet services have been blocked 28 times over the past five years in Kashmir, and in 2016, after the Burhan Wani incident, internet signals were blocked for five months.

If the attempt is to prevent images and videos such as the one about Farooq Ahmad Dar being tied to the front of an army jeep for an entire day from getting out, blocking a few websites will not do the trick. Information is like water. It will find a way out. Especially when much-used websites, such as Instagram, are not on the 'blocked' list. Also, in an age where virtual private networks (VPNs) are well known, blocking access to certain websites will become redundant very quickly.

Blocking the flow of information cannot be a solution to the problem. Ensuring that such violations of human rights do not happen, and bringing those responsible to justice would be a far more useful measure.

The other side of the coin in this situation is that while it might delay misinformation from spreading (It cannot possibly eliminate it, given that rumours existed and were spread quite freely before social media was even invented), it is important to remember that it will also make it harder to disseminate important information, especially in far flung areas. The ban comes at a time when there have been protests across campuses in the Valley. A new disturbing trend has emerged where school girls, their faces covered with dupattas or wearing burkhas, have joined the ranks of those throwing stones. These protests only go to show how much mistrust and suspicion there is in the minds of locals in the area. In such a situation, to enforce a blanket ban on technologies that teenagers in other part of the world take for granted will only make the youth feel more isolated and aggrieved. By restricting access to websites, the government is encouraging people to find alternative ways of resistance, while inconveniencing millions of people who aren't trying to brew discontent.

If the security agencies were monitoring online feeds to get a sense of the prevailing sentiment in certain areas of the Valley, by blocking web traffic, they have deprived themselves of a key information highway. Even though many of these apps claim encryption, there is enough evidence to show that security agencies monitor the chatter on the internet to detect and prevent extreme situations from occurring.

Banning social media in Kashmir could do more harm than good.

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How the BJP reinvented itself to win Delhi MCD

In its attempt at social engineering and to woo migrants from Purvanchal, the party fielded actor Manoj Tiwari

SHIVANI SINGH



For a party that till last year was blamed for the mess in the three municipalities, the BJP bucked 10 years of anti-incumbency in the civic polls held on April 23. Remarkably, the party secured a vote share of 36%—more than 3.7% than what it bagged in the 2015 assembly polls.

In contrast, the vote share of the Aam Aadmi Party that swept 67 out of 70 assembly seats in 2015 was reduced by half to 27% in just two years. This unlikely scenario of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi elections 2017 can be best summed up as a game of shifting goalposts and self-goals.

In the words of BJP state president Manoj Tiwari, the party reinvented itself in Delhi using Prime Minister Modi as the benchmark. As far as political strategies go, fighting a civic poll solely in the name of a prime minister was probably a first. "Pre-2014 BJP was different from the one we have now. We have raised the bar," Tiwari told *Hindustan Times* in a pre-poll interview. Admitting that governance standards in local bodies were wanting before Modi took over as the PM, he claimed that having "Modi as BJP's policy" would change that.

To underline a new order, the BJP also replaced all sitting councillors in Delhi. The appointment of Bhojpuri singer-actor Manoj Tiwari as the state president was the third masterstroke at reinvention. A new face in Delhi, he was different from the RSS-schooled old city leadership that increasingly looked lacklustre over the years.

Tiwari, in fact, entered politics via the Samajwadi Party in 2009 when he unsuccessfully contested his first election from the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha seat against none other than Yogi Adityanath. In 2011, he was part of Anna Hazare-led India against Corruption movement. Yet, the BJP had no qualms picking Tiwari to social engineer its prospects in Delhi and to replicate the heady

success in Uttar Pradesh.

Known to be a party of Hindu Punjabis and Banias since the days of the Jan Sangh, BJP had to expand its appeal base. The demography of city had, anyway, changed since the early 1990s. Many of the BJP's traditional voters had already moved out of the post-Partition resettlement colonies and the Walled City to the NCR towns. In many neighbourhoods, the new professional migrants have found their place among the families resettled after the Partition.

The Jats, Yadavs and Gujjars—the original residents of the rural pockets—are now outnumbered by Purvanchali migrants from UP and Bihar in many of the villages of Delhi. In the unauthorised colonies, where a third of Delhi's population lives, Purvanchalis are the dominant group. The induction of Tiwari, a Bhojpuri celebrity who had already won for BJP the Northeast Delhi Lok Sabha seat, a Purvanchali hub, in 2014, to woo these voters away from the AAP and the Congress seemed to have paid off well.

In the Purvanchali-dominated segments such as Burari, Kirari, Sangam Vihar and Karawal Nagar, for example, the BJP won 16 out of 22 municipal wards. Burari is where Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar launched their municipal elections campaigns.

Anything, the BJP's Delhi strategy got a big leg-up from the AAP. The party's never-ending blame game and bickering with the Centre and Delhi's Lieutenant Governor were already tiring people. Then, it launched a negative campaign harping on the BJP's mismanagement of the MCDs. Worse, the AAP forgot that it had a political base to consolidate.

The party that till two years ago took pride in the way it connected with the aam aadmi, somehow managed to lose its enthusiastic volunteer base. Their top-cad active supporters were conspicuously absent from Delhi's polling booths last Sunday.

Political fortunes follow momentum. The BJP used to its advantage the landslide victory in Uttar Pradesh to impress the Delhi voters. For a debutant in Punjab, the AAP fared well to emerge as the principal opposition party. But because of the victory-or-nothing hype, even its impressive show became a setback in the public perception. Irrespective of the merit of the AAP's case against the EVMs, the desperate protestations came across as excuses.

Such optics fuel negativity. Those who would not vote for the BJP ended up voting for the Congress in Delhi.

That is how the grand old party's vote share jumped from 9% in the 2015 assembly poll to 22% in this election despite no perceivable change in its appeal.

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SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS
WITHIN YOURSELF AND
NEVER BE DISAPPOINTED

Sarbari Sen

All around me, I find people looking for happiness. Most of them seek material pleasures to obtain happiness while some try to be happy by creating happy relationships.

Some even struggle to climb the ladder of life to gain happiness through social recognition. However, in spite of all this, there is a constant lack of contentment.

Happiness seems like a mirage, always waiting to be attained. But, the mistake

that we commit is when we search for happiness outside us. Happiness lies within us. It is a point of view.

Social perception cannot create tranquility. To achieve that state of mind, we have to search our souls, understand the purpose of this journey called life.

We have to create an environment of love and empathy, help and nurture people around us. This will soothe our minds and bring satisfaction and calmness in our day to day lives, ushering happiness.

A happy and satisfied soul is a pleasure

to be with. They generate goodness and well being. They direct and encourage all towards positivity.

An environment of love and care breeds goodness and peace. Happiness is a journey and not a destination.

It is not always about attaining; it is also about giving and caring. The onus of a happy life is on us.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal.)

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