

By Sidharth Mishra



In three decades, Indian politics has come a full circle. The party, which was once the torch bearer of development, today wants to be the pall-bearer for the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Amendment) Bill, 2015. The National Democratic Alliance government, on the other hand, is keen on pushing through the Bill, as they believe it will relieve the nation's long standing agrarian distress and create alternate avenues of employment. During a discussion on the current agrarian situation in Parliament on Monday, Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi's made a pithy "suit-boot government" remark. His comment calls for a deeper analysis of the idea of progress and change in the Indian context. Gandhi's reference to "suit and boot" made this author reminisce about the 1970s Bangla-Hindi film

Sagina Mahato

starring thespian Dilip Kumar.

The film focused on labour unrest in the tea estates of North Bengal and the gradual rise of Sagina, essayed by Dilip Kumar, as a trade union leader from a landless labourer. The theme was best encapsulated in Majrooh Sultanpuri's lines, "

Saala mai toh saahab ban gaya; Re saahab banke kaisa tan gaya; Yeh suit meraa dekho, yeh boot meraa dekho; Jaise gora koyee London ka... . Tum langotee walah naa badala mai naa badalega; Tum sab saala log kaa kismat, ham saala badalega; Sina dekho kaisa tan gaya.

" (Bugger look I have become prosperous; look at my suit and boot, which is like an Englishman of London... .You half-naked, you shall never change on your own; it's me who is going to change your fortune; look at my chest and how broad it is now.)

The arguments put forward by the Narendra Modi government and the counter-factuals promoted by the Congress has made the battle look like a clash between those trying to end inertia in the agrarian sector and those gunning for the status quo in the name of protecting farmer's interest. It's a role reversal of sorts for the two parties. While Narendra Modi with his humble background is today taunted for his 'suit-boot' avatar, whereas a 'finishing school' product like Rahul Gandhi wants to be seen as the saviour of the farm hands.

To illustrate the point further, let's recall the time when the Indira Gandhi-led government decided to go ahead with the holding of the Ninth Asian Games in New Delhi in 1982. At that time Congress general secretary Rajiv Gandhi took the responsibility of facilitating the organisation of the event, which was boycotted by the likes of 'Kisan' (farmer) leader Chowdhary Charan Singh and Socialist firebrand George Fernandes, since they believed the sporting event to be anti-Kisan.

Subsequently allegations and charges were made of land being forcibly acquired from the farmers of Delhi for peanuts and the kisan being deprived of their due. These 'Kisans' of 1982,

belonging to villages like Shahpur Jat and Hauz Khas, today earn a handsome fortune through rent from their properties. The compensation amount which they had intelligently invested, has also multiplied several times. Their generation next has moved on as well.

When he became prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had sounded the clarion call to take India into the 21st century. Three decades later his son Rahul Gandhi is trying to gain a toehold into national politics by projecting himself as a Kisan leader. I do not know if Rajiv Gandhi would have approved of his son's image of being a 'Haldhar', which was once the symbol of Janata Party, the conglomerate Jayaprakash Narayan created to defeat the Indira Gandhi-led Congress in 1977.

The Kisan rally of the Congress party, held last Sunday, certainly indicated that the party has lost its moorings. Its attempt at 'subsidy politics' shows that it has learned no lessons from its utterly humiliating defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. Such politics should be best left to the third front parties, the latest from this stable being the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), whose responsibilities are largely driven by regional aspirations.

Therefore, for the Congress to take recourse to Kisan politics in the way a Chowdhary Charan Singh pursued it would certainly prove detrimental. The first reason for this being that the Congress would be reduced to vying for a share in the electoral pie, which the reunited Socialist third-front would also be targeting. Second, it could end up losing the image of a party capable of good governance, something for which the rapidly increasing number of urban voters yearn for. And most importantly today the party does not have many grass-root leaders who can sweat it out with the farmers without the camera in tow.

The massive victory of the Congress in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls, which led to the formation of the United Progressive Alliance-II government, was thanks to its great performance in urban pockets. More than the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), it was the nuclear deal with the United States of America, which Dr Manmohan Singh pushed at great risk to the survival of his government, which paid rich dividends.

MNREGA was still better as it addressed the farm labour rather than the Indian 'Kulaks'. The party has never appealed to the Indian 'Kulak' class which has always preferred the Socialists parties of yore in their various new fangled avatars. These outfits understand the issues at hand and know when to agitate for higher support prices for the harvest, better procurement of grains and facilitation of the payment of the dues to the farmers from the sugar mill owners.

The Congress's rural support base was amongst the farmhands, the castes and communities exploited at the hands of these 'Kulaks'. Therefore Rahul Gandhi's stunt at Bhatta Parsaul and elsewhere failed to fetch him the desired political dividends. What should concern Rahul Gandhi

Sagina Mahato syndrome grips politics

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is the loss of Congress's core constituency in rural India.

Defeat in an election should not rattle a 130-year-old organisation to such an extent, that it changes its course as drastically as it is proposing to do. Rahul Gandhi should take the wise advise of family friend Capt. Amrinder Singh in right earnest and travel across the country, spend time with people to know what they want rather than depend on his 'think-tank' groupies, who are no more than '

gomastas

' (agents) of various vested interests.

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