

Vote-merchants have turned elections into a festivity of doles and freebies

Only one day before the Maharashtra assembly election, a top BJP leader was caught red-handed with lakhs of rupees. He was allegedly doling money to the voters. From him a huge amount of money was confiscated. A day earlier, Election Commission officials checked Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole's helicopter and bags at Tiroda helipad while he was going to campaign for a Maha Vikash Aghari candidate in Goregaon Assembly constituency. Later, EC also inspected Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's bag in Amravati as INDIA bloc parties continued to accuse the poll body of selective action. Faced with criticism of harassing the opposition, a day after the political row over a routine check of Shiv Sena (BT) chief Uddhav Thackeray's luggage, the BJP posted a video of airport security frisking Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis' bags as if such is the normal practice. This searching operation even if for public consumption indicates that cash does play a crucial role in purchase of vote when elections are round the corner. But the BJP tops the list in this nasty game as it is the richest among the bourgeois parliamentary parties which also shows how electoral verdict is manipulated with money-power. Politically unconscious people suffering from growing pauperization with every passing day can hardly afford to overcome the lure of money and fall prey to such bribing.

But there are numerous other ways by which these vote-merchants play havoc with human morality to win election. The most talked about means to translate in reality their greed for power is providing freebies to the people suffering from growing privation and deprivation. This phenomenon of wooing the voters with promise of freebies and doles had surfaced in the electoral scenario for over a decade. The DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, AAP in Delhi and TMC in West Bengal were pioneers whereas others also followed the suit. Providing monetary doles under some lucrative names either in the form of cash transfer or in kind like distribution of cycles, tabs, colour TVs, milch cows, mixer-grinder and gold for thali (mangal sutra) among others. Samajwadi Party before 2022 election in UP had promised free education for girls from primary classes till post-graduation, a 'Kanya Vidhya Dhan' scheme under which girls clearing their class 12th board examination will get a one-time amount of Rs 36,000. It also pledged to give a laptop to all students clearing their class 12 boards. Aping the Tamil Nadu "freebies culture", the TMC in West Bengal promised a cash subvention of Rs 1000 per month to poor women under Kanyasree scheme, Lakshmi's Bhandar, free bicycles to the high school students, Rs 25,000 for marriage of penurious girls under Rupashree scheme, a monthly cash allowance to the priests of all religions, a special allowance for the Muzzaeims (who gives azan in the mosques) and so forth.

The Congress is also not far behind. In the run-up for last Karnataka assembly election, the Congress party had promised every female head of the family Rs 2,000 a month, every unemployed diploma holder Rs 1,500 per month, and graduates Rs 3,000 a month. According to the party's pre-poll promises, women would also get to travel for free in the buses run by the state government. Also, every family would be provided 200 units of power for free. Similarly in Maharashtra election, the Congress-NCP-Shiv Sena combination had committed Rs 3000 monthly payment to each woman. It had also promised Rs10,000 each for 10,00,000 students every month. Incidentally, the CPI (M), who call themselves Marxists-Leftists, is one constituent of Maha Vikas Aghadi.

Most notably, PM Modi, two years back, took a snipe at the opposition and condemned such distribution of doles and freebies as 'revdi (a popular north Indian sweet) culture'. But then, in a *volte face*, the BJP itself had to switch to 'revdi' culture to secure votes. Mirroring the Kanyasree scheme of the TMC, the BJP, before last assembly election in Madhya Pradesh, announced a 'Ladli Bahen' scheme under which a stipend of Rs1250 would be paid to all girls. The BJP also

announced payment of Rs 2,100 per month to women, providing scooties to female college students and free dialysis in government hospitals before the last Haryana assembly election. In Maharashtra, the BJP coalition government has introduced a 'Ladla Bhai Yojana', designed to offer financial support up to Rs 10,000 per month to unemployed youth. On the eve of recently concluded assembly elections in Maharashtra, BJP, among other things, had promised raising monthly stipend of women from Rs 1500 to Rs 2100 per head. When the AAP government in Delhi provided subsidy on electricity bills, the BJP was vociferous against it. But during this year election in Maharashtra, the BJP had promised 30 per cent subsidy on electricity bills.

So, there is a fierce competition among all the vote-oriented parties to reap dividend in electoral battle riding over doles and freebies. Let it not be misconstrued that public welfare schemes and freebies are one and the same. Public welfare schemes are designed by a civilized government to raise the living standard of the people by bettering their socio-economic condition. But freebies are virtually carrots dangled before the voters to corner their votes through a process which is nothing but akin to bribing or unethical incitement. Secondly, where does the money for freebies come from? It is paid out of the tax revenue that the people irrespective of their income status provide to the exchequer either by direct or indirect route. When even a pauperized person purchase any item of utility, he is not aware that the price he is paying comprises a heavy load of indirect tax. Moreover, enhanced tariff of fuel price is realized from him as the cost of transportation is embedded in the price. So, in other words, a poor does not know that the dole he is receiving is in fact financed by himself. He is being fleeced in the form of waning income, rising price line, non-affordability to meet the rising cost of education, healthcare, spiralling power tariff and so forth. And to cover this fleecing that any government irrespective of hues and subservient to ruling capitalism, the root of all miseries and penuries of his life, dupe them with the allurements of doles and freebies.

Some people who cannot come out of the quagmire of capitalism weigh options that either freebies are to some extent helpful or freebies are complete wastage which instead of distributing them among people should be applied in productive process. The most important aspect in regard to freebies, which the bourgeois media and bourgeois thinkers try to keep people blindfolded to, is that doles do a great damage to people's morality.

People are in deep monetary crisis. The global hunger index and other human indices hold glaring testimony of the rising destitution and predicament of the tiling millions. What they see is that the contesting bourgeois parties hurl invectives against each other before election and pretend how eager they are to serve the people and ameliorate the burning problems they are mired in. But whoever rides to power follows the same set of anti-people policies and the pre-poll promises prove to be hoaxes. And none of the vote-based parties make any effort to make the masses politically conscious so as to distinguish between the right and wrong, genuine and fake. So, when during the election time, distressed people find a chance get some money right in hand, they grab at it and also think that freebies would bring some succour to their woes. It is on this "enchanted" fringe of haplessness and ignorance of the oppressed masses that the parliamentary parties work their stratagem.

In this situation the truth deceived deprived millions are required to imbibe is no dole, no freebie can solve their crises, even give them some relief. It is akin to the proverbial saying, "after meat comes mustard". By the time they receive a dole of Rs 2000, inflation rises so high as to gobble that up. Let it therefore be clear that till the time people consciously rally behind the force or party who do not trade in such freebie politics, expose the fact that no permanent solution can come by through vote and emancipation lies in overthrow of capitalism, such duping and cheating will not be abated. Running after doles and freebies is chasing a mirage.