

For the people to win

Karnataka must negotiate a new deal with the Centre for itself and its institutions



MILIND SOHONI

THE KARNATAKA ELECTION results have brought cheer to many of our liberal friends. But the question remains: Will the change in government help the common people of Karnataka? Let us examine this question more carefully.

According to the Lokniti-CSDS survey of the Karnataka electorate, the top three issues of interest to voters were unemployment (30 per cent), poverty (21 per cent) and lack of development (15 per cent). Education was at 6 per cent and corruption even lower. Thus, material development was the principal concern of voters and not emotive issues such as the politics of religion. But to change these material conditions, we need to understand how we got here in the first place.

Let us look at drinking water as an example. Beginning 2009, the Government of India launched the centrally-sponsored National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) which aimed to provide drinking water to every habitation. It came with its own one-size-fits-all norms and procedures and an alphabet soup (VWSC, VAP, DWSM, etc.) of committees and formats at the state, district and village level. This gradually reduced the ownership and capabilities of the concerned state department. The drinking water situation did not improve. Going by the 2018 NSSO data, a whopping 18 per cent of the people of Karnataka were dependent on bottled water.

The reasons for this failure were simple enough — the science of water, especially groundwater, did not advance nor did its planning or administration. Ideally, instead of micro-management, the central government should have supported an opening up of the sector by demanding periodic white papers from state departments, an analysis of existing practices and a discussion of the problems. This would have helped set the teaching and research agenda for the wide range of higher education institutions that dot the country. That would have improved the sector. But it did not happen. Sadly, the new Jal Jeevan Mission borrows heavily from the NRDWP and is likely to meet the same fate.

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schemes limits the space available to states to come up with solutions and is unlikely to improve outcomes.

The same holds true for the conduct of science and higher education. Their centralisation began in the 1950s and continues unabated. The Constitution itself places Science and Technology on the central list. Its further centralisation was carried out through the creation of elite central institutes, national scientific labs, and the academies which decide various awards and recognitions. This has made Indian science a science of “national development” and “international recognition” as opposed to one which solves material problems of common people.

Higher education, though on the concurrent list, was brought under central control through the UGC Act of 1956. Over the years, the central ministry has developed its own clutch of agencies and extremely corrosive competitive exams such as the JEE, NEET or CUET. These interfere with curriculum development by the states and its linkages with their developmental issues. It also impacts the accountability of colleges and universities to regional knowledge demands and job creation.

As a result, we are now producing graduates who cannot read a spreadsheet or write a complaint to a bus depot manager. And yet, never has the central education ministry measured how effective it has been. What job does an average Economics or Geography graduate take up? What biases does NEET or JEE have?

Coupled with this knowledge deficit is a British-era centralised administrative structure which is largely unaccountable and incompetent at fulfilling its stated role. The top bureaucracy and their departments too have never submitted themselves to any measurement. For example, we do not have a single official study or report on any aspect of the Covid-19 epidemic.

The folly of excessive centralisation for a nation so diverse was, of course, known to B R Ambedkar. During the great debates of the Constituent Assembly, he says, “[The Centre] cannot chew more than it can digest. It would

be a folly to make it so strong that it may fall by its own weight.” But this dictum has been lost in the last 70 years and there are now at least a dozen Acts which infringe upon the federal spirit of the original Constitution.

All this has compromised the ability of state governments to address the problems of their people. This in turn has severely impacted their welfare and their cultural and intellectual capabilities. It has also limited the capacity to face future challenges, especially environmental stress. Moreover, it has led to extreme inequalities and created a large underclass whose only job is to serve the top 20 per cent. It must drive their cars, swab their floors, deliver pizza, nurse their young and old, and wait on them at posh resorts. And yet it must live forever on *bhiksha* (alms) from the rich and the virtue accorded to it.

Sadly, there is little comprehension within the bottom 80 per cent of these structural impediments to their development and the subterfuge of handouts. Forgotten is the fall from “Har khet ko paani” (“Water for every farm”) to a “PM Kisan Samman” dole of Rs 6,000 every year. Indeed, forgotten too is the indignity of it all. The Lokniti-CSDS survey validates this — a majority of those who obtained benefits from various central or state welfare schemes voted for the ruling regime, while those who did not, voted for change. And the new regime promises even more handouts.

So what is a state government to do in these circumstances? The obvious answer is to negotiate a new deal with the Centre for itself and its institutions and to insist on sovereignty in the development sectors, as enshrined in the Constitution. To achieve this, some states have nurtured a sub-national identity and an egalitarian culture which puts the welfare of the common people ahead of so-called national interests. In other states, central parties have been able to articulate the primacy of regional development and culture to contest excessive centralisation. How the new government in Karnataka achieves this will tell us whether the people did indeed win in Karnataka.

The writer teaches at IIT Bombay