

The Thin Line of Exclusion

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On the walls of the *Diwan-e-Khas*, where the Peacock Throne once sat, is inscribed, "If there be a paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here." Curiously, it is not so inscribed in the *Diwan-e-Aam*. It is, indeed, a thin (but formidable) line that separates *Jannat* from *Jahannum*, *Khas* from *Aam*, governor from governed. When Shahjahan founded the magnificent *Lal Qila* containing these two *Diwans*, he followed two sound principles of imperial power. Firstly, he had the fort built overlooking a river – the lazy, gliding, majestic Yamuna, whose waters murmured tales of Krishna frolicking with the *Gopis*. And secondly, he abstracted the funds from the treasury in the name of relief – anticipating food-for-work programs by four centuries. It is thus that private pleasure and public pain are wedded together, binding one to the service of the other.

Gradually, over the centuries, the river retreated from the fort walls and left behind an empty flood plain begging to be occupied. It is, therefore, not surprising that when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was assassinated, his ashes were interred in a plot of land on this plain, tucked away between the fort and the *Mughal bund*, originally built to protect the landed gentry of Daryaganj from the river. Over the decades other eminences joined the Mahatma in their own *samadhis* –Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. To preserve their endless rest, it was necessary to build another embankment along the Yamuna. And this gave birth to the *Pushta*, a necklace of little houses strung along the embankment, extraordinarily busy with life, working families yearning to participate in the nation's destiny. In January 2004, there were 30,000 families in the shadow of the *samadhis*. By April, there were none.

A vicious combination of blind judicial pronouncements and ruthless administrative action, under the super-vision of an arrogant dark knight of the Emergency, when democracy itself lay shattered, had reduced 30,000 homes to rubble. It is not easy to witness the tearing agony of those rendered homeless in their own land, but it may be possible to imagine their smouldering rage at the hell they have been cast into. So they came hunkering back on election day in May, determined to make democracy bend to their will, and, ballot by secret ballot, they voted Jagmohan, emblematic Minister of 'Culture' and 'Tourism' in a Shining India government, out of power. As the results came pouring in, and it became clear that a Congress-led government was going to steer the nation, there was a collective sigh of relief. "Now", said the people who constitute democracy, "now we can return to our homes and our work."

But will work and homes remain in the many *Pushtas* that constitute India? Will there finally be an end to this desolate, interminable process of uprooting lives and livelihoods? By what will we know that change is indeed in the air? We know that, before the elections, the Congress had committed itself to providing shelter for the poor. In the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), forged with the allies, it further emphasised the need for housing near the place of occupation. Perhaps pressured by the Communist Parties, it also declared that forced evictions and demolitions would be stopped and a national rehabilitation policy prepared for those displaced by

development. The key question is, how different is this from the BJP's vision of an ideal city free of slums, or the TDP's promise of clean and green cities with houses and sites for the homeless?

A similar query arises with respect to work and livelihoods. In its manifesto, the Congress had, along with the DMK, committed itself to expand employment in the organised sector and promote employment-intensive growth, in contrast to the BJP's smug assertion that lakhs of jobs were already being spun-off in the informal sector. The Congress promised that support would be provided to unorganised enterprises and laws would be enacted to protect labour and safety. Legal space would be made available in towns and cities for hawkers, vendors, and food-sellers. The Left went one step further and demanded enshrining the right to work as a fundamental right. Both the CPI and CPM asked that small-scale industries be provided with cheap credit and marketing facilities, and traditional sectors be protected. Both emphasised the requirement of minimum wages for workers in the unorganised sector.

Thus, the National Employment Guarantee Act in the CMP, for creating 100 days of employment, is essentially an attractive Congress proposal, but a far cry from the basic demand of the Left. The CMP provides for credit for small-scale industries (SSI), and modernisation of village industries, with a national fund for the unorganised, informal sector. Unlike the BJP and TDP, it reinforces the Left's demand for protecting labour by promising the welfare of all, particularly the 93% in the unorganised sector. The CMP further offers the lollipop of subsidies to public-private partnerships in urban transport, water supply, municipal administration, and social housing. But, paradoxically, it also shares the TDP's vision of women associations assuming responsibility for drinking water, sanitation, primary education and health, nutrition and energy.

Eventually, it is left to the 2004-2005 budget to cut through the chaff and reveal the real intent of governance. Only an additional Rs10,000 crores has been set aside for the CMP. 85 items have been dropped from the SSI reserved list in order to promote "competitive" business. The Rs10,000 crores promised for modernisation finds no mention. Food-for-work programmes are proposed only in 150 districts. The Public Distribution System has been abandoned. There is a paltry Rs40 crores as health insurance for the poor. The labour allocation has been marginally increased from Rs835 to 924 crores. Subsidies for the poor are down by Rs6,600 crores. There is nothing for rehabilitation. Revenue expenditure on government has been reduced. The onus for social sector spending, including housing, now lies with banks, financial institutions, and multi-lateral agencies. Responsibility for basic services has been turned over to women's associations

In this political sitcom the BJP and the TDP had glibly argued that development benefits from their liberalisation policies would eventually trickle down to the poor. That is why they lost. The Congress and the DMK stepped backwards to accept that globalisation may not be good enough, and needs a "human face". That is why they won. The CPM and the CPI called for 'alternative policies' to protect their constituency, and won a few more seats. The CMP is clearly a document that tries to reconcile contradictory pressures and demands. But the budget is the real indicator of what lies behind the mask. For it proceeds to further cut back on State investment, privatising the profitable areas of the economy, letting market forces determine the

priorities, and encouraging self-help groups and non-government organisations to take over the delivery of services.

If this is not indication enough of intent, then one has only to return to the somnolent Yamuna – representative of *Pushtas* all over India, where eviction is a part of life. Three petitions to the Chief Justice of India; monthly appeals to the Delhi government; fortnightly memoranda to the Human Rights Commission; weekly reminders to the Union Minister for Urban Development; daily pleas to the media to uncover the inhuman face of urban development: everything echoes off the stony walls of silence that protect governance. In vivid technicolor contrast, the columns of the dailies are overwhelmed by religion, sport, and commerce. The Akshardham temple, the Commonwealth Games village, and the Metro headquarters gobble up, acre after illegitimate acre, the same precious land on the Yamuna bed that the poor are too illegal to occupy. Delhi, we are told ad nauseam, will be a “world class city”, goose-stepping to the rhythm of India as a “global power”.

The thin line between autocratic vision and democratic reality is a construct of power. Its tension arises from the sordid fact that the *Khas* cannot tolerate the simple dreams of the *Aam*. “Pickpockets”, “anti-socials”, “criminals”, “thieves”, “encroachers”, “polluters”: intemperate words used by the strong to describe the weak. On that thin line, therefore, “civil” society everywhere builds a wall to keep the “uncivil” out of paradise. One day the plaintive voices from across the wall will take on an ominous tone. One day the thin line will snap. On that day will the meek move? To inherit the earth. As has been promised in higher and nobler manifestos.

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