

Democracy Dividend

The sight of two uniformed men in front of our house was a bit odd. This was after all the middle of the day and though the road in front of our house sees maniacal driving by testosterone driven teenagers, it can by no means be classified as crime infested. And in any case, they seemed woefully underprepared for the kind of crime for which our city has become notorious- gangland wars, extortion and kidnappings. The only weapons they carried were a couple of well-oiled bamboo *dandas* since they were not your regular Haryana Police but Home Guards. Initially I brushed their presence to a possible visit by some officer to the neighbourhood but when I saw similar sights on almost all roads of the locality, my curiosity got the better of me.

The next day during my evening walk, I noticed one such person staffing a particularly lonely road. Upon enquiring as to why this sudden interest in citizens' safety, he was quite frank. He said he was just following orders and the Police Commissioner has ordered all Home Guard personnel to get on the roads since that the elections are around the corner and the government wants us to believe that it cares about our safety!

The election fever started in the town several months ago. Suddenly, a lot more people seemed to be interested in organizing religious discourses and functions. The sermons or kirtans would feature a noted religious figure or singer. It was another matter that the billboards advertising these worthy events were typically sponsored by prospective ticket seekers. One couldn't miss them- their airbrushed, smiling faces occupied more than half the board! And in case you wondered who they were, they helpfully told you that they were your prospective legislators.

Anything to do with religion seems to be sure shot winner. In the previous election, one candidate plastered all the walls with signs asking people to contact him if they wanted a free *sundar kand* path in their homes. I imagine a lot of people earned gratis religious merit as a result though I am not sure if the sponsor benefitted electorally. The same person this year has done one better- he has promised a free, all expenses paid trip to Prayagraj for a once in a lifetime *kumbh darshan*. The busses leave at regular intervals and there is promise of excellent arrangement for boarding and lodging.

The other thing which the prospective candidates seem to be very keen on is wishing the public. Whether it is Raksha Bandhan or Makar sankranti or even Chath pooja (no

doubt because of the recent influx of voters from Eastern parts of the country) boards would go up with best wishes and huge mug shots of the prospectives.

All this has been happening for a few months and one assumes it will increase as the days of the ticket distribution approaches. It is of course great for the economy. Billboards have to be printed, then transport hired to take them all over the city, people hired to climb electricity poles and put them up. Tentwallahs and caterers too do roaring business with all the discourses and *kirtans* being organized. These functions are a bonanza for "DJ Sound" people, this being a peculiar moniker for the providers of sound systems. Democracy is good for the economy it seems since all this money spent gives the GDP a boost. Much like during demonetization, the one set of people whose business boomed were the photocopy shop owners since every time you wanted to take out money from the bank, you needed a copy of all kinds of cards.

The Home Guards too seem to be reaping the democracy dividend. Since they are a quasi-volunteer force, they usually assist the regular police force in their duties. Thus, for instance, one sees them with the traffic policemen at intersections where they do the dirty work of managing traffic while the regular cops indulge in the lucrative business of stopping people for traffic violations.

But in the colony now, they wield supreme power. And just like anyone else in our country who wears a uniform, do not hesitate to use it. The other day, I saw one of the Home Guards stop a milkman on a motorcycle. The young milkman was doing his evening round of delivering milk. And of course, milkmen never wear helmets and worse, never carry a driving license or registration papers. The Home Guard gave him a long spiel about what it could all mean. The youngster, obviously scared, groveled before this all powerful uniformed man and tried to beg for mercy. This went on for a few minutes after which the negotiations started. Unfortunately for the Home Guard, the youngster was not carrying much money and so the violation was settled for a mere fifty rupees. Not much, but enough for a quarter of *santra* (country liquor) on the way home! Small reward for keeping a bored vigil on a lonely street I guess.

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