

Farmers agitation: Lessons to be learnt

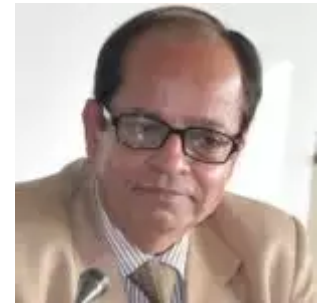
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At long last, the Home Ministry has veered round to the view that the protest sites at the borders of Delhi should be cleared of protestors. The news must have come as a big relief for ordinary people in the region, and maybe even for a section of the protestors who were willy-nilly keeping company with others. Why did the government not undertake such a decision earlier and what gains or losses occurred meantime due to this policy of procrastination on the part of both the Government and the farmers' groups need to be discussed in society to derive right lessons for the working of democracy.

It looks like the government was waiting for nature, or to be more precise, Corona to strike again. It happened at the time of the Shaheen Bagh protests: the police swung into action only when dire warnings were sounded about the possibility of the protest site turning into a super-spreader. So, this time at the Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur borders of Delhi too, the Corona threat is being cited even though, during the first Corona wave, the protestors were not deterred. Mercifully, the harvesting season has set in and it has seen the decline of number of protestors thereby bolstering government's expectation that the situation can be turned normal.

Another factor that the government seems to have been banking upon is the normal fatigue of the participants of any agitation and its consequent petering out. The government's expectations went up when the farm union leader Rakesh Tikait announced October as the deadline which showed that he foresaw opportunity for personal initiative. His breaking down in the aftermath of the adverse reaction from all quarters following the Red Fort incident had worked well and suddenly, he could see his chances of emerging as the central figure. So, October deadline gave him time enough to build himself up as a national leader by visiting various states going to elections and raking up sentiments against the government. This, on the other hand, must have held a silver lining for the government because the farm unions had so far been claiming apolitical identity. A leader with political aspirations could chime well with the establishment. Besides, chances of petering out of the movement definitely went up with his declaration.

The government stand had been to deal with the protest with kid gloves simply because the farmer, in our land, has been glorified since the days when India had to import wheat to meet demand within the country. Any strong-arm tactics would have been suicidal at the hustings. Due time had to be given to let the public see the rationale of any such action.

Maybe the government wanted to impress democracies elsewhere in the world even though that did not quite work successfully. Critics looking through coloured lenses found the regime in India repressive ignoring the ignoble and audacious attack on the Red Fort. Important politicians in Canada and Britain spoke against the three farm acts even if they were not involved and supposedly had little knowledge of these laws. There was clear possibility that the rich Punjab farmers had successfully lobbied with them through the diasporic Punjabi population there. The government learnt the lesson that expecting foreign democracies to sing to the tune of Indian democracy was not so simple and so there were terse reactions from the MEA which shoed giving up on such an expectation.

The public meanwhile, particularly, the people living around the protest sites or those who had to cross Delhi borders for business –and there is always a large number of such people – suffered leading to huge financial losses for businessmen and industrial workers. Patients being taken to Delhi for treatment had to go through harrowing times and ordinary people visiting friends and relatives in Delhi had to take circuitous routes. They were weary of it all and even felt that the protesting farmers were not actually poor as their clout with the foreign governments and the amenities at the protest sites suggested.

The farmers should have learnt the lesson that expecting the central government to agree to whatever they desired, without any regard for reasoned discussions, is not possible. In any democracy, the dialogue between the government and the public ought to be on the basis of sound reasoning and logic and adopting any rigid stand does not help. Setting the goal of the talks as a precondition nullifies the dialogue. That would be a positive outcome which might help smoothen the rough road of democracy in the country.

Now that the agitation has lost out on followers due to various reasons and surely on public support, the protestors should gracefully withdraw the agitation rather than wait being evicted in disgrace. The government is still ready to discuss things. Only the unions have to rid themselves of biases which like a virus has seeped into some leaders who do not seem to be functioning in democratic spirit and in the national interest.

END OF ARTICLE

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