

BJP demands its pound of flesh for Sengol installation

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Amit Shah is clear that the BJP expects Tamil Nadu to pay its dues. He is unembarrassed claiming that 25 MPs is a small price for the benevolence showed by Modi.



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Union Home Minister Amit Shah being felicitated by party leaders during a public meeting, in Vellore. Credit: PTI Photo

Union home minister Amit Shah is a many-sided character, combining the comically matter of fact and a sense of threat in his style. Recently, he informed the people that Prime Minister Narendra Modi loves Tamil Nadu, and has a special place in his heart and his constituency for Tamil culture.

Shah also claims that Tamil Nadu should be grateful to Modi for installing the Sengol in Parliament. He outlines Modi's deeds, listing out each act. You know there is an impending bill to pay. A few references to Tamil Nadu, comes at high cost and Shah cheerfully announces that Tamil Nadu should show its gratitude by voting 25 BJP

members to Parliament. In Shah's lingo, there is little difference between toll, tax, and gift. The crucial part lies in the manner of repayment. A lack of acknowledgement and a lack of payment both become default. Tamil Nadu now owes the regime as it has defaulted on major gifts.

Behind all this is a deeper statement, a sense of a *fait accompli*, that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is here to stay, and we better get used to it. The sheer matter-of-factness needs a deeper reading. A mix of metaphors and eras makes the story even more confusing, Shah, symbolically plays the messenger telling Tamil Nadu that they are vassals of the BJP regime, that gratitude and sycophancy go together. Almost insidiously, Shah is making the BJP on par with the Chola dynasty of the Lutyens regime. There is something seductive about the trappings of power. If power is a costume ball, the BJP is getting used to it. That they are here to stay after 2024. It is time to revise Lord Acton's observation that power seduces, and absolute power seduces absolutely.

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There is a second factor, which is more insidious. It is a language of power and the relations it creates. Power speaks and insists on speaking the language of currency. There is no notion of gift or a sense of distributive justice within the federal system. Shah is a cashier demanding a return payment.

Politics is no longer the world of freebies. Politics now demands a payment and a definitive return. It's calculative and calculating. Words like welfare and care feel outdated. Politicians look benevolent, mainly because they use people tax money to play politics. Politics is no longer trusteeship; generosity is only a caveat for deferred payments.

Democracy today is a regime of clients rather than citizens. Shah is clear that the BJP expects Tamil Nadu to pay its dues. He is unembarrassed claiming that 25 MPs is a small price for the benevolence of the Modi raj. For Shah the corporate calculus is clear. The conviviality of the calculation is clear, so is the clarity of cash, only now the idiom moves to party politics and governance. Well-being is only a flavour cold cash provides.

There is a mixing of metaphors about the event. Politicians seem to be at home in feudal and in imperial idioms as also in the commercial. The very pragmatism is impressive. Tamil Nadu should receive the message. Cold cash can only provide cold comfort. The calculative sense of politics is clear, it in fact makes the future clearer. It is democracy that adds the new calculations to politics. I was once listening to a child promising god that he would offer him six more mangoes if he passed in the math test; Shah's lingo is as calculative but less innocent. In fact, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin should follow and mimic the same effect by declaring a scheme or function honouring Modi, and send Shah the bill. The era of cold calculations has begun; there is no love lost between the parties. The sadness will haunt democracy.

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