

Free Tickets to Corruption

Political parties should announce a code of ethics for their members as a first step against graft



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The recent drama for free cricket-match tickets by Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) is nothing new in Karnataka. Last year, legislators demanded a minimum of two passes for each of the 300 MLAs for an India-England match.

So, not surprisingly, this year, their juniors, a little lower in the power totem pole, councillors of the Mahanagara Palike sought no less than 450 free tickets for the IPL match in the city — yes, two tickets per head.

When the requisite quantity and quality of tickets was not forthcoming, media reported that they refused to clean the garbage from Chinaswamy Stadium and soon raised objections to decades-old infrastructure like swimming pools and so on in the stadium complex in retaliation. They also threatened to slap commercial tax for lease of the stadium complex and motley facilities for various events of the ICC cup in the coming season.

A couple of years ago, the Bangalore city police threatened to withdraw security to a match unless their brass were given free tickets to a game of cricket. And all this in a state whose capital is

among the worst-governed cities in the country in terms of any infrastructure index.

It needs little involved reasoning to see why this act of BBMP and others before them was akin to corruption. The tickets sought were for personal gratification. Cleaning the stadium or rendering other services was official duty. Threatening to levy commercial taxes bordered on blackmail.

All this is news but, then again, hardly news. After all what the Karnataka politicians and local government officials have unabashedly exhibited is nothing more than what is taken as given all over the country — that the power invested in 'government servants' is first, foremost and almost exclusively for their personal enjoyment, use and benefit, and so are all the assets of the nation.

National resources are for parliamentarians, central ministers and babus to misuse; the state's estates are for legislators, state ministers and state-level babus to abuse; and a city's assets are chattels for the councillors and local officials to milk.

Central bigwigs are no bigwigs if they have to pay their way to any significant event in Delhi — whether Commonwealth Games or an IPL opening. They will get priority over all others into the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Much of the police will be personal security for state overlords. Local biggies will rarely, if ever, pay their way even to local cinema halls. Ba-



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bus can requisition vehicles and hotel accommodation for their families from the institutions that fall under their ministries, on demand.

So systematised is this practice that it does not even raise eyebrows any more. For example, we did not hear one single voice from any senior politician (or even a junior one) denouncing this blatant blackmail in Karnataka. Why?

Because it is one nice big club and the demand is clearly considered reasonable. BJP has been making much noise about the probity, or rather the lack of it, in the ruling party. Yet, not one party leader has decried the conduct of their 'disciplined soldiers'. Even the PM did not use the opportunity to send out a strong signal that the nation needs higher standards to eschew trading power for

personal gratification.

For progressive and thinking party leaders, is it so difficult to have the 'obedient soldiers' of their parties to adopt a code of conduct and ethics policy that, if flouted, wantonly could lead to their expulsion? Even off-the-shelf templates of such codes of any reasonably respectful institution, diligently enforced, should be sufficient for starters. Can many more of them come forward to walk the talk and show the way for probity in public life?

Sadly, India has never been so bereft of leaders. Who is a leader after all? One who wins elections by hook or by crook, or one who shows the correct way to his followers? By their acts of commission — like the BBMP conduct — and omission — of not disciplining such mem-

bers of the party — it seems increasingly hard to call any of our 'leaders' as leaders.

I use the term leaders in quotes because, sadly, even for an accomplished individual like our PM, it is hard to attach the prefix 'leader'.

Those who cannot mould the conduct of their followers in the right direction, inculcating in them a sense of duty and service and constantly remind them of the purpose of their being where they are, have no right to be referred to as leaders. And our 'leaders' do not even consider the conduct of their 'soldiers' wrong to begin with, leave alone try to influence it in the right direction. Are we reduced to a society in whose dictionary the word 'patriotism' no longer exists?

Perhaps the only leader that emerged tall in this display of misuse of power was Santosh Hegde, the former Lokayukta of Karnataka. He considered the BBMP conduct a fit case to pursue under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

At a time when Anna Hazare has brought corruption to the country's centre stage, the least the rest of the system can do to is to start the march now, as we have miles to go. Political parties should publicly announce and enforce a sound code of conduct and ethics policy. This will be a visible beginning, to show that the way forward in future will be the way pointing away from corruption and graft, even if a comprehensive anti-corruption Bill is some distance away.