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Jharokha Darshan: The Visible Political Power

That a politician was compelled to make a public appearance despite ill health tells us something about the political culture in India. Manohar Parrikar's rather dramatic entry at the budget session of 2018 should make us not only enquire into the short-term machinations in contemporary politics, but also the culture in which the visibility of the ruling authority is of paramount importance. For one thing was crystal clear in the political spectacle surrounding Parrikar's sudden appearance at the budget session: the importance of his visibility for colleagues, allies, and the masses.

It is interesting to note the role played by public visibility in politics (and not just in the abovementioned incident). As can be perceived from the appearances of politicians in inaugurating even the smallest public works, to be seen in public ensures that the ruling authority is recognized as such by the people. Recently, it was reported that some sarpanches in Priol were upset because their names did not feature in the inauguration plaque of new public infrastructure owing to a circular issues by the government prohibiting the same. These upset sarpanches argue that it is they who do most of the hard work to make a developmental work a reality, and hence should not be excluded. The enormous outpouring of congratulatory messages in the pages of newspapers (sometimes even occupying two full pages!) is another case in point.

Public visibility and validation is important in this sense as the legislator is not seen or does not operate as a public servant (in the true sense of the term) but is a dispenser of benevolence and favors; he is the patron *par excellence* in contemporary democratic politics in India. Hence, one can expect a conflict if a sarpanch gets more visibility than, say, a minister. The importance of public visibility and public validation for a ruling authority figure has a long history in South Asia. For instance, the Mughal Emperor Akbar can be considered to have properly invested and institutionalized the vocabulary and practice of the ruler making a public appearance. Like the Mughal emperor, the ruling authority continues as a dispenser of benevolence, favors, and justice down to the smallest level of Indian governance.

Based on Indic and Persian models of kingship, as well as the practice of worshipping the sun prevalent in ancient Persia as in South Asia, Akbar would present himself to his subjects from a window of his palace – the jharokha – first to worship the sun and later to hear the petitions and grievances of his subjects. This practice was continued by later Mughal emperors, reaching its zenith in the reign of Shahjahan, with the magnificent Diwan-i-Aam audience hall in the Red Fort. The practice was rooted to such an extent in Mughal imperial culture that even Aurangzeb, considered to be a purist, carried it forward for some years of his reign. By enacting such daily rituals, authority and legitimacy to rule was vested in the figure of the emperor – a necessary condition if a king or an emperor was to govern his empire and be recognized as such in the eyes of his subjects.

What this history indicates is that the visible presence of the ruling authority was a requirement not just during the celebration of festivals of the state or some religious occasions, but was necessary on an everyday basis. Political authority, therefore, is expressed as a daily ritual in which the figure of authority needs to be visible. This figure of authority needs to be *seen* as presiding over the governance of the land. Thus, the authority figure needs to be seen not only in the parliament/assembly but also at the ground level presiding over works of public infrastructure or overseeing the successful dissemination of governmental schemes.

That such a pattern of authority continues in our times – apparently a time of liberal and constitutional democracies – is also indicative of the fact that political authority is understood largely as a kingly-feudal authority. We understand our politicians as rulers and as benevolent patrons of yore, rather than as public servants more suited for constitutional and liberal democracies. Political figures are then given deference by the masses, often commanded by kings; but which seems over the top for public servants entrusted with the welfare of everyone. In this context, it is interesting to note that as early as in the first half of the twentieth century most of the Concanim newspapers referred to the Portuguese Governor General as “*Goencho Raza*” or “*Amcho Raza*”. Given that by this time the Governor Generals were appointed by elected representatives in the Portuguese parliament, by no stretch of imagination, could the person who headed the government in Goa during the last decades of Portuguese sovereignty qualify as a king – a *rajah*! Neither was he a public servant; however, it could be quite possible that the Governor Generals were seen as successors of the Viceroys – effectively the deputies of kings in Goa and therefore ‘kings’ in their own right.

In such a scenario, visibility of the political figure becomes one of the crucial ways in which authority is legitimized. The flip side of the issue is that political authority gets expressed in terms of feudal relations, thus hindering a transition to egalitarian forms of governance. Even basic governance is held back because the political figure is indisposed, and cannot lend his physical presence to the government. In the final analysis, rather than promoting an ethos of committed public service to all citizens, age-old hierarchies are maintained through the cult of the individual.

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