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Anger in the wake of Aila

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The king of a state should be like him— thus spoke Mohammad Ismail, a resident of cyclone-hit Dhamakhali in North 24-Parganas, where West Bengal Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi went to see post-disaster relief operations. This is exactly where the previous day the CM had faced tough questions and the local MLA had been heckled.

Barely a month had passed since the Left Front's disastrous performance in the elections when Cyclone Aila struck the state. The Left administration's poor relief and rehabilitation operations in its wake have been met with surprising anger from affected people in and around South Bengal. Independent of blame games, this is democracy behaving as it should. This also has a lot to do with the other great democratic exercise that took place a month ago.

In a well-known paper, using Indian data, economists Timothy Besley and Robin Burgess show that public food distribution and calamity relief expenditure are higher where governments face greater electoral accountability and where newspaper circulation is highest. Measures of accountability consist of voter turnouts, election timings and the extent of political competition.

The suggestion that media and political competition are key supports Amartya Sen's well-known thesis about media and democracy's role in preventing famines. This is what we would expect. Without informed consumers, competitive markets cannot guarantee quality. In fact, there can be a race to the bottom. This is also true if consumers are informed but there is no competition.

In Bengal, the media is relatively free and pro-active. For example, during 1958-92, it ranked fourth (after Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu) in per capita newspaper and periodical circulation. So, information is not scarce. But given the seeming invincibility of the Left Front and the disorganised state of the Opposition, voters didn't believe they had any way of changing the government's behaviour. The last elections have changed this. Voters feel they can stand up to government officials and politicians without the fear of reprisal.

In the political scenario of Bengal, this fact is worthy of note. Among the indicators suggesting high political participation, the figure that sticks out like a sore thumb is of the number of people who ask questions in local government meetings. Most studies and surveys reveal that less than one-third of those attending gram panchayat meetings ask questions, while in a relatively low-political-participation state like Karnataka, the figure is close to half. What looks like the emergence of an opposition force and of healthy political competition in Bengal, finally, has helped shape the mode of popular expression that the CM saw in Dhamakhali last week.

Too much political competition may not be a good thing, since it leads to reckless populism at the expense of long-term benefits to the population at large. The recent controversy over land acquisition is a case in point—where for all the faults of the government, the Opposition did not exactly cover itself with glory. But this is less of a concern for disaster relief.

However, even the role of the media has changed in subtle ways. The communication revolution and globalisation of media have, for example, created subtle forms of peer pressure across regions and countries. For example, for swing voters in the US, it was more Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath than the Iraq war that dealt a fatal blow to his administration's image. The surprisingly responsive way the Chinese government handled the aftermath of the earthquake in Sichuan last year had a lot to do with its hand being forced by media flashing those images all across the world. Starvation deaths in remote villages in the western districts of West Bengal in the late seventies received some attention in the regional press, but were not subject to the kind of media frenzy that met the 2005 hunger deaths in Amlashol. Like in sports, once you get to see national and international teams in action, that pressures regional and national teams to perform.

Competition too has various subtle aspects and is not restricted merely to political competition among parties. For example, where performance counts, parties will be under pressure to select candidates who will deliver more for their constituents over those whose chief qualification is loyalty to the leadership. Also, NGOs and voluntary organisations have become really active in rural Bengal and many of them, over time, have earned the trust of local people. Even local governments have had to come to terms with them. In times of natural calamities like Aila, workers of these organisations often play active roles and this too imposes a competitive pressure on government officials and local politicians.

It is often heard that "All our problems are due to politicians". This confuses symptoms with the disease. Politicians can and do change. Like in any other domain, they just need the right incentives.

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