**Bleeding from Shylocks cut**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2021-02-23

SHYLOCK is the big business, Antonio, the political parties. Let`s throw in Portia, symbolising law and justice, but which mostly eludes Indians currently. The news is heart-warming in the interregnum though. A brilliant woman journalist won a tenacious legal battle with an alleged sex predator of a powerful social echelon. And octogenarian lef tist poet Varavara Rao got bail too, albeit for six months.

But Rao`s comrades, India`s most brilliant and selfless souls, are cramming the jails. A battery of leftist intellectuals and lawyers along with a merrily self-effacing octogenarian Jesuit priest stand accused of plotting to murder the prime minister in a laughably bizarre plot. Others are facing sedition charges for orchestrating communal violence in Delhi, which their rivals actually waged under police protection.

An American newspaper has revealed how the dubious assassination plot was structured around hacked computers that were used to plant the `evidence` of the purported crime. So, the victories here and there are welcome aberrations happy aberrations in a system that stands entrenched against equal rights and dignity for women and which ambushes dissenting citizens at will.

It`s no secret that major political parties receive funds from big business, which becomes a fertile ground for guid pro quo. In fact, it`s a curious rule of thumb that the parties whose leaders are in jail or face charges for alleged graft, are precisely the ones that the corporate lobbies shunned, and, therefore, did not favour with their largesse. It is alsolikely that theleaders didn`t accept theimplied guid pro quo and chose to suffer.

It`s a bit like the movie industry. If one didn`t pick the money f rom the usurious market the movie is likely never going to find a theatre to screen it.

Mayawati and Lalu Yadav are a case in point of politicians who have been made an example of for seeking alternative routes of raising money, tainted money, to fight costly elections, and which they mostly won. Portia will have to be more innovative than leaning on her fabled court craft and throwing in a clever interpretation of law to tilt the argument. Today, she has to weigh the cases as presented.Chara ghotala or fodder scam is up for public scrutiny and trial by media, a bail-less crime, but an opaque defence dealhas to be decidedfor reasons of national security through sealed envelopes in highest court rooms. This, therefore, is a political battle and has to be fought politically. It is farfetched to think of defeating a closet patriarchy or a renegade state in a court battle.

In this regard, a key component of Prime Minister Modi`s hare-brained demonetisation move had a clever edge. He mopped up 85 per cent of India`s cash on Nov 8, 2016. The Uttar Pradesh assembly polls began on Feb 11, 2017. By cancelling big currency notes on the eve of a huge election, which Uttar Pradesh always is, he sucked out avital resource the rivals needed to give him a good fight.

Why don`t Indian parties crowd-fund as some, but only some, sections of the left do? Even in the heartland of capitalism in the United States, Bernie Sanders could come tantalisingly close to becoming president with crowd funding. Delhi`s Aam Aadmi Party came to power with the help of this mostly shunned method of raising electoral funds. In the bargain, AAP inspired donors to see themselves as stakeholders in the great endeavour.

We read in the morning paper that India`s main opposition Congress party has run out of money.

Elections are due in key states where the party could do well, primarily Assam, with clever handling. It`s a wrong time not to have money. West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Kerala are also up for polls.

Being in penury, or near penury, is, however, a good sign for the Congress party and may not besuch a bad idea for India`s democracy either.

Remember the tycoons muscling their way through pliable media contacts to claim cabinet berths for their acolytesin the secondinningsof the Congressled alliance of Manmohan Singh? The ministry of telecommunications was crucial to the quest. And with all the deals being done to monopolise data and e-commerce today, the stakes were bound to be high. The BJP has emerged as the monopoly beneficiary of corporate donations, not least by tweaking the law to make the transactions opaque. No surprise there.

A great reason for the Congress`s financial crunch is Rahul Gandhi`s decision to make a direct connection between India`s prevailing economic crisis and Mr Modi`s patronage of his crony capitalist friends. Protesting farmers, dissenting intellectuals and assorted environmentalists across the world have seen through the plot. (Whoever can see the plot is an enemy of the state.) On the flip side of the Congress`s course correction under Gandhi, an interview was published of Punjab`s Congress Chief Minister Amarinder Singh. He is rowing back f rom the bold demands by the farmers for the repeal of pro-business farm laws. Singh favours suspending the laws for two years instead of annulling them. The India Today magazine did some fact-checking to show that Singh had not met Modi`s friend Mukesh Ambani, as claimed, a day ahead of the nationwide strike by the farmers. The cordial picture of the two was from 2017.

Amarinder`s challenger in Congress is cricketerturned-politician Navjot Sidhu, a vocal critic of big business. Shylock is hemorrhaging India. Rahul Gandhi is losing his MLAs to corporate-political pelf, the latest casualty being his government in Pondicherry. It`s time he went to the people with the bowl, an agreeable way to involve them in his bold analysis of the country`s crisis. He can start to stitch the wounds, not as a grand leader for which he must win a mandate, but as a caring citizen like those languishing in jails. The Congress will be the richer for it. Good for Portia too.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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