

THE IRONY OF BEING THE COMMON MAN

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ABSTRACT

We have always talked about the common man, and have always found the common man talking. Sounds ironical, but no class is willing to feel and live like a commoner, if at all, we have actually deciphered the meaning of the common man. In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote in ‘Common Sense’, “I do not choose to be a common man. It is my right to be uncommon...I will not trade freedom for beneficence, nor my dignity for a handout. I will never cower before any master, nor bend to any threat. It is my heritage to stand erect, proud and unafraid.”. In India, we have tried to find many variants, but if you wish to go by the assessment of Bidisha Ganguly, who does economic research for the Confederation of Indian Industry, it is a reference of largely the middle class who get affected by the changes in the tax slabs. On the contrary, it may be anyone on the road, except the elite and the rich. Since independence, there has been a persistent debate and surge to carve out his identity, both politically and economically. Results have varied, but every attempt has classified him as emphatic, observant and vulnerable. The present paper is a very miniscule attempt to understand the common man’s limited canvas that create large democracies, as systems inevitably cannot do without them.

Keywords: *Caricature, Classes, Common, Government, Victim.*

PAPER

Can you recall Saif Ali Khan’s famous one-liner in the movie Love Aaj Kal, referring to the AAM AADMI as the MANGO PEOPLE? Initially, this would have definitely pleased a few, Mango being the king of fruits. But has the aam aadmi reached to the heights of being a monarch, the one who can decide, dictate, and demand! Or has he been narrowed down to a mere seasonal identity, like that of the fruit that has yet not reached on everybody’s plate, except for the ones who have proved their worthiness of affording it. Like the seasonal political fervor or carnival, the aam aadmi or the common man is always in demand in the season of political manifestations and electoral bonhomie. Thus, the most acceptable definition that any dictionary would provide to this phrase would be ‘the undistinguished commoner, lacking class or rank, distinction or special attributes.’¹ The phrase “common man”, needless to say, has wide political currency in India, with parties across the political spectrum using it.

As we peep into history to excavate the phrase, it inevitably takes us to another greatest democracy on the face of the globe. It was with Andrew Jackson's term as President (1829-1837) that ushered a new era in American politics. History was being created as, for the first time, in the United States of America, a man born, in the most humble of the circumstances, was elected the President. Many of us are aware that most of the people in the previous generations who gained access to the political arena, had gained precedence due to their family background, wealth, prestige, and education. The families of the Adams or the Jefferson’s had already pronounced the guidelines for political appointees. Undoubtedly, Andrew Jackson’s election proved that a persons’ lineage did not ensure a place in office, but actually, it was the candidate’s ability to appeal to the electorate. It was Jackson’s election that started the

supposed 'age of the common man'.² The Jacksonian era had begun. Jackson's success was based on the public's belief that Jackson was one of them. In reality Jackson was anything but common. This era also symbolized the era of the common man, and constituted great change, raking up issues like, slavery, Indians, westward mobility, and balance of power between the executive and the legislative branches of government and most Americans identified themselves into the middle class. The 1820s, a time of transition and transformation called for a common man who could guide the government and politics through the changeful age. The common man had assumed control. It was the beginning of the era of equality of opportunities as political actions forever changed the presidency.³

As for us in India, are we sure whether we have actually discovered the common man. The person who dared to personify the Common Man and gift it to the larger Indian community with sheer honesty and openness was none other but our own Indian author and cartoonist R. K. Laxman. For over a half of a century, the Common Man represented the hopes, aspirations, troubles and perhaps even foibles of the average Indian, through a daily comic strip, "You Said It" in *The Times of India* that was started in 1951.

The curiousness of human life lies in the fact that it is intertwined at all steps of its existence. The common man through a common strip!!! Thanks, but to the British rule, that brought cartooning to India and struck roots. Although historically we have been rich in sculpture, painting and architecture, but the art of graphic satire and humor was unknown, although some popular poetry and folklore could always afford to poke some fun on the follies of men and monarchs. The world of caricatures had dawned. With the beginning of our struggle for independence, the cartoonist dared to depict the real characters, as also the superficial ones. As India was declared a sovereign democratic republic through a Constitution that was so laboriously drawn, it was envisaged that every citizen would enjoy equality, liberty and fraternity. The freedom of the media became sacred. With everything in place, the politicians, nay freedom fighters, took to the relaxing couch.⁴

You might be supposedly thinking where at all is the common man in here that we began to talk about. Kindly wait, we have already taken our desired path. Had things worked the manner in which our founders of free India had hoped, the Press people would have been out of job and the cartoonist would have become an extinct creature. But fortunately, the rulers and the ruled, the people in power and the people in poverty, gave enough fodder to the cartoonist for cattle-grazing. Politics began to offer ample reasons to analyze the new style of its functioning that was hitherto unknown to the ordinary citizen. Ideologies began to change speedily diverting from citizen concerns, and instead moving towards parties squabbling amongst themselves. Political behavior became more and more strange and curious. Dharnas, booth-capturing, party defections became everyday norms. Naturally enough, this new twist in politics enabled the cartoonist to survive. And the citizen became an awe-struck spectator. Inevitably, at various junctures and without a voice, he became the centre of conversation without uttering a word. Whatever murmurings began to take the rounds gradually ended only in political gossips.⁵ We were slowly moving towards building a nation that was prone to talking politics just anywhere. We all can understand that it had to happen.

All publications of those times were not political in content, but they did make an effort to serve some satire and sarcasm to the reader with his morning tea. And this period gifted us with one of the most renowned cartoonist of our country namely R K Laxman, whose caricatures defined the common man in a new stature. As he himself agreed that 'as he became more and more entrenched in watching and commenting on the political hobnobbing of the country, he felt the need to define the common Indian. Precious time would be lost if he would draw elaborate masses of people that comprised of the Maharashtrians, the Bengalis, the Tamilians, the Punjabis, the Assamese and the et.al.' Laxman was of the opinion that it was easy to distinguish an individual from another in the western world because of the dress

that one wore, but in India this could not lead to a landmark decision. The medley of differences boggled him. How was the Common Man to be defined?⁶

Eventually, the grass that shot from the ground became the long-lasting identity of the common man irrespective of all the reasons and causes that separated him from others. What finally emerged, in the words of Laxman, was, “A man in checked coat, whose bald head boasts only a wisp of white hair, and whose bristling moustache lends support to a bulbous nose, which in turn holds up an oversized pair of glasses. He has a permanent look of bewilderment on his face. He is ubiquitous. Today he is found hanging around a cabinet room where a high-powered meeting is in progress. Tomorrow he is among the slum dwellers listening to their woes, or marching along with protestors as they demand the abolition of the nuclear bomb. That, of course, does not preclude him from being present at a banquet hosted by the prime minister for a visiting foreign dignitary. This man has survived all sorts of domestic crises for forty years, long after the politicians who professed to protect him have disappeared. He is tough and durable. Like the mute millions of our country, he has not uttered a word in all these years he has been around. He is a silent, bewildered, and often bemused spectator of events which anyway are beyond his control.”⁷

This COMMON MAN became a medium of comment on the socio-economic and political aspects of Indian life, and reflected the general mood of the country. This caricature column surprisingly appealed to all, whether critics or appreciators. The Time magazine wrote, ‘what’s common about this character is that like most Indians, he sees his country being forced through endless indignities by its leaders and yet doesn’t even whimper in protest’. According to anthropologist Ritu Gairola Khanduri, “Clad in a dhoti and a plaid jacket, the puzzled Common Man is no dupe: his sharp observations miss no detail of the political circus.”⁸

On 26 January (please mind the date) 2015, the king of caricature, left commonality to merge with the divine. For decades, he had fed the Indian masses with a satirical take on the Indian democratic process. Of course, he did not forget to take with him, his creation, the ubiquitous ‘common man’, the witness to the growth of democracy in India. But just on our next turn in our journey, after this devastating loss, the political corridors began to witness the party of the common man or ‘Aam Aadmi Party’ (AAP) that came to power in Delhi. The aam aadmi moved out of his black and white frame to become a real, active participant in Indian politics, as everyone graphed it. The aam aadmi was depicted to be the new shape of democracy and eventually his destiny. As evidenced by Roy R Thomas's tribute to Laxman, “the change” had begun.⁹ It was the audacious rise of the AAM AADMI etched on a Gandhi cap.

Riding on a nationwide anti-corruption campaign and the issue of the Lokpal bill, along with the likes of Prashant Bhushan, Anand Kumar, Yogendra Yadav and others, and under the umbrella shadow of Anna Hazare (soon the umbrella vanished and so did the shadow), there seemed for the first time in decades, to be hope for sustainable change. Arvind Kejriwal gave out the trumpet call on 2 October 2012, and adopted the broom or the ‘jhaadu’ as its election symbol that clearly indicated to the masses that now they could identify with a political party that had arrived to sweep away the filth of corruption.

But the common man was failed miserably. After just 49 days Arvind Kejriwal, the vehement ‘muffler man’ resigned. We shook our heads and swore by our senses that they would never be able to rise again. But alas, they did. Now this requires a little scrutiny. It is virtually based on a few self-evident truths---

First, perhaps, humility has always tended to be an attractive quality for Indians and it is something that the AAP demonstrated remarkably. Whenever such features are displayed by a person of power in power, it has the power to sway the hearts and minds of every thinking and feeling Indian who wants a clean, transparent and accountable government. How many times has any Indian politician apologized to the people he has betrayed? Apologies are rare;

excuses are a daily occurrence. Kejriwal deviated from the established practice by apologizing to the electorate, a trump card that rewrote his political career. So when the voters were confronted with the all-powerful BJP and the sinking Congress, they flocked towards the only party that seemed human and that was here to stay due to its anti-corruption slogan. Nonetheless, humility makes for a great leader and the basis for truly responsive governance. Or is it something else? And what did the common man do – he was mobilized to shake-up present-day politics through disruptions and loud protests, marred by violence, and where rationality was still under a scanner. The Common Man alas was pressured under the herd mentality. Power never has a trickle-down effect. It is only construed by its perverted forms.

Also, we all would agree that the process of voting is not merely a numbers game. It is not influenced only by facts, statistics or even policies. It is driven by emotions at some occasions and by charismatic or traditional authorities at other times. Aren't these the same emotions that have been used to drive caste-based politics or to create a creed of the cow-vigilantes, but it is a far cry from any inclusive politics. When we cast our vote for a 'leader' we want that leader to have our best interests at heart. This becomes the core of accountability. And in all this, the common man raises his expectations, wants a change every five years to try an assortment of political flavors, but can never reach to a conclusion to narrate the moral of the story as to what is best for the nation. We are taught to live, nay exist, in parts. Therefore, there can never be a consensus on what is expected in a democracy ---- who should speak, and how much, and when and where? The questions go unanswered.

With each passing day, one is compelled to enter a situation where the common man is constantly being violated by people who are not necessarily authorized to question him. The vulnerable and the marginalized, as the flourishing category of the commoners, are always bound to find themselves in the queue, from food subsidies to ticketing to demonetization. Please hold, the GST has just arrived, and my favorite food in my favorite restaurant has begun to make my pockets soggy. Philosophers have always sermoned, 'Live in the Present, as the Past has already gone and Future is always unpredictable.' And in between these three stages of existence, Happiness becomes a commodity. If you wish to leave the 'Q', then enter the domain of 'I'. Remain self-focused and individualistic. Create a situation where governance reaches out to you, and you don't knock at its doors. Contrarily, the common man's world is defined within extremely narrow classifications of the relation between the government and the governed. "You pay, we serve." A pizza would reach your home earlier than the ambulance; you can avail a car loan at 7%, but Education loan at 12%; where the rising prices of commodities have made the kitchens minimalistic but the sim card is offered without a penny; and where the Olympic gold medalist is offered cash, goodies and advertisement contracts, while the family of the dying soldier, one lakh only. The gift of digitization and cashless transactions would make the western world more worthy to us if we could also imitate their models of Education, Medical facilities, Pension, etc. The body of taxation actually does not come with the soul of relaxation. That's the dilemma.

Lets share some remarkable observations by, none other than Nani Palkhivala, a prominent lawyer and economist, that appeared in the February 1971 issue of *Freedom First*.¹⁰ He said, "India has never known true democratic freedom in its entire history except during the last 23 years. If Plato's dictum regarding political evolution is correct, our newly won freedom will have to be zealously guarded if it is not to be supplanted by dictatorship. In a nascent republic where freedom is not bred in the bones of the people, the danger of dictatorship is always vastly greater than in democracies which are centuries old." He continued, "In India freedom is not more than one election away from extinction. When an attempt to uphold the rule of law is called a manifestation of "vested interests"; and when the preservation of the sanctity of the Constitution is called the handiwork of "reactionary forces", it should be clear to

any thinking mind that freedom is in peril. Political freedom and civil liberty are the keystones of the Indian Constitution. Our Constitution is primarily shaped and moulded for the Common Man. The only persons who would be disappointed with our Constitution are those who believe in outdated ideologies which can only result in leveling down and not leveling up.”

The Common Man, as we see him today, was never born, but constructed, no less than a test-tube baby that was considered a miracle. but controlled by the creator. Freedom and dignity is not the copyright of the elitist because the basics and essentials must be above the reach of the State and of transient politicians in power whose naked juvenile chatter is covered by the fig-leaf of demagogic claptrap. The protection of the common man against all kinds of men in public affairs, none of whom can be trusted with unlimited power over others, lies not in their forbearance but in limitations on their power, especially in a nation of divergent creeds and ideologies, and a wide variety of religions and languages. The calamity is bound to occur as this common man is in a constant tug-of-war, a war that is both internal and external. Internally, life curses him to extremities to labor for existence, all supplemented with anger, jealousy, hatred and violence. Externally, both the political and economic institutions allow his entity to be shaped no better than a muse. With no viable options, the common man can suitably find just one title, the TRISHANKU, a famous character in Hindu mythology, narrated through the Valamiki Ramayana, that has come to denote a middleground or limbo between one’s goals or desires and one’s current state or possessions.

The narration has driven us to much negativity, but this common man is also a struggler, a fighter, the game-changer. From literature, to folk tales, to films, the genre is only focusing on him. The 2013 American-Sri Lankan thriller, A Common Man, starring Ben Kingsley and Ben Cross, and inspired by our own Bollywood movie A Wednesday(2008), revolves around the plot of challenging the set standards and norms of the society, and therefore terrorizes the police department for release of four prisoners. Its an effort to establish that the common man cannot always be enclosed as a victim. With his strengths, he can turn the tables on all agencies. However, this glorification is an enchantment only for a couple of hours. Like, the herculean Katappa in the movie Bahubali, who despite his strengths is relegated to the class of the servitudes alone because that’s his destiny. He is not permitted to apply logic to orders and rationality to put them into application.

In the hope, that the Common Man would rise above his perverted analysis of his identity, and would emerge in a new epithet.

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