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## Gandhi and Gandhi

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The theatrical fracas over the governor of West Bengal's decision to voluntarily shut off lights at Raj Bhavan exemplifies some deep infirmities in our politics. To tackle a minor issue first. We can all have fun unpacking the symbolic meaning of shutting off lights at Raj Bhavan. It probably exemplified the darkness of the state more than it expressed solidarity with the people. But whatever his motives in doing so, the governor clearly failed to take on board two lessons that those engaged in a politics of symbolic gesture ought to be aware of. First, public functionaries and private citizens have different degrees of freedom in what they can do. Whatever his personal views, a governor cannot be seen to be criticising his government, unless there is some serious constitutional issue at stake. And whichever way the governor interprets his gesture, there is no doubt that it was a riposte to his own government, one that as governor he is not entitled to make. Mohandas Gandhi himself was very clear that the politics of so-called gandhigiri cannot apply to public office; which is why he chose never to hold one.

Second, Gandhiji also knew that the authority of symbolic gestures depends not upon one-time interventions, but moral authority carefully and dedicatedly crafted over the course of a long time. The force of symbolic gestures can easily be undermined by the suspicion that they are merely a form of grandstanding. The only way to counter that suspicion is to have a consistent record of sacrifice. Or to pick an issue of such moral importance that no one could disagree. The governor's choice of issue and the manner of articulating it failed on these counts. The CPM's response has been characteristically supercilious and over the top. But the governor did invite it. Ironically, he shares with his CPM opponents an odd sensibility about politics: one in which symbols matter more than the substance.

But the deeper issue the episode raises is this. In the idioms of Indian politics, there is still far too much space occupied by the politics of good intentions and by an insistence on heartfelt gestures of solidarity. Some of this is warranted: we need a language and gestures to express the idea that someone cares. But often a lot of this politics exemplifies what Hazari Prasad Dwivedi once memorably described as "Jab dil bhara ho, aur dimag khali ho" politics. It is a huge distraction from thinking hard about the decisions that need to be taken; it infantilises voters, as if to suggest that what they need is some kind of comforting hug rather than rational policy.

Take one recent instance of a politics of this kind. Much is being made of the fact that Rahul Gandhi has been out to discover the rural poor, rejecting the temptations of ministerial work for grassroots politics. This is supposed to show that he is a man of the masses, hard at work in rural India, staying away from the glitterati of Mumbai and the chatterati of Delhi. There may be no doubt that his politics is well-intentioned, that he genuinely cares about the poor, and he seeks to be their leader rather than the leader of the privileged. But like Gopal Gandhi, he seems to have forgotten one key distinction. Standing with the people is not the same thing as standing for them. While the character and sentiments of the politician may matter, it is the consequences of their actions that matter more. This is why the kind of legitimacy Rahul Gandhi is seeking to carve for himself is so ineffective and possibly pernicious. It wants to wear the mantle of innocence, unsullied by the temptations and responsibility of exercising policy choices, as far as possible. In doing so it invites the charge of hypocrisy.

But more seriously, it runs up against a fundamental contradiction. What does it mean to express solidarity for the rural poor when your power ministry has been moribund, when your ministry of agriculture wakes up too late, or your ministry for education continues to stymie opportunities for mobility? In keeping a distance from hard policy decisions, other than the ones that express a politics of pure intention, that embody a symbolic gesture here and there, Rahul Gandhi has fallen victim to the oldest fallacy in politics: that there is grassroots out there that can be cultivated without sullyng your hands with the exercise of power. Of course, being in touch with the so-called grassroots matters in some sense. But it is odd to think that leadership can be exercised by appearing to forgo power and talking about the poor, rather than exercising power to really help them. We have a strange discourse where so-called bad politicians are seen as power hungry, and the way to prove that you are a good politician is to appear to critique power itself. But a sensible politics is about connecting the imperatives of power to rational policy; protesting against power is neither here nor there. But by emphasising solidarity over policy, palliatives that express his concern rather than broad structural changes, Rahul Gandhi is unlikely to make headway.

Indian voters are, in their own peculiar way, hard-headed. One of the messages they have been consistently sending through elections is that they like to punish politicians by voting them out. But equally, they are impatient with politicians who are merely nice and sincere, who rely on their personal virtues and good intentions to get them through. None of our effective chief ministers is likely to win a "nice person" contest. Gopal Gandhi's voluntary forgoing of power for two hours is beside the point. It would be more interesting if he has a diagnosis of why there is a power shortage. Rahul Gandhi's concern for the poor is neither here nor there. It will matter more if he has a diagnosis for why they don't get reliable power, rational subsidies and all the things it is very much possible to provide them. It is absolutely astonishing that in the midst of this power crisis, not one politician has been able to stand up and explain clearly why there is a power shortage and how easy it might be to fix it. Politicians think it is more important to be seen to be doing something than actually doing something.

My worry about Gopal Gandhi's gesture was that it was political in this bad sense of the term: an expression of inchoate

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feeling more than a rational resolution of a serious problem.

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