

Farmers trip Modi's power trip

It isn't Muslim riot victims but the ryots of Gujarat who are the first vocal protestors against Narendra Modi and his policies. Puncturing the hype surrounding the chief minister's 'achievements', the BJP farmers' wing has spoken out against his much-touted power reforms.

DIONNE BUNSHA
in Sabarkantha

Dissent is hard to come by in Gujarat. The opposition puts up a very feeble fight. The press is largely pliable. Activism is squelched. Criticism is not tolerated. You will be accused of hurting Gujarati 'Asmita' (pride), a chauvinistic fervour whipped up by chief minister Narendra Modi during his pre-election Gaurav Yatra.

But Gujarat witnessed an unusual sight over the last 15 days. An RSS pracharak, Laljibhai Patel, camped on the banks of the Sabarmati in Ahmedabad on a hunger strike. The first rumblings of dissent against the Modi administration have emerged from within his party itself. From the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS)- the farmer's wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The BKS has been at loggerheads with Modi's government since last June when it raised power tariffs from Rs 500 to Rs 1,260 per horsepower. Farmers have also been against the Gujarat Electricity Board's effort to install meters on farms. With the BKS agitation gaining support, the government reduced the tariff to Rs 900 per horsepower in October last year.

But the farmers were not satisfied. They continued with their agitation. That irked Modi. He got the BKS forcibly evicted from their office in a government flat in Gandhinagar. Then Laljibhai joined the BKS agitation, an organisation of which he is co-founder. After two weeks of resistance, negotiation and intervention from Arun Jaitley, they reached a compromise on 4th February. Lalji called off his fast. But all the farmers got in return was a mere Rs. 50 per horsepower reduction in tariff.



Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi with party leader L.K. Advani in Ahmedabad, during the latter's Bharat Uday Yatra at the height of the campaign for the general elections.

Photo: Divyakant Solanki/AP

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi with party leader L.K. Advani in Ahmedabad, during the latter's Bharat Uday Yatra at the height of the campaign for the general elections.

This temporary truce may have saved Modi from embarrassment. But it will be a long way before the problems faced by Gujarat's farmers are resolved. The power problem is closely linked to the acute water shortage that the state confronts. With no other source of irrigation, farmers pump ground water. Groundwater supplies around 85% of Gujarat's irrigated land, as compared to 60% in India. This has adversely affected agriculture.

Production costs are so high, agriculture is no longer profitable. "Wheat cultivation in north Gujarat is 10 times more expensive than in central Gujarat because in the north, they consume a lot more electricity to pump water," says Jay Narayan Vyas, former Narmada minister. Unable to keep up with spiralling input costs, several farmers are heavily in debt.

"Our expenses are much higher than the price we get in the market for our produce," said Bhikabai Patel, a BKS committee member. "We spend Rs 550 to grow 20 kg of wheat. But the market rate is only Rs 125 for 20 kg. All farmers are already suffering heavy losses. By doubling electricity prices, the government has added to our burdens."

Farmers have faced several difficulties due to the Gujarat Electricity Board's (GEB) erratic services. "Why should we pay more when they don't deliver on their promise of 14 hours uninterrupted power supply? We get electricity for only six hours a day. Sometimes, at odd hours of the night," Patel pointed out.

It's unfair that farmers alone are blamed for the GEB's losses. "Transmission and distribution (T&D) are also very high. This is because industrialists bribe local engineers and steal electricity directly from the cables. Wherever there are industries, line losses are highest. Why doesn't the government look into this?" asked Parthibhai Patel, a farmer from Banaskantha.

But the Gujarat government says it has no choice but to raise tariffs for farmers. In the last five years, the GEB has accumulated losses of Rs 6,000 crores. "We are giving farmers a subsidy of Rs 1,700 crore every year," said Saurabh Patel, minister for energy. "As part of our power sector reforms, we have passed an act promising that subsidies will not be more than 67% of the cost of power production. At present, we charge 42 paise per unit, when the actual cost is Rs 2.50 per unit."

Cheap power also allows indiscriminate drilling of tubewells, up to depths of 1,500 feet. This has completely depleted aquifers. "In the future, even if you give farmers electricity free of cost, they will have no water to pump," says Jay Narayan Vyas. Falling groundwater tables have also had adverse environmental effects. Due to excessive fluoride in the groundwater, people suffer from flourosis, a condition in which teeth and bones degrade.

The BKS agitation points to the larger problems that farmers confront. "Water is a life and death issue for farmers today. Alternative sources of irrigation like the Narmada water have to be provided. That would reduce electricity usage by one-third and regenerate water tables," says Tushar Shah from the International Water Management Institute. "Also, cropping patterns must change. Farmers in north Gujarat should stop cultivating water-guzzling crops like wheat and alfalfa that are not suitable for such an arid region."

The crisis in agriculture stretches far beyond a tussle over power tariffs. The can of worms has been opened. For how long will the Modi government be able to contain it?

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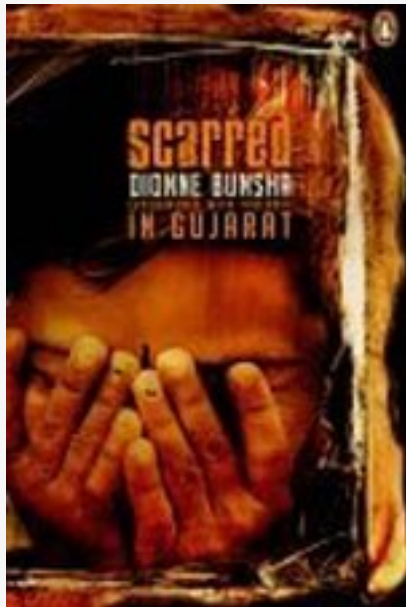
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