

South Asia

Nov 19, 2004

Three strikes for Indian business

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Yet another holiday. Thank the favorite mode of protest of political parties - strike. The communist state of West Bengal, desperately trying for an image makeover, just had one *bandh* (general strike) on November 17 and has two more lined up, on November 22 and December 3.

"No work" is just another holiday. Only these are even better than the regular ones because the roads are free (strikers don't allow public or private transport), which means cricket and football matches round the day right on the busiest thoroughfares. In a city where playgrounds are fast evaporating to make way for highrises, *bandhs* are naturally a special occasion for the younger lot.

But then, life is a zero-sum game. While some make merry on *bandhs*, for millions of families who live on daily wages, it's a day to dread. The same goes for the general economy, which loses billions of rupees just on the whim of political parties which call *bandhs* these days at the drop of a hat, and on the most trivial of issues. A general strike in West Bengal, as in the rest of the country, is now more a measure of political muscle than an instrument of protest. Never mind the issue, for a politician, a *bandh* is a great way of telling his constituency that he's still around.

But at whose expense? The industrial culture that spawns *bandhs* has understandably caused a massive flight of capital from West Bengal to other states, where lost mandays are taken a little more seriously. The same thing happened in Maharashtra in the 1980s when mill strikes in Mumbai (then called Bombay) drove capital to neighboring Gujarat.

The key to a successful *bandh* is the creation of a fear psychosis. Political parties in India, particularly West Bengal, have managed to this pretty well. The more the muscle power of a party, and its tendency to flex it, the more successful the *bandh*. This is why *bandhs* are more successful when called by major parties. Wednesday's *bandh*, called by a minor leftist outfit, evoked no response at all in the capital Kolkata, but managed to paralyze life in some districts where the party has pockets of influence (read potential to foment trouble).

Two of the three latest *bandhs* have been called on the same issue - fuel price hikes - but by two different parties on two different dates. A fare hike in any mode of public transport also almost always meets with a *bandh*. The list is endless - power tariff hikes, hikes in hospital charges ... The farce of the entire exercise is driven home by the fact that *bandhs* are generally called on either a Friday or a Monday, to "help" the overworked populace to a long weekend. Note, November 22 is a Monday, while December 3 is a Friday.

Since the executive is a prisoner of politics, India's judiciary is often compelled to step in to sort out critical issues. Recently, the Supreme Court ruled that a strike by Tamil Nadu government employees was illegal. Last year, the Bombay High Court imposed a Rs2 million (US\$45,000) fine on each of the two parties - the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party - for calling a *bandh* that the court felt widely disrupted economic activity. In another stunning ruling, a Kolkata judge went so far as to disallow street processions, saying they disrupt lives of ordinary citizens - a verdict widely hailed by ordinary citizens but ridiculed by political parties. Recently, the Kolkata High Court put the onus on the state government to see to it that the state is not paralyzed during a *bandh*.

Such judicial activism is welcomed by the harassed masses in a country where causes for general strikes range from the ridiculous to the farcical. Sample these: Karnataka refuses to give water from the river

Cauvery to Tamil Nadu - Tamil Nadu *bandh*; a bandit kidnaps an actor from Karnataka - Karnataka *bandh*; terrorists attack a temple - Bharat *bandh*(all-India strike).

The economic impact of a strike is incalculable. The *bandh* called by the radical Vishwa Hindu Parishad in protest against a terrorist attack on Swaminarayan Temple resulted in an estimated production loss for the state of Gujarat to the tune of Rs20 billion, while the figure for the country as a whole was over Rs100 billion, according to the All India Association of Industries. That's twice what India paid to Russia for the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov. The Confederation of Indian Industry put the loss for just Mumbai at about Rs1.3 billion. These figures do not take into account the huge losses in wages for workers, losses of productive mandays by professionals, losses in earnings by traders, taxi drivers and the unorganized sector. *Bandhs* also have a crippling impact on call centers, which, ideally, are never supposed to down shutters. The Bangalore *bandh* over Cauvery waters sent shock waves through the industry. But such trivia doesn't interest India's politicians.

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