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Edits & Columns
Bias against Bhubaneswar

Chitta Baral
 Posted online: Saturday, July 01, 2006 at 0000 hrs

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A government run by the likes of Dr Manmohan Singh and P. Chidambaram had raised high expectations in me. However, these hopes have so far been belied. The reason why many of us support privatisation in general but oppose the NALCO divestment is that we do not trust Singh and Chidambaram to use the money raised in a way that will be fair to Orissa.

The UPA government has so far behaved in a extremely partisan manner. You need only look at Budget '06-'07, to come to this conclusion. In item 96 of the budget speech, the finance minister provides Rs 100 crore each for the universities of Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai — the first two are either in UPA states or in states ruled by an ally; the third is the FM's home state. In item 97, he provides Rs 100 crore for the Punjab Agricultural University — in the state where the PM spent his youth. In item 98, he mentions a biotech institute in Kerala, a state once ruled by an UPA government and now by an UPA ally. These items are the only ones that figure under the heading 'Institutions of Excellence', as if those in the other states are not worthy of this honorific.

This is not all. While there are goodies for the states ruled by the UPA or those of its allies, there is punishment for a non-UPA ruled state. The expenditure budget volume 2, item 73, lists two IISERs (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research) at Rs 50 crore in Pune and Kolkata — again states allied with the UPA — and earlier this year a third one has been announced for Punjab. These will be new institutions. Yet, during NDA-rule the precursors of the IISERs — then termed NISs (National Institute of Science) — were proposed for Pune, Allahabad, Chennai and Bhubaneswar. Among these, only Pune was retained.

Let us remember that Bhubaneswar does not have any centrally funded institute of higher education, apart from one NIT. It has no IIT, no IIM, no IISc. With Bihar and Rajasthan, this state figures at the bottom of the list with respect to higher education funding. Yet, ironically Orissa has been found to be among the two states that send the most number of students to institutes of scientific research. But this does not matter, it seems. What matters is the fact that Orissa does not happen to be a UPA state. It therefore deserves to be punished by this government.

This has led many of us in Orissa to wonder about its fate. God save it from exploiters who don a mask of simplicity to get a good press but are intentionally rude on occasions. As the PM is understood to have said to Orissa's MPs: "Money does not grow on trees." But, Dr Singh, it seems to grow on trees when it involves Punjab or West Bengal! Dr Singh talks about equality, equity and service to all people, but when the time comes it is the UPA states and those of its allies that walked away with the bulk of the funding.

And please don't mention the proposal to set up AIIMS in backward states: the

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expenditure budget of 2006-2007 (item 26 of sbe 46) shows that the original budget for this initiative in 2005-06 was Rs 250 crore. This was revised downwards to Rs 6 crore and the budget for 2006-07 is Rs 75 crore.

Surely the PM and FM do not have to be told that India's budget outlays are for every region of India; that not only should national funds be spread across India, they should be used to check existing regional imbalances instead of aggravating them. Under these circumstances, the NALCO divestment can only be seen as taking money out of Orissa to benefit the Centre. And, who knows, perhaps it will be earmarked for a UPA state in next year's budget!

Now if the prime minister and his Cabinet were to shed their arrogance and correct their mistakes, starting with the announcement that the government will go ahead with the earlier plan to establish an NIS/IISER in Orissa as planned, that the government will correct regional imbalances by creating new IITs in the states without them, and that it would open central universities in backward district clusters across India, they would have gone some way in correcting the impression that they are essentially biased.

As for NALCO, if the money generated by divesting 10 per cent of the unit is spent on building Orissa's long neglected infrastructure, then I for one will fully support the proposed divestment. However, as things stand, I have no hope that these suggestions will even be considered by New Delhi.

The writer is professor, Arizona State University

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