

TOLL TAX AND ATTEMPT TO KILL REASONING

India has the second largest road system in the world with a road length of about 3.3 million kms. There is, however, a high disparity in construction quality and road conditions nationwide. To reduce the congestion and improve road quality, the central and state governments have focused on road development projects in the recent years. Public private partnerships have also been leveraged through the Build, Operate and Transfer (BOT) framework. The primary revenue generation for these BOT projects is through tolls. Due to difficulties and costs of toll collections, the government has also initiated annuity based BOT projects, wherein revenue streams would be provided to the BOT operator, either based on traffic volumes, or as a pre-determined amount.

Toll tax is collected to recover the total capital outlay which includes the cost of construction, repairs, maintenance, expenses on toll operation and interest on the outlay. The new facility thus constructed should provide reduced travel time and increased level of service. This tax is collected for a reasonable period of time after which the facility is surrendered to the public. Of late, toll tax is being levied on parking of vehicles in the urban centres in a move to decongest the streets and reduce the pollution levels. This concept is known as Congestion Pricing. Toll is not a tax, it is a fee. It is charged on the people who use the road. This ensures that only those people who use the road have to pay for it. Road tax is used for developing roads like city roads, and civic infrastructure. The purpose in tolling roads is so that we can have sustainable infrastructure to boost our economy using private capital, thus freeing up taxpayers money for other purposes such as health and sanitation, education, law and order, etc.

The private entity is free to charge citizens for using the infrastructure - till they have squeezed enough from it. This part is a bit controversial as some times the transfer to public maintenance does not take place in a proper way. For instance in certain places the toll rates are still being collected even after the contract period is over. This is a double edged sword. Government of India based infrastructure maintenance is not exactly known for efficiency and infrastructure is not built in time. Essentially this is a free get away card and the government is happy to do this. Citizens on the other hand have to pay hefty amounts to use the infrastructure whereas public model does not aim to make a profit.

Issues Faced currently leading to resentment to pay Toll Taxes:-

1. Toll taxes have no fixed time limit attached to it. There are toll booths in the country which are still charging the tax-payers after 20 years of construction.
2. Toll taxes are a double whammy as while we go through the highway as well as when we return we are charged with the same amount of tax; irrespective of the duration of visit.
3. There is no mechanism to ensure the quality of roads even after paying huge amount of money as toll tax.
4. Toll tax amounts to double taxation as the citizens already pay certain taxes to the government for infrastructure purpose.
5. The companies make toll taxes as an instrument to earn as much profit as possible which is not reasonable.

The fact that toll taxes have lost their purpose and become a tool to excavate money from the tax-payers is, to a great extent, true. The total absence of transparency in the toll collection system has time and again aroused suspicion and anger among commuters. In fact, people from across the country are still puzzled as to why toll charges on highways or expressways are increased all the time, especially when there is not much information available on the increase in number of vehicles using the road. There is hardly any authentic information on how much toll is collected annually by the private agency at each booth. Hence the current system of Toll Tax was criticised by many people in India.

Despite several promises by state politicians to close toll booths, the 'business' continues to not only rob travellers but is also 'automatically' increasing the period for toll collection. Every now and then political parties indulge in violent protests against toll charges, allegedly more for political one-upmanship than sort out the issue that is burdening commuters.

Veteran Left leader Govind Pansare had started Anti Toll Tax Campaign. Pansare's frank views on historical facts and social norms were revolutionary and irked many who didn't approve of his anti superstition and secular ideology. Govind and his wife, Uma, were shot at in Kolhapur on Monday, 16th February, 2015 when they had been out for a walk. This is third such incident in Maharashtra after RTI activist Satish Shetty and rationalist Dr Narendra Dabholkar were shot dead in Pune. Popularly known as Comrade Pansare or Pansare Kaka, he was one of those leaders who spearheaded the anti-toll movement in Kolhapur district of western Maharashtra. He was vocal against communalism. A highly-respected politician, he was on the Central Committee of CPI. He had also taken part in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement. Pansare was against capitalist and communal forces and the reason behind the murderous attack on the veteran leader is not yet known.

The similarities between the attack on Dr Narendra Dabholkar and now, Pansare, are a little too many. Both are noted social activists who have believed in secular thoughts and were proponents of the anti superstition movement. Both have dedicated their lives to fighting against injustice in society. Both were in the firing line of certain sections of society who resented their views on secularism and social justice. And both were attacked in a similar fashion by attackers shooting out at them in the early hours of the morning. And both had been receiving threats from people who opposed their views. In both these cases, the attempt was to silence the ideology they stood for.

The attack on Pansare saw widespread protests across Maharashtra with people pouring into the streets to demand immediate action against the assailants. Black flag protests in Aurangabad, rural parts of Solapur and Nashik and even Mumbai shows the following Pansare enjoyed among the weaker sections of society. The chief minister, Devendra Fadnavis, announced the formation of ten police teams to probe the matter but the assurance held little value for the people of Maharashtra who have seen Dabholkar's killers not being caught till date. Pansare's supporters and colleagues believe that criminals have been emboldened by the police's inability to nab the accused in the Dabholkar case. It's been 18 months since Dabholkar was shot dead in the middle of Pune and the killers have not been brought to book as yet. As protests pick up across the state, all eyes are on the new government to see if the police force under the new regime will be able to ensure action against the attackers.

Around a fortnight ago, it is said, Govind Pansare, got a threat letter from an unidentified person. The sender was someone who didn't agree with the senior activist's views. But that was a regular feature for the social activist who fought for justice for the underprivileged and marginalised and espoused secular values all his life. The danger that these random letters

posed was seen only on 16th February's morning when Pansare and his wife Uma were shot at by assailants on a bike when the couple were out for a morning walk. Let's agree to disagree and not silence the disagreement with bullet. A society devoid of opposition is a society devoid of reason.