

Acrimony submerged vital issues

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Need to restore parliamentary decorum

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MIDDLE

A wedding to remember

by Ranjit Singh Kalha

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chief August 10, 2003 ago at Baghdad. I was sitting in my office sometime in July, 1993, and was quite pleasantly surprised to receive a communication from Barazan Al-Tikriti, the stepbrother of the then President Saddam Hussein.

NEWS ANALYSIS

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THE Afghans are feeling like an abandoned child. The US-led international coalition forces destroyed whatever facilities the country had like roads, hospitals, schools and trade infrastructure while trying to eliminate the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. But the reconstruction promises are yet to be fulfilled. Some aid has reportedly come to keep the Hamid Karzai government going, but that is too little keeping in view the vast requirement.

DELHI DURBAR

No dual citizenship for NRIs in EU

AN NRI association in France finds it illogical that the Vajpayee government should deny dual citizenship to Indians in European Union countries. The Union Cabinet had decided recently to grant dual citizenship to NRIs in the US, the UK, Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherland and Italy.

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An election-year exercise Acrimony submerged vital issues

THE numerical advantage that the ruling coalition enjoyed was well-known to the Opposition. Still if it brought forth a no-confidence motion, it was not in any fond hope that it would be able to topple the Vajpayee government. The real motive was to set the ball rolling for the forthcoming elections by discrediting the government to the maximum extent possible. National security is the lynchpin of the BJP's poll strategy and that is why the concerted attack was on this plank carried out by pointing out the numerous shortcomings on the defence front. In fact, there was no shortage of sticks to

beat the government with. The nine-point chargesheet included everything from the "coffin-gate" scandal to destroying the country's social fabric to indulging in corruption. It is just that the Opposition parties could not marshal their resources too well, whereas the ruling combine fared marginally better. The fault perhaps lay with the lack of coordination. The decision of the Congress to hear out Defence Minister George Fernandes and that of the left parties and the Rashtriya Janata Dal to stage a walkout was a clear indicator of the divergence of views. The exit of old warhorses Vasant Sathe and NKP Salve from the Congress just hours before the crucial debate also left a shadow on the proceedings.

The NDA did not really have convincing answers to many questions but its leaders used their debating skills to sidetrack various issues. While serious issues are pending before the country, the debate at times degenerated into sheer noise and avoidable acrimony. The people would have appreciated debate of better quality.

The debate served the Congress party's keenness to push Mrs Sonia Gandhi onto the centrestage as a combative leader and she did not disappoint the faithfuls and cheerleaders. But she tended to be shrill and brash, a weakness which stalwarts like Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Mr L.K. Advani exploited to the hilt. The NDA had chosen its speakers after much deliberation to give a befitting reply. If they managed to fend off everything that the Opposition threw at them without going on the backfoot, the secret lay in anticipating what the opponents were going to say. CPM leader Somnath Chatterjee was not exactly jesting when he said that the motion had been moved primarily to get a reply from the Prime Minister. Mr Vajpayee did that in style, and converted the occasion into an opportunity to list out the various "achievements" of his government. Mr Vajpayee had himself spoken in many a no-confidence motion in the past. This was the first time he was facing one. It was moved a bit late in the day as a new Lok Sabha is to be elected in a year's time. The Lok Sabha by defeating the motion has thrown the ball into the people's court.



Call off the boycott Need to restore parliamentary decorum

ONE issue that had dominated the two-day debate on the no-confidence motion moved by the Opposition against Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government is the boycott of Defence Minister George Fernandes by the Opposition since his re-induction into the Union Cabinet late last year. On Monday, though the Congress members heard Mr Fernandes' 90-minute speech, it is not clear whether they have finally lifted their boycott on him. But the so-called unity among the Opposition members over this issue stood exposed when the Left and Rashtriya Janata Dal members staged a walkout the moment Mr Fernandes stood up to make his speech. Clearly, the manner in which the Opposition has been treating Mr Fernandes during the past 22 months is unwarranted. The boycott of Mr Fernandes is not only an insult to the Defence Minister but also goes against well-established parliamentary norms and decorum.

In a parliamentary democracy, the Opposition may have differences of opinion with the government on matters of policy and decision-making. It may also have reservations on the conduct and functioning of individual ministers. But the legitimate forum for the Opposition to sort out its differences with the government or individual ministers is the floor of Parliament. How can the Opposition refuse to recognise a person as Defence Minister when he is duly sworn in as minister by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister? The only way by which the Opposition can get rid of a minister is to vote him out, but it can do so only through a vote against the government. The no-confidence vote on Tuesday reaffirmed that it simply did not have the numbers needed for ousting the government or Mr Fernandes.

Now when the motion has been discussed and the opposition has had its say on the NDA government's performance, it should call off Mr Fernandes' boycott. It may not speak well of Parliament if members submit questions but do not listen to the answers by the Minister? It is time the Opposition realised its constitutional role in a parliamentary democracy. Even though the all-party meeting convened by the Lok Sabha Speaker recently had failed to end the impasse, there is still reason for hope. The Opposition need not overstretch its point.



No props for PSUs Accountability must be enforced

THE Supreme Court judgement declaring that employees of public sector undertakings are not on a par with the government staff is bound to have wide repercussions. Dismissing a writ petition filed by employees of the sick Indian Drug and Pharmaceuticals Ltd seeking a direction to the Centre to raise their salaries by implementing the pay commission's recommendations, the apex court has made it clear that the employees of government companies cannot claim a legal right to demand higher pay scales from the state government. Although in this particular case the employees were offered an exit through a voluntary retirement scheme, there is a clear message for other government undertakings and their employees that their fortunes are linked and they would all swim and sink together.

If a government undertaking suffers losses, its management and employees are bound to suffer the consequences. What happened in the case of Punwire is still fresh in memory. Its employees paid a heavy price for the mismanagement of the government company. The Punjab Government did not come to their rescue. On the other hand, if a public sector undertaking performs well, it is free to reward the employees accordingly. There are some well-managed PSUs whose employees' perks and pay scales are better than those of government employees. It all depends on how they and their organisation perform. The judgement affirms the autonomous character of the state undertakings.

As part of the economic reforms, the Centre and states have been forced to pursue the disinvestment programme, offloading the government stake in PSUs. It is because of the realisation that the government has no business to be in business. Government officials cannot run hotels and other services as efficiently as those in the private sector. The exchequer has been bled white by bad investments in business projects that have failed or given poor returns. The state electricity boards all over the country are into heavy losses. How long can the state governments pay for their mismanagement? But it is unfair to make the employees alone pay for the non-performance of their organisation. Political heads and IAS officers managing government companies should also be held responsible. Quite often it is because of the bureaucracy and political managers that a government company collapses and both get away. They must be held accountable.



TUP

Thought for the day

Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.

— Clement Attlee





Interlinking of the rivers It's a noose, not a garland by Aditi Roy Ghatak

ARDENT supporters of the government's ambitions river-linking project ask the opposition to shut up; an opposition comprising stalwarts in the field of hydrology, engineering, management and environment led by none other than Ramaswamy Iyer, former Secretary, Water Resources, and many others with impeccable credentials. At stake are the lives of at least three million Indians, an 8,000 square-mile landmass that will be flooded and the great Indian ecosystem that will be violated in a manner that has never been attempted before, courtesy a nation-wide river-link project.

This becomes doubly ominous considering India's inglorious record with its big dams, with some 3,000 dams representing a story that is "littered with failures" and the ill-conceived and delusory \$120 billion project that believes that Indian rivers can be strung up like a garland in a final solution to India's acute water stress. Imagine the consequences of asking Andhra Pradesh to share the Godavari waters with Tamil Nadu! Imagine Bangladesh waiting quietly while India redraws the hydrology map.

Why is India so water stressed? Environmental and hydro-geologist Subrata Sinha promptly points to the large-scale replacement of traditional drought and flood resistant plants by exotic, hybrid and high-yielding brands which guzzle water. The greatest mismanagement around Indian agriculture has been in tempting farmers to grow more by subsidising irrigation even where water is not available with grievous long-term consequences for agriculture itself. The slightest monsoon variation leads to calamities and the water-loving agri-system invariably ends up degrading the soil and eventually causing a drop in productivity. The long-term solution would then lie in rationalising agriculture in conformity with land and climate.

Thus, at hand is the task of bringing the glacial waters of the melting Himalayan snows to the parched Indian peninsula by literally trapping the flood waters from 14 Himalayan tributaries of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra in North India and Nepal and transferring them to the South via a series of canals and pumping stations, across the Vindhya mountains to replenish 17 southern rivers, including the Godavari, the Krishna and the Cauvery. This contractors' dream project will entail constructing some 300 reservoirs and digging more than 1,000 km of canals. River-link proponents theorise that two-thirds of the 1.9 trillion cubic metres of rainwater in the Indian rivers goes into the sea and should be impounded to relieve the water stress. Adding grist to their mill has been the Supreme Court order to complete the gigantic project within a decade and a half. Is this a blessing in disguise? As the environmentalist insists, there is no shadow of a doubt that the river-link will violate the environmental laws of the land. The question is who can tell about respecting laws in a country where the Taj Mahal was on the verge of being converted into Taj Mall.

The Task Force on Interlinking of Rivers has reportedly finalised its Action Plan-I. The peninsular links would be taken up first. Like Prometheus Unbound, India seeks to tame nature. How will the Vindhyas be negotiated? Dr S. Kalayanaraman, former Asian Development Bank executive, responds that it would not be done by lifting water but by circumnavigating the mountains: "north of the mountains the flow of the link between the Ganga and the Mahanadi will be from the west/north-east to the south-east (by gravity) and the south of the Vindhya mountains, the flow of the link between the Mahanadi and the Godavari will be from the east to the south-west/south (by gravity)". Geologists find this hilarious. "Transferring water from one valley to another across the water divide is a geographical and physical near-impossibility", says Debasish Chatterjee. He should know as he was the geomorphologist in charge of the Geological Survey of India, Eastern Region, when geological investigations for the Mahanadi-Godavari link were taken up.

The end results will be alarming: River-linking will not ensure water for all but impound huge tracts of food-growing soil. It will not stop the flooding because the rivers are often simultaneously in spate: the Gangetic plain can hardly deal with the excess Brahmaputra waters when the Ganga is overflowing. It will not solve water disputes but place every state against the other over riparian rights. It will not bring peace but, by displacing some three million people, will tear asunder societies all over the country. It will provide no permanent solutions but temporary ones, a la the Bhakra Nangal dam that helped the first burst of the Green Revolution but made Punjab the land of flash-floods, thanks to the silting that reduced the storage capacity in the Gobind Sagar and necessitated the catastrophic opening of the floodgates in the eighties with another dam required to supplement the supply of water into the main dam. It will upset India's neighbours, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, whose riparian rights will be tampered with.

As the Brahmaputra is linked to the Ganga, waters will be forced across Himalayan streams and through the topography through aqueducts and structures, impairing the hydrological balance, geohydrological setting of the entire Himalayan water system in a region that is seismically sensitive to boot. Besides, rivers have a logic as they carry soil and water depositing them along the way and meeting the sea after forming a rich delta. Violating this natural course on a mass scale can only have serious consequences.

When rivers become one, this marine biodiversity is destroyed because rivers being natural systems are "connected like a web in a macro-dynamics of nature, its floral-faunal milieu, and not merely conduits of water". Worse, joining polluted waters with clean ones would make sewers of them all.

Juxtaposed with this hypnotic logic of transporting waters down thousands of kilometres is the humble concept of collecting water just where the rains drop it. Unfortunately, this does not need international agencies. It involves going back to grassroots knowledge and decentralised water management technology that would involve planners in New Delhi learning from tradition. It means harvesting rainwater from rooftops and open areas in urban areas and rural check-dams and soak pits, naturally or artificially allowing the run-off to percolate into the ground and recharging soils. This simple process would help soil retain moisture and the topsoil by checking erosion while retaining the green cover as well. Water percolation has, in fact, brought back dry seasonal rivers to life in Rajasthan and Karnataka, which have major success stories.

What chance does the home-made remedy have against the contractor-driven thinking in New Delhi, especially in an election year when access to poll funds are in direct proportion to contracting orders or even a promise thereof? Also, how better can the order book get? The contractors expect to be digging the entire length and breadth of the country and then building again as water is transported from Assam to Kerala, through the farmlands of Bihar, for instance. There are no fears of Bihar villagers pilfering water or not giving up their lands for the canals to ferry water for their Keralite brethren without demur!

Why this haste in bulldozing ahead with a proposition of this magnitude that would entail years of planning when there was no mention of this proposal even in the 10th Plan document. Earlier proposals along these lines, from the days of Sir Arthur Cotton and later Captain Dinshaw Dastur, the pilot who wanted to string up the rivers in the mid-thirties, have been discussed threadbare and abandoned because of the sheer human and environmental agony and the financial cost that rendered them non-starters.



A wedding to remember by Ranjit Singh Kalha

THE recent killing of Uday Saddam Hussein, his brother Qusay and nephew at Mosul by US troops vividly brought to my mind Uday's wedding some 10 years ago at Baghdad.

I was sitting in my office sometime in July, 1993, and was quite pleasantly surprised to receive a communication from Barazan Al-Tikriti, the stepbrother of the then President Saddam Hussein. Barazan himself was a powerful figure in the regime and I was at once curious and a little anxious to see what was in the envelope. On opening the envelope I found an invitation for myself as the Indian Ambassador and for my wife to attend the wedding of his daughter to Uday Saddam Hussein. In those days we never declined such an invitation, but more than that I was curious to meet the President's family and that too in informal surroundings. Many thoughts raced through my mind. Everyone in Baghdad was petrified of Uday. Some suggested he was an alcoholic, some a killer and a philanderer. I was not going to miss this opportunity! I was keen to meet him.

July 29, 1993 was the appointed day. We arrived at Barazan Al-Tikriti's house, which was located at Jadriya, a fashionable district just behind Baghdad University. It was a hot evening and our expectations arose as we entered the house. As expected security was indeed tight. Barazan's house was a large one with splendid gardens. Inside, the furnishings were extraordinarily bright with marble floorings and expensive chandeliers. It was fully airconditioned. The back lawns opened onto the river Tigris and sitting in the gardens we could see the river flow by ever so slowly. It was indeed a beautiful view, just like that in a fashion magazine.

As we entered the main hall Barazan and his wife greeted us quite warmly. Standing nearby was Uday Saddam Hussein and a little further away Qusay and their family members. Uday greeted us warmly and spoke good English, as did his brother Qusay. Uday Saddam Hussein was about 5'11" tall and was wearing a smart brown jacket with an open collar. He had a crew cut and a thin day-old beard. Qusay on the other hand was a little shorter, thinner, was clean-shaven with a moustache much like his father's. He was wearing a dark suit with a tie. Qusay spoke about Indo-Iraq relations whereas Uday was content to make small talk. The family members were well dressed and was obviously enjoying themselves.

The cream of Iraqi society was present, including generals in uniform and ministers. Liquor flowed freely and imported food (in spite of the sanctions) was plentiful. A band was in attendance and they played popular music, which consisted of mostly old American songs. The women were all well dressed in western style clothes and showed no inhibitions when it came to consuming champagne. Looking at the party, the food, and the music it seemed all so unreal. All the efforts being made to make the sanctions more stringent against Iraq obviously had no effect on the leadership. Only the people of Iraq seemed to be suffering. I wondered whether Western governments, pushing for sanctions realised this.

There was one surprise at the party. Present were the Bishops of the Syrian church and the Orthodox Church as also some well-known gentlemen from northern Iraq in Kurdish dress. Obviously they were hedging their bets!

Finally came the time to depart. Uday escorted us to the door and said his goodbyes like a gentleman. Was it real, was he a murderer, an alcoholic? Now that they are no more, it is best left to history to decide.

Ranjit Singh Kalha retired as a Secretary to the Government of India (MEA) and served as India's Ambassador to Iraq from 1992 to 1994.



NEWS ANALYSIS

Taliban remnants regrouping in Afghanistan Hamid Karzai government struggling for survival by Syed Nooruzzaman

THE Afghans are feeling like an abandoned child. The US-led international coalition forces destroyed whatever facilities the country had like roads, hospitals, schools and trade infrastructure while trying to eliminate the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. But the reconstruction promises are yet to be fulfilled. Some aid has reportedly come to keep the Hamid Karzai government going, but that is too little keeping in view the vast requirement.



Karzai government going, but that Afghans wave swords during independence is too little keeping in view the vast day celebrations in Kabul on Tuesday. – requirement. Reuters photo

President Karzai's problems are growing. Provincial governors follow only those guidelines from Kabul which suit them. They are mostly the warlords of their particular areas and, therefore, Kabul cannot afford to replace them. Mr Karzai is derisively called the mayor of Kabul because his writ hardly runs beyond the national capital. Exploiting the sentiments of the disgruntled Afghans, the remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda seem to be regrouping. An August 13-datelined report from Kabul said that the country experienced the most serious outbreak of violence when 61 people lost their lives in 24 hours. While 25 deaths occurred in clashes between the forces of a sacked district official and those of his successor in Urzgan province, 15 died in Helmand province when a bus was blown apart by a bomb blast, believed to be the handiwork of the Taliban. The rest of the casualties were reported from other parts of the country, mostly a result of attacks by the Taliban. Helmand was one of the bastions of the Taliban before the ouster of the fundamentalist outfit's regime in the wake of 9/11.

On August 16 and 17 Taliban activists targeted two police stations in Paktika province in areas bordering Pakistan, killing more than 22 persons. There may be more such incidents which go unreported because of various reasons. Taliban guerrillas are active in most of their previous strongholds, particularly in the areas bordering Pakistan. They hit a target and run away to safer places in Pakistan's Pashtun-dominated provinces. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry admits this fact, yet very little is being done to take on the extremists effectively.

The re-emergence of the Taliban has come about despite the presence of 12,500 US-led coalition troops and the arrival of 5,000 NATO fighters in Kabul. That too when the primary job of the foreign troops is to hunt for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda activists. The Karzai government and the UN have been pressing for the deployment of NATO fighters in the lawless provinces too, but in vain. NATO's activities are confined to Kabul and the surrounding areas.

Since restoring law and order is the most difficult task before the Karzai government, it recently created a special force for the purpose — the Afghan National Army. Initially, it has 5000 men, functioning as national guards, but there is a plan to increase its strength to 70,000 fighters. They are intended to replace the factional militias, coming in the way of transforming Afghanistan into an orderly country. Reports say that the government has received over \$ 400 million from various foreign donors, including the US, and recruitment to the army is on at Gardez, Kunduz, Bamyan, etc.

However, the Karzai regime is struggling for survival. Its fate largely depends on the growth of the National Army into a well-trained and properly equipped force. The upsetting development for him and his sympathisers, within the country and abroad, is that the army expansion project is being resisted by the Defence Minister, Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim, an ethnic Tajik. A key member of the ruling Northern Alliance, composed of mainly Tajiks and Uzbeks, Mr Fahim, perhaps, feels that the emergence of a strong army will weaken his position in the government.

The army is bound to have a strong Pashtun presence because of Afghanistan being a Pashtun-majority state. The minority tribes, controlling the levers of power, are unprepared to accept this because of their history of tribal distrust and the Pashtun character of the ousted regime. The state of affairs is quite depressing for Mr Karzai, who has to face elections in June next year. Being a Pashtun, he is hopeful of being back in the saddle, but he wants to take no chances. He is contemplating calling a Loya Jirga (assembly of tribal chiefs) to make his uncooperating colleagues and provincial chieftains fall in line.

The situation is taking an interesting turn for India. President Karzai and his colleagues realise that America cannot concentrate on Afghanistan as much as it did before it opened the Iraq front. Islamabad has its own games to play using the Pashtun card, as Pakistan's NWFP and Baluchistan provinces have a

majority Pashtun population. Iran is not welcome owing to its strongly anti-American policy and the Shia factor. The circumstances have never been so favourable for India. This is an ideal opportunity for New Delhi to strengthen its position in that strategically significant country by helping Kabul in different areas like infrastructure development and food supply.



DELHI DURBAR

No dual citizenship for NRIs in EU

AN NRI association in France finds it illogical that the Vajpayee government should deny dual citizenship to Indians in European Union countries. The Union Cabinet had decided recently to grant dual citizenship to NRIs in the US, the UK, Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherland and Italy. A Bill in this regard is to be introduced in the winter session of Parliament to amend the Citizenship Act, 1955.

While it is easy to understand why NRIs in the US, the UK, Australia and the Netherland are being granted dual citizenship, the choice of other European countries like Italy and Finland is hard to understand. It is not clear why France, Germany and Portugal having significant communities of Indian origin have been excluded, though they permit their citizens to hold dual citizenship.

Tough contest for Shiela Dikshit?

The war horse of yesteryear M L Sondhi appears to be in the reckoning again. Delhi BJP president Madan Lal Khurana is believed to have taken up his cause with the BJP and RSS brass to pit Sondhi gainst Delhi Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit from the Gole market assembly segment in the coming November elections.

The BJP's chief ministerial candidate Khurana believes that Shiela Dikshit will have no opposition worth the name if the party fields Poonam Azad against her. Former Delhi BJP chief M L Garg appears to be pushing Poonam's case. Sondhi's likely nomination has led to a churning and rethink in the DPCC as it might tie down Shiela Dikshit to campaigning in the Gole market constituency rather than covering the entire ground of the NCT of Delhi.

The buzz in IPS circles

The buzz in the higher echelons of the Indian Police Service is about the prospects of P C Sharma, who is shortly retiring as the Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation, being picked for a gubernatorial assignment. Without losing much sleep on who is likely to be the next CBI chief, these officials have no doubt that Sharma may either be picked for a foreign assignment or be appointed as Governor of Pondicherry. Sharma reportedly has the eyes and ears of certain important functionaries in the all important Prime Minister's Office.

TV crew earns securitymen's ire

The breaching of security in the Parliament House complex by a look-alike of Union Shipping Minister and Rajya Sabha MP Shatrughan Sinha recently has embarrassed the watch and ward staff no end. It has put the entire security apparatus into a tizzy. At the end of the day the usual blame game was in evidence. However, the ire of the security personnel is directed against private TV news channels which captured the Sinha imposter making his way into the portals of the country's highest legislative body.

Kalyan Singh at Liberahan panel

Former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, who has been avoiding the Liberahan Commission all these years, is seriously contemplating deposing before it. The obvious aim is to bring top BJP leaders like Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, Dr Murli Manohar Joshi and even Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee under a cloud of suspicion. He has been advised by his friends that his political graph could rise again if he went hammer and tongs against his erstwhile party colleagues. The advice appears to have had some impact on him as he was reportedly at the commission's office in Vigyan Bhavan recently to consult officials about the prospects of his deposing before it.

Contributed by TRR and Satish Misra



REFLECTIONS

He who grasps the truth, realises that there is but one religion of all mankind; as God is one and has ever been the same.

- Guru Nanak

This body is like a boat intended to ferry a person across the ocean of birth and death, leading him to the shore of immortality.

— Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

What we are today come from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.

- The Dhammapada

The gateway of hell leading to the ruin of the soul is threefold — lust, anger and greed. Therefore, these three, one should abandon.

— The Bhagavad Gita





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