

Opposition Boycott in India

Our opposition being in the midst of a parliamentary boycott themselves, may revel in some poetic justice that the world's largest democracy in the neighbourhood is currently faced with an opposition boycott of the monsoon session of the Lok Sabha. What is even more significant, the Indian opposition has gone a step forward by resigning from the parliamentary committees wholesale. The Indian parliament has been known for noisy scenes, bickering and walk-outs but hardly ever work abstention on this scale.

Their withdrawal from all the parliamentary committees, an unheard-of step, can obviously be put down to their allegations that the ruling party were scuttling the committee system. The opposition thought that the findings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee in the securities scam were not being adequately acted upon by the government which was trying only to soft-pedal an 'action taken' formulation through the parliament dubbing it as an *interim* measure. If the Indian opposition had not gone for such extreme measures beforehand it might have been because an issue as serious as this one had not cropped up in the past. Basically, however, Narasimha Rao's government does not enjoy the majority of the previous governments in India, so that it has a modicum of vulnerability despite its self-vindicating continuity. The opposition seem to think they have a rallying point in the financial scandal. In fact, it has threatened that as the next step they might ask their members to resign their parliamentary seats forcing early polls in India.

Thus the implications can be serious for both the future of Narasimha Rao's government as well as that of the present parliament, if the parliamentary impasse is not broken primarily through a government initiative. The opposition may try to build on what is merely a technical difference over handling an alleged bank swindle, and stretch out to mould public opinion in their favour by harping on the point that there is a price-tag to liberalisation, in the shape of occasional financial scandals. So soon after his three years in office, which the Congress (I) celebrated only the other day with some fanfare, Narasimha Rao faces this attack from the opposition — in renewed vigour. The stabilisation of Narasimha Rao's government has largely been due to his economic liberalisation programmes, according to many India watchers. Which is why the same is drawing a flak from the opposition with such ferocity at the moment.

But all this does not mean that Indian democracy has gone foot-loose; in fact the way the present confrontation is resolved may very well end up adding a new chapter to the parliamentary practices in India which have grown in strength, diversity and resilience over the last 46 years to be absorptive enough. Besides, political parties of all denominations in India know very well that parliamentary proceedings form the bed-rock of Indian democracy in action. They are not simply mentally conditioned to turn their backs to the parliament indefinitely. Drawing-rooms or streets can never be a substitute for parliament. The Speaker of the Lok Sabha Shivraj V Patil said meaningfully, he was 'both happy and unhappy' at the developments and went on to emphasise the need for the government and the opposition to persist in 'carrying on a dialogue' for breaking the impasse. It is the system that will ultimately count.

Disciplining Doctors

Finally a minister has acted decisively. The Health Minister needs to be commended because so seldom do our ministers take such clear decisions, when the situation so merits. One of the major criticisms against this government, is that it does not act courageously and in a forthright manner. The removal of as many as 40 doctors from duties is no exception to this rule. But however much one may like to sympathise with these doctors, the fact remains that the Health and Family Welfare Ministry's decision was a painful necessity too. Medical practitioners in the country are not specially known for their professional integrity. Certainly there may be a few exceptions but that should not make a case for the doctors in general. The difference between their attitudes to the job when in private practice and when in the government service is glaringly wide. While in private practice they would spend hours seeing as many patients as possible in a ritualistic fashion, but in government service — particularly in areas outside of big cities — the doctors continually keep themselves absent from the places of their duties and would not mind drawing their salaries regularly.

So the point is how the medical professionals are going to perform the job they are expected to do, not the loss of their service. The wicked practice they have been carrying on is common knowledge. It is only surprising how the faulting medical men could keep their service so long. Not that they are guilty of committing the offence for the first time now. The country's health complexes and mafassil hospitals are deserted by doctors en masse, leaving the medical service there in total disarray. As the hospitals go on limping, the authorities too turn a blind eye to the indiscipline most of the time. It is unbelievable that if the government took a stern measure earlier, the doctors could have made such a mockery of the whole medical profession. They could do so in collusion with a section of the relevant directorate and ministry.

Now that the ministry has come hard on some of the defaulters and wrong-doers, there is every possibility of the doctors mending their ways. For much too long this aspect has left a baneful effect on the country's medicare system. It will not be possible to clear overnight the backlog that has mounted over the years. But certainly corrective actions can initiate the process of a qualitative improvement in the performance of hospitals in the country. But unless the pressure is sustained, things may slide back to where they were. It is futile to lament over the past. The stress should be on what can be salvaged from the existing situation for ensuring the future performance. Penalising the erring doctors does not necessarily give a guarantee for improvement of the whole medical service. There are other vested interest groups resorting to all sorts of corrupt practices in the health-care service centres. They must be taken care of to deliver the goods. Hospitals are a dead thing without the staff who work there and it is these people who ought to be equal to the challenges and refuse to compromise their professional integrity.

US Sets its Sights on Five Asian Markets

Javed A Malik writes from New York

The US seems to be moderating its traditional stand and approaches towards human and workers' rights, nuclear non-proliferation, and violation of intellectual property rights

THE United States seems to be in agreement with Asian leaders who believe that the 21st century belongs to the region.

Half of the 10 "Big Emerging Markets" identified by US policy-makers earlier this year are in Asia. The so-called "Big Emerging Markets" are expected to receive special attention from America as they are projected to be importing more than the European Union and Japan combined by the year 2010.

Asian countries which can anticipate improved economic and commercial relations with the US are China, Indonesia, South Korea, India and Turkey, although some are reluctant to put it in the region.

Other members of the privileged group are South Africa, Poland, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.

Americans did not make any secret of their keen interest in Asia when they launched plans for an aggressive approach towards the Big 10. Solid evidence of the region's being given special importance emerged when, just six months after the launch of the initiative, Undersecretary of Commerce for International Trade Jeffrey E Garten announced that his country developed "the most elaborate strategy that the government

has ever had towards a developing country." The object of this strategy is Indonesia.

The Southeast Asian country will, in fact, be used as a model for the development of strategies for the other nine nations in the big 10.

The strategy includes the formation of comprehensive all-inclusive task forces to study a particular country and its situation. The task forces will then recommend what action the US government could take to ensure that the most benefits can be derived by it and the US companies from that particular country's economic growth.

The US plans to open "Commercial Centres" in these countries, away from the imposing, guarded American embassies. These centres will serve as focal points of the commercial drive by the US.

The long-term nature of this "most important focus of the administration's national export strategy" is evident when Mr Garten says: "It will test our ability to sustain attention over a longer period of time."

Plans also include working

with American private companies and business that are already in the country of interest and other government agencies to develop other strategies. Activities will include tracking of large development projects, developing data on growth industries, financing and technical assistance of the countries.

The US seems to be moderating its traditional stand and approaches towards human and workers' rights, nuclear non-proliferation, and violations of intellectual property rights apparently realising that, especially in Asia, it cannot go very far if it stands firm on these issues.

Although the government does not say so in very clear terms, a top Department of Commerce official said, "Pursuing our interests in these countries will require deft balancing of commercial and foreign policy considerations."

The recent renewal of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for China by President Clinton is to be a good indication of this more moderate approach.

The Big Emerging Markets... have enough political influence and aspiration to offer effective challenge to US policies in multilateral organisations such as IMF (International Monetary Fund), GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the United Nations," the official warms.

He said of China, which may be the world's largest economy in the early 21st century if present growth rates continue: "Major problems separate us, but even greater promise draws us together."

Indonesia may be the next biggest of the Big 10 markets although less visible to the outside world.

With 188 million people, the fourth most populous nation in the world is becoming increasingly a major focus of American attention. It has one of the fastest growth rates globally so the opening up of its economy is of great interest to the US. US planners expect US\$100 billion worth of infrastructure projects there, as the country's 13,000 islands have to be linked via telecommunications satellite and power

lines.

The US is actually not the only country keeping a keen eye on Indonesia. The country is the largest recipient of Japanese official assistance — a clear sign that it is also of great interest to the neighbouring economic giant.

Many of these countries have both regional and global political ambitions and have significant technological power. Three of the Asian nations are already nuclear powers and their future directions are often unclear. What they do in future will be heavily influenced by their economic success and the treatment they get as trading nations.

In addition to these issues are environmental questions, primarily the matter of sustainable development that has so often created a rift between developing and developed worlds.

In this complicated situation the stakes are high for the US and Mr Garten believes, "Our future ability to compete and create jobs and remain a world leader will depend on our ability to succeed in these Big 10."

He adds, "When I think of these markets, I think of nothing so much as America in the 21st century."

vocacy by Washington on behalf of our firms is critical."

But the task is not likely to be easy for the US. The targeted nations are big enough to exert influence in world affairs on their own terms, creating complication for the "World's only remaining superpower."

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Figures compiled by US officials clearly show why America has picked the Asian nations in its Big 10 list. It has been estimated, for instance, that just for infrastructure in the "Chinese Economic Area" in the next six years, over US\$560 billion will be spent.

India needs over US\$100-billion worth of infrastructure projects as the country, which will have 900 million people by the end of the decade, has only seven million phone lines, among other things.

For the projected infrastructure requirements, an American official says, "Often the bidding process is won through a government procurement system. Here the intercession of foreign governments in the process is essential and expected. This is where systematic, effective ad-

— Depthnews Asia

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Creative Approaches for Credit to the Poor

by M Yahiya

I sat in front of 20 middle aged women in a remote village of Bangladesh to know about their self initiatives to improve their present socio-economic conditions. The women were all poor and according to their organisers 'poor' means who run short of minimum survival income for the whole year. The group, unusually disciplined, was attentively listening to a college-educated young girl about nutrition and cleanliness in the daily affairs of life.

My purpose, however, was not to know about their nutritional activities. I came to see the credit operations of the group. But a young child around four years of age attracted my attention. He was playing between us and the women group members who were all sitting on the mud floor. I asked who the child was. The village nutrition worker immediately picked my question and said that the child was a third degree malnourished one. She explained that she checked all the kids of that village and identified the first degree to third degree malnourished children and planned a one-month special feeding programme with a one year follow-up plan. It was hard to believe that this healthy, lovely and lively child was once third degree malnourished and I was surprised to know that the cost borne together with the family and the women group members who were all sitting on the mud floor. I asked who the child was. 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