

GROUND REALITIES

En masse promotion without posts

Politicisation goes top-heavy

THAT seven hundred promotions are in the offing for the posts of additional secretary, joint secretary and deputy secretary in a week is quite extraordinary. Yet, the government is doing it in style. Clearly, it is not aimed to strengthen bureaucracy, rather it will weaken it. This could in effect leave the administration and policymaking more politicised, more partisan.

Actually, the promoted would neither fill in potential or real vacancies. They are just being upgraded in rank, status and scales of salary and perks without having to discharge the obligations that their elevations should have placed on their shoulders.

The reason apparently given for the en masse promotion is extension of the retirement age from 57 to 59. Why should an increase in the retirement age, which would be for all bureaucrats to enjoy, would necessitate almost instant promotion on such a massive scale where consideration of merit or availability of posts is not being weighed up at all?

It has been openly admitted that the move is aimed at defusing a 'growing discontent'. We are all for vertical mobility or rewarding deserving bureaucrats with promotion and incentives. But blanket promotions can not be helpful to administrative integration nor can it enhance professional competence as the left-out would be groveling.

More importantly, in the present context, it leaves no room for staggering the impact on the national exchequer which otherwise could have been ensured through selective and well-merited promotion against actual vacancies. It is more outrageous than surprising perhaps that the people in authority do not even mention the need for austerity and cutback on government expenditure, far less show any sign of practicing it.

In a time of high inflation we didn't even blink an eye while frequently traveling abroad, sometimes with large entourage.

En masse promotion is symptomatic of a general policy of appeasement the government pursues being totally oblivious of the high cost it extracts from governance overall.

Mob violence given short shrift

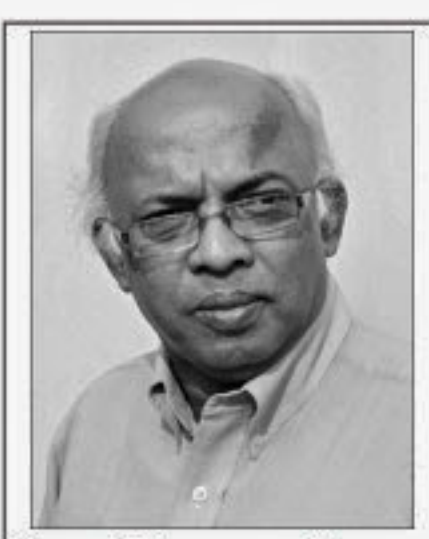
Let the police act on time

WHEN in mid-July 2011 six students from different city schools and colleges were brutally lynched by an angry mob at Aminbazar with the police acting as mere bystanders, we were outraged, to say the least. What happened thereafter was equally horrendous. Instead of arresting the masterminds behind the violence, the police filed a robbery case against the students who were later proved to have no connection whatsoever with any criminal act. Now that an investigation has been initiated into another case accusing unknown villagers, we are rendered speechless to see that the probe has barely made any progress even after extensive media attention coupled with a High Court directive.

Families of the deceased students have alleged that the case is stuck in an impasse due to some collusive arrangements between the police and the criminals. Although some of the arrested have admitted to their direct involvement with the incident, the police have fended off saying that producing witnesses will take more time. The spot where the students were killed is one of the biggest hotspots of illegal sand trading and drug business. Yet, we have yet to hear anything about the peddlers' alleged involvement with the crime.

Mob violence often leading to the victims' killing is a gruesome criminal offence. Even when a criminal is caught red handed, he has a right to protection from law. Therefore, a conscientious citizen should take a criminal to court instead of taking law in his own hand. What we find more menacing is a trend of people from different professions launching an obnoxious attack on someone without even examining the veracity of the victim's involvement with the crime. It is more obnoxious when such a crime is committed in front of the police. This is precisely what had happened in the killing of the six innocent students.

As we have clearly stated in this column before, we vehemently condemn all incidents of mob violence and demand immediate punishment of all perpetrators involved. We also condemn the passive role played by the police and urge them to take prompt action while a man



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU cannot ignore the bamboo. More to the point, you cannot cast aside the truth that the bamboo has

played a vital role at various points in our history. That it has a power of its own, either to intimidate or set the mind thinking was demonstrated a couple of weeks ago when a young lawmaker in Rangpur, hundreds of his followers in tow and with sleek, green bamboos in hand, descended on the local medical college for purposes that were as nefarious as they were reprehensible. The bamboo came in handy, even when those under attack fought back and gave the lawmaker and his hangers-on a taste of that self-same bamboo.

The bamboo, then, is what we employ when we set out to do something we cannot argue through with logic. Back in the old days, when chars rose out of the many riverbeds in the country, large gangs of men with criminal intent, generally led by a local politician and armed with hard, forbidding bamboos, rushed forth to occupy those chars. Heads were split open, hearts stopped beating and blood flowed on the new sand. It was something like the mythic battles of old, with the bamboo serving for a decision maker. The more bamboos you had, the bigger the chances of your battlefield triumph. The char was yours to rule over. The rest of the world be damned.

But do note that sinister intent has not always been at the back of the bamboo argument. In our villages, even in these days of quick money and quicker rise of concrete

structures, the bamboo serves as the foundation of humble huts in lonely villages. Nothing can serve as more durable construction material than the bamboo. It goes deep into the ground and holds up an entire home. In the old days (perhaps even now) its hollow space served a purpose. Rural men and women, disinclined to go to the bank and deposit their savings there, simply put coins and currency notes of different dimensions into those hollows. Quite often, the notes were

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eaten up by worms, but that did little to deter our wise ancestors from trusting in the bamboo more than they would trust in a distant bank.

Something of the religious comes attached to the bamboo. You see this when people die in this country. Apart from the need for a shroud and a swiftly dug grave, there is a brisk rush for bamboo because split bamboos serve as a roof on the grave of the one departed. The splits are set carefully and lovingly over a grave and then covered over with plantain leaves. Even as the heart breaks in us, we then move into placing all that dug up soil on the grave, a place whence the dead one will not rise again. Not, at least, until the day of judgement.

And yet the bamboo is also a reason for celebration. It comes in useful at marriages, in the villages and in the towns, when bridal gates of a lofty kind need to be erected. You see, the bridegroom and his retinue must be made to feel the significance of the day. Of course,

you can have gates made of banana plants, but then there is a chance that a slight wind or a bunch of running, giggling children will simply push them down. Where would that leave the bridal party? The bamboo holds up the huge shamiana under which hundreds of people, quite oblivious of the fact that there is a tomorrow, go on feasting as if today will never end.

In the distant past, when the term "connectivity" had not been invented, the bamboo was all we had to cross a stream if we meant to

reach our villages through the winding paths between the fields of paddy and jute. It was no bridge, not even a culvert. In fact, it was a contraption based on the primitive. Two bamboos stretched across the stream, one at shoulder level on which you placed your hand and the other underfoot on which you moved forward gingerly in order not to slip into the water below. But then, some did fall and did give us cause for some much needed laughter. The fallen one then needed to be plucked from the river, almost like a fish at the end of a rod.

In the perspective of national politics, the bamboo was forever immortalised in Bengali history when a million people cheered every word that Bangabandhu declaimed at the old Race Course on March 7, 1971. The bamboo was not really the weapon we would need in our war of national liberation, but it made the point: if anyone so much as tried to thwart our wish for self-determination, the bamboo waited for him. It was

heavy, it was large and it produced a thwack when it landed so beautifully on the back of the oppressor. Moreover, there was a symbolism that came into it. In the days before the Pakistan army began its mission of murder and rape at the end of March 1971, young Bengali men and women trained with sawed-off bamboo pieces at Dhaka University. Those bamboo pieces would within weeks be replaced by guns. The bamboo, as you can imagine, was to show us the way to a good war.

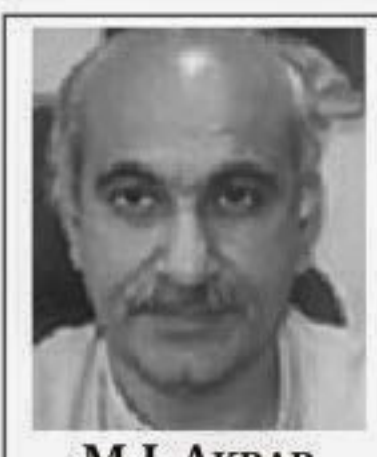
Whole shards of poetry have come to be attached to the bamboo. On damp, drizzly monsoon nights in our villages, the sound of rain and wind through the bamboo groves serves as a perpetual reminder of the timelessness of our pastoral roots. Naughty children, warned by irritated mothers of the existence of ghosts amidst those groves, go off to sleep in gentle manner. The bamboo often transforms itself into a barrier, when neighbours put up fences between one another or to prevent the neighbour's cow or goat from cheerfully eating up the plants growing in their courtyard. The bamboo becomes scaffolding for the poverty-stricken men who must be atop them as they build the homes of the affluent. A sudden plunge off that bamboo throws up instant tragedy. Titumir tried warding off his enemies through raising a bamboo fortress for his soldiers.

Let us call it a day. But, ah! In the ultimate sense, the bamboo often becomes an apt expression, a metaphor as it were, for human anger. Your neighbour purloins your mangoes and your coconuts every night. One dark morning, in fiendish mood, you tell him you will give him bamboo. Your fruits are stolen no more.

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BYLINE

The spice is missing



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is one exit poll which no Indian election commissioner can ban. It is called word-of-mouth. This word does not come

out of the mouth of politicians on the stump, or journalists on the fly. It emerges from those with feet firmly planted on the ground, voters, who have protected their treasured franchise with jealous secrecy till the day of decision, but now that it has been made are happy to discuss it at their familiar community focal points, the teashop, or perhaps over a warm fire on a cold evening that breathes some life into the night.

Novices, amateurs and outsiders (which means 90% of us) wait for a formal declaration of results. Professionals, that thin slice of activists entwined around the greasy electoral pole, know what has happened by sunset on voting day. Sincere party functionaries can get upset and vocal if the news is bad for their side; the grubby money-soakers simply slip away, laughing all the way to their cash holes. Candidates, understandably, are reluctant to accept the truth if the prognostication is negative. They have invested too much emotional capital in the process. It is best to keep your eyes shut for as long as possible when your dream has splintered.

If the purpose behind the present ban on exit polls during the election

process is to prevent the presumed result in one sub-region from influencing another a week down the line, then it does not work, particularly when polling is spread through a month in a province as large and complex as Uttar Pradesh. Voting begins this time in the north, in the arc below the Himalayas and north of the Ganga, and shifts, in stages, east and centre before completing the circle in the west. The voters of phase 2 will know in 48 hours how parties and candidates have fared in the areas that polled in phase 1 -- through the bus and train routes

Polls are a small part of elections; governments fell or remained when polls were part of the news narrative without qualifications. They are a touch of spice in a huge menu. The Election Commission is doing heroic work protecting the electoral diet from the many poisons we have injected, but it could restore some of the old flavour.

that are vehicles of word-of-mouth.

How much does this influence voting patterns? There is certainly some collateral benefit for any party on the upswing. A sense of victory can be contagious. But equally it can energise those behind to put in an extra effort, while the frontrunners spend their time in premature self-congratulation. The classic instance was in 2004 when the Congress-led UPA crept up from behind in the third and fourth rounds of the general election to pip a dazed NDA by a short head. UPA capitalised brilliantly on good

fortune; NDA is yet to recover. At a micro constituency level, when the middle class of Varanasi realised around noon on voting day in the 2009 elections that Murli Manohar Joshi was trailing behind a recognised mafia don, it woke up and went to the booth.

The key to democracy is simple, but often misunderstood. Voters do not vote for parties; they vote for themselves. They select a party which is the closest approximation of their self-interest at that point of the political calendar. Voters have a mind of their own. Democracy gives

them the right to change it. The primary instinct is personal, not partisan, which is why elections are such a vibrant and pulsating phenomenon. An election result is a flood that builds up one raindrop at a time.

The voter is driven by context. The UP or Punjab voter today does not really need an impressive judgement from the Supreme Court or a special trial court to conclude that the UPA government in Delhi is drenched in corruption. But he is voting for the next government in Chandigarh or Lucknow, not Delhi. He will take a call on Delhi when

that opportunity comes. In January and February 2012 he has been asked to decide the fate of Parkash Singh Badal and Mayawati. Groups like Team Anna get it wrong when they campaign for a cause that is certainly vitally important but secondary, at this time, to the voter's larger concerns.

Surprisingly, fulltime politicians make the same mistake. How Rahul Gandhi does in UP will offer no substantive clue about how he will do when he, inevitably, leads the Congress at the national level. In that sense it does not matter, beyond media gurgling, whether he is triumphant on March 6 or mildly depressed. Wind back to 2004. The BJP swept the states some months before it lost the national elections. Being elected leader of India is quite a different matter from being a provincial champion. I doubt if Dr. Manmohan Singh could get elected chief minister of Punjab, but he did get the mandate for PM in 2009. Apples and oranges may sit on the same stall, but they are quite different fruit.

Polls are a small part of elections; governments fell or remained when polls were part of the news narrative without qualifications. They are a touch of spice in a huge menu. The Election Commission is doing heroic work protecting the electoral diet from the many poisons we have injected, but it could restore some of the old flavour.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today and Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 8

1238

The Mongols burn the Russian city of Vladimir.

1250

Seventh Crusade: Crusaders engage Ayyubid forces in the Battle of Al Mansurah.

1952

Elizabeth II is proclaimed Queen of the United Kingdom.

1955

The Government of Sindh abolishes the Jagirdari system in the province. One million acres (4000 km²) of land thus acquired is to be distributed among the landless peasants.