

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Are we there yet?

Our narrowing rivers

HC directives must be correctly, and promptly, implemented

WHEN all else fails, the courts are our last resort to seeking remedies for things gone wrong. In the case of river conservation, however, it seems that, so far, even the courts have failed to have things set straight.

The implementation of a 2009 High Court order directing the concerned authorities to demarcate rivers as per Cadastral Survey and Revised Survey has been erroneous, with faulty demarcation which has left out the foreshores in many places. The 'error', it seems, has been made by officials to deliberately exclude the foreshores so that land-grabbers could cash in, filling up the land for their own purposes. In the process, land-grabbing is being legitimised. Meanwhile, the government, in order to retain the eroded areas and shoals to protect them as directed by the HC, is having to earth-fill into the rivers, making them even narrower than they already are.

We are shocked at the blatant disregard of an HC order by not only unscrupulous land grabbers encroaching upon public land and rivers for their own selfish interests but also government officials who have been assigned the responsibility of protecting the land and rivers. Now, while a committee formed last year to probe the issue of the faulty demarcation says it has relocated the pillars although it is clear that not all of them have been relocated correctly, the national taskforce on river conservation led by the shipping minister appears to be helpless in terms of rectifying the faulty demarcation.

This game of passing the buck must stop. The faulty demarcation is not irreversible. It can be easily rectified if there is true political will. But for this to happen, first, the guilty officials must be made accountable. And secondly, an oversight body comprising experts and government functionaries must be put in place to ensure undoing of the mistakes and correctly implementing the HC's directives towards protecting the rivers.

Strangling our rivers is akin to stifling the lifeline of our country and its people and that is not a crime we can afford to commit. We recall that the prime minister had repeatedly expressed her commitment to freeing Dhaka's rivers from pollution and grabbing. Its high time she turn her attention afresh to this public concern of great import.

Governing bodies of schools and colleges

These impede rather than foster their growth

TO achieve the goal of quality education, governing bodies or managing committees of educational institutions have a crucial role to play.

Conversely, depending on how such bodies are formed and who those are manned by they can be a liability for an educational institution.

No particular standards have been set so far to determine who should qualify for becoming the members and chairmen of the governing bodies of schools and colleges.

Two sets of people usually take advantage of the situation and influence the formation of the governing bodies. First, influential persons of the locality or ruling party loyalists. Second, lawmakers of local constituencies. They exercise control from choosing governing body members and chairmen to appointing teachers.

Unfortunately, through their interference in selection and appointment, the legislators often stifle the growth of professionalism in these institutions.

These factors are largely to blame for widespread corruption in the administration of these educational institutions as well as poor quality of the teaching staff and education as such.

This is true of all schools and colleges of the country regardless of their being government or non-government ones.

At a seminar held in the city to address the issue, speakers underscored the need for manning the government bodies of the schools and colleges with qualified people. To this end, they suggested that the members and chairmen of the governing or management bodies should have at least higher secondary or graduation certificates. The education minister laid particular emphasis on the 'mindset' or motivation of the people who would run these bodies.

The importance of selecting people of good credentials, neutrality and probity and with adequate educational qualifications need not be overemphasised.

We would, therefore, urge the government to look into this unhelpful culture and take necessary measures to rid our educational institutions of political influence, mis-



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PERHAPS no other "readers' comments" as a reaction to the news of the revival of Padma loan could encapsulate the collective feeling of the people on the issue more than the very pithy one from a reader which said the entire Padma episode has hurt the "soul of the nation." Can anyone disagree? Dismay and hurt were the overwhelming feelings of all self-respecting Bangladeshis. And according to one commentator the country has been belittled. And we are not quite there yet.

There was elation in everyone who wanted to see the project through and certainly the AL has been relieved of the albatross around its neck which the project had really become. And it might well thank the WB for reversing its decision, but no matter the degree of gloss that the AL would like to put on the revival of the loan, the price for the nation has been much more than can merely be calculated in terms of cost overrun. Certain losses can be made up ... a loss of face can be seldom, if ever, salvaged, no matter how those responsible for demeaning the country atone for it.

We are not surprised at the brave face put on by the AL. Some have suggested that the party may still find a silver lining in the dark episode to show to the people as the vindication of its stand. It will be odious for anyone to see this as

offering political dividends, most of all for the AL, and for it to exploit it as such will be even more undesirable.

While the people at one point appreciated the stand of the government that it would not act at the bidding of the WB, and whatever it wished would simply not eventuate automatically, the government had to wilt in the end because of the inherent weakness in its own stand. The fact that it was on a sticky wicket became very apparent from the uncoordinated and often clumsy

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comments that emanated right from the head of the government downwards. Its brouhaha was not consistent with its genuflection to revive the loan; it had to eventually express its willingness to comply with the new conditions to renew the project.

But, notwithstanding the revival of the loan, there are questions that need answers from the government, at least to remove the grey areas that still remain, if nothing else than to assuage, partly, the hurt soul of the nation.

We feel the government owes the people an explanation as to why the matter that could have been addressed sincerely one year ago

has dragged on for so long and all conditions that were imposed by the WB as a result of the "conspiracy to resort to corruption" by a few associated with the project have now been met, and the consequence of an obtuse attitude -- cost overrun by about five percent.

We are faced with new conditions by the WB, in spite of the finance minister's assertion that there are none. Perhaps quoting the relevant portion of the September 2012 WB statement is in order to prove that there is an attempt to fool the pub-

lic. And the AL might find, after going through the Bank's statement of September 20 and 25, and no one needs to read between the lines, that its expression of thanks and gratitude to the Bank is perhaps a tad premature.

On September 20 the WB had said: "The government agreed to a series of measures as a pre-requisite for any renewed implementation. These include new procurement arrangements with enhanced oversight, to ensure transparency and clean construction of the bridge; investigations proceeding in a full, fair, and expeditious manner; and an independent external panel to review the government's investiga-

tion and report their findings to the government and the World Bank."

It has further clarified any misgivings in its statement released on September 25 that "to engage anew in the project will require new implementation arrangements that give much greater oversight of project procurement processes to the Bank and co-financiers." And only after "satisfactory implementation of all these measures as well as a positive report from the external panel of internationally recognised experts that the World Bank will go ahead with the financing of the project." We are not quite there yet, are we?

And this brings us to the nub of the issue, an impartial inquiry into the allegations. If the AL really wants to remove any misgivings and make things clear, if it really means what it says, that national interest is above party or individual interest, then there must be an impartial investigation. Regrettably, the government continues to feel that the cancellation of the loan was at the behest of one person. And this has again been restated by the PM in New York very recently.

The so-called conspirators, as alleged by the government, must be identified and all the grey areas removed. And that can start by the government releasing all the WB correspondences addressed to it on this issue. Not doing so will continue to cast doubts on the government's probity.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Politicking for power



KULDIP NAYYAR

POLITICS is different from politicking. One is an art of running a government, while the other is mere manipulation of votes.

What is currently going in India is politicking -- how to gather sufficient votes to dislodge the Congress-led United Progress Alliance (UPA). The withdrawal of support by the Trinamool Congress by Mamata Banerjee has presented the opposition with a god-sent opportunity. Her 19 votes in the Lok Sabha has reduced the Congress coalition to 254 from 273, which is the magical figure for a simple majority in the lower house.

Since the government has gone ahead with the notification of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail, the matter after reforms has gone beyond the orbit of negotiation. It is also apparent that the Congress must have calculated that it can muster a majority on the matter of reforms. This means that even if Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party with 22 members decides to withdraw his support to the Congress from outside, Mayawati's Bahujan Samajwadi Party with 21 votes or smaller parties with their fewer votes are ready to step in to sustain the Manmohan Singh government.

The vehement opposition by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is understandable, but many in the opposition, including Mulayam Singh, are not willing to side with any combination which has BJP as its member. The BJP itself has diluted its stand on FDI and wanted a special session of parliament to remind the government that the then finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee, had given an assurance to the house that parliament would be consulted

on the issue.

In fact, the role of Pranab Mukherjee, now the president of India, is going to be very crucial. It looks as if the Congress Party anticipated such things and placed him at the crucial position. He is going to decide, if and when the Congress is defeated in the Lok Sabha, the party that should be invited to form the government. Next to the Congress, which has 205 members at present, is the BJP with 114 seats. It is difficult to imagine that the president will ask it to form the government. Already, a third front has come up with Mulayam Singh Yadav, Chandrababu Naidu and the Left. It will throw its hat in the ring when the opportunity arises.

When the focus is on how to grab power, the people are used only as an instrument, which the different political parties are busy doing. It is an unfortunate situation but India has to live with it until its gets rid of such elements who have no interest in the nation except to occupy the chair.

True, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has 154 members but the Mulayam Singh alliance is also claiming to have the support of many other parties. Several permutations and combinations will emerge as long as the Congress doesn't have a clear majority. The situation the president may face is whether he should continue with the Congress till the next parliament session in winter or to get into the exercise of finding a successor.

The opposition is not a united lot and not in a position to give a list of a majority of members if the president were to invite it. The *Bharat Bandh*, a futile exercise that cost the nation some Rs. 18,000 crore, showed that one group demonstrated against the price rise and

FDI at Jantar Mantar and the other on Parliament Street. For the Congress, it may be difficult to have an alliance of 273 as its strength was before Mamata Banerjee walked out. But there is no other viable front emerging to challenge the Manmohan Singh government which is now asserting in the economic field.

The debate on a mid-term poll is understandable because the government in a minority cannot function properly with all the guns booming in the opposition. If there is no political consensus, the country cannot make any progress in the conditions where even the allies of the Congress were not with it wholly as was seen during the *Bharat*

Bandh. The attitude of the BJP indicates that it will not allow parliament to function even in the winter session or the subsequent ones. In other words, the choice before the Congress is whether to continue to stay in power without the sanction of the people who represent parliament or to go back to the people and seek a fresh mandate.

Opportunism in these conditions, however unfortunate, is absolutely logical. Take the case of Bihar. It is a peculiar state which does little to push back the backwardness but Chief Minister Nitish Kumar says at the top of his voice that the mere size of it -- its strength in the 543-member Lok Sabha is 40 -- entitles the state to have all its demands met. Nitish Kumar, a comparatively reasonable person, too has not been

able to bottle up his ambition or that of the state. In the crisis-ridden politics, where every Lok Sabha member counts, he has come to believe that Bihar's seats can tilt future parliaments and political parties.

This may be true in a particular situation. Even otherwise, the weight of 40 members is too heavy to be brushed aside. My criticism is the demand that Nitish Kumar has made. He has declared that Bihar would vote for a party or a group if his state is accorded a special status. The constitution has a couple of Articles and confers the special status. Jammu and Kashmir and some states in the northeast have it. I shall be surprised if Bihar gets special status.

In fact, all states need a special status. The centre should have only three-four subjects -- Defence, Foreign Affairs, Communications and Currency -- with it and give the rest to the states which are really close to the people and reflect their aspirations. The governance of some 70 years since independence has proved to the states that for every important work they have to rush to New Delhi. In fact, they have set up their mini-offices with Resident Commissioners, all senior IAS officers, in the national capital to pursue matters relating to their state.

A people's movement to fight against the ills that have crept into governance would have been helpful. A Lokpal bill is the most important measure needed at this time. But when the focus is on how to grab power, the people are used only as an instrument, which the different political parties are busy doing. It is an unfortunate situation but India has to live with it until its gets rid of such elements who have no interest in the nation except to occupy the chair.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 27

1669

The Venetians surrender the fortress of Candia to the Ottomans, thus ending the 21-year long Siege of Candia.

1988

National League for Democracy is formed by Aung San Suu Kyi and various others to help fight against dictatorship in Myanmar.

1996

In Afghanistan, the Taliban capture the capital city Kabul after driving out President Burhanuddin Rabbani and executing former leader Mohammad Najibullah.