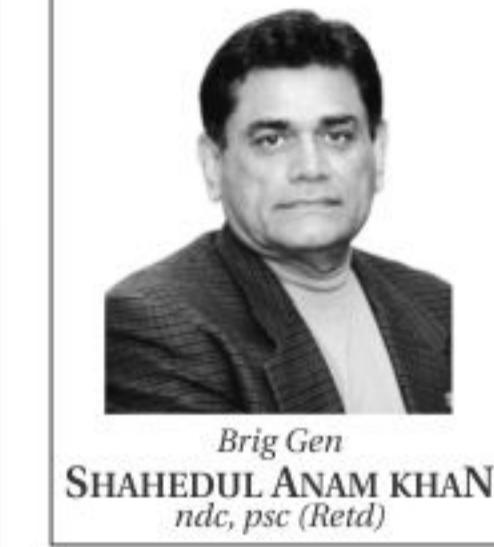


STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Tolerating dissent

Brig Gen
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OMEONE had said that dissent is the highest form of patriotism. And I chose to commence this piece with a quote the

source of which is still being disputed (contrary to popular belief that the saying originated from the third president of the United States it is now believed to be only a few years old and not 200), it being very relevant to our deliberations today. Very few will disagree that whoever uttered these priceless words had articulated perhaps the most enduring sentiments (criticism and dissent) that drives and sustains the spirit of freedom and democracy around the world.

It is the "scoundrels" that the government is finding hard to put up with in Bangladesh, if one were to accept that patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels, or even the first. That tolerating criticism is not one of the forte of this government, or for that matter any past governments, has once again been demonstrated by the way it has come down upon its critics.

There is a criticism psychosis that is pervading the minds of our leadership today. And thus the strident reaction, the latest on the government list includes the TIB, and the talk shows, and its wary eyes have not even spared the recent meeting between the visiting WB delegation

and a few reputed national figures. The TIB has come under government criticism for its survey report on the performance of the members of current parliament, and not for the first time either has its motives been questioned. And one finds it hard to believe that the talk show participants would be so denigrated as to be compared with those that prefer nocturnal quietness to ply their trade.

Regrettably, this is not the first

A government that wants to render public service must understand that stifling criticism creates an aura of fear, and no productive activity can take place in an environment of fear. There is a free society and there is a fear society -- take your pick.

time that criticism of the government or disagreements with its policies has received the government's and the party's wrath. Those at the helm of affairs tend to forget that the critics are not their enemies; and a government that cannot differentiate between honest and well meaning criticism and "disloyal subversion" is not really worth its salt or the trust of the people.

One can recall a very insightful article by Professor Rehman Sobhan which appeared in these very pages soon after the Awami League was elected to its first term in office, on December 23, 1998, entitled, "My critic, my friend a road to better governance." It seems that prudent warnings from time to time by its

well wishers have been ignored by the government, in fact those have been turned on their heads and it would not be wrong to suggest that some of the well meaning critics are now much misunderstood.

It is queer too that behind every such report, as that of the TIB's, the government finds an ulterior motive, a conspiracy to "undo" it. Some of its spin doctors, so often given to flights of fancy, have come out with the conspiracy theory, once

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again, and to quote a senior cabinet member, the report is aimed to impede democracy and invite undemocratic forces.

Let us make one thing clear. The TIB Report, or for that matter the words spoken in the talk shows, are not the be all and end all of the matter. Not all criticisms are always fair or just. Where in the world is it so? And just as those that use the media to express dissent or criticise government policies the government too is at liberty to disprove criticisms through its own observations. Its correct riposte is in proving the critics wrong, or, where the critics are right, to correct its policies, never in running the critics down. As one Nobel laureate had

said, it is easy to mock dissent. Mocking comes easily to those that do not have the weight of reason behind them.

One might wonder at the cause of such pathological aversions to criticisms. Offering reasons in such matters may be risky but worth none the less. One might attribute the current syndrome to the huge majority that the government enjoys in the parliament. On its own it has a 2/3, and together with its allies, a 4/5 majority. This has made it supremely confident of itself and makes it feel impervious to any criticism. It is quite happy to ride roughshod on popular feelings forgetting the wise counsel that dissenting voices must not only be heard they must also be encouraged because a wise person must be constantly wary of those that agree with him or her readily.

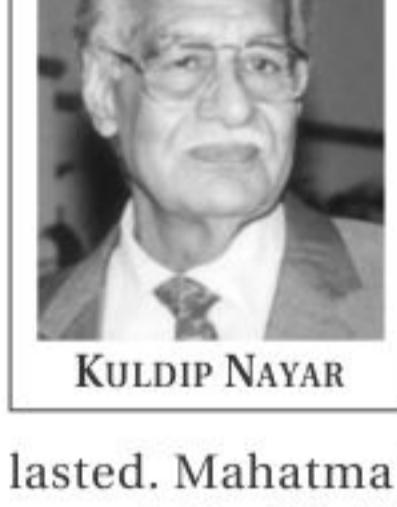
A critic is your friend because he tells you what you should hear and not what you want to hear. The unpleasant facts must not be discarded but internalised to redact policies and rectify mistakes. A critic is a friend because he has not learnt to, "sandwich every bit of criticism between two thick layers of praise." A government that wants to render public service must understand that stifling criticism creates an aura of fear, and no productive activity can take place in an environment of fear. There is a free society and there is a fear society -- take your pick.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Clean JP versus corrupt dynasty



R EVOLUTIONARIES have a short span of fame. They are forgotten sooner than their length of struggle and sacrifice has lasted. Mahatma Gandhi, who ousted the British rule, is mostly remembered because of the Indian currency notes which carry his photo. So is the case with the founders of Pakistan and Bangladesh -- Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman, who too are beaming through the currency notes in their respective countries.

Poor Jayaprakash Narayan enjoys no such honour although he had contributed within a revolution to release India from the shackles of authoritarian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1977. When I visited Patna, I sensed the neglect even in his home state Bihar, where he was born. Coincidence had it that the day of my visit happened to be October 11, the birthday of Jayaprakash Narayan. No local newspaper had any mention of him, much less carry his photo.

The state government run by chief minister Nitish Kumar, one of JP's leading followers, had taken no notice of that day. There was not even a small official function to recall his services to the state, if not the country. The airport named after him still carries the wrong spelling of his first name, Jai, instead of Jay.

At Kadam Kuan, where his forlorn residence stands in a congested area, was without any crowd. A few of us queued before his statue to garland him. What shocked me was that some builders were trying to occupy part of the building which has been converted into a museum, retaining the study and the bedroom of JP as he used them.

Still he was the man who had single-handedly put democracy back on track after it had been derailed. He crushed the mighty

Indira Gandhi, then the prime minister, in the 1977 elections. He showed how an ordinary person (aam admi) can retrieve his right to speak out, to write or to live freely if he determinedly stands against despots. JP revived the constitution which she had suspended and gave back newspapers their freedom.

It is another matter that JP failed in his lifetime even after giving the second independence to the people. He fell ill and could not keep an eye on those who took the reins of the government at the centre. There was no difference between Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian rule and non-performing Janata government. I complained to the then Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, that JP was

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years. When such examples come to light, they evoke hope in an otherwise gloomy atmosphere.

I have wondered why the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty has come to be entangled with corruption. No finger was pointed out at Jawaharlal Nehru although he stayed India's prime minister for 17 years. Even a charge of corruption against his ministers was rare. TT

Krishnamachari, the then finance minister, was found involved in helping a company to dispose of its shares to a particular insurance company. Then a commission that probed the charges held him guilty and he had to resign. Never did anybody suspect Nehru. It was not that people like him belonged to an

Corruption of the dynasty has lessened in tone and tenor. None of its member is in the government. But Vadra has created the stench. The Congress party and some members of the Manmohan Singh cabinet are up in arms to defend him. Yet the damage to the dynasty's reputation has been done.

unhappy over his lack of contact with ministers. Desai curtly replied that he had not even gone to meet Gandhi. "JP is not bigger than Gandhi," said Desai.

Back in Delhi, I saw the debasement of politics. The central government was busy defending Robert Vadra, Congress president Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law. It had been found that he had submitted to the Registrar of Companies balance sheets which were at variance with the records of a real estate company from which he had purchased properties. He reportedly made some Rs. 700 crore.

But hats off to Ashok Khemka for cancelling the land allotment to Vadra as the Haryana cadre officer found the allotment illegal. The poor officer has been transferred -- 40th transfer in his service of 20

years. When only sacrifices were remembered and not the scams which were rare. The fact was that their methods were clean and they never thought of any hanky-panky.

Everything went haywire when Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, came to power. The phase of coterie, connivance at the illicit huge party funds and corrupt deals in public sector undertakings -- all are the products of Mrs Gandhi's rule and the later consequences. The Congress governments in the states and at the centre became suspects in the eyes of the people. They blamed individual ministers or the party leaders but wondered how far Mrs Gandhi was involved.

Her reputation got tattered during the emergency and her son, Sanjay Gandhi, gave her the name of a mother who protected her child. His

venture, Maruti, to produce small cars with the assistance of a Japanese firm, Suzuki, came to be called Ma Ruti (mother crying). How Sanjay Gandhi got the licence to manufacture the car, how he got the land near Gurgaon and how he got an unsecured loan reminds one the repetition of Robert Vadra's venture in building properties worth many crores of rupees.

Vadra is the first case of a son-in-law becoming a part of the dynasty. Feroze Gandhi, son-in-law of Nehru, was an exposure of corruption. He was so upright that he did not even live at the Prime Minister's house but had a separate bungalow to which he was entitled as a member of parliament.

It is a pity that Feroze Gandhi's son, Rajiv Gandhi, got contaminated when, as prime minister, he finalised a deal to buy the Bofors guns. Bofors, a Swedish firm, gave money, kickbacks, to get the order, again through the pressure that Rajiv Gandhi used on the army selection team. Indeed, Bofors became synonymous for corruption. Rajiv Gandhi lost the 1989 election on that count.

Corruption of the dynasty has lessened in tone and tenor. None of its member is in the government. But Vadra has created the stench. The Congress party and some members of the Manmohan Singh cabinet are up in arms to defend him. Yet the damage to the dynasty's reputation has been done.

How all this is in sharp contrast to JP, who tried to introduce values to the movement he led! There was no wisp of corruption. The agitation was to retrieve the values. It is still a far cry but, if they are to be restored, the first step should be to re-establish propriety in public life. It should be applicable to ministers both at the centre and in the states. Today, the same challenge faces the nation which is seething with anger over injustice.

Corruption is only a part of it.

The writer is an eminent Indian Journalist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 18

1748

Signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle ends the War of the Austrian Succession.

1779

American Revolutionary War: The Franco-American Siege of Savannah is lifted.

1859

Henri Bergson, French philosopher, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature is born (d. 1941).

1944

Soviet Union begins liberation of Czechoslovakia.

1954

Texas Instruments announces the first Transistor radio.