

## Looking For An Excuse

ALL THIS SHADOW-BOXING! THAT THE CONTENTIOUS OMBUDSMAN Bill would be passed in the Lower House in the extended winter session of Parliament was a foregone conclusion. And the Congress Party showed a 'sense of urgency' only to defeat the very purpose of the much talked about and yet less understood, Lokpal Bill. They debated the anti-corruption Lokpal and Lokayukta Bill, 2011 for the sake of debate and the caricature of parliamentary culture was not without its lighter moment as the redoubtable Lalu Yadav suggested that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should be selected as the first Lokpal as he was an honest person. While the main opposition—the Bharitya Janata Party (BJP) criticised the Bill because they were not taken into confidence at the drafting stage and inclusion of sub-quota within quota was against the spirit of Lokpal, other non-left opposition forces like the Yadav brigade opposed it apprehending further curtailment of India's federal structure. For the Congress the issue was how to prioritise status quo-ism over genuine change and play the game safely. But the farcical side of the Lokpal exercise was that the accompanying constitution amendment Bill to give Lokpal and Lokayuktas constitutional status was defeated and quite expectedly, for lacking a two-third majority of the members present and voting on the floor of the House. The crisis managers of Congress Party were fully aware of it well in advance and yet they pretended to be innocuous in the matter. In truth Congress heaved an audible sigh of relief as they knew better than anybody else that the prospects of getting the passage of the Bill in the upper house were grim as one of their alliance partners began to talk Turkey immediately after the vote in Loksabha was over. Congress Party deliberately avoided the process of building a consensus over the dissenting voice with the sole objective of killing the Lokpal initiative while leaving many a loose end even in the revised draft.

Those who are opposing it on the ground of federalism—or lack of it—are simply hiding the fact that at no point of time India was really federal in its true sense. One reason there are so many regional parties and ethnic identities fighting for political space is absence of federalism. States are at worst enlarged municipalities with limited power to look after all aspects of people's lives. The system is already unitary and enormous concentration of legal and economic power at the centre seems to have created a situation where corruption is the order of the day. Unlike Italy the system here is corrupt and inefficient as well.

Prime Minister in the Lokpal Bill in its present form has been protected in such a way that he could not be touched under any circumstances, again a calculated ploy to dilute the idea of all encompassing Lokpal authority.

As India still lives in the medieval era of caste and communal frenzy the drafters of the all-important Bill didn't forget to bring in minority quota reservation clause that tempted the opposition parties, particularly the saffron brigade, to smell rat as assembly election in Uttar Pradesh where minority factor is decisive in any electoral power equation, is round the corner. The British divided India once on religious-communal basis but their able successors have been dividing Indian society on multiple issues, otherwise obnoxious, since 1947. Whether they can

safe-guard the crumbling Nehru dynasty by way of playing caste and communal cards eternally, particularly in the North is open to question.

No doubt, Uttar Pradesh, the traditional supplier of India's Prime Minister mattered a lot in the Congress Party's election calculus in the yester years and it continues to matter even after the split of India's largest state and creation of Uttarakhand. Uttar Pradesh is no longer a safe bait for the inheritors of Nehru dynasty, albeit dynastic democracy remains a hallmark of parliamentary politics in South Asian region.

Lokpal is not yet an issue in any of the five states that are going to polls shortly. Castelords don't need it. Nor do communal outfits bother about whether they draft a strong Lokpal Bill or a weak Lokpal Bill. All fortune-seekers are gathered in UP, they are all risk-takers. Anna crusade will not be a poll issue in UP where elections are traditionally fought on caste and communal lines. 'Backward' Thakurs and 'Forward' Dalits—all fight it out in the name of caste hegemony and caste prejudice.

The point at issue is whether hunger strike that Gandhians trust and depend upon, can always deliver the goods. Irom Sharmila's hunger strike against army brutalities and the very Act that help the army perpetuate those brutalities is history. Eleven years on and yet her support base is still very fragile and marginal. Unlike Arab Spring Anna movement with limited goal is too weak to create waves across the country. Mere ripples are not enough to force the Singhs to knowtow to people's wishes. For the team Anna the situation now is back to square one. India's basic masses are not making themselves heard on Anna affairs and without them search for a new model of governance may be turned into a search for a scapegoat to maintain the status quo. □□□

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