

Calcutta Notebook

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APRIL IS THE CRUELEST month and so is October but come November, there is a nip in the air, moods change, woollens are eyed with a suppressed longing and its season time for bird watchers. The huge jheel at the Calcutta zoo has lost its enchanting quality but birdwatchers have shifted their gaze to another water body across the river, in Santragachi, Howrah. Many venture to distant Chittaranjan for a tryst with avian visitors. During this pleasant state of being, this city had the pleasure to listen to Andre Beteille at the Raja Rammohun Roy Memorial Museum.

Having chosen to speak on 'Government & Opposition' the speaker chose to hit the nail on the head by saying that for the successful operation of a democracy, a strong government needs to be supplemented by a strong opposition. To buttress this point he cited the example of the United Kingdom where the opposition is referred to as 'Her Majesty's Opposition'. Admitting that that the acrimony between the government and opposition is not something peculiar to India he pointed out that 'We have moved some distance away from where we started in 1950'.

Arguing that democracy rests finely on a tension between the twin principles of 'rule of numbers' and 'rule of law', he added that at times procedures are not respected and many political decisions are taken on the pressure of numbers. However while at the present juncture the balance has shifted towards the 'pressure of numbers', the speaker was of the firm view that if 'rule of law is not respected then it is not a democracy'. Distinguishing between the two and emphasising that 'democracy has to work out a balance for the tension', the speaker specified that a rule of law is a constitutional democracy whereas a populist democracy is one where numbers tend to prevail.

Getting into the specifics of post 1947 Indian politics and with reference to the emergency of 1975 the speaker categorised Indira Gandhi as a 'halfhearted despot' in comparison to Stalin and Mao. 'Half hearted', since the lady called for elections in 1977 which she badly lost and then she rode back to power on the crest of the next election.

Harking back to the days of the Constituent Assembly, Beteille commented that Nehru and Ambedkar, 'both at heart were constitutionalists' but the populist elements lurked in the background and these forces came to the forefront in a big way during the JP movement. The speaker felt that that the rule of numbers was once again back into reckoning through the Anna Hazare bandwagon which was creating an optical illusion of participation by a cross section of the population through the weight of numbers. Although many observers have asserted to the contrary, Beteille's view is that there were no significant presence of 'stone breakers, manual labourers, farmers' at Anna Hazare's gatherings. Nivedita & Aditya Nigam have written elsewhere that 'It is by now established that there was substantial Muslim and dalit

participation ...' and 'Anybody who moved around where protests were happening could have seen that the large majority of participants were lower middle class to working class people' (EPW VOL 46 No. 37, September 10–September 16, 2011).

Coming back to the essence of a working democracy Beteille emphasised that a peculiarity of a democracy is that an opposition is regarded as legitimate and is given a tangible form by the modern party system. To give the devil its due the speaker commented that 'the germ of an opposition party was sown in India by the British in the form of the Indian National Congress'. The imperative therefore, is that the government and opposition accept each other and the government get used to the idea that '5 years hence the opposition may be in power'. The speaker regretted that this way of thinking has not taken root in India leading to an absence of civility and trust between the Congress and the Opposition and this works both ways to an extent that 'Manmohan Singh believes that the country will fall apart if BJP comes to power'.

Ideally, the Parliamentary model works best in a two party system and also in case of coalitional politics but too many parties can cause stress to the aforesaid model. Speculating on the extreme possibilities that this model may offer the speaker said that 'one alternative is a one party democracy for which there are historical examples' and the other is a partyless democracy. The second possibility is yet to work itself out but it looms large, having support in the political thinking and writings of Mahatma Gandhi and JP. The speaker opined that the notion of partyless democracy has deep roots in the nation's political psyche and the speaker was fearful of such an eventuality. At the end, the author commented that Gandhi and Ambedkar were two persons vastly different to each other and that the latter was "against the grammar of anarchy of populist movements'. The speaker ended with a note of hope that 'we will carry along constitutional democracy with populist movements'.

To this correspondent, the speaker's view appeared to be that come what may and whatever be the strife, the resolution lay through the mechanism of the constitution and the three estates that it has spawned. That those on the periphery or outside this closed establishment have no mechanism to get their voice heard and that their grievances are usually ignored or encashed by the establishment's *chowkidars* was something that did not emerge from the deliberations. A close follower of Indian politics may have observed that there is no relief or the redress available to the marginalised or the alienated when an unwanted element gets elected/selected repeatedly to the bicameral legislatures. One has in mind the rumours about a 'genteel' law maker and minister whose political career started with the appropriation of the treasury of a breakaway party.

The moot question is how does the system that enchants Prof Beteille get rid of such elements who have ensured that they be endeared to all the props in the system. Till such time that one may ponder to find an answer, such persons continue to gnaw at the innards of the system and this country. The situation is bad enough for the people of this country to demand for another behemoth of a bureaucracy in the form of a *Lokpal*. To 'Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero' Galileo retorted that 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero' (Bertolt Brecht's 'The Life of

Galileo'). Extending the analogy, unhappier is a land that has to bear the burden of India's present crop of politicians and unhappier still is a land that needs a *Lokpal*. □□□