

perspective

“ Democracy is being allowed to vote for the candidate you dislike least — Robert Byrne

Don't meddle in school education

Union Human Resource (HRD) ministry has drafted plans for a national teachers' tribunal to hear complaints by teachers in private educational institutions. The tribunal will cover un-aided schools, and will be modelled on the lines of the Central Administrative Tribunal for central government employees. A bill will have to be moved to facilitate its birth. HRD officials say the decision was taken after the ministry received a slew of complaints from private sector teachers - at school and college levels - of severe exploitation. Interestingly, the ministry itself had posed the question and came up with the answer.

The very idea of autonomy of educational institutions is abhorrent to HRD minister Arjun Singh, who has been thinking up ways to intervene, benevolently of course, in affairs and institutions where the state's presence should be minimal. Irrespective of whoever is in charge and the political colour of the regime at the Centre, the HRD ministry has always had a troubled relationship with the idea of autonomy. The thought of letting schools, colleges and other institutions of higher education create and sustain their own ethos brings out deep-rooted insecurities in the ministry. The Indian institutes of technology and management have faced the brunt of this tendency at several levels, from questions of fees and the reservation of seats to matters relating to syllabus and pedagogy. It is now the turn of private schools and colleges, urban and rural.

The private sector employs over two-thirds of teachers at the school and higher levels. It is time the Centre and state governments reviewed their role in some important sectors of civil society, such as education. The state should set up basic standards and parameters, and make sure of the existence of proper infrastructure. But after that, it must withdraw and let the institutions fend for themselves. As for the private teacher's labour rights, the state can lay down the policy on issues such as minimum wages, or conditions of employment and dismissal. But the day-to-day administration and the problems that could arise should be dealt with by the institutions. Undue interference militates against the concept of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and is prone to abuse by the bureaucracy. A return to the inspector raj in the education sector is neither in consonance with the liberal ethos of our times nor good for the growth of quality education.

A monarchy in transition

While most of the world's attention will be riveted towards Washington in the first week of November, watching to know whether Barack Obama or John McCain will be the next leader of the world's most powerful country, thousands of miles away in a quiet corner the world almost forgot, a young man will be officially initiated into fulfilling his destined leadership role. However, even before his coronation at an auspicious time decided by astrologers on November 6, 28-year-old King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk has remarkably presided over a diminution of his duties. The world's youngest hereditary monarch, Wangchuk has toured the length and breadth of Bhutan to ensure that in 2008 the country referred to as the 'last Shangri-La' formally became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government.

Unlike neighbouring Nepal where the Shah dynasty had to be shown the door, the move to democratic rule was proposed by Bhutan's royal family, and not the result of any popular upsurge. By his own diktat, the king relinquished his own absolute powers to become largely a figurehead guiding the country's 'Gross National Happiness,' a unique Bhutanese concept and benchmark for development designed to reflect the tiny Himalayan nation's standard of progress. In less than two years since he became monarch in December 2006, on his father Jigme Singye Wangchuk's sudden abdication of power, Khesar has guided Bhutan's transition from an absolute monarchy to democracy, slowly and steadily educating its citizens on the virtues of democratic governance. The young king began his unusual reign overseeing the transition of his country to democracy, by presiding over the last sessions of the advisory Parliament in which electoral laws, land reform and other important issues were deliberated. According to him, it is the responsibility of this generation of Bhutanese, which he represents, to ensure the success of representative democracy. His father had specified that democracy was not necessarily Bhutan's goal, but a part of good governance and a key pillar of the King's ultimate objective - to achieve Gross National Happiness.

Early in his reign, in February 2007, Khesar signed a landmark agreement with India which revised decades-old ties with its neighbour, giving Bhutan greater say over its foreign and defence policies. India, which has huge stakes in Bhutan's development, has very close links strategically and economically with the landlocked Himalayan nation and "very few hiccups" in the relationship. Naturally, the Indian contingent at the coronation of Bhutan's fifth Druk Gyalpo, educated in the USA and Britain, will be more than symbolic, with President Pratibha Patil leading the delegation that includes UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and the Congress 'yuvraj', General Secretary Rahul Gandhi.

Will the lotus bloom?

With elections in six states only weeks away, the BJP is looking much more agile

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance, despite the current hype and rhetoric, will pass the litmus of its popularity when elections to six state assemblies are held in November-December this year.

Given the General Elections could be held anytime after these Assembly elections, the electoral outcome would naturally shape the future of BJP and Congress at the Centre. The two parties will be locked in direct contests in these three states with a host of marginal parties such as Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party, Uma Bharati's Jan Shakti and Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party playing spoil sport for both sides. The BJP's loss would be the Congress' gain. For the BJP, the stakes are very high as it rules in three of these six states -- Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh -- and had also won 56 of 65 Lok Sabha seats from these States in 2004.

The BJP knows the importance of these assembly elections. It is conscious of the fact that it cannot make major gains elsewhere in the country in the next round of Lok Sabha polls. It has already made big gains in two of its ruled states -Gujarat and Karnataka. It also does not expect any miracle to happen in Uttar Pradesh, which had played a decisive role in the past in helping the party occupy centre-stage at the national level. Its Ram temple card is a dead horse in UP, the State which accounts for 80 Lok Sabha seats. Dalit leader, Mayawati, and Mulayam Singh Yadav are comfortably entrenched there and would deny any space to the Hindutva party. In the prevailing scenario, the BJP may find it difficult to even retain the 10 Lok Sabha seats that it had won in the State last time, notwithstanding the fact that former UP Chief Minister Rajnath Singh is leading the party. In Maharashtra, with Raj Thackeray making determined efforts to appropriate the base of Shiv Sena coupled with the divided BJP in the state, the party can hardly expect much.

Naturally, for the BJP, the primary target and concern is to retain its grip over MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh so as to



PRAKASH PATRA

be in the reckoning for power at the Centre. A lacklustre performance in these states could not only see party's fortunes plummeting further, but also the Congress, which would be the beneficiary, could seize the opportunity to advance general elections. As of now, the mood in BJP is buoyant, as the party would be facing elections after installing its first government in the south, Karnataka. On the other hand, the Congress appears to be on the defensive on the anti-terror issue and gives the impression of being in a quandary over the campaign points that could catch the fancy of the electorate in the three states. The outcome of the elections would determine the future course of political events in the country. A win by the BJP would put the UPA Government on the run. A defeat would help the Congress to turn aggressive and force general elections.

The Congress seems to be pinning all its faith and hope on the anti-incumbency factor working against the BJP this time around, as it had in 2003 when it lost power in these states and fared very badly in the subsequent Lok Sabha polls. An impression is gaining ground that the Congress is lacking the required aggressiveness to dislodge the BJP from power, despite having a host of issues to beat the BJP with.

In terms of poll preparedness too, the BJP again appears to be miles ahead of its rival. Not only in these three states but also in Delhi where the Congress is in power, it has projected its Chief Ministerial candidates - Vasundhara Raje in Rajasthan, Shivraj Singh in MP, Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh and Vijay Kumar Malhotra in Delhi. The Congress, on the other side, already plagued by infighting and dissidence, has only been able to project the current Chief Minister, Sheila

Dixit, in Delhi, and continues to dither on the leadership issue in other states. Apparently, this move will keep all party factions in good humour.

True, the Congress tradition is one, which focuses on a strong central leadership and does not allow regional satraps to emerge. But times have changed, with single-party dominance replaced by a much more plural polity. It is high time for the Congress to imbibe the changing culture and promote strong regional leaders to provide effective leadership in states. One of the major factors in the Congress' spectacular performance in Andhra Pradesh last time was the projection of Y S Rajasekhara Reddy as CM.

In the absence of proper state leadership, the burden of poll campaigns rests on Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. They may draw decent crowds at their meetings, but to translate them into votes, the party would require local leaders, having a direct stake in the process, to mobilise the party and people at the grassroots level. The party should have drawn lessons from UP where although Rahul Gandhi drew much bigger crowds than the state leaders, there was no credible face at the state level who could have converted the crowds to votes. It is not that the Congress has a dearth of state level leaders. But the party continues to be in the traditional mode, as the central leadership perceives the emergence of power centres at the state level as a threat.

The other fallout of the absence of strong regional leaders is that party president Sonia Gandhi often becomes a vulnerable target of regional opposition leaders. Narendra Modi gained from a direct confrontation with Sonia during the Gujarat elections. The latest example is of Mayawati who on the issue of railway project in Rae Bareilly and Amethi, has drawn Sonia Gandhi into personal confrontations. Mayawati's purpose is clear: by having a personalised stand off, she establishes equivalence with Sonia Gandhi and in the process enhances her stature. Had there been strong Congress leaders in UP, who could have taken her head on, Mayawati would have been on her toes.

(The writer is a freelance journalist)

BLOG POST

Another bid to save the planet

One of the big events of 2009 will be the mega-summit in Copenhagen in November-December to agree on a post-Kyoto regime for cutting greenhouse-gas emissions. No deal means, in effect, that the world gives up on combating global warming. In theory, the chances of a deal should be good. The Kyoto-resistant Bush administration will be gone. China, now the world's biggest producer of greenhouse gases, has started to get serious about its environmental policy. The



European Union wants to lead the world in greenery. And politicians everywhere now claim that tackling global warming is among their highest priorities.

Yet all may not be wonderful at Copenhagen. For one thing, governments struggling to come out of recessions will be in no mood to make economic sacrifices even in the name of saving the planet. And the politics of carbon-cutting are complicated in all the places whose influence on the outcome of the negotiations will be decisive. In America, despite the change to a greener administration, getting an agreement through Congress will be hard.

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/theworldin2009/>

BLOG SURF

Women and literature

It wasn't so much the fulsome nature of the tributes to the literary agent Pat Kavanagh which struck me, as a period detail. Emma Dally, speaking of her time as literary editor of Cosmopolitan in the 80s, recalls Kavanagh offering stories from heavyweights such as Margaret Drabble, Marina Warner and even Isaac Bashevis Singer. Open this month's Cosmopolitan and you will struggle to find a single book review, let alone the 12 pages of original fiction that Dally filled each month. And Cosmo is not the only offender. A

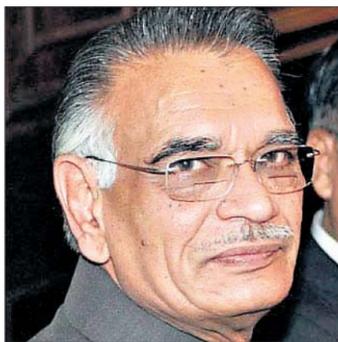
flick through the 20 or so women's glossies at my local newsagent musters barely enough books to cover a coffee table. And the closest thing to a short story is Scarlet magazine's Literature feature. Sample title: "Things that Go Hump in the Night". But perhaps the page is turning. Magazines such as Red, Easy Living and Psychologies - largely pitched at the over 35s - cannot afford to ignore the book club crowd. As Ian McEwan once wrote: "When women stop reading, the novel will be dead."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/bookblog>

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Zero-performance Union minister

THIS REFERS to home minister Shivraj Patil's threat to impose the president's rule in Orissa because of the attacks on Christians there. After losing the Lok Sabha election, Patil entered the Cabinet via Rajya Sabha. His sole qualification for the post is that he is loyal to the Gandhi family. He has done nothing of note in the four years after becoming the home minister. After the last bomb blasts in New Delhi, his photographs appeared in newspapers not because of the action he was initiating but because of his wardrobe. He has been silent over blasts across the country because Muslims were involved in all of them. But he has suddenly become hyperactive in Orissa. He is eager to pull down the elected government in Orissa. People now are well



Shivram Gopal Vaidya, Pune

Regulate migration

The main point raised by the MNS chief is that the north Indians should be kept out as they deprive locals of jobs. He also is unhappy that the immigrants do not respect the local culture. This is because India is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country. Raj is also ignoring the contribution of the immigrants to the State's development. It may inspire leaders in neighbouring states to adopt similar ways. So Raj must realise that this is cheap popularity. It impedes the development of the country. The migration issue is serious. Not all states are developed sufficiently to provide jobs to all their people. Here the employment policies can give priority to the local people. The Centre should study the migration issue and decide on a policy to regulate it.

Deepanjan Paul, On e-mail

OFFBEAT

Swords and sorcery return to syndication

BY BROOKS BARNES

In the world of television, it's nearly impossible to go wrong with a sweaty, half-naked hunk chopping wood in slow motion. But Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert know that better than anybody.

Before Raimi went off to turn Spider-Man into a multi-billion-dollar movie franchise, the two men were credited with creating a genre of television beloved (at least for a time) around the globe: the syndicated fantasy action drama. Heavy on dragons and fire -- not to mention men in lace-up leather pants and scantily clad women wielding swords -- their "Hercules: The Legendary Journeys" and "Xena: Warrior Princess" were both pop-culture phenomena in the mid-1990s.

Audiences eventually overused on the genre, largely because production companies flooded the market with copycats. At least 65 syndicated one-hour dramas arrived from 1991 to 2000, with entries like "Conan: The Adventurer," "Highlander" and "The Adventures of Sinbad" borrowing directly from the Raimi-Tapert formula.

A changing television business accelerated the genre's death, and by 2007 there was not a single syndicated drama in production.

With the clutter cleared out -- and with local television stations grappling with a sudden need for programming -- Raimi and Tapert are back. Their syndicated series "Legend of the Seeker," produced in conjunction with the Walt Disney Co.'s ABC Studios, will make its debut on November 1 on stations reaching about 95 per cent of the country. Based on the best-selling "Sword of Truth" books by Terry Goodkind, the series combines elements of fantasy and adventure with exotic settings furnished by New Zealand.

The hunk is Richard Cypher, a woodsman who transforms into a magical leader to stop a greasy tyrant named Darken Rahl. Richard, played by Craig Horner ("Monarch Cove"), teams with a mysterious woman named Kahlan Amnell, a formidable bodyguard and guide played by Bridget Regan ("The Black Donnellis"). Zedd, a wise and powerful wizard played by Bruce Spence ("The Matrix Revolutions"), accompanies the pair on their journey,

shooting fireballs from his palms as needed.

Imagine "The Lord of the Rings" Parts 1, 2 and 3 with a (much) lower budget and characters that show more skin, and you've got "Legend of the Seeker." Why would Raimi, who is preparing to direct "Spider-Man 4," and Tapert, who enjoys a successful career producing horror films like the "Grudge" series (and a marriage to Lucy Lawless, aka Xena), want to tread back into this cheesiest of arenas? Raimi said he became a big fan of Goodkind's books after a friend mentioned that his son was devouring them. In particular, he said, he was attracted to the evolution of the male lead.

"He's a boy thrust into a position of adulthood where he has to immediately become a leader and a hero," Raimi said in a phone interview. "That is very compelling to me, especially in the context of a really fun adventure story."

Tapert also became hooked on the story -- laid out in 11 books that have sold more than 25 million copies worldwide -- and saw an opening in the syndication business that had not existed in nearly a decade.

(NYT News Service)

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