

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

• By Dr. M.N. Buch

In 1943 my father was Director General, Food and Civil Supplies and Secretary, Food in the pre-partition Punjab. Our house, 45 Empress Road, was just outside the rear gate of the Government House (Raj Bhavan), Lahore. In the summer months at exactly 0630 hours the Governor, Sir Bertrand Glancy, dressed in a half-sleeved shirt, shorts and peshawari chappals followed by an A.D.C, bicycled upto the gate of our house and accompanied by my father, also attired in half sleeved shirt, shorts and peshawaris, cycled off to the Secretariat on The Mall. One morning I asked the Governor why he, who was the Lat Saheb with several limousines at his disposal, cycled to work. His answer was, “Young man, do you not know there is a war on and we have petrol rationing? If I do not follow the rules how can I make others do it?”

This episode has stuck in my mind because it tells one so much about the British. The British love for ceremonial is not less than ours and certainly a British Governor lived in great style. When the occasion demanded it they could be very formal and were attended by pomp and circumstance, which included guards of honour, bands in attendance and people paying homage to the representative of the King-Emperor. But when it came to rules, regulations and law, they were all equals, whether ruler or rule. Certainly I do not remember roads being blocked for long periods because the Governor or Viceroy was to pass. The British were completely sure of themselves and did not need the trappings of office to announce their presence. At the district level the Collector certainly did not have huge boards announcing his office prominently displayed on his vehicle. He was not given a government vehicle and he always used his own motor car. He might dress formally for dinner, but his field kit was practical and suited to the climate and the circumstances under which he worked. This did not in any way detract from his authority, but he did not make a fuss about the office he held.

Let us fast forward to 1962, when I was Collector of Betul. I received a telephone call at about one in the morning that the newly appointed irrigation minister had arrived at the circuit house from Bilaspur, his hometown and that he was very annoyed that there was no suitable reception awaiting him. Anyway, I went to the circuit house and found the minister hopping mad. I told him that we had no intimation of his visit and that no telegram alleged to have been sent by his Private Secretary had ever reached us. The minister insisted on waking up the officer incharge of the telegraph office and when he confirmed that no telegram has been received, the minister still continued to protest about the failure of the district administration to suitably receive him.

At this point I went home because it was not necessary for me to attend on the minister late at night. It was reported to me next morning that the minister refused to enter the circuit house till a police guard had been arranged and the guard had ceremoniously saluted the minister, despite the fact that after sunset such ceremonies are prohibited. To the minister his visit was incomplete till he had received honours which he thought were his due. In Betul, at least, he was a laughing stock for months together.

We have a Motor Vehicles Act which prescribes how vehicle will be registered. Despite this one finds a large number of Members of Parliament and State Legislatures not displaying a registration number and instead substituting large boards bearing such legends as Sansad, M.P, MLA, etc. This is a statutory violation. Most officers advertise their posts on their vehicle by name plates which give their position, with many citizens following this example and displaying boards which say former Municipal Councillor, Congress or BJP party officer bearer, etc. No one bothers that this is in violation of law

because these people, who obviously suffer from an acute sense of inferiority, feel that they can compensate by virtual advertising the post they hold. Pilot vehicles, escort vehicles, street lining by the police, etc., are all means by which these pigmies try to pretend they are giants. Obviously substance is replaced by what is virtually a hologram of the pomp and circumstance which attends public office.

A British minister does not travel in a convoy. The British Prime Minister is obviously well guarded, but this is done with extreme discretion and causes no disruption of normal life when the Prime Minister moves around. By contrast our Prime Minister moves under a huge blanket of security which is highly visible, causes great inconvenience to people and is not necessarily very efficient or effective. I still remember when Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma was President of India he came to Bhopal and I counted seventy-three vehicles in his convoy, including an ambulance and a fire engine.

Pomp and circumstance cannot make a position or a leader. Pomp and circumstance may project a person as leader but it cannot substitute for leadership. Our leaders have obviously abandoned all the qualities of leadership and now are dependent on pomp and circumstance alone. What a shame!
