

SO HELP US, LORD!

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

The Congress Party differed from others in that it could handle dissidence within the party much better than any other political party in India. It also had the reputation of having sensitive political antennae which enables it to judge the public mood, to come out with the correct political pronouncements to suit this mood and to turn a disadvantageous situation to its own advantage. Indira Gandhi's slogan of 'gareebi hatao' and her appeal to the electorate that whereas the opposition had the single point programme of removing Indira, her sole objective was to remove poverty was a masterstroke. The timing of her slogan was so finely tuned to what the public wanted to hear that it catapulted Indira to an unassailable political position in the country.

Let us fast forward to the scenario today. The government has been wracked by a whole series of allegations of wrongdoing and extreme corruption. Anna Hazare has been able to appeal to the public outcry against corruption, capture the imagination of the people and launch a movement of the people which has now degenerated into an insistence on the passing of a Bill in Parliament as dictated by Hazare rather than the substance of fighting corruption. The Congress is in a state of semi war with allies such as the Trinamul Congress. The party's major ally in the South, DMK, is no longer in power in Tamil Nadu. In Andhra Pradesh the Telangana question has split the party wide open and in Maharashtra the record of government is very questionable. Increasingly Rahul Gandhi is beginning to look like Don Quixote tilting at windmills on the plains of La Mancha, attended by his Sancho Panza, Digvijay Singh. On the nuclear power front what happened at Fukushima has led to grave doubts about the safety of our nuclear power plants and this has led to widespread agitation against new plants at Jaitapur and Kudankulam. The dream of nuclear power is unravelling because government does not have the finesse necessary to persuade people about the need of nuclear power and the safety of our power stations.

This is the time for sagacious, firm, consistent government and a policy which in the long run accelerates the pace of development and in the short run is a copy book exercise in fire fighting. No doubt government has been accused of dithering, of being weak and indecisive, or being tolerant of corruption. Regardless of electoral consequences this is the time for the government to be firm in the matter of governance which affects the lives of ordinary Indians. This is the time for government to prove that it has the capacity to overhaul the system of governance, to fight corruption, to empower its officials to take right decisions and to reach out to the people so that the problems of inflation, lawlessness, corruption, etc., can be tackled with their help. This would convince people that government is purposive. What does government do? To show decisiveness, with an exquisite sense of lack of timing, government unveils a policy of permitting foreign retail houses to make an entry into the Indian retail market. This one pronouncement has united two archrivals, CPI (M) and BJP, in opposing the move. It has aroused the anger of small traders throughout the country, regardless of their political affiliation, who feel endangered by the present decision of government. It has raised the spectre of Indian manufacturing units being swamped by the global retailers bringing in cheap Chinese goods to the detriment of Indian manufacturers. It has given a voice to every one who has doubts about Congress's capacity to govern this country and it has certainly projected a hologram of a possible revival of commercial imperialism.

The purpose of this essay is not to examine the rights or wrongs of government's decision on retail trade. That would undoubtedly be the subject of another article. However, there is no gainsaying

the fact that at a time when the back of the small wage earner and the middleclass is being broken by the burden of prices, government should not blithely talk about tackling the problem by bringing in foreign retailers. There is an obvious disconnect between government and the people and more than anything else this has aroused public anger. One is amazed that those ideologues who are supposed to think on behalf of the party have either ceased to exist or have unerringly hit upon the one issue whose only supporters would be the very limited members of the consuming classes who are largely confined to some megacities. The average Indian, struggling to survive, will talk cold comfort from the fact that Bombay and Madras will get Tesco and Walmart stores which sell items which would be categorised as luxuries.

Health, sanitation, water supply, public transport, education, employment are some of the issues which are of daily concern to the average citizen. To very large numbers of people even survival itself is a matter of deep concern. If the Congress Party wanted to make a gesture which would win the hearts of the people it could have zeroed in on these issues, but instead it showed extreme insensitiveness in opting for foreign participation in retail trade in India.

If the timing and subject of the announcement of the government were inappropriate, the handling of Parliament by the ruling party is even worse. I find it impossible to forgive the opposition for bringing Parliament to a halt. By insisting that unless what it says is discussed, unless Chidambaram is ousted as Home Minister, the opposition will not let Parliament function, the opposition is being as dictatorial as Anna Hazare whose slogan is his Jan Lokpal or bust! The opposition should realise that in a parliamentary democracy if it has the right to raise issues in Parliament, the majority party, the government, has also the right to take decisions. Government will hear the opposition and should accept any sensible suggestions made by it. However, the opposition has also to graciously accept the decisions of the majority and not to try to neutralise them by disrupting proceedings in Parliament. It is here that government has been both weak and bumbling. When the adjournment motion was mooted government, if it has nothing to hide, should have readily agreed to its admission. When Arjun Singh was Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and Sunderlal Patwa was leader of opposition an adjournment motion was moved by Patwa. Arjun Singh immediately requested the Speaker to admit the motion and to start the debate immediately. This set Patwa rocking back on his heels because he did not expect such a response from Arjun Singh. Anyway, the motion was admitted, the opposition's plea for more time was rejected and within two hours the motion was defeated. In Parliament, however, government is adamant that there will be no adjournment motion, the opposition insists on it and there is a deadlock. Even at the risk of inviting the wrath of Parliament I must ask this question. Is the public is not justified in calling to account those Members of Parliament who were not doing their duty of running Parliament? Parliament has a huge building in which to deliberate. The people only have the street. Is that where the parliamentarians will ultimately be called to account? Both government and opposition should ponder over this.
