



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

FRESH from his landslide victory in the assembly elections, Nitish Kumar seems to be in a hurry—to clean up Bihar politics. He has just turned off the tap of legislative spoils in the state without caring a hoot either for the muted murmurs from his own stable mates in the NDA or the loud protests from the opposition. Last Friday, the Bihar Cabinet decided to abolish the ₹1 crore given annually to all legislators of the state assembly and the Bihar council under the Local Area Development (LAD) fund. The move will save the State exchequer ₹318 crore. But the bigger benefit is immeasurable. It will help the Bihar legislators overcome the credibility deficit—that many of their compatriots across the country face.

The MLA LAD fund is an offshoot of the MPLAD scheme introduced by the Narasimha Rao government whose aim was to help MPs execute development in their constituencies. State governments followed suit with similar funds for MLAs. When the scheme was launched in 1993-94, the annual grant was ₹50 lakh per MP.



Narasimha Rao

The amount was increased to ₹1 crore in 1994-95 and four years later, it was again doubled. Under the scheme, funds are directly sent to the district authorities who are supposed to examine and implement the developmental works recommended by the local MP.

The officials are expected to maintain details of the funds utilised and the work executed and are to send monthly progress reports to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. According to a reply given to a recent RTI query, the total amount released under MP LADS since its inception is ₹20,957.25 crore as of march 2010. That's for about 800 MPs alone. Add ₹1 crore each to nearly 4,000 legislators for the last 15 years and it works out to a mindboggling ₹60,000 crores.

That kind of money over a decade and a half should have made our villages cleaner and the villagers healthier. But travel into the interiors and you will realise that in the past 15 years, things have only gone from bad to worse.

The reason is simple: there are just too many middlemen walking away with the cash meant for the poor. The flood of central schemes like the JNNURM, MNREGA and suchlike have only made matters easier for the touts: there is too much duplication and too little accountability. That's why nobody is surprised when audits show that the same stretch of road has been constructed under differ-

ent schemes or that the same well is shown to have been built five different times.

Last year, a CAG review of some MPLAD schemes found many instances of the money being diverted for purposes it was clearly not meant for.

In Andhra Pradesh, the CAG found that money released by the Centre for development was parked in term deposits in banks in violation of rules which clearly state that money should be kept in savings accounts in nationalised banks and is not to be kept in fixed deposits.

An earlier CAG review found huge amounts of money being diverted to purposes ranging from building clubs to renovat-

ing schools owned by powerful politicians or their relatives or even landscaping some bigwig's front yard. Despite such massive frauds, the programme implementation ministry had proposed last year to increase the annual outlay for each MP from ₹2 to ₹5 crore. The suggestion was thrown out by the Planning Commission with one official remarking that "MPs would do better making laws than administering development work".

Nitish has taken a very bold step and deserves all praise. He is the first Chief Minister in the country to do so. It has added several inches to his stature, besides giving him the moral

right to do everything for probity. He has clearly taken his idea of governance a notch above the rest.

Indeed, it is heartening to note that Bihar—which is largely known as a land of scams—has just dished out a lesson in good governance for rest of the country.

Without the LAD funds, which many describe as the drip-drip-drip of corruption used in creating foot soldiers, the public representatives will have to increasingly represent people to stay relevant in their constituencies. For once it can be said that Bihar has shown the way. It's now up to the rest of the country to follow.

Bihar shows the way

ARYA PRAHARAJ



Committees are the only saving grace of this session

WITH Parliament unable to function all through the winter session, which is nearly a month old now, it is tempting to come to the conclusion that our MPs are really an irresponsible lot.

But are they? Not if you go by the record of the various parliamentary standing and consultative committees attached to the various ministries. True, the ties between the ruling UPA and the Opposition have been fractious at best and all we have seen so far has been boycotts, walk-outs, shouting, adjournments and even the odd freestyle wrestle, but all the committees are meeting regularly.

A lot of parliamentary business is conducted in 17 subject-based or departmentally connected standing committees that, between them, cover the entire gamut of legislative business.

I am told that MPs who go for each other's jugular in the house are often seen walking hand in hand like good friends to participate in the committee meetings. That's a good sign because we have seen much worse.

I recall that the first three sessions of UPA-1 in 2004 were marked by much rancour and bitterness and it wasn't until the winter session of 2004 that the houses finally got down to some business.

But the peace turned out to be short-lived as in the budget session of 2005, the Opposition boycotted not only the two houses but also deliberations of all the consultative committees, standing committees and business advisory committees.

This time, on Sonia Gandhi's advice, all Congress MPs have refused to avail their daily allowance of ₹2,000 each, but back then, it was the Opposition MPs who not only refused to take their daily allowance, but also did not sign the attendance register. The allowance was a pittance then, but that wasn't the reason they refused the money. It was a matter of principle, you see.

WHO GOES there, friend or foe? That's what a lot of opposition leaders are asking after the BJP's Murli Manohar Joshi appeared to virtually echo the Congress stand by insisting there was no need for a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) to probe the 2G scam. Joshi feels that Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is good enough to handle the investigations. Joshi, otherwise a trenchant critic of the Congress is of course the chairman of the PAC and holds the status of a Cabinet Minister.

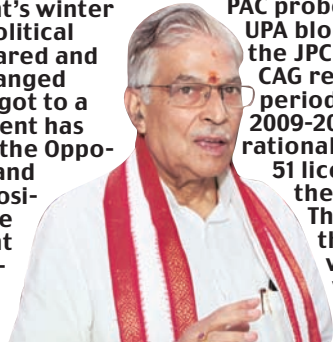
And it's also no secret that he loves the spotlight being on him. The problem though is that the PAC is not vested with the overriding powers that a JPC has when it comes to probing monumental scams such as the 2G scandal.

The PAC took notice of the scam much before the CAG even presented its report and had decided to call former officials of the telecom ministry for depositions. In fact, it was only after the PAC

MM Joshi's googly on JPC foxes UPA & NDA alike

began looking into the scam that the CAG hurriedly presented its report. All this was, of course, before Parliament's winter session began. Political temperatures soared and the equations changed once the session got to a start and Parliament has been derailed as the Opposition—the NDA and the non-NDA opposition blocks—have been holding joint protests in Parliament and sepa-

M.M. Joshi



rate protests outside demanding that nothing less than a JPC was enough to unravel the Raja of all scams.

But Joshi's oft repeated claim that the PAC is the right forum to probe the scam is bringing out the fissures within his own party, which has been at the forefront in stalling Parliament. Joshi's actions have left the BJP leadership squirming in embarrassment. His colleagues in the Opposition cannot figure out why Joshi is hurrying ahead with the PAC probe when the entire non-UPA block was adamant about the JPC. Joshi retorts that the CAG report is an audit of the period covering 2003-04 to 2009-2010 and questions the rationale for overlooking over 51 licenses handed out during the previous four years.

That was the period when the BJP, of which Joshi was once the president, was in power. The enemy within?

SONIA Gandhi's 64th birthday came and went last Thursday in perhaps exactly the way she would have wanted it. No full page advertisements, no launch of new schemes, no celebrations. Yet tongues wagged when among the early callers spotted arriving at 10 Janpath to greet the Congress president were Kanimozhi, the daughter of DMK supremo M. Karunanidhi and T.R. Baalu, the former union minister. Other DMK leaders like Dayanidhi Maran followed later. I would have thought that with A. Raja being booted out of the union cabinet and the CBI giving him hot chase, relations between the Congress and the DMK would have taken a nosedive.

But with the DMK finding itself with its back to the wall, it is clear that at this stage, the regional party needs the Congress more—rather than the other way round.

The Congress may have snubbed Jayalalithaa's offer of support in lieu of dumping the DMK, but with Karunanidhi's bunch of ministers proving to be millstones around the Congress' neck, Akbar Road is clearly keeping its options open. That explains why the poet in Karunanidhi resurfaced on Sonia's birthday. Apparently, in a message he sent to Sonia, Karunanidhi waxed lyrical about Sonia's qualities calling her "a historic light of sacrifice guiding the destiny of the country". It's the kind of stuff that would make even the most sycophantic of Congress leaders turn green with envy.