

## A TASTE OF POLITICS

Netarhat School did not have a students' Union. Unlike other public schools we did not have the system of house-monitors or school monitors. We also did not have the tradition of senior boys lording over the juniors - though my batch, the senior-most, would have loved to have this privilege. However, every Ashrama soon evolved its own system of local self-government.

In Shanti Ashram — my house, we had the democratic system to start with. The “Ashram-Pramukh” - House Monitor, was elected. He was nick-named later as “Wazeer-E-Azam” (Prime Minister). It worked smoothly for first six months. Later the boys got disinterested. Except for ensuring cleanliness of the premises and enforcing the house-master's directions, he had no other job. He had no special or non-special privileges. He had no recognition at the school level either. In fact this “Prime-Minister” was a prime-minister i.e., first servant, in the literal sense of the term. Hence after some time there were no takers. I was elected in the sixth month and remained in this ‘exalted office’ till my house was changed. For others it was ‘Natha Singh or Prem Singh, one and the same thing’.

Different faculties soon set up academic associations. The first to come up was ‘Vigyan-Parishad’. It aimed at promotion of physical sciences' studies. Students presented papers followed up by a question-answer session. Mostly the science students became members though there was no bar against others. I had presented a paper on ‘Bubbles’ which was much appreciated.

Inspired by this we, the students of the Humanities' stream, set up ‘Ithihas Parishad’; the historical society. Under its aegis we organised paper-reading sessions, panel-discussions and seminars.

The biology group - those who opted for physics, chemistry and biology as main subjects for their Higher-Secondary examination, was a minority group. Out of a batch of sixty students about 35 to 40 boys opted for the pure sciences, ten to fifteen opted for the humanities. Only 10-12 boys went for the bio- group. In my batch only six boys had gone for it.

Not to be left behind, this group also decided to set up an association of its own. They gave it a grandiose name, “Natural History

Society". In Hindi it was labelled Prakriti Anusandhan Parishad'.

Since their number was so small, had they confined the membership to themselves, their meetings would have been very poorly attended compared to the other societies. Hence they decided to make it a broad-based association. Initially they tried to rope in the pure science group students. These boys were not interested in things like fungus and frogs. Their minds were seized with higher and more sublime issues like possibility of life in other planets; the Black Hole and the possibility of earth slipping into it. Even the possibility of a man setting his feet on moon was a prosaic issue with them. Talking to them one felt that some of them would themselves be making a trip to moon by next week or so.

These boys with their nose in the air and eyes gazing at the stars refused flatly to join those who were scouring the terra firma collecting specimens of various living species, dissecting them and trying to learn about their bodily functions and systems. Not only did they refuse, they derisively nick-named the new society yet to be born as 'Keeda - Batoran Samiti' i.e., the association for collection of worms.

Rebuffed by the elite they turned towards us, the poor cousins-the humanities group, for support. We had a common link also. The humanities' students had to study 'Every-Day Science' as a compulsory subject for the exams. Shri H.K. Asthana, the biology teacher was our common teacher.

We readily agreed to give them a helping hand. However, this support was to be 'issue-based'. The first and foremost issue was that the association was to be run on democratic principles. The bio-boys, perhaps, did not realise what they were in for. They agreed to this condition readily.

The first session of the 'Natural History Society' was inaugurated with great aplomb. The combined strength of the two groups filled up the hall. Some observers from the pure science group also deigned to come to grace the occasion.

After the aims and objectives of the society were explained at length by Shri Asthana the next item on the agenda was taken up which was election of office bearers. The bio-boys expected that the posts of Chairman, General Secretary and Assistant General Sec-

retary would go to them since they were specialising in the subject. One or two boys of the humanities' group could be accommodated in the governing body as members by way of grace.

We had other designs. Since we outnumbered them by two to one, we wanted to elect boys from our group for all the posts. The bio-group could fill-up the membership-slots.

This strategy had been discussed and decided upon by us before-hand. The bio-group had no inkling of it.

We had a smooth sailing. One after the other our candidates won the contests by wide margins. I remember Eric Ekka -least interested in study of any walking, crawling, swimming or flying creature unless cooked well, was elected to adorn the post of the Chairman of 'The Natural History Society'. I forget names of other winning candidates. However they all belonged to Eric's tribe.

Shri Asthana and the bio-boys were stunned at this development. However, they could do nothing in the face of this coup.

We came out happily thinking that we had won the battle. The bio-boys stayed back. They discussed among themselves as to how to deal with this situation. Ultimately they decided to persuade Shri Asthana, the patron of the Society, to cancel the election. They also decided to frame the constitution of the Society in such a way that only the bio-boys became voting members. The 'Humanities-Students' could be associate members. As such we could attend the meetings, even read papers but could not vote or hold office.

This arbitrary decision appeared to be highly undemocratic to us. We were students of political science and considered ourselves to be experts on constitutional laws and practices. We were not prepared to accept this counter-coup lying low.

We held a meeting in the basket-ball court to discuss ways and means of protesting against this decision. Shaileshwar gave a rousing speech. It seemed to us that if this injustice was not undone immediately it would irreparably harm the cause of democracy in India. It was decided that a delegation should **meet the** Principal and request him to reverse the biology teacher's decision.

The delegation promptly called on the Principal. Sri Dar was perhaps **aware** of the developments but he feigned ignorance. He

gave us a patient hearing. Once we had let off our steam he gave his decision. He told us quietly that since we were so keen to pursue our interests in natural sciences, we could form an association of our own to pursue our studies in this field. He would be happy to preside over its sessions. If our presentations were of higher standard compared to those of the bio-boys' association, they would also gravitate to our association. In the field of studies there is no harm in having more than one association. "Let a thousand blossoms bloom," he concluded with a chuckle and took away the wind from our sails.

Needless to say, we did not bother to form another association. Instead we joined the pure-science group to label 'The Natural History Society' as the 'Keeda Batoran Samiti', (Worm-Collectors' Society.)

Thus our first essay into campus politics came a cropper - the coup was outmatched by the counter-coup.

The second political activity was of a higher level. The first elected Communist government of Kerala headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad was dismissed by the Central Govt. There was a great debate in Parliament, media and the academic circles over this issue. Opinions were sharply divided. The leftists cried foul. The rightists and middle-of-the-road-wallahs rejoiced over it.

Most of us had not adopted any political ideology though Marxism, the Utopian variety of it, did weave a spell of charm over us. Those were **the** days of the slogans of 'Hindi-Russi **Bhai-Bhai**'; 'Hindi-Chini **Bhai-Bhai**' and the socialistic pattern of society. Most of us felt that dismissal of an elected communist government would make the Marxists and leftists lose their confidence in the electoral system and push them again on the path of the Telangana i.e., the armed struggle.

Shailoo (Shaileshwar Sati Prasad) was the staunchest Marxist amidst our ranks. He vociferously protested against the dismissal and proposed that we should hold a seminar to debate the issue. Shri Dar was hesitant to permit such a discussion. He wondered whether any such discussion - protesting against a presidential proclamation, could be organised in a government-run school. We assured him that the discussion would be an academic exercise and nothing objectionable would be said. On this he permitted us to

debate the issue albeit reluctantly.

About twenty odd boys gathered in the Assembly hall. Befitting the occasion most of us donned Kurta-Pyajamas. There was a free-flowing debate. Like the Parliament and the assemblies, many 'points of order' were raised from time to time. Fortunately there was no walk-out. We had borrowed copies of the Indian Constitution and various Commentaries on it from the library and turned its pages laboriously to find the relevant Articles referred to by the speakers. The Chairman, I am not able to recollect who the gentleman was, had a hard time keeping the speakers adhere to their allotted time.

Shailoo distinguished himself in this discussion. He put up the communists' view-point very succinctly. It is a pity that he did not join active politics later. I understand he did join the leftists for some time-but got disillusioned soon and left their fold. There were quite a few speakers supporting the Central Govt.'s action but they could not counter Shailoo's forceful sallies. I also participated in the deliberations but kept to the middle of the road — the measure was harsh but perhaps the situation warranted it. After the discussion a resolution was adopted to the effect that such actions should be resorted to only in exceptional circumstances and after a public debate — quite diplomatic!

The resolution was submitted to Sri Dar. I do not think he sent it anywhere. So, like most of the conventions, seminars and conferences our fledgeling effort also proved to be "all sound and fury, signifying nothing."

There is a saying "Those who can do, Do. Those who can think but can not do, Teach. Those who cannot do either, Attend Seminars."

