

Politics of Shame

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It took 21 years and nine commissions of inquiry for the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots to get their first token of justice. When Justice G.T. Nanavati handed his report on February 9 this year, he cast aspersions on the role of individual Congress leaders. It took another six months for the Congress-led UPA Government to try to cover up what Nanavati had sought to uncover. The Centre's Action Taken Report (ATR), filed in Parliament last week, was at best a fig leaf: blatant clean chits were given to Union Minister Jagdish Tytler and Congress MP Sajjan Kumar. It was only after the Opposition rejected the ATR and moved an adjournment motion on Government inaction that the Congress finally gave in and pressured Tyler into re-signing. But not before the party lost face. It may have won the motion in Parliament, but it was a hollow victory.

"If only Tyler had been made to resign the minute the report was out, the Congress would have won the moral high ground," bemoans a party MP. Not even Congress' allies had supported the ATR. Initially the BJP was slow to react, what with the shadow of the Gujarat riots still looming in the background. But prodded by its ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), it demanded the resignations of Tyler and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. "Why did he sign such an ATR when the Commission had used such strong language as credible evidence against the Congress leaders?" asks BJP's Sushma Swaraj.

Indeed, the aftermath of the report is as much about Dr. Manmohan Singh as about Tytler & Co. The BJP took to calling him Sardar Manmohan Singh. The prime minister was censured by the Opposition as he is not only a Congressman, but also a member of the victimised community. According to PMO sources, Manmohan had expected the controversy to snowball ever since he had appointed Tytler as minister. Aides recall the time he had to introduce the ministers to the Lok Sabha. "He was probably the first prime minister to be prevented from doing so as the Opposition walked out on the issue of tainted ministers. The Akalis stormed the well of the House, protesting against Tytler's inclusion," says an aide.

The P.M.'s anguish was also on display on August 10 during his reply to the Opposition-sponsored adjournment motion in the Lok Sabha. "What happened in 1984 was a national tragedy, a human tragedy, a blot on our national conscience," he said. "There is something called perception and some-thing called the sentiment of the House. The Government respects this and bows to the sentiment." He reassured the MPs that the Government would take action against specific individuals and cases named in the report for further probe. Reading out a couplet in Gurumukhi, Manmohan Singh was clearly playing to a vote bank that extended far beyond the four walls of Parliament.

For Tytler, who had initially clung to his ministerial berth, the writing on the wall was clear. There had been widespread resentment on his inclusion even within the Congress. Aware of this, Tytler had actively engaged in damage control. The day the report was tabled in Parliament, he held a press conference surrounded by a handful of Sikhs as props. "Please help me," he appealed. "I am a victim of misinterpretation. My whole political career is in your hands." Tytler claims he is a victim of political vendetta launched by a senior Congress leader and her aide. He is referring to Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit and her aide Pawan Khera, say his supporters. Kumar too resigned as chairman, Delhi Rural Development Board, a cabinet rank post, as part of damage control.

The Congress was worried about the larger fallout in terms of its secular image. One of its allies, Ram Vilas Paswan, had filed an affidavit before the Nanavati Commission. Recalling the 1984 incident Paswan said, "Suddenly a Sikh taxi driver entered my house to save his life. But the hapless Sikh was captured, assaulted and set ablaze." This, from a cabinet

minis-ter, not a member of the Opposition. But the Congress apparently believed it could get away without offering any scalps. In fact, till date, there has not been a single prosecution in the riots. All this was lost in Parliament as the debate degenerated into a battle between the two riots: Gujarat and Delhi.

As for the Left, the response was rather unexpected. Fearing a political backlash, it seemed hesitant to turn the issue against the Congress. So while the CPI(M) offered a short critique on the report, the CPI limited itself to advising the Government on punishing the guilty. "After 21 years and nine commissions and inquiry committees, it is a dismal state of affairs that justice cannot be rendered to the thousands who suffered in the pogroms," said a CPI(M) Politburo statement. Without naming the Congress leaders allegedly involved in the riots, the party suggested that the Government institute a probe against them. Ironically, Fernandes had irked the Congress by labeling the '84 riots as a "pogrom".

In Punjab too, the ATR stirred a political hornet's nest. If the strident response in the Sikh religio-political circles is any indication, the issue holds serious portents with far-reaching repercussions. The ruling Congress' refusal to read the riot act to its senior leaders indicted by the Commission has opened a Pandora's box. Not only has the ATR resurrected anti-Congressism, a deep-seated sentiment that dogged the party long after Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh riots, but it has also provided the moderate and radical Akalis with a weapon to whip up Sikh passions for political ends. Coming in the backdrop of the recent attempts by the Babbar Khalsa to revive terrorism in Punjab, such apprehensions bear an ominous ring. Says MP Sukhbir Singh, son of SAD chief Parkash Singh Badal: "By denying justice to the Sikhs, the Congress is giving the militants another handle to strike."

The ATR has also dealt a severe blow to the Congress' recent efforts to erase the anti-Sikh stigma it had acquired in the '80s. The goodwill of the Sikhs that the party had earned through the elevation of Manmohan as the country's first Sikh prime minister and General J.J. Singh as the first Sikh chief of army staff, may have been lost due to the ATR. "By failing to face the damning report, the Congress has shot itself in the foot," says Amritsar-based political analyst Harish Puri.

For the Amarinder Singh-led Punjab Government, the reopening of the riots issue is a double whammy. On the one hand, the emotive issue has bolstered the morale of the Opposition Shiromani Akali Dal, and on the other hand it has put paid to his carefully crafted moves to build his Panthic credentials. While agreeing with the party high command's line runs the risk of losing the Sikh support base, Amarinder's efforts to adorn the Panthic mantle have gone awry, given the strong reaction that the ATR has evoked from the Sikhs. The ATR has also struck a discordant note at a time when the Amarinder Government was gloating about being adjudged the Best State in the INDIA TODAY states ranking.

By ensuring Tytler's resignation and by promising a relook at the recommendations of the Nanavati Commission report, the Congress has managed to salvage some damage. It is tokenism at best. But in political terms it gives the battered party some leeway. Minutes after tending his resignation, Tytler was pointing fingers at the BJP. "I resigned to facilitate an enquiry, unlike LK Advani who continued as minister even after he had been chargesheeted," he said. The resignation seems to have given the party the pretence of a moral high ground.

But for the victims of the riots, it is too little, and much too late. When told of the Government's offer of a compensation of Rs 3.5 lakh for each victim, a Sikh widow retorted, "I'll give the Government Rs 30 lakh if it gives me Tytler's head." Considering the stakes, the Union minister's resignation is small change.

For the Government, the report is a double-edged sword. Any further cover-up will be a

much larger crime.

