

FACING THE MUSIC

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- 1) Nandangarh is a famous Sub-Division in Uttar Pradesh because of its rich Cultural Heritage. It has sprawling acres of green grasslands, tropical forests and a treasure trove of unique flora and fauna. It is a tourists' paradise & the home of many renowned Urdu poets of the past. Smt. Jayalaxmi, took charge as Sub-Divisional Officer on 02.02.2001. She met the officers in charge of the Establishment, Nazirkhana, Treasury, Revenue and Judicial Munshikhana sections and acquainted herself with their responsibilities. On the very first day a District-level Organisation which called itself the Manab Adhikar Bachao Committee met the SDO to tell her of the miserable state of affairs in her office with particular reference to the massive backlog in disposal of applications for issuance of the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and other Backward Class (OBC) certificates. They alleged that a number of cases were missing and scores of others rejected on undisclosed grounds. They also maintained that the way the applications have been handled over the years, smacked of arbitrariness and total lack of transparency. The Backward Classes Welfare Section of the office also drew their flak for being unsympathetic and rude to the public.
- 2) The SDO lent a patient hearing and asked the Secretary of the organization to submit a list of aggrieved individuals as early as possible. The Secretary felt pleased and complimented that Smt. Jayalaxmi was much better than her predecessor who pretended to be too busy to entertain any grievance of the public.
- 3) Subsequently, on the same day the SDO had to sign a reply to an assembly query on the present status of SC, ST and OBC cases. She was surprised to note that the monthly disposal was a meagre 97 vis-a-vis the pending cases which were a staggering 2523. She immediately made up her mind to take up the issue on a war footing.
- 4) The SDO looked worried and immediately summoned 3 Deputy Collectors and asked for suggestions as to what steps should be taken to reduce the massive backlog. One of them suggested that special hearing camps could be organized at all the Blocks. Another suggested that since the Block Offices were busy with election works it would be better if all pending cases were heard Blockwise on selected dates in the SDO's Office itself. The third officer felt that such works could be taken up after election.
- 5) A random scrutiny of several pending cases revealed that for a substantial number of cases, hearing of the candidates have already taken place but no follow-up action has been taken. Decision on rejection or acceptance was kept pending for years.

- 6) She asked the Inspector, Backward classes Welfare to identify all these cases. She distributed them (523 in total) among Dy. Magistrates for expeditious disposal in 10 days. As for the remaining 2000 cases, she decided to club them together and dispose summarily block-wise through special fast track camps. Hearing dates were fixed in consultation with BDOs. The next few days, SDO was flooded with calls from different quarters, including local political heavy weights for favourable consideration of individual cases.
- 7) Within a week of taking over charge the MP of the area summoned the SDO over telephone to his residence for discussing pending SC, ST, OBC cases. The SDO told him, "Sir, I shall be very happy to welcome you to my office". The MP reportedly was very angry and sent a list through a special messenger.
- 8) In the meantime the SDO perused one such specially recommended OBC case and was sure of its rejection as sufficient documentary evidence had not been furnished. Some office staff who claimed to be close confidantes of the Minister-in-Charge told the Confidential Assistant to the SDO that the MIC might summon her since election was round the corner.
- 9) The SDO was a little bit tense yet she retained her composure and asked her officers to deal with all the cases according to merit instead of giving in to any kind of pressure. She even decided to visit individual blocks to summarily dispose cases on the spot. "What, if we also distribute caste certificates on the same day just like a single window system on the same spot?" asked one staff-member. "It will also boost the image of the office", quipped another. SDO only gave a smile which had a hint of approval.
- 10) Suddenly a worried looking Inspector, B.C.W. one day informed the SDO that several cases could not be traced. The SDO immediately called for the dealing assistant who pleaded inability to maintain such a mass of records and much to their chagrin, she threatened to start Departmental proceedings against both the Inspector and the Dealing Assistant. Thereupon the latter asked for some time to track down the missing records. SDO gave them a deadline of three days. Three days later, the two informed that the missing records (500) could not be traced.
- 11) The SDO shot off show-cause notices to the two with a direction to reply within 7 days of the receipt of the notice, failing which DP would be drawn up against them. The D.M. was also apprised of the development by the SDO.
- 12) The two employees approached the leaders of their Association with a request to bail them out of this crisis. Their leader, Narinder (who was the leader of the majority of employees), after an unofficial probe, came to the conclusion that some members of their rival Association were involved. Narinder then asked their district level leader to take up the matter with their counterparts in rival Association. No headway was made. The missing case records remained untraced. The Inspector, BCW & the DA were spending sleepless nights at home. The DA in particular was on verge of a nervous breakdown. "Serves you right for being so careless" quipped a member of the minority association "Do we arrange a psychiatrist for you?" asked another staff amid peals of laughter and jeers of the others.

To find a way out, the Inspector BCW talked to his counterparts in the 3 blocks for reconstructing the missing cases and sending the same to the S.D.O's office within 7 days. It was also decided to keep the matter a closely guarded secret. Narinder, by virtue of his influence in the subdivision issued a whip to DA s of the 3 blocks & Inspector BCWs of the Blocks to reconstruct the 100 cases & submit them within 7 days. He even stated that there should be no hesitation even if some papers were missing because they could always be furnished at the time of hearing. This was urgent because the credibility of the BCW set up at the sub divisional level was at stake.

The Backward Classes Welfare section heaved a sigh of relief as complete & some partially constructed case records reached the SDO's office within 5 days.

Somehow, the SDO got an inkling of these developments but she chose to play it down.

- 13) As the day of hearing drew nearer, tension mounted. The Block offices were buzzing with rumour of violent political agitation on the scheduled dates. Undeterred, the SDO decided to go ahead with her plan. She visited the first block and signed the certificates in deserving cases. Nearly 20% of the total number of applications, including some highly recommended cases were rejected on convincing grounds. Distribution of the certificates followed shortly, thereafter. As the news of rejection spread, trouble started. All the local leaders including MLA of the ruling party stormed the camp office and started raising slogans against the SDO. The SDO asked the SDPO to send police force when the staff of the SDOs office were prevented from loading the files in their vehicles by an irate mob. The mob started ransacking the block office. Police arrived within half an hour and burst teargas shells to disperse the mob.
- 14) The SDO received innumerable anonymous phone calls threatening dire consequences. Rumours were afloat that the SDO had incurred the displeasure of the political heavyweights and that she might have to face the music of it all.....

Appendix I: Teaching Note

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- I. a. Desirable qualities of a leader: Ability to take strong decisions, to be polite & firm. To be able to anticipate the future to have secure & reliable information channels
- b. Style of a leader: Blend of consultative & authoritative styles (as & when required)
- c. Role of a leader: To ensure that issues of pressing urgency are accorded topmost priority; to exercise tact; dexterous planning & execution.
- II. Administrative failures : Arbitrariness, lack of Transparency
- III. Need for good governance : Prioritization, Sensitization, Impartiality – not succumbing to pressure
- Relationship between Civil Servants & Politicians : Constitutional Role
- Role of Staff Unions : Relationship of Administration & Staff Union
