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Ajai Shukla: Learning from Lord Curzon

BROADSWORD

Ajai Shukla / New Delhi May 22, 2007

There are few indicators of a country's strategic temper as reliable as the way it treats its frontiers. British regents like Lord Curzon, acutely sensitive to the vulnerabilities of their borders, employed a variety of devices to keep those areas trouble-free and their inhabitants neutral, if not favourably disposed towards the centre. From granting some border areas the status of "excluded area" (in the case of the Naga Hills) to protecting the identity of border people by restricting access by outsiders (the Inner Line, which still exists in the north-eastern states) the British protected their most sensitive borders less with hard power than with a careful mix of political autonomy, cultural respect and a clearly stated assurance of protection.

India's approach is markedly different. Forced, partially through political and strategic miscalculations, into deploying large numbers of soldiers for the physical protection of its borders, first in J&K and then on the border with China, New Delhi has been far less sensitive than its Curzonian predecessor. The Indian Frontier Administrative Service, a specially selected cadre of frontier administrators that was steeped in local tradition and sensitivities, merged in the mid-1970s with the IAS. Unsurprisingly, administration moved from local tradition and sensitivity to the rulebooks and power tantrums of New Delhi.

Take the ongoing trouble in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, India's strategically vital chunk of the Tibetan plateau, where a Deputy Commissioner's personal feud with a well-respected local NGO threatens to snowball into widespread resentment. In the cross hairs of the DC, Mr MK Dwivedi, is the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) and its Director, Sonam Wangchuk. SECMOL has done remarkable work in bringing up education in the interiors of Leh, since kicking off "Operation New Hope" in 1994 through a tripartite MoU with the government and the local community. Over the last decade, SECMOL has trained 3,567 village teachers, VEC members, panchayat leaders, village headmen and women leaders, bringing up pass percentages in Leh district from 5% in 1994 to 55% today. SECMOL's next phase of Operation New Hope was to be the Ladakh model of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan; it was inaugurated by President APJ Abdul Kalam in June 2006, setting a pass percentage target of 90% by 2010.

The Director of SECMOL, Sonam Wangchuk, has received the J&K Governor's medal for educational reform. Since 2004, he has been a member of the National Governing Council for the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. President Abdul Kalam's address to the nation on Independence Day last year mentioned SECMOL as one of the initiatives that formed the model for a Knowledge Society in India by 2020.

Leh's DC, MK Dwivedi, clearly doesn't agree with the President. He has issued a notice declaring SECMOL "a significant threat to the administration and peace of the region" and an illegal occupant of government land. Sonam Wangchuk has been notified as guilty of having "anti-national connections" in China and other foreign countries. SECMOL is guilty of "threatening Council and District Administration officials". Behind the crackdown: Sonam Wangchuk made the cardinal error of speaking publicly about the administration's neglect of education.

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SECMOL has denied the allegations. Wangchuk has stated that his only connection with China was a pilgrimage he made with his mother (like many other Buddhists from Leh) to Lhasa six years ago. Intending to clarify its position to the people of Ladakh, SECMOL prepared a CD on that. The DC struck back this March by invoking Section 144 of the Cr.PC, imposing a ban on circulation of material by Wangchuk, or any other member of SECMOL. Public protests were also prohibited by that order, which still remains operative. All employees of the Education Department have been instructed to suspend cooperation with SECMOL.

The J&K government, worried by events, dispatched the Divisional Commissioner to Ladakh in August last year. After meeting everyone concerned, the Commissioner brokered a compromise. Mr Dwivedi agreed to withdraw his notices and orders against SECMOL. But after the Divisional Commissioner returned to Srinagar, the Leh DC went back on his promise.

Mr Dwivedi is evidently enjoying the power he wields, apparently issuing notices against SECMOL based on pure hearsay. Explaining to a local newspaper, he said, "I received some complaints against him from the locals. A teachers' association complained against him for unnecessarily interfering in their working while some other people alleged that he has some odd connections with Tibet and China."

Dwivedi is also at loggerheads with the local tourism industry. The administration has promulgated notices laying down hotel rates, much to the resentment of local hoteliers. Pinto Narbu, the MLA from Nubra, who runs a local hotel, fumes, "He's an old-style bureaucrat who wants to control things. Hotels are not essential services. Who is he to try and lay down hotel rooms, which are governed by market forces all over the world!"

Insensitive administration is not new to India. But Ladakh, which has remained comparatively free of anti-India resentment even through the turmoil that has plagued J&K, is a special place that must be administered by special people. This is equally true of other border areas, inhabited by people who need to be won over to the idea of India. Arrogance, like Mr Dwivedi's, is an indulgence that India cannot afford.

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Keeping the people living in region like Ladakh a border state happier in a manner that they should ever feel that they have an administration which is benign is the first requisite to strengthen the security of the nation. Army generally follows this dictum in many ways within its limited powers while operating in this region. Any administrative action which is seen as anti people by the locals certainly weakens the fibres of security apparatus and be avoided. Is there any intelligence please.

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Ajai Shukla

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