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Propaganda darshan

February 17, 2013, 5:41 AM IST

MJ Akbar in The Siege Within | India | TOI

Thank heaven for little Doordarshans . An offshoot of the government-controlled TV behemoth, Doordarshan Bharati, broadcast a moving hour-long documentary on the late genius Ustad Amir Khan, at least 35 minutes of which was free from the excesses of a garrulous presenter and experts tripping over their own repetitions . This unknown channel had the pawmarks of its parent's ethos: a logo like a design patch from a 19th century sari; a script font quivering in a style that was synonymous with deep emotion in the 1950s. But whenever Doordarshan dips into that treasure house, its archives, there is magic.

This should be Doordarshan's true public calling. It should eliminate news from its oeuvre, since it is run by politicians. News is almost always injurious to any government's health. Propaganda is safer, so Doordarshan is ordered to sell propaganda as news. Why should our taxes pay for political propaganda?

You can measure a government's desperation by the effort it puts into disinformation. Doordarshan reported the AgustaWestland scandal not, as others did, with evidence gathered by the Italian police, but with stress on some heavy breathing by our defence minister, St Antony of Kerala, who suddenly discovered the virtues of transparency and "experts" of the sort who claimed they had never witnessed such ministerial integrity ever before. There was, naturally, no mention of AK Antony's shocking silence over the past 11 months when he repeatedly shrugged off details of the scandal brought to his notice.

Fortunately, the Italian government did what the Indian government refused to do: investigate on its turf. Antony remained curiously unmoved even when the name of a service chief popped up, with implications on the credibility and morale of the force. A Member of Parliament, Prakash Javadekar, wrote to him. Antony continued to do nothing. Why? Antony calls himself an honest politician. If, therefore, Antony was not protecting himself, who was he protecting?

The defence ministry's explanation for inaction was silly. It sent a request for information to Rome through the external affairs ministry. When it got nothing, it did nothing. But this was always an Indian crime as much as an Italian one. Italy did not wait for information from India; why did India wait for Italy?

In any cover up, deft use is made of that extremely useful fish called the red herring. A shoal of facts, mostly irrelevant, is thrown into the stream of information to divert the chase. Let's keep this simple.

What are we looking for? Evidence of bribes through agents. The concern is not about the quality or specifications of the helicopter, which may all be very good indeed, but the fact that commissions were given to honour what former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi has called the rules of the system. According to the confession by Guido Haschke, the principal middleman, to the Italian police, bribes began to flow from 2007 and continued till 2011. We know who was in power in Delhi then. Haschke got 20 million euros, and allegedly passed on 12 million to Sanjeev and Rajiv Tyagi, relatives of ex-IAF chief SP Tyagi. Why did the Indian government look the other way?

There is at least one good political reason for Antony's prevarication. It is reasonable to assume that he hoped that delay would push the investigation process beyond the general election in 2014. This government's bliss is directly proportionate to voters' ignorance. Antony's shock at Italy's speed was evident on his face.

The manipulation of time is part of political strategy. CBI moves rapidly against an electoral adversary of the Congress like Jagan Reddy. CBI becomes immobile when told to move in the coal block fraud, since friends and cronies of ministers are involved. Five months ago, after massive public outcry, CBI was given charge of "coalgate" . We have just learnt from CBI's director Ranjit Sinha, who appeared before a parliament committee, that his agency has not yet received files he asked for. The distance between the two offices can be covered by a pleasant walk, but neither demand nor delivery was considered worth any hurry.

Jagan Reddy has been repeatedly denied bail on the specious argument that, despite being out of power, he might still have enough influence over officials to subvert their investigation. Compare this with the generosity towards coal minister