

Jaitley's jugaad, Bedi's dissent

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In late December 2020, former cricket great Bishen Singh Bedi generated some public heat with his missive to the Delhi District Cricket Association (DDCA) to remove a stand named after him at the erstwhile Feroze Shah Kotla and now Arun Jaitley Stadium. He wrote, "It pains me no end to point out the far from flattering facts about DDCA's unsavoury past but trust me it has a context...Keep in mind, these are the ills of nepotism – you get blamed for decisions you weren't part of, and you can't even give the excuse of absence. As I observe now, even in your leadership, DDCA's court culture of fawning

obeisance continues...After the Feroze Shah Kotla was named hurriedly & most undeservingly after Late Arun Jaitley, my reaction then was, maybe somehow good sense might prevail to keep Kotla sacrosanct. How wrong I was.”

Bedi was among the few people who stood up to the then DDCA president Arun Jaitley, calling him out for maladministration, among other things. Some other Delhi cricketers, too, of his time supported him then. In the mid-2000s, some much younger Delhi players threatened to leave playing for Delhi to join other teams during Jaitley’s helmsmanship but later changed their stance vis-à-vis Jaitley (hint: swashbuckling opener). Barring some off-mainstream media coverage, India’s huge cricket media – much of it being Delhi-centred – was all hush over the everyday, every season mess that was the DDCA under Jaitley.

For this writer, Bedi’s letter is a document of dissent quintessentially against Delhi’s jugaad culture and politics, which has defined it for eons and advanced since Indian independence. When Jaitley passed on, many of the capital’s celebrity political editors and journalists praised him to the skies. They looked the other way during his tenure as DDCA president and, worse, even as finance minister.

In some ways, Bedi’s letter becomes a layered remembrance on one aspect of the man’s public record. There wasn’t a word of difference, no nuance – almost zero critique – in much of mainstream media when Jaitley passed on. But more than commentary on Jaitley, those hagiographies painted a poor picture of media, media ownership and culture. At the apex of his influence in Delhi, there was much talk over his hold on big sections of national media and their political news bureaux. When he departed, one political news anchor of a major station admitted on Twitter that he was her “guiding light” who she “called every morning”. Commenting on the role of the media during the Emergency, L K Advani had said “You were asked only to bend, but you crawled.” He wasn’t the only one with such views about the supine press during the Congress heyday. But in the 2010s and 2020s, with the expansion of social media, the embossing of Hindutva on the Indian psyche, what is one to make of the role of traditional, mainstream, often Delhi-based, media? Are they worse now than they were in the past?

The DDCA, like other things, is a metaphor for the embarrassment called Delhi. It also complicates how one views Jaitley. It’s ironic – a man who harpooned Congress culture that promoted the feudalism of the first family – went on to exemplify so much of what he decried once. The student leader who went to jail in the Emergency, and impaled Khushwant Singh in print for the latter’s role in it – u-turned on what he stood for: The baiter of jugaad who became adept at it himself. Jaitley’s son presides over the DDCA. Nepotism is when others do it. BJP or Congress, what difference?

Bedi’s letter got some play since India is a powerhouse in the sport. It may just as well apply to other sports that are not so popular. Often, our press has reported on the horrors that our Olympic athletes and sportspersons have had to face due to

administrative high-handedness or callousness. Where are many of these associations housed? Well, where else? The capital's political culture rubs off on all else in its radius with its selfishness, hubris and chamchagiri.

Bedi's letter is an attack on all this. It is a restatement of values and propriety in sport. It's about setting and maintaining standards and principles. A Jaitley's jugaad will always provoke a Bedi's dissent.

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