The Weals and Woes of the Back Bencher

Unless the academic authorities take it into the heads to alter the seating arrangements in classes, that recalcitrant and flippant section of the class — the back benchers — are bound to figure frequently in the academic scene. Until such time when the present seating arrangements in classes are abandoned in favour of a circular or galleried type, the back benchers will continue to be a class by themselves forming the core of all seething troubles.

As one bright student (front bencher) puts it, "They (the back benchers) are to the masters, the black sheep; to the front benchers a stumbling block; and to the Principal, Vandals in the making". Scathing as this opinion is, still no student who has an opportunity to sit in the back bench, will I am sure, relish this; for, there are two sides to every coin and unless one looks at the other side and finds the blissful and Utopian life surrounding the back bencher, no decisive opinion can be formed on this very delicate problem.

As one who has been a close associate and frequent tenant of the back bench for many years, I feel it is my bounden duty to expose to my less fortunate classmates, the empyrean life encompassing the back bencher.

The back bencher has that unique and enviable privilege (unlike his counterpart — the front bencher), to follow the flights of his own fancy, oblivious of the master's presence or the proceedings in the class. If at any moment, and it is quite frequent, he finds the lecture too monotonous, all he has to do is bury his head behind a towering six-footer and lo! he is soon in the arms of Morpheus. If, however he finds himself too awake to enjoy "nature's second course", he has only to whip out an Erle Stanley Gardner or Ian Fleming and presto! he is in a world of beautiful blondes and sultry secretaries.

As I begin to disclose the virtues of the back bench, I can imagine the front benchers eyeing me peevishly with regret and awe — regret for their having missed so much fun, and awe at the audacity of their fortunate brethren. These two privileges by themselves are sufficient to arouse the latent jealousy and wrath of the front benchers, but wait! there is more.

Hunger is a natural human instinct and it has the unhealthy feature of stalking us, at odd moments; and for a college student who has to conserve a lot of energy, waiting from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. listening to prosaic and loathsome lectures, working intricate problems and, above all being made to sit tight like a yogi, can be very trying on his gastronomical habits.

To the back bencher however, this poses no serious problem for, he can always when necessity demands, filch the lunch packet of an unwary friend, enjoy a tasty forbidden meal, draining it with a word of compliment to the cooking. All this, mind you, when the lecturer is seriously trying to impress on the boys that, "nearly one-third of the people in India are starving or are on the brink of starvation." I take this

opportunity to throw open a challenge to any front bencher, if he can enjoy a meal undisturbed, without being expelled for a week. I am no dictator who forces his subjects to accept views indiscriminately; on the contrary, like a just king, I allow you to see for yourself the aura of happiness that surrounds the back bencher.

Further, the back bench is the centripetal force which brings to light some of the latent talents of a few hitherto unknown geniuses. "Let your light shine" so goes our edifying motto and none but the back benchers are faithful adherents to this motto. Conscious of the fact that they have talent for singing, drumming and everything that goes with music, they proceed to exhibit it with gusto during periods so that even the lecturer is sometimes forced to admit that they are no mean musicians although he is at a loss to know who the genius exactly is so that he might reward him with a week's stay at home to nurture his talent. Unfortunately for our lecturer, the back bench provides a coverage to our shy maestro.

Finally, the back bench is the lodestar that attracts a particular section of the boys whose discussion centres on such topics as the clandestine love affairs of their friends, the latest movies that have found their way to the city, the swinging fashions of the day and other matters of a similar nature. All such discussions are carried on while the lecture is in full swing, without exciting ridicule and embarassment. This opportunity is denied to the front benchers who are blissfully ignorant of all this general knowledge.

It must be noted with regret however, that the back bencher's life is not one of uninterrupted joy, for there are times when he will have to drain the cup of hemlock.

The moment a student occupies the back bench the lecturers are up in arms against him.

It does not seem to dawn on our revered lecturers that someone has got to occupy the back bench. Hard as you may try to convince them, they will only tell you that by occupying the back bench, a student is committing a faux pas. It is their age-old fad that all sadistic and unsocial elements have their birth at the back bench. What has led them to generalise in such a heartless manner only the Almighty knows. The back bencher knows that he is completely innocent. It is this partisan attitude on the part of the lecturers that lends a somewhat gloomy outlook to the otherwise untarnished life of a back bencher. For this reason, he has time and again been impelled to play the role of a scapegoat.

Apart from the lecturer, their other kill-joy is the Principal whose insidious attempts to bring to book unearthly elements in classrooms are only too well known to be repeated. His hawk-like eyes invariably pitch upon the back benchers who amidst protests of innocence are led to his room. A proper study of this investigator's habits — the time of his rounds — the frequency etc., is necessary if one wants to sit in the back bench and at the same time wishes to save one's skin.

Thus, having seen both sides of the coin we can now after all, form an impartial opinion regarding the back benchers. No reader of this, who has no axe to grind, will deny the fact that the back benchers are indeed a favoured lot whose little encumbrances fade into insignificance before the manifold benefits they derive. Hence any attempt to alter the seating arrangements in classes should not only be resisted but should be met with force.

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