

Making an envoy feel at home

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JUNE 18, 2020 00:05 IST

Presentation of credentials by a foreign envoy was once an elaborate affair

The press reported a few days back that “the credential ceremony was conducted via a video-conferencing from the South Block as the envoys stood in front of a large screen one after another. This exercise was conducted as usual credential ceremony in Rashtrapati Bhawan could not be arranged due to spread of COVID-19.”

The rationale of the procedure is understandable. The knowledgeable in the public would, however, note that this may also signal the demise, or virtual oblivion, associated with an institution of great antiquity that serves global discourse between organised communities. It was said, perhaps jocularly, that it originated when one set of cannibals concluded that it is better to hear a message than eat the messenger. Overtime, a set of rules and rituals were developed in all countries East and West to ensure that such representatives are accorded appropriate religious, legal and practical immunities to discharge their functions. Alongside, elaborate ceremonials emerged to give a palpable demonstration of the relative power and influence of the sender and the receiver of these missions. A later development of this was the resident mission. Accidental or deliberate departures from these norms were viewed seriously and even led to armed conflicts.

Multiple objectives

Much has been written over centuries about the functions entrusted to these emissaries. A good example is the 11th century wazir Nizamul Mulk Tusi and his *Siyasat-nama* that has a full chapter on Ambassadors. “It should be realised that when Kings send Ambassadors to one another their purpose is not merely the message or the letter which they communicate openly, but secretly they have a hundred other points and objects in view.” Some of these were listed and remain relevant to this day, like the state of infrastructure, condition and morale of the armed forces, the state of the economy, etc. The author added that “Ambassadors are generally censorious and always on the lookout to see what faults there are in the kingdom and kingship and what virtues.” Independent India inherited and

improved upon these rituals and developed its own practices. Presentation of credentials by a foreign envoy in the days of yore was an elaborate affair: travel to the Rashtrapati Bhavan in an open vehicle, ceremonial conduct to the Ashoka Hall, formal dress norms military and civil, presentation to the President by a Secretary to government in the MEA, a short speech by the Ambassador and an appropriate response by the President and an informal tete-a-tete of the Head of State with the new arrival and his spouse. The whole ceremony took about 45 minutes and left an indelible mark on the new arrival.

Our heads of state on their part took these ceremonial duties with due care. On one occasion, our head of state declined to receive a new Ambassador who carried the letter of credence of a very recently demised head of his own land. “I shall not receive a dead man’s letter” was the stentorian ruling that deferred the presentation ceremony, leaving South Block to work out functional alternatives! It was also not uncommon for the head of state to dine at the Embassy of the land proposed to be visited in the immediate future.

Abandonment of rituals

Individual propensities and, occasionally, pressures of time came up from time to time to scoff at the procedure as antediluvian and suggest its abandonment even if subjectivity argued for its virtue elsewhere in the world. The open carriage of course was abandoned on security considerations. Overtime and while the contents and wording of the letter of credence have been retained in most countries, its practical content stands diluted and changed. It was argued that the head of state should not be burdened with too many of these duties. Individual presentation was thus replaced by group disposal.

The ingredients and procedures of a ritual may be incidental in the larger scheme of things. Yet, we know that symbols and rituals are essential parts of international diplomacy. In this sense, ritual becomes a power source and has been used down the ages to project images of power. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz had observed that “in ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined get fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms that turn out to be the same world.”

The world of practical diplomacy understands this and continues to practise it. For us, to abridge one aspect for it makes little sense, more so because this on past record was highly appreciated and commended.

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