

How the Ministry of Regrets was born

An excerpt from C. Y. Gopinath's **The Book of Answers**

Excerpted from *The Book of Answers*

"No, no, no, no," Arindam waved my words away. "You must understand. Ishwar Prasad, with barely eight months to go before the elections, this morning announced the creation of a brand new ministry, the likes of which has never been heard of before, not in India and not in any other nation."

He allowed a dramatic silence to sit between us.

On the telly at this moment a bureaucrat sub-titled Mr. Ramasubban Vengayam, Minister of Errors and Regrets, was shaking his head morosely from side to side. "I think even the formation of a ministry such as mine is very regrettable," he was saying. "It will take us a long time to recover from this blunder the government has committed. My Ministry apologizes deeply, from the bottom of the heart, to all Indians who will be affected by our work in the days ahead."

The visual changed to a room full of men and women with cameras and tape recorders; clearly this was a press conference. A young man in a tweed coat spoke up, "What is your ministry's main function, sir?"

"Our main function is blinding honesty," said the minister heavily. "Perhaps it is our main weakness. I and my staff stand ready to admit and apologize every time the government commits a blunder. For example, when third rate laws are passed to benefit one or two individuals. Or when there is bribery and corruption. Or when ministers and senior officials have extra-marital affairs. I'm sure you get the general idea."

I had to admit it was a master stroke — rather than a spokesman who denied governmental improprieties, this one conceded them all. He was a disarming figure, sure to generate laughter and sympathy, and lawsuits hardly ever.

"Why would the government enact a law that it knows will be a blunder?" asked the chief reporter of Dainik Baatchheet (or Daily Chitchat) from the town of Gorakhpur.

"This is the impression," the Minister agreed at once. "A good government should not make such mistakes. But the history of the world is full of 'mistakes' made by 'good' governments. My Ministry will always recommend that the government commit new and original mistakes as soon as possible."

"But why commit mistakes?"

"Because, my dear sir, we learn from mistakes. A government that makes no mistakes is a government that has stopped learning. My ministry will regularly release lists of mistakes worth committing. And also mistakes worth repeating."

"Why repeat a mistake?" asked India Today.

"It is like a lemon," said the Minister. "Give it one more squeeze, a few more drops come out. We want to learn everything possible from every mistake, and sometimes one has to commit it a few times to get the best banging for the buck, as the Americans say."

"How many mistakes can your ministry commit at any given time?" came a querulous old voice, (a Parsi food critic, Arindam whispered).

"We do not commit the mistakes ourselves, madam," clarified Vengayam. "We release lists of approved mistakes that may be made, and farm the work out to selected contractors in a system we call MCT, or Mistake-Commit-and-Transfer, not unlike the Build-Operate-and-Transfer system that we use for super-highways and bridges. In MCT, once a mistake has been successfully committed by an approved contractor, we include it in our gazetted list of mistakes that may be committed by anyone without prior approval or licence."

"India is a big country, sir," said the compère of a radio political round-up. "Does your Ministry intend to apologize for all the rubbish that goes in our national life?"

"You raise a good point," said the Minister, with regret. "We will have to choose our blunders carefully. Simply don't have enough staff yet for all that we have to regret in India. Not easy to find people who apologize well."

A bubbly young thing from MTV wanted to know what skills went into good regretting. "It's like classical dance," said the minister. "Expression is everything."

"Will the honorable minister show us an expression?"

Vengayam laughed good-naturedly. "But I must find something to regret," he said, looking around. "Let me see. Perhaps we can regret the freedom of the press." He composed his face into a neutral expression, eyes fixed at a point about three feet above the middle of the room, giving me the impression that he was looking straight at me. A shadow settled over his eyes, their edges drooped, as his head tilted a few degrees to his right. His mouth curved downward tragically at some depressing inner thought, and his shoulders hunched, reducing his stature and conjuring up contrition. There was no doubt he was deeply struck by remorse.

The look cleared, the smile returned. "That was Simple Regret," he said. "We also have Passing Regret, Deep Regret, Deep Shock, Simple Remorse, Deep Remorse, Catatonic Regret, Passing Grief and Intolerable Grief. More expressions will be added depending on the mistake committed."

Arindam clicked the television shut. "What does this tell you?"

I was sure he would tell me.

"It should tell you that Ishwar Prasad is planning something big and regrettable," he said, after a few moments.