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He Came, He Spoke, the RSS Conquered

Apoorvanand

It says something about our times that the whole nation was glued to their television sets to watch a former president visiting the birth place of K.B. Hedgewar and the offices of a semi-secret organisation called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

Nearly all news channels ran a live telecast of not only Pranab Mukherjee addressing the swayamsevaks of the RSS but also the speech of Mohan Bhagwat, the sar sanghchhalak, or supremo, of the RSS which came just before. A nondescript RSS function became a national event and the message of the Sangh reached all corners of India thanks to our curiosity over what India's former president was going to do there.

Picture perfect for the RSS. It got not only one, but many frames which it will showcase to future generations to prove that it is not shunned by the civilised: Pranab Mukherjee standing on the balcony of the birth place of Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS; Mukherjee garlanding his statue; Mukherjee's remarks in the visiting book: "I came here to pay my respects to a great son of India."

As Mukherjee was providing the RSS these photo-ops, I flipped through Pathey, a pocket-sized book full of the gems of Hedgewar Thought which swaymsevaks are supposed to carry around. The Telegraph has reproduced some of them for our benefit, to enlighten us about the greatness of the mind of this son of India:

- The Sangh wants to put in reality the words "Hindusthan of Hindus". Hindusthan is a country of Hindus. Like other nations of other people (eg Germany of Germans), this is a nation of Hindu people.
- Only a piece of land cannot be called 'Nation'. A nation is created where people of one thought, one culture and one tradition live together since ancient times. Because of exactly the above reasons, 'Hindusthan' is the name given to our country and this is a country of the Hindus.
- Expecting help from others and pleading for it is a clear sign of weakness. This clearly reflects in behavior. So, Sangh swayamsewaks should fearlessly proclaim, "Hindusthan of

Hindus". Remove all narrow-mindedness. We do not say that others should not live here. But they should be aware that they are living in Hindusthan of Hindus. (Like others would realise, if they were living there, that they are living in France of French people, or Germany of Germans, or Spain of Spanish people). Others cannot infringe on rights of Hindus here.

- Seeing the Saffron Flag (Bhagwa Dhwaj), the entire history of the nation along with its tradition and culture comes before our eyes. The mind rises and special motivation comes in it. Only this Saffron Flag (Bhagwa Dhwaj) we consider as our Guru, as a symbol of our Tatva, i.e. principle. Sangh has regarded the most sacred Bhagwa Dhwaj as the Guru instead of any particular individual.

The same Hedgewar had called Muslims "Yavana snakes", who should be seen with suspicion for their reluctance to pay homage to mother India.

Every word of his contradicts the idea of India that Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Rajagopalachari, Azad and Sarojini Naidu shaped through their struggles, and he built the RSS to dismantle the edifice of secular India that Mukherjee eulogised in his speech.

If Hedgewar is great, then the very notion of greatness would need to be revised or upturned. Would any sensible German politician call an anti-Semitic ideologue a great son of Germany?

Apart from these, the picture of Mukherji himself standing at attention to watch the saffron flag go up and the parade of the lathi-wielding swayamsevaks would be

taken around as trophies by the RSS.

The spokespersons of the RSS lost no time in telling the world that the speeches of Bhagwat and Mukherjee complimented each other. They did in many ways, even if the Congress party and the commentariat is applauding Mukherjee for his great, statesmanlike address.

Bhagwat used the cover of unity in diversity to camouflage his real message that Hindus are specially responsible (uttardayi) for India. And Mukherjee, while dwelling at length about the great ancient period of India and its unbroken history of 5,000 years, wrapped up the crucial medieval period in just two sentences. To tell an audience of swayamsevaks that "Muslim invaders" came and ruled India for 600 years, after which the East India Company captured India, is to endorse their wrong-headed, communal reading of history in which they speak of "800 years of foreign rule".

What Mukherjee chose not to say

The whole event was high in symbolism. Mukherjee obliged the RSS by not embarrassing it by putting a mirror to the Sangh. We may be pardoned for calling him Gandhian but his speech showed that he lacks the courage of Gandhi. Gandhi did not mince words when he told the leaders of the Sangh of his unhappiness at learning they were involved in anti-Muslim violence, or when he forced Golwalkar to say that the RSS did not believe in violence against minorities. Of course, Golwalkar, like a true Sanghi, never meant it.

No one expected Pranab babu to be as forthright as Patel, who slammed Golwalkar for the obstinacy of the RSS and its refusal

to mend its ideology of violence against the minorities. Mukherjee used diplomatese, but he was not honest. He said "violence" when he should have said murder and lynching. He said "at the heart of violence is darkness" when he should have said that at the core of violence is the anti-Muslim and anti-Christian hatred spread by the RSS and its affiliates. He should have talked about lumpen crowds taking over India and the goondaism that is being practised in the name of nationalism. Instead, Mukherjee gave a sanctimonious speech which—as a friend from Gujarat, Prasad Chako, rightly said—"would fit any audience anywhere, a speech which anyone could interpret in any manner".

Mukherjee only flattered his hosts when he said that India was the fastest growing economy. He complained about India being very low on the happiness index. But he did not care to identify the unhappy lot or the sources of their unhappiness. Otherwise, he could have talked about the farmers who are dying and battling against a murderous economic regime, he could have talked about the youth which feels unwanted in this great land, he could have mentioned Dalits, who are being attacked everywhere, and of course Muslims and Christians who are at the target of the government and the RSS. He preferred not to do that. That could have struck a discordant note on a solemn occasion like this.

Since people love positivity, Mukherjee could have talked about the humanity that people like Yashpal Saxena of Delhi and Imam Rashidi of Asansol, who lost their sons to the communal frenzy that the RSS and its affiliates have unleashed on

the people of this country. Or, the sadhus of Ayodhya who held an iftar for their Muslim neighbours in their temples, or the heroic strivings of the citizens of Gurgaon who are battling the demon of divisiveness by bringing Hindus closer to Muslims. He did not remember them. He could have. He decided not to.

By pitching himself above the divides which are tearing apart the lives of ordinary Indians, @CitiznMukherjee, as he calls himself on Twitter, shied away from the duties of a true citizen. Citizenship is cultivated by standing together with those who are being denied the rights attendant on citizenship.

What the ‘great son’s’ message really is

Bhagwat, so lovingly and reverentially addressed as sarsangha chalakji by Mukherjee, anticipated the impact of the event when he said that after it was over, the Sangh would remain the Sangh and Pranab Mukherjee would remain Pranab Mukherjee.

Bhagwat was right. Just when the nation was preparing for the passing out parade of the swayamsevaks at Nagpur, one of them, their senior, Basanagouda Patil Yatnal, a BJP MLA from Karnataka, was heard instructing corporators not to work for Muslims.

“I am telling you corporators, don’t work for the welfare for Muslims. You must work for the welfare of Hindus only. Who voted us to power? I told my staff, no one wearing skull caps or burqas should visit my office,” the Indian Express reported Yatnal telling his party workers.

Yatnal is only following the “great son of India”, Hedgewar, and his *maatr sanstha*, the RSS.

Before he is called fringe, let us remind ourselves that he has served as a minister in the government of the darling of Indian democrats, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a proud swayamsevak.

Nice words fail to gloss over the viciousness of the mind that lurks behind them.

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Progress of RSS is Ominous

Kuldip Nayar

I find the followers of secular ideology as fanatic as the others. There was a furore over the visit of BJP president Amit Shah to my residence a few days ago. Criticism over telephone and emails were numberless. And all that they said was “you should not have allowed him to visit you.”

I want to put the record straight. A couple of days before Shah’s visit, a few activists came to my house. We were together in the Jayaprakash Narain movement. They asked me that if I had any objection to meeting Shah at my residence. I told them that anybody can come to my house and I do not discriminate people on the basis of their ideology.

I feel that my ideology of not mixing religion with politics is probably the best and we should not wear beliefs on our sleeves. One should not be afraid of sharing thoughts with the people who are staunchly opposed to you. Ideological differences should have no place. After all, democracy is all about discussion and debate.

Mahatma Gandhi talked to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and even visited his residence to persuade him not to insist on partition. After his visit, he observed that he had failed to convince Jinnah. There was no bitterness in their thought. Gandhi,

in fact, went on fast for 21 days on what he called “purification.” The lesson to be learnt is that we should not hesitate to sit across the table to iron out our differences.

I must admit that my opinion about Amit Shah was that of a person emitting fire and brimstone. But I was completely bowled over by his courtesy and politeness, clear thought process and perception and, above all, possessing an affable temperament. He was anxious to convince me even though he knew my philosophy was opposite to his and that of the BJP.

He said he was six years old when he started going to the RSS shakas. I could spot the pride in his eyes when said this. Indeed, he has been through the grind at Nagpur. It has been a long haul for Shah but he has ultimately emerged as the party president.

India is at the crossroads. Followers of Hindutva want to capture power and oust the principle of togetherness. I partly touched on this topic while talking to Amit Shah. He said that the BJP develops an area comprehensively when it takes over. My observation was that in the process the mosques also get demolished. He refused to be provoked and responded saying that development dependent on the deputy commissioner of the area.

The two main points on which Shah dwelt during his meeting with me were caste and partition. He said that the socialists ended up in caste politics and mentioned that Ram Manohar Lohia, the founder, underlined caste all the time. That is probably the reason, according to me, why they were able to capture power only in States in initial years and not at the Centre. Shah also emphasised that the present set of leaders of different parties were following the same path.

Strange, those who believe in the ideology of development for all should get divided on the betterment of certain groups when they come to power. This is understandable at the State level. But they do not get over divisive politics even when they come to power at the Centre. The ruling BJP is one example. They have 21 States under their rule and the party has employed different tactics and methods in different States to capture power.

Even the Congress, the oldest party with secular outlook, is no longer an organisation which it used to be. Its problem is that it has no leader and has resorted to parochial politics. Rahul Gandhi will have a hard time in 2019 when he would have pitted himself against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been able to push the BJP down the Vindhyas. The Karnataka example is before the country.

Amit Shah, talking on partition, said that if “we had waited” the Indian subcontinent would not have got divided. Shah is wrong on this issue. Lord Clement Atlee, the British Prime Minister, who announced the end of their rule had fixed June 6, 1948 as the date when they would leave India as either one country or more. But partition took

place in mid-August in 1947, at least 10 months before the deadline set by Lord Atlee.

When I asked Lord Mountbatten why partition was effected earlier than June 1948, he said he could not hold the country together. He regretted the death of millions of people in the process. However, he justified partition on the plea that it could not be helped. So what Shah thought was contrary to the events which ultimately unfolded.

When I told Lord Mountbatten that he was responsible for the death of people during partition, he said that he had saved the lives of two million people when he diverted to Kolkata the food ships meant for his troops in South Asia. Before the Almighty he would swear that he had saved as many people from

starvation.

Shah’s remark had a tinge of disappointment. But his party does not seem to have learnt any lesson. It is trying to impose a Hindutva rule of sorts even when the BJP realizes that 17 crore Muslims are against what the party is attempting to do. And one thing which Shah and his party should remember is that India has a secular Constitution and whoever rules the country should follow it in letter and spirit.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem so. The RSS is spreading itself all over and, in the process, extinguishing the identity of others. The BJP needs it because it has no cadre of its own. Whatever the reason, the rule of RSS is forbidding.

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Why Do Soldiers Continue to Die on the India-Pakistan Border?

Sandeep Pandey

In 1947 India was divided by the foreign rulers by playing a game of divide and rule to which the religious fundamentalists fell prey. Since then, India and Pakistan have had a checkered history and uneasy relationship, sometimes climaxing in violent conflagrations and war.

While both the governments prefer to maintain an adversarial relationship, which now sustains vested interests on both sides, the common people and business interests on both the sides want peace. They do not want conflicts in which people die. The soldiers dying on both sides, after all, come from mostly modest middle class rural backgrounds. While the leaders

can meet when they choose to, the common people do not have control over their destiny. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stopped over in Pakistan in December 2015 while on the way from Afghanistan and participated in a family event of Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif; the former heads of intelligence agencies of both countries, Asad Durrani of the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan and Amarjit Singh Dulat of Research and Analysis Wing of India, co-authored a book *The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace*; the National Security Advisors of the two countries, retired Lt. Gen. Nasser Khan Janjua and Ajit Doval,

continue to meet in third countries; Adani is interested in selling 4,000 MW of power to Pakistan; and powerful business interests have ensured a peaceful border in Gujarat. Why then do soldiers keep killing each other on the northern border? We never hear of any Indian soldiers dying on the Indo-China border, probably because India and China have an unwritten / unspoken agreement not to kill each other's soldiers. If this is so, why can't a similar understanding be reached with Pakistan. After all, leaders of governments and intelligence agencies and security advisors are talking to each other.

We believe that if the governments of India and Pakistan cannot solve the disputes between the two countries, then the people should take the initiative. If the common people of the two countries are allowed to meet, then over a period of time peace and harmony will prevail. The two governments should facilitate the meeting of common people from the two sides by granting them passports and visas easily. Since people from the two sides of the border share a common culture, they can play an important role where the governments have failed.

Along the Indian border with Pakistan, there are openings between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad in Kashmir, at Wagah–Attari in Punjab and at Munabao–Khokrapar in Rajasthan–Sindh. Gujarat doesn't have an opening into Pakistan even though a number of fisherfolk from both sides land up in each other's jails. The people in Bhuj, Kutch have had intimate relationships with people from the other side, and given an opportunity, trade can flourish between the two areas again.

If the border between Gujarat

and Sindh is opened either at Khavda or Nada Bet, the people from the two sides will get an opportunity to meet easily, there will be promotion of trade and tourism, and ultimately peace and friendship will be strengthened. The fisherfolk whose relatives land in jail on other side can easily travel across the border to find out about their well being and make an effort to get them released. It is in the interest of common people that borders are opened up.

If people of the two countries are allowed to meet freely, an atmosphere of peace and harmony will be created in which it will be easier to resolve the outstanding disputes too. When our defence expenses will go down, resources will be freed up for developmental activities which will benefit the poor on both sides.

When the two Koreas can end their enmity after almost as long a period as India–Pakistan animosity has existed, why can't the two South Asian neighbours not achieve the same feat?

The two governments should also take an initiative to replace the military ceremony on Wagah–Attari every evening with a peace ceremony where people are allowed to meet and celebrate peace, harmony, friendship and their shared culture. Such a model of peace ceremony can then be replicated on all border openings. A model for peace ceremony has been developed by a class on Social Movements at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar during 2016–17.

The governments of India and Pakistan should create a situation in which ultimately all restrictions on travel across the border are removed and people are allowed to meet freely. This will be a great service

to humanity.

An India–Pakistan Friendship and Peace March is being organised from 19 to 30 June, 2018 from Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad to Nada Bet on Pakistan border, 290 km from Ahmedabad. Organisations endorsing this March include Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, Aaghaz-e-Dosti, Minority Coordination Committee, Gujarat, Gujarat Lok Samiti, Bandhkam Mazdoor Sangathan, Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research, Karachi, National Alliance of People's Movements, Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal, All India Secular Forum, Manthan Samayiki, Kolkata, Jharkhand Nagrik Prayas, sacw.net, Confederation of Voluntary Agencies, Hyderabad, Hamari Awaz, Insaf Foundation, Gujarat Mazdoor Panchayat, Khudai Khidmatgar and Socialist Party (India).

When European countries, which were such bitter enemies of each other that they converted their wars into World Wars less than a hundred years ago, can create a Union in which all restrictions on travel have been removed, why can't the same thing be achieved in South Asia? If over a hundred countries in five regions of the world can sign on agreements to make themselves Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, why can't India and Pakistan do the same? In the long term, there is no alternative to the low intensity war currently being waged between the two countries other than to establish peace and friendship, especially since a full-fledged war is not possible because of the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides.

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Massive Public Opposition to Konkan Refinery Project

Sukanya Shantha and Ruchira Petkar

On May 30, around 15,000 villagers – the police had come prepared for around 10,000 protestors – gathered at the Rajiv Gandhi Maidan in Rajapur to demand an uncompromising roll-back of an oil refinery project announced by Fadnavis’s government early last year. The protestors included not just men and women in equal numbers from the affected villages, but also several hundred people from neighbouring villages who had come to show their solidarity with them in their struggle to protect their livelihoods.

The Rs 3 lakh crore oil refinery project which, officials say, will employ over one lakh people, is being opposed by all political parties, including the Shiv Sena, by environmentalists and also by human rights activists. But so far, the government has stayed resolute in its decision and in April, amidst opposition, it went ahead with signing a Memorandum of Understanding between Saudi Aramco and three state-owned companies – Indian Oil Corporation Limited, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited. When completed by 2022, the project will be the world’s biggest single-location oil refinery project with a capacity to process 60 million tonnes of crude annually.

The oil refinery is planned over an expanse of 14,675 acres (5,870 hectares) of land in Maharashtra’s Konkan region. Of this, only only 126 acres (52 hectares) belong to the state. The rest has to be acquired. The 17 villages identified for the project

are in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts along the western coast and include Nanar, Sagwe, Taral, Karsinghewadi, Vadapalle, Villye, Dattawadi, Padekarwadi, Katradevi, Karvine, Chowke, Upade, Padwe, Sakhar, Gothiware, Girye and Rameshwar. Each of these villages has several smaller revenue villages under them. Nanar gram panchayat, for instance, consists of four revenue villages – Nanar, Ingalwadi, Palekarwadi and Wadi Chivari. The flourishing farmers and fisherfolk of these villages will all be displaced if this project goes ahead.

Konkan, a biodiversity hotspot and one of the most prosperous belts of the state, is home to the famous Alphonso mango, among other produce. The picturesque western coastline of India has innumerable beaches, mostly unexplored and underexposed to tourist activities. With rains in abundance, the farmers of this rich land, unlike those from Vidarbha and Marathwada region, have managed to do well without needing the state to extend its loan waiver scheme to the region. Konkan alone contributes 41% of Maharashtra’s GDP.

Coastal fishing here has remained a primary source of income for most Koli and Kokani Muslim communities who work harmoniously together. These fishing communities, unlike their farmer counterparts from the region, are only marginal landholders. And with this project underway, it is the fisherfolk who face the maximum risk of losing out on their source of livelihood without any reasonable

compensation.

Majid Adam Bhatkar, former sarpanch (head of the village) calls these beaches the community’s ATM. “Absolutely no family has ever gone to bed hungry. One could just go into the sea for a few hours and return home with fish worth a few hundred. These beaches have been our lifeline for generations,” Bhatkar explains.

Mango and paddy cultivation is the main source of earnings for the farmers. Vinod Suke, the newly-elected sarpanch of Rameshwar village in Sindhudurg explains that an average household here manages to earn between Rs 6-10 lakh from Alphonso mangoes alone. “It is a six-month-long work starting November. Even the poorest in the village owns over 100 mango trees. The earnings are enough for them to live a reasonably comfortable life,” Suke says. Last year, over 54 thousand metric tonnes of mangoes were sold from these 17 villages. This is over and above other produces like paddy, ragi and toor dal.

Yogesh Natekar, another resident of the village and an active member of the Konkan Refinery Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti, an organisation of affected persons floated to oppose the project, points out that no farmer in this region had to ever end their life due to failed crops. “Kokani (Konkan) soil has never failed its people. Even in the worst times, people have managed,” Natekar claims.

The farmers here boast of being self-reliant, which is also one of the primary reasons why they do not

consider an oil refinery project as a “gateway to development”.

“What jobs will the government provide us. Even the poorest here employ four or five workers under them,” says 69-year-old N.D. Kulkarni of Sagve village. The villagers claim Ratnagiri alone has over one lakh migrant labourers working at the Alphonso orchards. Kulkarni, who worked in Mumbai for over three decades, said the project will, in fact, render a large number of people jobless. “At present, even an elderly person like me is able to earn for his living. Once our lands are taken away, the state will consider only the younger generation eligible for employment. What will the older generation, especially those living alone do?” Kulkarni asks.

On at least two occasions, representatives from the revenue department had visited villages for land measurements, but the villagers obstructed their way and they had to return. The district administration has made several attempts to speak to the village heads and convince them to organise meetings with the villagers, but these official efforts have not made any headway so far. The people are in no mood to listen – they want the project to be cancelled.

Konkan and the people’s struggle

This is not the first time a massive scale project has been planned in Konkan. Also, this is not the first time that a project has been met with massive protest.

In 1992, Vedanta’s Sterlite Industries was allotted 500 acres of land in Zadgaon village of Ratnagiri to set up a 60,000 tonne per annum copper smelter and associated facilities by the state government. But a well-informed people’s

movement pushed the company outside the state and the project finally moved to Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu.

This was followed by another project set up by the Dabhol Power Company in the early 90s. The project was initiated by the now-defunct US energy major Enron. This project went through a lot of political churning and people’s opposition. The land acquisition was forced upon the locals by the then Congress government. While the BJP and Shiv Sena had initially opposed the project, they too went ahead with the project when they were voted to power in 1995. The project since has run into major losses and its future is now uncertain.

Another project, the Indo-French nuclear power initiative at Jaitapur, has also faced vociferous opposition from the local people and the Shiv Sena. The project, with a capacity to generate 9,900 MW electricity, was planned in 2010 by the then Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. Though land for the project was acquired amidst vehement opposition, it has barely made any progress because of concerns about the cost of the electricity that will be produced.

The political drama

People in Nanar say they understand the games of politicians all too well. “Every ruling party has had a chequered past. When in power, they have only taken an anti-people stand. Although the Sena and the Congress are extending their support, we aren’t relying on them in our agitation. It is a people’s movement, organised and executed by the locals,” said Nanar’s sarpanch Omkar Pabhudesai.

Seeing the popular mood,

local political leaders and village representatives have unanimously decided to keep their party allegiance aside while participating in the agitation. The village gram sabhas have passed numerous resolutions opposing the project and have already submitted a bunch of “no-consent” applications to the government.

Unfair means

Even though the villagers are confident of their unity and say that with time the movement will only intensify, they fear that bulk buying of the land by “outsiders” could dent their agitation. Even before the state had decided on the project, several investors, mostly from Gujarat, suddenly begun buying land from the locals. They paid high prices and bought land in bulk.

When villagers were served notice and asked to submit their consent letters to the revenue department, these new buyers – now considered “farmers” in official records – swiftly consented to the project. “It is pretty obvious that they had only blocked the land and were acting at the behest of the state,” says Prabhakar Devlekar, ex-sarpanch and vice president of the Konkan Refinery Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti.

The land, Devlekar says was bought from villagers for around Rs 3 lakh per hectare and upon acquisition by the state, could yield the owners anywhere around a crore of rupees, he estimates. There are fears that the state will use this way to show that the locals have acceded to the project.

Environmental impact

The project is expected to destroy over 14 lakh mango trees, six lakh cashew trees, paddy fields

spread over 500 acres along with huge parcels of flora and fauna, hence endangering the region's fragile coastal environment. Even before an exhaustive environment assessment could be carried out, Fadnavis had declared the project would emit "zero pollution" and that it would not pose any hazard to the environment.

But environmentalist Girish Raut says these are mindless claims made to keep the locals in the dark. He says the first impact of the refinery will be on the intertidal zone, which is a critical interface between terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Not just will the trees be felled for the refinery, but the habitat of marine life will also be severely impacted, Raut adds.

The villagers here are conscious of not wanting to be seen as "anti-development". "There are at least a dozen different projects that the state can provide us. Why can't they set up a processing unit to help farmers store and sell their produce?" asks Satyavan Palekar of Nanar. "We want development, but our question to this government is, at what and whose cost?"

(Note: This article has been edited by us.)

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Chavismo: Part IV

The fourth part of a series of seven articles by Marco Teruggi on Chavismo, the ongoing socialist revolutionary project in Venezuela, that the Venezuelans fondly call Bolivarian revolution.

'We Are All Soldiers'

Marco Teruggi

I was captivated by the man the very first time I saw him in Mar del Plata (Argentina), in 2005. He was standing before a packed stadium, quoting Eva Peron, talking about Francisco de Miranda. It was raining, there was a sea wind, and he was there for a master class in history. Beginning as a soldier in the Venezuelan military, he had already faced everything an empire unloads when one wants to challenge it and advance. That day I unknowingly became a Chavista. I was not the only one, we were thousands. There was something in his words, the historical time he carried, the certainty he offered.

I later saw him in Caracas. He made such a powerful impact. I remember the crowded avenue, the wait, the joy when suddenly, from the top of a truck, he appeared. Seeing him, the crowd went into a frenzy. It was a fascinating sight. The man had already become a myth.

A leadership of this magnitude was necessary to channel Venezuela's organic crisis into a revolutionary outlet. There had been huge mobilisations of people since 1989, there had been so many struggles and defeats, and the country was at the crossroads, without knowing where to go. The left was fragmented, and its various factions were small, without much following. "There was no mass work, the popular struggles were frozen," explained Chavez. The

subjective and objective conditions were both ripe for a change; what was needed was someone who could gather around him the scattered people and mould them into a revolutionary force. Chavez declared he would do it. And he did it.

He built himself up as the President, Head of State, head of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB); he moulded himself as the leader of a historical movement and of a political party; he became a mass pedagogue, an astute political strategist, a theoretician. As sociologists say, he was a charismatic leader. Such leaders emerge every few decades on our continent, they break with the past, revive the class struggle, and lay the foundations for rebuilding society.

Understanding Chavismo

You cannot understand Chavismo without understanding the role of the leadership, both in the civilian government and the military. He was the one who led the movement from the front. He was the one who took along with him all the various parties and the different ideologies, who could contain the worst tendencies and advance the revolutionary project and gradually push it more and more towards the left. He became an almost mythical figure, who decisively won every election, including the one held just before his death. His last victory

summoned a continent. The right, the empire, just did not know how to handle him.

Most political observers understand all this about Chavez. But Chavez was more than that: the people loved him, he was both father and brother to them. He continues to be among the people, continues to ignite their passions, continues to be in their prayers, they continue to light candles at the altar for him.

His death created a vacuum. Chavismo needed a new leadership, but it did not exist. The enemy was waiting for such an opportunity, it unleashed a violent war with full fury. With Chavez no longer at the helm, the enemy thought that it needed only a push to demolish Chavismo. But it was wrong. Chavez remained alive even after his death, and he continues to be the unifying element in the people's resistance that continues to this day.

How to fill the vacuum left by Chavez? How was the vacuum in the leadership of the government, state, Bolivarian movement, the FANB, mass pedagogy to be filled? This was the task that Nicolas Maduro had to fulfill, when he became the President after Chavez. But leadership cannot be exercised by decree, it has to be won. Furthermore, Maduro had to perform these tasks in a situation where the enemy launched three violent attacks on his presidency within a space of four years. These assaults brutally bruised the economy, badly damaging all the gains of the revolution, while also worsening the historical problems of the Venezuelan economy, such as corruption.

Closing Ranks

Maduro is not Chavez. It is absurd to pretend otherwise. Nor

is there Madurismo. But Maduro has displayed amazing leadership qualities, the clearest example being his call for the convening of the National Constituent Assembly in 2017 when the country was going down a confrontationist path from which it appeared there would be no return. Maduro redirected the country down the democratic way, demonstrating that he was a brilliant strategist, and was more able than the opposition. Responding to Maduro's call, Chavismo closed ranks around Maduro, ensuring his victory in the strategic battle. As Maradona, the legendary Argentinian footballer, described it, in times of crisis, we are all soldiers.

How much should be asked of the leadership? Maduro is not Chavez, it wouldn't be fair to ask him to perform the exemplary leadership role that Chavez played. Now that Chavez is not there, it is Chavismo that has to fulfill that role. Chavismo means all the various players in Venezuela, acting in unison. These include the parties, movements, communes, FANB, intellectuals – they must all come together to defend the revolution and advance it. The opposition wants to focus all attention on Maduro, to vilify him, to put the blame for all the problems on his leadership, and thereby launch a campaign to unseat him from the presidency and replace him with an opposition leader. They had done this with Chavez, they are doing it now with Maduro.

It is of course necessary to build leadership, one that is respected by the people and carries authority. This is particularly important at a time when there is a huge leadership vacuum in Venezuela, and when the country is facing a war from within and without, which has brought to

the fore all the negative tendencies that had been overcome during the Chavez years. However, these tendencies had not completely gone away, that takes a very long time, and they have increased in a big way again, such as benefiting oneself at the cost of society.

Consolidating Leadership

Chavismo is a heterogeneous, multiclass movement, ranging from the peasantry, the native Indians and city slum dwellers to the new entrepreneurial class. It is to the credit of Maduro that he has been able to consolidate his leadership within these diverse ranks of Chavismo, which is why there was a broad acceptance to his appointment as the Chavismo candidate for the 2018 presidential elections. On the other hand, it is also true that within the not so diehard supporters of Chavismo, or those supporters of Chavismo who have become disillusioned with it because of the economic crisis, or among the ordinary people who were watching the struggle from the sidelines and were never very passionate about social change, Maduro's authority is being questioned. All these sections of society have come to believe in the propaganda war being waged by the domestic opposition with the help of its international supporters, that the economic crisis has its roots in Chavismo, that Chavismo is fundamentally incapable of leading the country out of the economic crisis.

Chavismo needs a leadership having the authority and acceptability and charisma of a Chavez. Venezuela needs such a leadership. It was the titanic leadership of Chavez, his capacity to unify the country and guide it down the revolutionary

path, that enabled the revolutionary process to advance in Venezuela, an advance that no one had predicted till it actually took place. Now that Chavez is no longer there, it would be foolhardy to expect another Chavez to come on the scene and advance the revolution. The new President is trying his best, but ultimately, the revolutionary advance will now depend on the conscious actions of all of us, the the believers in Chavismo, the many Chavismos that we all are.

Are we all Chavez ?

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Saying a Firm 'No' To Displacement: Mahava Bharala Struggle in Rajasthan

Bharat Dogra

At a time when there is growing social and legal agreement that farmers' lands should not be acquired where the entire community is firmly opposed to it and when there are other options available to the government, it is inexplicable why the government has been so insistent about acquiring land in Mahava and Bharala villages (Neem Ka Thana Block of Sikar district). For the last four years, the overwhelming majority of the people of these villages have united to resist the notices served to them regarding takeover of their lands so that an industrial corporation can allot it to various industries.

As villagers explained during a recent visit to these villages, this has always been regarded as a two-crop area and has good prospects for agriculture and animal husbandry. Even what is described as wasteland in official records is actually very useful for supporting animal husbandry and related livelihoods, people say. Bhagvati Devi, who has been in the forefront of the anti-displacement struggle, says, "This land has provided for seven generations of villagers and we are determined that our future generations also continue to get this support."

Villagers here fear that as a large number of stone crushers exist in nearby areas, so their lands when acquired may also be used for this purpose, making it impossible to live

here because of the health destroying pollution caused by stone crushers.

Already indiscriminate mining has started in this area. In Mahava village this has begun just near a water body, which should never be done. This water body is being destroyed by this mining. Agriculture, animal husbandry and other sources of livelihoods are also being adversely affected and houses are being damaged. When people protested against this indiscriminate mining, they were lathi charged. One woman suffered a hand fracture but still was jailed along with another woman for some days.

People are afraid of the mining and crusher mafia which is all powerful in this belt of about 150 villages in Sikar, Jaipur and Jhunjhunu districts. Yet they are determined to carry forward their struggle to protect their lands and village. Their struggle should get wide support.

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Four Years of Modi Government: Two Circles of Growth

Arun Kumar

The ruling dispensation in India is facing a crisis of low growth, protests by major sections of the population—farmers, youth and traders—and criticism about non fulfillment of the many promises it has made. It has announced many policies but not only is their implementation tardy, many of them are a continuation of the past policies under different names. This is another kind of policy paralysis which UPA II was accused of. To counter these criticisms, the government has been highlighting its achievements by comparing the present performance of the economy with that of the UPA II.

No doubt the situation today is not what it was in 2012–13 when there was a macroeconomic crisis. But presently a crisis confronts the nation, triggered by two shocks to the economy—due to the demonetisation announced on November 8, 2016 and implementation of GST from July 1, 2017. So, the present crisis is a different macroeconomic crisis than the earlier one because it is policy induced—that is the damaging part. It is brought about by ill thought through policies.

1. What NDA Inherited in 2014

In May 2014, the CPI inflation rate was at about 9%. The quarterly rate of growth in the second quarter of 2014–15 when the NDA government took over was a high of 8.5%. It had recovered from a low of 4.5% in the last quarter of 2013–14. The growth data are based on a revised method of estimation. The Current Account Deficit in external trade was

at 1.7 % in 2013–14, a considerable improvement over the high of 4.8% the year before. The Fiscal Deficit of the Central government in 2013–14 was at 4.5% while it was at 4.9% the year before. The Foreign Exchange Reserves were at \$304 billion in 2013–14 as compared to \$292 billion the year before. Thus, there is no doubt that the economy faced a macroeconomic crisis in 2012–13 but it was recovering from that crisis in 2013–14, just before the NDA government took power in May 2014.

The economic crisis during the UPA regime was triggered by national and international factors. Nationally, there was a loss of confidence in the economy due to policy paralysis brought about by the revelation of massive corruption cases and the massive people's movements that started in 2010–11. People linked the high levels of prices to corruption brought about by crony capitalism—what went into the pockets of the corrupt came out of the pockets of the public. Droughts led to decline in agriculture and distress among farmers and also higher prices.

At the international level, high crude oil prices and low growth in major economies resulted in declining levels of exports and Balance of Payment (BOP) difficulties. Rising crude oil prices meant a larger import bill, higher trade deficit and inflation. It also led to higher levels of subsidies which meant a higher level of deficit in the budget. The macroeconomic problems led to lower levels of

investments in the economy, lower levels of employment generation and crisis in the lives of the young who could not get jobs commensurate with their training. The youth looked for a leader who could get them out of the morass they found themselves in.

2. Government's Performance Since 2014

The NDA government in May 2014 was lucky to inherit an improving macroeconomic situation. Crude oil prices moderated, drought abated and growth in the advanced countries picked up so that exports improved. In 2018, the CPI rate of inflation is down to about 3%, the rate of growth is at about 7% (official data), Fiscal Deficit of the Central Government is down to 3.6%, foreign exchange reserves are at \$402 billion and the Current Account Deficit is at 0.7% of GDP. The PM has argued that the sales of passenger vehicles have grown by 12% and that of commercial vehicles by 23%. Domestic air travel has increased by 14% and international air freight traffic by 16%. This growth is on a low base. But even if it is taken at face value, none of these pertain to the unorganised sectors of the economy. They reflect the growth of the better off sections.

The lower crude prices resulted in lower energy prices and lower levels of inflation. It also resulted in lower import bill and not only lower levels of subsidies from the budget but increased tax collections due to higher excise and sales tax. All this led to lower current account

deficit, higher capital flows and higher foreign exchange reserves and lower level of deficit in the budget. However, the farm crisis and the employment crisis are continuing in spite of the much better macroeconomic conditions that the NDA regime has had.

So, why has a better macroeconomic situation not led to improvements in the conditions of the marginalised sections of the country? Income and wealth disparity is on the rise, with the top few per cent cornering all the growth in the economy. According to OXFAM, the top 1% in India own 73% of the wealth while the bottom 50% hardly saw any increase in their wealth. The World Inequality Report of 2017 shows that the top 1% of the income earners got 22% of the national income. This does not include the black incomes that these people generate. If that were to be included, their share of incomes would shoot up to almost 50% of the national income.

India has been experiencing 'marginalising growth' for a long time and this process is only accelerating with the pro-business stance of the NDA government. It is creating two circles of growth in the economy with the organised sectors growing and the unorganised sectors in retreat. This has been the aggravated by the twin shocks to the Indian economy since November 2016. So, even if the growth rates rise, the situation of the marginalised does not improve.

India embarked on a 'growth at any cost' strategy with the New Economic Policies in 1991. The burden of this growth has been borne by the workers, farmers and the environment. This has meant that the growth has been based on

the prosperity of a narrow section of the population and not the entire population. The worsening income distribution has led to an unstable economic climate which has also translated into an unstable political and social situation.

Rising disparities mean that the mass demand from the bulk of the population rises slowly and growth depends more and more on investment and the consumption of the well-off sections. The stock market boom and the rising wealth effect for the well-off spurs their consumption. Post 2007–08 global economic crisis, both these stimuli weakened and growth rates fell. The NDA in its four years has not been able to revive demand and investment since disparities have continued to rise and the twin shocks of demonetisation and GST have aggravated the disparities as discussed below.

In India, investment and especially private corporate investment has been much less than what it was in 2007–08. This is due to lack of broad based demand. RBI data shows that capacity utilisation has been hovering at around 70–75%. No wonder private investment is tepid at best.

3. Analysis of Some Key Aspects of the Economy

i) NPAs of the Banks

The massive buildup of non-performing assets (NPAs) in the banking system of the country and especially in the public sector banks (PSBs) has further crippled their capacity to lend. According to the latest Economic Survey, the Gross Non Performing Advances (GNPA) "ratio rose marginally from 12.5% to 13.5% between March and

September 2017. Stressed advances ratio of PSBs rose from 15.6% to 16.2% during the period." In March 2014, these were 4.4% according to the Economic Survey of 2014. It was 2.09% in 2008–09. So, there has been quite a sharp increase in NPAs since 2008–09 but most of the increase has been in the period after 2014. What are the reasons?

Most of the NPAs relate to the sickness in the infrastructure sector, steel, mining, aviation and textiles. India has gone in for high cost infrastructure which the poor can ill afford. For instance, the government is going in for a bullet train between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Its viability is in doubt since the ticket will cost as much as the airfare between these two cities, so that only the well-off can use it. When much of the railway infrastructure is woefully weak and in urgent need of improvement, to go in for such a project can only be for prestige (and ego) and not for sound economic reasons.

A package of investment in the banks to boost their capital has been announced but that will not resolve the problem since it emanates from default by industry.

ii) Black Economy Continues to Grow

A major part of the NPAs relate to corruption and widespread crony capitalism prevailing in the banking system. The appointment of the top brass of the PSBs is based on political and bureaucratic consideration. They are open to political pressures to oblige businessmen with connections. So, scrutiny for loans has often been cursory and without proper risk assessment. This has not changed after the NDA came to power in 2014.

The Nirav Modi scam is the biggest one to surface, but many other smaller ones are being unearthed with great regularity, like the Rotomac case. In 2015, a Rs 10,000 crore havala with Dubai and Hong Kong via a private bank in Surat was reported. In 2015, fraud was detected in the Bank of Baroda branch in Delhi wherein Rs 6,000 crore was illegally transferred to Hong Kong.

The problem of crony capitalism is not confined to the PSBs; as the recent ICICI case shows, this is also happening in private banks. In the case of these banks, there are favourites who get easy loans. Investigation is going on into the ICICI case which originated a decade back. Curiously, a whistleblower had flagged this case in 2016, but action has been initiated only recently. Even the media did not pick this up.

During the UPA II rule, massive cases of corruption came to light. The black economy continued to grow and aggravated the growing inequality. NDA came to power promising a clean-up and easing of the tax burden on everyone by bringing back the black money held abroad. It boldly promised that every family would be able to get Rs 15 lakh. The BJP President admitted that it was only a *chunavi jumla* (meant only for the elections). Not even Rs 5,000 crore has been declared under the Foreign Money Laws promulgated (with draconian provisions). If distributed to the 26 crore families in the country, each would get barely Rs 200. Of course, even this is not going to happen. This has been a huge disappointment for the many poor who opened a bank account under Jan Dhan Yojana in the hope that they were soon going to get free money.

Corruption and ‘black income generation’ have not declined if one is to go by the scams that are now coming to light. It takes a bit of time for the scams to get exposed. The Congress party is accusing the government of a scam in the huge Rafael deal. During UPA I, only a few major scams came to light; what was exposed during UPA II mainly related to the earlier UPA I regime. The reason is that in all major projects, there are corrupt deals, but it takes a while for them to be unearthed—usually when a whistleblower comes forward. (Now, even this is getting difficult as the whistleblowers are being threatened and many have even been killed. In the case of the huge VYAPAM scam, 48 people linked to it have died.) In this NDA regime, if the big bullet train project or the highway construction projects have any payoffs, they will come to light in due course of time. Till then the government may look clean.

Black economy is also linked to the flight of capital from the economy. As the Nirav Modi case shows and the revelations under the Paradise and Panama Papers scams indicate, flight of capital continues unabated. So, a poor country which is short of capital for investment in essentials like education and health is losing capital. The government has made no serious attempt to check this. The Supreme Court monitored SIT to unearth black money has been functioning for the last 4 years but it seems to have made little headway in denting black money generation or its flow abroad. It has submitted a few reports but they have not been made public.

The government claims that it has taken several major steps to check black income generation,

like the Income Declaration Scheme (IDS) and demonetisation, but as we have discussed elsewhere, these have not helped to check the black economy; in fact, demonetisation cannot really check black money generation. The government claims that GST will also help check black income generation, but reports indicate that a large part of the business is still going on in cash and not via the formal channels. Most importantly, the government has taken no action to check the most important source of black money generation, the corruption in the political process; it has made no attempt to clean it up.

iii) Challenges Regarding Employment

Given that investment is not very buoyant and black income generation continues apace, making the economy inefficient, employment generation remains weak.

The problem in India is that there is no social security, so that workers cannot afford to remain unemployed. People do whatever they can—sell a little of something on the road side, drive a rickshaw, do head load work and so on. These people get work for very few hours a day and earn very little in doing so. Thus, while there is massive underemployment, statistics show there is very little unemployment (the way it is officially measured), since everyone is counted as employed one way or the other. But it is clear that many in the work force do residual jobs.

In the Indian economy, the organised sector employs only about 7% of the workforce; the rest are employed in the unorganised sector doing mostly marginal jobs. Within the unorganised sector, the agricultural sector is the largest

employer, providing employment to around 46% of the work force. The second largest employment generator in the unorganised sector are the micro units, which are counted under the MSME sector. The micro units constitute between 95% and 99.5% of the MSME sector and employ 97% of the work force employed in this sector, with an average of 1.7 persons per unit. All of these workers work at very low wages.

If the organised sector employment had been expanding, it could have absorbed more and more of the workers from the unorganised sectors. But this is not happening since the organised sector is going in for massive automation. Further, since its share in GDP is rising, the unorganised sector is getting marginalised and so are its workers. Finally, to reduce its labour costs and maximise its profits, the organised sector is utilising more and more contract labour and making them work longer hours and without proper safety precautions. Contract labour is provided by contractors who keep them temporary and they are counted as unorganised sector workers.

Of late, the government has claimed that there is a massive increase in employment of between 7 million and 15 million new formal sector jobs. This argument is being put forth as employment is likely to be a major issue in the upcoming national elections in 2019. If there was such massive employment generation in the formal sectors, why would 23 million people apply for 90,000 low skill jobs in Railways or lakhs of young apply for a few hundred jobs of peons or scavengers in UP, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Youth with engineering, MBA and MCom degrees applied for these jobs—

totally incommensurate with their degrees and skills they are supposed to have acquired. The reason why they applied for these jobs is that they are presently also doing menial jobs, and wish to go for a government job which at least gives them some security. This is a reflection of the problem of underemployment.

The official claims of new jobs are based on two factors. First, they are counting the number of new registrants under the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and other formal sector pension (NPS) and insurance (ESIC) schemes. Secondly, they add the number of potential jobs that may have been created under the Mudra Scheme. It is said that about 11 crore people have taken loans under the scheme, and even if one third of them generate 1 additional job, then about 3.5 crore new jobs would have been created. Thus, the government is claiming that there is no employment problem and the issue is being highlighted by the opposition only for political gains.

Under the Mudra scheme, the average loan taken is about Rs 45,000. This investment is likely to have substituted the more expensive private loans that may have taken earlier. While this loan may lead to an increase in the productivity of the person taking the loan, like for example shifting from doing head load work to keeping a cow for milk, the amount of loan given under this scheme is too small to increase employment even in the micro units where the average employment is 1.7 per unit with an investment of up to Rs 5 lakh. So, this loan may have helped reduce underemployment, but it is unlikely to have led to more employment except at the margins—nowhere near the claimed 3 crore new jobs.

The government is also pointing to new taxi drivers under the taxi aggregators, new delivery boys due to e-commerce, and so on. The issue is how many of them are former taxi drivers at the taxi stands and how many small stores have retrenched staff due to fall in business consequent to increase in e-commerce. As always, the government claims that investment leads to an increase in employment, but does not tell how many jobs are lost due to some businesses closing down or downsizing.

The EPF data on new registrants is not a surprise since firms are registering employees whom they were not registering earlier. There are two policy changes that have led to a spurt in these registrations. First, after 2015, the definition of those required to register their employees has changed. Earlier firms with more than 20 employees were required to register. This was changed to more than 10 employees. So, a large number of firms and their employees came under the EPF. All these would be new registrants, but it does not mean new jobs.

Second, in the recent budgets a large number of concessions were announced for registration of new employees. A tax concession was announced. Further, the provident fund contribution of new employees was to be paid by the government. We need to know how many contract workers were registered as new employees due to these factors. So, those who were not counted earlier are now getting counted. This is not an increase in employment but simply a change of category.

The problem of underemployment remains as before with massive automation in the economy and a slackening of investment.

(to be concluded)

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