

Two Tales of Contrast*

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Now that we had had two years of the Modi government, it is only natural to look back at what has changed. So we are being treated to numerous assessments of the performance thus far, which obviously vary according to the political and other predilections of the assessors.

On the economic front, whichever way you slice it, it is clear that very little has changed for the better. Investment rates are still down, unemployment has increased and rural real wages are falling, and material insecurities of important groups like farmers and informal workers are actually increasing. In response to this, critics are being told that the government “needs more time”. But improvement on these indicators would require a change of economic policy direction, which seems very unlikely. The itinerant Prime Minister makes much of the relatively high national income growth rate in India, but takes very little note of the fact that this is translating into even less “trickle down” than the previous UPA government could manage. The majority of the population facing worsening conditions can only wonder at these remarkable GDP numbers.

Meanwhile there is disarray in the social sectors, with declines in central government spending creating havoc in many of the programmes that were treated as “flagship” programmes of the previous government. As these have been downplayed and starved of funds, state governments have been scrambling, often unsuccessfully, simply to maintain past levels of expenditure, with no question of providing more much-needed funds for nutrition, health, education. Funds provided for the MNREGA, which is supposed to be legally a demand driven scheme whose expenditure cannot be capped, have had to be constantly fought for at every level, with Chief Ministers writing desperate letters to the Central Ministry to release funds and even the Supreme Court having to step in to force the Centre to pay the previous year’s dues. Surprisingly, the much-vaunted new initiatives of the current government, such as the Swacchh Bharat Abhiyan and the Make in India and Smart Cities programmes, are given this miserly treatment - characterised by more publicity than true action and without providing enough public funds to make a real difference.

In terms of the effects of this government on civil society there is much room for disquiet if not anguish. It is evident that unpleasant, divisive and dangerous social tendencies have been flourishing and growing, encouraged by the implicit and sometimes explicit action and inaction of the ruling party at the Centre and the members of its various front organisations. It’s now open season for vigilante violence and intimidation of the most appalling kind, whether to punish people suspected of carrying or keeping beef, or attack young women for what the beholder feels is inappropriate dressing or unacceptably flamboyant behaviour, or for even writing or forwarding pieces that are disagreed with. The open or tacit encouragement (not to say involvement) of all of these appalling events by important members of the Sangh Parivar has been made worse by the studied silence of those who matter at the top, who tend to be so garrulous on less important matters.

But one aspect that has got less public attention, though its consequences may be just as damaging for the future, is how the current central government has chosen to play with institutions, rules and procedures for its own partisan ends. It is not just that the ruling party has sought to settle political scores and suppress dissent – that is a common practice in India, unfortunately. It is also how easily the institutions themselves and the people who operate in them have allowed themselves to be swayed and bent in this manner, in ways that are bound to reduce public trust. This in turn can lead to real alienation and distrust among the people, which will be hard to win back not just for this government but for all future governments and democratic structures.

This is brought out most clearly by two recent cases of very contrasting experience, both using arms of the state that affect ordinary people in various ways.

The first relates to the use of the immigration counters at airports to prevent the movement of those who have been criticising the actions of the State. Last year the Greenpeace activist Priya Pillai was prevented from boarding a flight to London to speak at the UK Parliament on the human rights and environmental concerns with the actions of mining companies in Odisha and elsewhere. The central government persisted in taking a tough line on this, arguing that any criticism of investment in India was “anti-national” and even persecuting the organisation Greenpeace in various ways to prevent its functioning. It took a [Delhi High Court judgement](#) to reverse the ban on her foreign travel, as the court had to point out to the government that it could not suppress dissent in this undemocratic manner and ordered her name removed from all such watch lists. (Incidentally Rajiv Shukdhher, the judge who gave this ruling, has since been transferred to Madras High Court – a move that is bound to raise both questions and eyebrows.)

Undeterred by such censure, now the government has meted out similar treatment to Gladson Dungdung, the tribal right activist and General Secretary of the Jharkhand Human Rights Movement. He was [offloaded](#) from a flight to the United Kingdom where he would have spoken at a seminar on environmental justice at the University of Sussex. Once again this activity was deemed “anti-national”, and it was falsely claimed that his passport had to be impounded. (Indeed, his passport had been revoked a few years earlier but subsequently reinstated, as the government has no valid legal case for impounding it.)

Contrast the experience of these people, whose only crime has been to fight for the rights of citizens of this country as recognised by the Constitution, with the experience of liquor/luxury travel baron Vijay Mallya. He was able to flee the country comfortably, several days after it was known that the public banks would seek repayment of thousands of crores of loans he had been defaulting on, and also well after the Enforcement Directorate had issued notices to him. The machinery that is so prompt and effective in oppressing ordinary citizens and preventing their travel, apparently does not have the software and database at immigration counters to track a big fish like Mr Mallya. It is obvious to everyone that Mr Mallya was allowed to leave and go in comfort to his mansion in a London suburb, and that all the angry noises made publicly thereafter were just an attempt to hoodwink the nation. The subsequent half-hearted attempts to ensure his return are rightly being seen cynically by the Indian people, as the record of UK approvals of Indian requests for extradition

is dismal and it is most unlikely that the government can secure his return without a settlement in which he states his conditions.

The way in which the Ministry of Home Affairs has become an arm of not just the current government, but of the ruling party and extreme elements within it, is evident in another set of contrasting recent experiences. In February this year, some students of Jawaharlal Nehru University, where I teach, were targeted by the media and by the Indian state on the basis of what are known to be doctored and morphed videos that purported to be showing them shouting “anti-national” slogans. These were played repeatedly on several national news channels, accompanied by incendiary commentary, to the point that public outrage was created against the students and the university. Three students were jailed, and arrest warrants made for several others. One student was badly beaten up inside the court premises on two occasions as police watched; faculty and students inside the courtroom were also threatened, pushed and physically attacked. Thereafter some of these students have received threats on their lives, other students have been thrown out of rented accommodation and insulted in public places.

All this continuing violence is based on evidence that is now known to be doctored, by mischievously and maliciously altering and editing audio and video tracks so as to make some students appear guilty. Never mind that the offence itself – shouting slogans against the Indian state – has never been found to be seditious in the courts of India. The point is that the students so accused were not actually guilty of even that. Yet those who doctored those videos (which was apparently a very sophisticated job, requiring high tech laboratory facilities) and those who knowingly displayed those videos in an incendiary manner, were actually guilty of multiple crimes according to the Indian Penal Code.

Yet the Government of India has not bothered to ask a single question about this issue of making and then showing clearly false videos, and even the media have downplayed the case that has been lodged against two news channels in this regard by the Delhi Government. Why has the Government been so unwilling to recognise, much less take action, against such clearly criminal behaviour by those who manipulated this videographic “evidence”? Perhaps because the Home Minister himself eagerly took up the issue immediately to declare the students guilty and even of having links with Hafiz Sayeed! Yet ignoring this has grave consequences for the future, which can come back to this government and the ruling party as well.

By contrast, no such lassitude has been displayed in the case of the journalist Pushp Sharma. He had written an article in Milli Gazette, quoting a reply to a Right to Information query, which suggested that despite getting Muslim applicants for the job of yoga instructors, no Muslims had been hired “as per government policy”. It is now argued that this RTI reply was forged, and on that basis, Mr Sharma has been arrested! This even though this forgery first needs to be probed, and the basic question of whether Muslim yoga instructors were actually hired or not is easy to prove or disprove. The article was unquestionably embarrassing for the government, but to claim as the Delhi Police (who are under the Central Home Ministry) is now doing that writing this article was “spreading communal hatred” is both bizarre and unfair, when clearly the attempt was to point to such communal discrimination on the part of the government.

So the government is arresting some who seek to bring out possible injustice, by arguing that the evidence is forged, and also jailing others who are not guilty of anything on the basis of forged evidence, and ignoring all the pointers to that particular forgery. These contradictions would be amusing if they did not have such terrible effects. But among the terrible legacies of this government's first two years, these blatant double standards are also among those that will have negative repercussions.

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