

## **Raghuvansh Babu: A committed socialist in times of neo-liberalism**

- Prem Singh

It is an undeniable fact that today's corporate India is intoxicated with the idea the digital. It is constantly on the fast-track to transform all into the digital, and as quickly as possible. In such an environment, Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, popularly called as Raghuvansh Babu in friendly circles, sent his hand-written resignation addressed to Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad Yadav on September 10, on plain paper. Lalu Yadav too wrote the answer on plain paper, by hand. This particular incident can be perceived as peculiar in the light of the present corporate India's political business circles, in which crores and crores of rupees are spent every day, particularly when elections are around the corner. Bundles and bundles of glossy, colourful publicity material is brought out through advertising companies. These letters exchanged between two, down to earth leaders suggest that thrift and simplicity in the politics/governance of a country, burdened by poverty and unemployment should be the one and only option. Raghuvansh Babu wrote three more letters - one for the general reader, and two for Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, on the same day, again by hand.

There is no need for a detailed discussion about the specific concerns/questions raised in these letters here, in this obituary note. How much and how uncontrollably we people, working in every field, speak and write, day and night! Yet our hunger to speak and write does not seem to have a far-reaching end. These three brief letters by Raghuvansh Babu are also a sharp commentary on this contemporary, verbose trend.

Lalu Yadav wrote to Raghuvansh Babu in his reply that he (Raghuvansh Babu) is not going anywhere, that is, RJD will not let him leave). But preparations were already made to go by Raghuvansh Babu. Everyone has to depart from this mundane world. Raghuvansh Babu's family, friends and loved ones will regret that he was frustrated and hurt at the time of leaving. (Moreover, an ugly controversy was raised for petty electoral gains even before his last rites were performed.) Whatever, at the end of his life, his conduct once again illuminated the political personality he had carved out and earned for himself through a long political struggle. India's socialist movement, in which Raghuvansh Babu was groomed, ended politically with the merger of the Socialist Party with the Janata Party in 1977. Since then, some pieces of that movement have been floating in mainstream politics. The RJD happened to be one of them. Raghuvansh Babu remained in the RJD since its formation. He always supported Lalu Yadav. Some people wonder that how could Raghuvansh Babu, even coming from a privileged caste and with a Ph.D. degree in mathematics in hand, get to fit in Lalu Yadav's backward politics pursued in a blunt manner!

The reason can be traced back to the socialist movement itself. Dr. Rammanohar Lohia used to tell the political workers of the forward castes in the socialist movement that they would have to work in order to pursue the path of backward leadership in politics. Raghuvansh Babu, who worked with and was trained by the legendary backward leader Karpoori Thakur, did the work of becoming *Khaad* in furthering the leadership of Lalu Yadav. He did not promote his children in politics, nor did he make politics a means of making assets. People close to him say that feudal arrogance had not even touched his personality. It is a different and ironic story that almost all backward and Dalit leaders, including Lalu Yadav, fall prey to feudal arrogance and conduct as soon as they get power.

Although Raghuvansh Babu was active in mainstream politics throughout his political career, he was well aware about the fact that a group of socialists were engaged in the struggle of alternative politics against the onslaught of neo-liberalism. Senior socialist leader Kishan Patnaik (30 July 1930-27 September 2004), the theorist of that political stream, passed away in Bhubaneswar after which a condolence meeting was held in Delhi to pay him homage. The meeting was attended by political activists and intellectuals in large numbers. Raghuvansh Babu attended the condolence meeting and paid his tribute to Kishanji in a sober and quiet manner. I remember that he was the only leader from mainstream politics to do so.

In his letter written for common public readers, Raghuvansh Babu has raised several issues citing one of Lohia's ideas: "politics means fighting evil, religion means doing good". One of the issues mentioned in the letter was that the posters of the party (RJD) on which the photographs of five inspiring leaders - Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan, Lohia, Babasaheb and Karpoori Thakur - were printed, now carry the pictures of five family members. This, along with his deep distress, was actually a sort of confession that there had been no point in continuing with the politics of the present avatar of socialism! Raghuvansh Babu was committed to the one, as he mentioned in the letter, that was against "feudalism, casteism, dynasty-rule, family-rule, communalism".

Raghuvansh Babu, you were devoted to your work with utmost honesty, devotion and commitment. Even while following mainstream power politics, there was an aura of socialism in your political persona. You, even while working with a staunch neo-liberal prime minister, had crafted the Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for the benefit of poor masses living in rural India. The scheme is helping them in the troubling times of corona pandemic to some extent. You, being a true inheritor of JP, Lohia and Karpoori Thakur, upheld the socialist values and ideals even during the hostile neo-liberal-communal nexus. My deep respect and humble tribute to your memory.

*(The author teaches Hindi at the University of Delhi and was the former president of Socialist Party India)*