

The Independence and Gandhi: In the Clutches of Neo-liberalism

Dr. Prem Singh

The RSS did not participate in the freedom struggle, and that it was responsible for Gandhi's assassination, are facts that are not new. These arguments have been used repeatedly against the RSS since the Independence of India in 1947. The RSS does not claim a stake in the freedom struggle, but refutes the accusation of being party to Gandhi's assassination. Ever since Modi government was formed at the centre, the secular camp has vociferously taken up these two points, and the last few months have indeed seen an intensification of this endeavour. Perhaps the camp feels that by emphasizing these two accusations repeatedly, it will discredit the RSS in the eyes of the people and gain political mileage in the bargain. However this thought process needs to be seriously deliberated upon. The reason is that the manner and the intent with which the secular camp raises these two points to attack the RSS, has little to do with the Independence or Gandhi. The intervention of the secular camp would have been significant only if it had raised the serious question pertaining to a contemporary fact - how and why did Narendra Modi-led BJP form a majority government at the centre despite its history of treason against the freedom movement and the act of assassinating Gandhi? The secular camp ought to have attempted a serious investigation as to whether the Independence and Gandhi have actually lost relevance for the people of India? If yes, then what are the reasons? The investigation requires serious self-introspection; an understanding of how it is itself responsible for this situation, then, to eventually question itself - whether it, on its own part, really values the Independence of the country and Gandhi?

The secular camp, which considers itself above all questions, can get away with the argument that the present government had merely 31 percent voters while the remaining majority of the country believes in the Independence and Gandhi; and that it is this very constituency which secularists seek to caution against the RSS. Now, the fact that the 31 percent citizens have veered away from the Independence and Gandhi should in itself be a serious cause of worry for the secular camp, for it constitutes a significant section of society. The secular camp which bears the responsibility of the nation at ideological and institutional level cannot function in terms of 'mine-thine' social-political divisions. The other question is, how can the secular camp assume that all those who did not vote for BJP, actually value the Independence and Gandhi? The truth is that most of the political parties that have garnered the remaining 69 percent of the votes are in some measure or another, votaries of neo-liberalism. It doesn't need to be elaborated that the votaries of neo-liberalism will be, in material and moral spirit, anti-Independence as well as anti-Gandhi. Therefore, the question as to how the RSS-BJP combine, despite being against the Independence and Gandhi, could form a majority government, raises an accusing finger elsewhere too; at all the historic lapses, blunders and the blinking of eyes on the part of the secularists. Despite their reluctance to face a bitter reality, the secularists owe the people of the country their democratic right to know the truth; a certain transparency regarding political/economic positions taken by the secular camp. In other words, the question is likely to singe the ones who are raising it. But for the sake of democracy and the cause of the common people there should be no harm and no fear in such singeing and self-assessment even if it is injurious to one's own image.

It is not imperative for all or anyone to essentially believe in Gandhi. But it is not correct for detractors of Gandhi to seek political mileage by constantly upbraiding the RSS for his assassination. Gandhi's opponent Mayawati and dalit intellectuals, who propagate dalit identity, do not make a hue and cry about his assassination. The same is true for the Independence. It is not essential that everybody has to believe in the freedom struggle of India and the values accrued during it. But then such people should not castigate RSS for not participating in the freedom struggle.

First, the case of the Independence; it is important before and above Gandhi. For a number of years even serious scholarship failed to notice that after 1991, with beginning of implementation of the new economic policies heralding neo-liberal slavery, there arose, simultaneously, a powerful resentment across the nation to oppose it. On the one hand laws were being passed one after the other (mostly through ordinances) against the basic spirit of the Constitution, on the other hand, those very laws were being vehemently opposed. Some of these opposing voices came from the mainstream politics also. Even the RSS-formed Swadeshi Jagran Manch expressed concerns over the policies that threatened to pawn the nation's Independence. This protest was rather scattered and non-political. But a cohesive understanding and the need for an alternative politics had been generated by means of these protests by 1995. Equipped with the spirit of the Independence, this alternative politics stood in direct confrontation against the Congress, the BJP and the NGOs subsisting on foreign aid. But soon enough the supposed third force political parties including communist parties agreed to follow the path marked out by neo-liberalism. P Chidambaram was the finance minister in the Deve Gowda's government. And the world is very much aware of the events in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal.

It was an unequal battle between the two fundamentally unequal parties, but the struggle against neo-imperialism was advancing in a systematic and strong manner. Some of the best minds of our times and a large section of the youth were involved in it at the cost of their careers and health. Despite Atal Behari's government and the two of Manmohan Singh governments that followed it, the struggle against neo-imperialism stayed strong. The country was almost flooded with anti-neo-imperialist pamphlets, tracts, folders, little magazines, booklets and books. But just then came the clarion call of the "second freedom". India Against Corruption (IAC), Aam Aadmi Party and mainstream media manufactured a false contender against the Congress, and by taking along in its wake diverse elements such as RSS and communists, socialists, Gandhians, corporate houses, civil society, Ramdev-Sri Sri Ravi Shankar they destroyed the struggle against neo-imperialism. As soon as Anna Hazare put the glass of juice to his lips to break his fast at Ramlila Maidan he silenced the debate/discussions of neo-imperialist slavery from the ambit of political discourse. In the past two decades, the myriad voices echoing through the country – *azadi bachao, videshi kampniyan bharat chhodo, WTO bharat chhodo* - were drowned in the name of an imagined mirage of 'second freedom'. The meaning of alternative politics was reduced to a matter of wins and losses between various neo-liberal parties; the noose of neo-imperialist slavery thus tightened even further.

Actually, the hard-earned Independence began to be disregarded in terms of spirit and values even from the point of its achievement in 1947. The partition of the country was the biggest blow. The Independence, accomplished after the protracted struggle and sacrifices of the people of India, was discredited by the progressive camp as a false, incomplete and compromised result of international developments and so on. One argument fielded was that the Independence could have easily been won by means of violence, instead of the long-drawn non-violent one. Though this very mind-set had secretly breathed a sigh of relief that lakhs of rebels, who sacrificed their lives, were defeated in 1857; because they happened to be too backward for their tastes. Even today, the Indian intelligentsia, whether Marxists or modernists, are still horrified with the thought that if 1857 had been successful, the country would have remained engulfed in ignorance as it was before the ascendance of the British. The RSS was not satisfied with 'Gandhi Vadh'. It did not forgive Gandhi for opposing the Partition and advocating Hindu-Muslim unity. Its mission was to make India 'Muslim free', that is, once again dividing apart the country and society. It launched a petty campaign against not just Gandhi but also Nehru and the Congress, the platform of India's freedom struggle. In this manner it became 'nationalist' before as well as after the Independence while remaining completely divorced from the task of nation-building.

It was, as if, the process of gaining the Independence became a crime in free India; and the leaders of the nationalist struggle – criminals! In fact, those who put the very achievement of the Independence in the dock displayed a complete disregard for the struggle of the Indian people; and perceived them as worthless who did not help in making a ‘communist nation’ or a ‘Hindu nation’ of their fantasy; that too without ousting the British! Both these camps are fighting over Bhagat Singh these days, who had considered liberation from the British to be the first goal, and laid down his life for it. If this utterly ‘denigrated’ Independence became the alibi for rampant loot by opportunists and corrupt politicians, businessmen and officers, it should not surprise us. In this state, people have often repeated the comment “the British were better.” Since the Independence has no currency in our national/civil life people have ignored the charge of treason against the RSS, and promptly voted a BJP government to power.

Now let us take the case of Gandhi’s assassination. Secularists, especially the communists, may use Gandhi’s assassination strategically, but they have been forerunners along with the Congress, in assassinating his ideas. During the freedom struggle itself they had started calling Gandhi a bourgeois, reactionary, pedestrian peddler of superstitions and so on. After the Independence, the Congress first used him as a shield for the party, and later for the family rule. Narsimha Rao and Manmohan Singh falsely linked neo-liberalism to Gandhi’s dreams. Now the BJP is doing the same thing. The existing dalit outrage targets Gandhi already. Libertarians want to put everything on hold to finish off Gandhi first. Ever since the backward discourse has taken off, Gandhi is their very first target. An enthusiastic backward polemicist is likely to claim that if Gandhi weren’t there, Brahmanism would have been long eradicated from India society. So, Gandhi shouldn’t have been there at all! The absurd excess of blind anti-Gandhi sentiment is in that Gandhi is held responsible for all kinds of problems even after his death. The emergent solidarity of communist-dalit-libertarian intellectuals is basically based on anti-Gandhi sentiment. Even though the one result of this solidarity is to pull Ambedkar into a liaison with neo-liberalism. Muslims still have some respect for Gandhi. But in this era of fanaticism, it may not last long. Like the Independence, Gandhi stands devalued in the country. Then why would people protest against the RSS for Gandhi’s killing?

Let us discuss a little more about Gandhi’s assassination though it will be a bit of a digression. Gandhi’s assassination has been variously interpreted. Lohia’s interpretation is still the most important among them. Such interpretations of Gandhi’s assassination are no longer relevant. One simple explanation would be that it was an event that happened during the course of the Partition of India. More than ten lakh people died during the riots of Partition. In the course of things if Gandhi was killed too, it is not such an earth shattering tragedy. He had abjured the celebrations of the Independence and was touring the riot-affected areas instead. There some rioter could have easily accomplice Nathuram Godse’s work. Gandhi’s killer was convicted by a court of law; and in legal parlance, Gandhi got justice. The government carried out his funeral procession with full state honours, and constructed a fabulous memorial where leaders from all over the world come to pay their tributes to him. The Congress governmentalized him and created all kinds of havens for his followers. And all this, when crores of victims of displacement, murder and rape received no justice. While Gandhi lived, he was always tormented by such brutalities, discriminations and injustices. Therefore, perhaps, it is not appropriate to keep discussing Gandhi’s assassination. Instead a two-fold consolation can be drawn from his assassination. First, the positive consolation, that he sacrificed his life to redeem the bloodstained abominations of the leadership of those times. Second, the negative one, that at least one big leader also lost his life in the tragedy of the Partition!

Therefore, it could be said that the secular camp, while demonstrating against RSS's treason, is itself not entirely driven by the true spirit of the Independence. Even when it attacks the RSS on the issue of Gandhi's assassination, it cannot bring itself to respect Gandhi. The style of defamation that the NGO don Arvind Kejriwal picked up from the RSS and played out like a master craftsman, the secular camp wishes to employ the same to defame the RSS to seize power. This style denigrates both : the Independence and indeed, Gandhi.

Do such attacks on the RSS by the secular camp stop communalism or even lessen it? This is a serious question that needs to be investigated because the secular camp claims that neo-liberalism can be tackled later; communalism needs to be fought urgently. While it is true that the secularists are staunch opponents of the communal RSS-BJP, it is also true that they never oppose political parties and individuals guilty of communalism - from Congress to Kejriwal. The BJP's mass base, on the basis of this general election results, is approximately one-fourth of the total. To oppose this one-fourth while pandering to the communalism of the remaining three-fourth, is to force the entire society into the vicious process of communalism. These are the dangers of the communal politics of the secular camp that I wish to argue about. Two examples may be considered here.

Despite having a majority government in the centre, when BJP suffered a humiliating defeat in Delhi, courtesy Kejriwal, the secular camp could hardly contain its happiness. A lot of communist friends walked with a spring in their steps, holding Congress in one hand and Kejriwal in the other. Kejriwal has been in the profession of 'social service' with foreign aid for a long time. During that time he did not once open his mouth against the horrendous anti-Sikh riots in 1984, or against the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, or against the 2002 Gujarat riots. Kejriwal's NGO guru, Anna Hazare first praised Modi from Jantar Mantar, and Modi acknowledged this in a personal letter. Elements like Ramdev and Sri Sri, who run businesses of religion, meditation, spirituality, yoga and Ayurveda, were his associates. The organizational aspect of the India Against Corruption's campaign was handled by the RSS. When the Aam Aadmi Party was formed, it had a profusion of communal and lumpen elements. When western Uttar Pradesh was engulfed in the fires of communal riots, the victor Kejriwal was offering thanks to the almighty by stoking the fires in the 'havan-kund'. Contesting from Banaras, he ensured Modi's victory. For this he sought blessings of Baba Vishwanath by visiting the temple, and the Ganges by taking a holy dip. It is a matter of grave concern that after the implementation of the model code of conduct, the blatant displays of religious ritualism do not invite cancellation of candidature by the Election Commission of India.

During the mid-term Assembly elections, held in Delhi after the resignation of Kejriwal, the city was gripped by communal tension. The messages that were relayed on radio broadcasts by recognized political parties, focused on the attempts to aggravate the communal situation in Delhi by communal forces. There were also appeals to defeat the communal forces in the elections. But the BJP and AAP broadcasts contained not one word about the communal incidents. Later, the chief minister of Delhi very graciously gave his approval to rename Aurangzeb Road. He then collaborated with Modi to arrange Sri Sri's festivities on the banks of Yamuna. The Justice Sachar Committee Report on the state of minorities in the country will complete ten years this November. With the exception of BJP and AAP, all big and small parties have issued statements regarding its implementation. These are merely statement of facts known to the public. It may be noted that the shades of communal politics and shades of communal collaboration of earlier secular leaders took a while to unravel. For a long time, they kept up the pressure of secularism on Jan Sangh/BJP. But for Kejriwal and his votaries there is no difference between secularism and communalism; whichever props them to power is acceptable to them. The

explanation is obvious. AAP has not emerged out of any political ideology, organization or struggle; making use of only popular strategies.

The second example is from Bihar. The defeat of the BJP here was heralded by the secular camp as the people's rejection of the brahminical and communal forces. Without going into too many details, some facts may be observed here. Nitish Kumar and his party allied with RSS/BJP for 16 years. This alliance continued through the 2002 Muslim genocide in Gujarat. The senior JDU leader was the co-coordinator of NDA. He opposed the decision to part ways with BJP. As such the credit for sowing the seeds of communalism in the, by and large, secular terrain of Bihar goes entirely to Janata Dal United. Therefore, the secular camp's argument that neo-liberalism will be fought against later whereas communalism needs to be fought now, is absolutely misplaced and misleading.

When, and if, the BJP is ousted, will the secular camp honour its intentions to bring neo-liberalism to a close? Or to challenge it, at least? Is it their policy and avowed intent? This is the proverbial 'yaksha prashna' of India's contemporary politics. Any politics that is practiced without answering it is constitutionally invalid. In polite language it is simply called the politics of power. Within the ambit of neo-liberalism, it really doesn't matter whether the politics of power is practiced by either the communal or the secular camp. A quick glance at the current political landscape reveals the answer to the aforementioned 'yaksha prashna'. The orientation and positioning of the active players in contemporary politics is clearly neo-liberal. About five years back I had written that Modi, born of the Sangh's womb, despite all the hype, would ultimately suffocate and wither in Gujarat. But the corporate conglomerate, the upholders of neo-liberalism, backed him up, and helped him rise to the PM office. Kejriwal is the direct product of neo-liberalism. It is clear to the corporate sector that the politicians of the so-called third front cannot be trusted at the Centre; given their social grounding, they cannot fast forward the nation swiftly on the path of neo-liberalism like the Congress or BJP. Which is why the corporate sector raised its own leader. Kejriwal is watched over by the Magsaysay award house along with corporate houses and national-international NGOs. The secular camp's support to the Congress could still be acceptable to a degree but, leave alone the intent and purpose, the basic political understanding of the kind of secular camp that has mushroomed around Kejriwal, is utterly suspect. It is seemingly a very happy development for them given that Kejriwal has defeated Modi in international popularity! The absolute height of the bankruptcy of political wisdom is achieved when the secular camp begins to see Kejriwal as a viable alternative to Modi as a PM candidate.

It is true that over the past three decades it has become not only difficult, but well nigh impossible to imagine a reversal and a breaking away from the clutches of neo-liberalism. International conditions and pressures too have had a role to play in this situation. In such a scenario, it doesn't appear as if any easy resolution can be found. The secular camp can say that there is little option and that it cannot help but practice politics within the neo-liberal framework. It can also say, and indeed it does say, that the neo-liberal shackles cannot be broken without getting inside the system. It also reminds people of its achievements, such as Right to Information Act, MNREGA, Tribal Forest Rights Act, Land Acquisition Act and so on. But the politicians who wish to practice politics within the corporate framework, the intellectuals who have to head institutions, the writers and artists who have to win awards, the experts/NGO folks who have to be advisers to the governmental committees, the actors and players who have to be brand ambassadors — they should say that along with such superficial reliefs, neo-liberal system will continue to exist. This straight away indicates that the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation, multinational companies, corporate houses will continue to dictate decision-making; agreements like Dunkel and India-America Nuclear deal, which compromise the autonomy of the nation, will continue to happen; disinvestment will continue in public

sector enterprises, all services from education to defence will be privatised; international companies like Carrefour, Wall Mart, Tesko will increase their business in the retail sector; debts of big corporate houses will be written off; natural resources will continue to be plundered; towns and villages will continue to be submerged, and their denizens will continue to be displaced; farmers and small entrepreneurs will continue to commit suicide; legions of innumerable people will continue to be unemployed; land and labour will be subjected to even more ruthless exploitation; the abyss of economic hardship will be bottomless; five hundred smart cities and more will come up; citizens' dignity/security/right to expression will no longer be legally guaranteed; the intervention of police/security forces/mafia will continue to rise in civil life This list of the denigration of our civil, social, cultural, educational, religious life at the hands of corporate companies can go on.

It is useless to blame the corporate sector. It does not love the communal BJP. It has been closely watching politicians and parties for the past three decades. It has also been watching the civil society that has come up in these decades. If it is convinced that neo-liberalism will continue to have unbridled reign in the name of secularism, it will replace the RSS/BJP overnight. Such an assurance will be given to the corporate by the secular camp. In this process the genuine movements that originated against neo-imperialist slavery would be pushed into the margins, to weaken, or to die away. In other words, the real fighters against neo-imperialism will become less visible or be merged into shades of neo-imperialism. The communal camp does not have that strength to bring this about. The responsibility of making a difference, this way or that, lies only with the secular camp.

1 April 2016

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Dr. Prem Singh
Dept. of Hindi
University of Delhi
Delhi - 110007 (INDIA)
Mob: +918826275067

Former Fellow
Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla
India

Former Visiting Professor
Center of Oriental Studies
Vilnius University
Lithuania

Former Visiting Professor
Center of Eastern Languages and Cultures
Dept. of Indology
Sofia University
Sofia
Bulgaria