

Indian Farmers' Movement Inaugurates A Tradition Of Democratic Functioning Against The Centralized Fascism Of Modi's Regime

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A lot of praise has been bestowed on the farmers' struggle against the black farm laws for its historic achievement of being the longest, most sustained non-violent mass civil disobedience movement in history far surpassing in duration, mobilization and intensity earlier historic movements such as Gandhi's Dandi salt march almost a century ago. What has been less noticed or commented on but is now becoming more evident is the striking contrast between the nature and character of how the farmers' movement functions in all aspects compared to the way the Indian government operates under the Modi-Shah duo.

For those living abroad in democratic societies where freedom of speech is the norm and is usually taken for granted, one immediate example of the Indian regime's fascist behavior is the cancellation of long-term visas and OCI cards of those supporting the farmers movement. A prominent US citizen of Indian origin Darshan Singh Dhaliwal, who has been supporting the farmers, was recently refused entry at Delhi airport and returned to the US. This action of the regime that equates criticism of government policy with anti-India activity, as if the government represents the entire country, underscores the fascist character of the Modi regime.

Extreme centralization is the core of the Modi regime's practice from the day it gained power. Journalist P Raman in a recent book writes that "Matta Parataram, Naayam' (I am supreme, none else - Bhagwat Gita, vii. 7) became the theme of Narendra Modi's cabinet management model. All powers were concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)." As the economy has soured fascist behavior and methods have come to the fore.

It is by now well established that the Modi government and its numerous bhakts (devotees) along with agencies of the state such as the police, the investigative agencies as well as various enforcement directorates all operate through instilling a sense of fear in anyone who dares to voice any difference from the policies or acts of those in power. Minorities, especially Muslims but also to some extent Christians and Dalits, don't even have to voice any differences; their mere existence is enough to attract random assaults on their person from Hindutva goons with police looking the other way or actively colluding in the violence. Much of this violence and repression is either implemented or made possible by the functioning of lower-level functionaries including police and subordinate levels of the judiciary; the examples are numerous but their principal feature is that they are all orchestrated, by acts of commission or omission, from the apex of the regime, viz. the Modi-Shah duo.

The acts of omission involve turning a blind eye to the acts of wanton violence by goons of the Sangh Parivar on hapless Muslims forcing them to chant jai shri ram (victory to Lord Ram, a Hindu supremacist slogan) and beating them sometimes to death with the police mere onlookers or, on occasion, active participants. Turning a blind eye in effect provides tacit encouragement to the

goons to continue their depredations. Modi is a master of this technique of keeping his lips sealed or uttering some meaningless platitudes whenever his bhakts commit acts of egregious violence, something that has happened hundreds of times in the seven and a half years he has been in-charge of government. Just as he has never held a press conference where reporters could ask questions, he keeps his mouth closed and fails to respond when an Akhlaq or a Junaid or an Asifa is lynched.

It is in the acts of commission, however, that the centralized fascism of the regime becomes apparent. The list is long and shows no signs of abating.

Bhima-Koregaon

The arrest of 16 human rights activists, academics, journalists, poets, and lawyers, many of them elderly some over the age of 80, under the draconian UAPA law in the so-called Bhima-Koregaon (B-K) case in 2018 and their continued imprisonment under harsh conditions provides a firm indication of the fascistic impulses at the heart of the Modi regime. Jesuit priest Stan Swamy, who had fought for many years for the rights of the most marginalized persons in India, was 84 years old and suffering from advanced Parkinson's disease when he was arrested in this case last year. He contracted the coronavirus in jail and died while imprisoned earlier this year. Gautam Navlakha, 70 years old and a well-known journalist, also arrested in the B-K case has been placed in an "anda" (egg-shaped) cell that denotes solitary confinement. It is an act of sheer cruelty and brutality more so as his earlier right to have a phone call with his partner who lives a thousand miles away has been taken away. There is no prospect of a trial starting anytime soon so, given their age, more accused may die before they are ever judged guilty or innocent. What is extraordinary in a country that calls itself a democracy is that a detailed forensic analysis of the hard drive of the computer belonging to one of those arrested, which forms the very basis of the government's charges, has been conclusively exposed as a fraud. Yet no one in the judiciary has dared to challenge the police and release those charged on bail before a trial so they don't have to languish in filthy and dangerous conditions in jail.

J&K statehood abolition

August 5, 2019 is a day that should live in infamy in a constitutional democracy. On this day, Modi and Shah wrecked the constitution by demolishing Article 370 that gave a special status to J&K, abolished its status as a state by dividing it into two union territories ruled by the Centre and put thousands of J&K residents, including senior politicians, in jail on grounds of "security". Some absurd justifications were given by Modi and Shah that this was done to bring prosperity to the people of the erstwhile state. Over two years later, the real reason seems to have been Hindutva's attempt to achieve demographic change in India's only Muslim majority state, likely on the advice of Israeli advisers promoting settler-colonialism on the lines of Israel-Palestine as admitted by the Indian consul in New York. How this will eventually turn out is unclear at present but destruction of constitutional provisions for oppressing minorities is another example of the fascist impulse at the heart of the Sangh Parivar regime.

CAA/NRC/Shahen Bagh

The passage of the nakedly majoritarian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 and the Home Minister Shah's threats to establish a National Register of Citizens (NRC) to remove "termites" in the midst of the exercise underway in Assam to determine citizenship naturally led to a reaction from the Muslim community and concerned citizens of all faiths and ethnicities who correctly perceived the BJP's idea of who the "termites" were. Thus began the courageous protests at Shahen Bagh in Delhi followed by similar protests in other cities in India. Shahen Bagh was led mainly by women, both elderly and young, many of them Muslim, holding copies of the Indian

constitution and portraits of its principal architect Babasaheb Ambedkar to decry the unjust laws targeted at minorities. Braving the Delhi winter, the protestors continued with their peaceful protest despite provocations from assorted goons and punks of the ruling party with assistance from the police. But Hindutva goons were able to launch riots in minority neighborhoods in the capital causing police to make mass arrests of protestors and lead to the end of the Shaheen Bagh protests. The advent of the coronavirus and ensuing lockdown further ended public protests, but it is significant that this democratic and spontaneous resistance to the centralized authoritarianism of the Modi regime has so far kept implementation of NRC in abeyance.

Farmers Movement Against Black Laws

In the context of the pro-corporate farm laws stealthily passed by the Modi regime in Parliament in September 2020, it needs to be pointed out that the Modi regime is the most rabidly pro-crony capitalist regime in independent India's history. This is the hallmark of the so-called Gujarat model of Modi where progress was measured partly in terms of how state policy on issues like taxation, environmental regulation, control of government land, etc. could be used to facilitate the capture and control of the economy by Ambani and Adani, the two favorite tycoons of Modi, or other lesser counterparts. The farm laws are another milestone on the Modi-road of "maximum governance, minimum government", viz. removing government from its traditional role of procuring foodgrains and assuring a minimum support price to the farmers and instead paving the way for the corporate sector to control production and prices that farmers rightly fear would lead to losing their land to the Adanis of India and their associates abroad.

Pegasus Spy Software

Over two years ago, it seems that some agency of the Indian government acquired the Pegasus spy software from an Israeli company NSO that claims it sells its products only to government for performing essential tasks to security. This powerful software can be used to hack remotely into the cell phones and computers of anyone that the agency controlling it so wishes. A detailed study by a consortium of news organizations established that several hundred cell phones belonging to various journalists, politicians, activists and others in India had been hacked just as they had been in other countries too. The Indian government has kept quiet and tried hard to stonewall any investigation of its conduct, another manifestation of a fascist tendency to ride roughshod over rules and regulations. It has been properly asked "If any government agency has used it [Pegasus] to snoop on Indian citizens, under what law, rule, guidelines, protocol or lawful procedure was such deployment made? These are vital questions at the heart of a citizen's basic rights." The government steadfastly refused to answer this even in the Supreme Court where it vaguely asserted national security as the reason for its refusal. Now the Supreme Court under the new Chief Justice Ramana seems to have finally become tired of the government's evasion and has appointed a special committee headed by a retired SC justice to probe the matter. While this is a heartening development, it needs to be acknowledged that there could be many pitfalls in its functioning, not least the cooperation of government witnesses, and fixing of responsibility.

Arrests of Kashmiri students cheering Pakistan

A particularly petty example of fascist behavior is the punitive action against some Muslim students in Kashmir and UP for having the temerity to cheer the victory of the Pakistan cricket team in its T20 match with India. Is there a law on the books that makes it illegal to celebrate a cricket team's victory?

Cumulative Radicalization

In a recent article in the Telegraph on October 16, 2021, Asim Ali focuses on the “concept of ‘cumulative radicalization’ [as] a useful mechanism to explain the country’s plunge towards the kind of violence and persecution that has been the hallmark of the Narendra Modi regime...This ‘cumulative radicalization’ is nurtured by the strategic silence of Modi, allowing his underlings and followers to interpret his will and compete for his favors, while escaping responsibility if things go sour. His vision of a ‘Hindu rashtra (nation) is never explicitly spelt out, but only signaled, especially through appointments to high office.”

Ali gives examples of the controversial Yogi Adityanath chosen by Modi to lead UP and Himanta Biswa Sarma to lead Assam. Both have excelled in vicious anti-Muslim persecution. He points out that “The story of ‘New India’ is not being written by Modi alone; some of its pages are being written by people like Himanta Biswa Sarma and Yogi Adityanath; and still others are being written by innumerable obscure Indians, be it a judge denying bail to dissidents or Dalit activists, or a journalist spreading invidious propaganda against farm law protesters, or a policeman arresting Muslims on trumped-up charges. Yet, all of them are, in a sense, ‘working towards Modi’ and towards his party. ‘New India’ is being constructed on the building blocks of ideological extremism and is cemented by the greed of those who wish to prosper from it. This is the ‘cumulative radicalization’ which opens the door for all kinds of atrocities.”

Farmers’ Struggle and Democracy

This kind of vindictive behavior that is leading the country into a cesspool of hatred and revenge can be contrasted with the farmers’ struggle that has been in relative terms a model of peaceful, non-violent democratic protest ultimately uniting its members behind the fulfilment of a common goal that provides broader lessons for the country. One specific example was provided by the mahapanchayat (Grand Assembly) of close to a million farmers in Muzaffarnagar, UP in September. It may be recalled that eight years ago, this same area had witnessed ghastly communal violence within the farming community between Hindu Jats and Muslims instigated by BJP leaders and this spread of hate and division was a factor in the victory of Modi in the national elections in 2014. In September 2021, the hundreds of thousands of farmers, Hindu and Muslim, gathered in the same area cheered and celebrated together the traditional Hindu and Muslim religious slogans of “Har har Mahadev” (glory to Mahadev) and “Allah hu Akbar” (God is great) made from the same platform as the symbol of their unity. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (United Farmers Movement) one of the groups leading the farmers has underlined its non-religious character in stark contrast to the repeated attempts of the BJP leadership to divide the people on a religious basis to win elections.

The farmers who have stood together united for almost a year despite suffering the death of over 700 of their members are setting a great example to the entire country.

Vinod Mubayi

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