

India, secularism battling Hindutva: The many ideas that Teesta Setalvad has come to symbolise

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It is limiting to freeze the activist and her husband as the doughty fighters of secularism battling Hindutva, or the fearless defenders of pluralistic India.

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From the time activist Teesta Setalvad took upon herself the onerous task of securing justice for the survivors of the 2002 Gujarat riots, she and her husband, Javed Anand, had gradually come to signify a variety of meanings. Some of these have been now magnified manifold because of the recent CBI raid on the couple, popularly perceived to have been carried out at the behest of the National Democratic Alliance government to hound and harass them.

Mutual animosity often conjoins political opponents like Siamese twins. This is true of Setalvad and Narendra Modi, whom she wants the court to put on criminal trial for the 2002 riots. This is the essence of the petition she helped file for Zakia Jafri. Her husband, Ehsan, was dismembered in the carnage.

The media have, for long, sizzled with stories about the establishment in Gujarat intimidating Setalvad by accusing her of tutoring eyewitnesses and misappropriating donations collected to build a memorial for keeping the memory of the riots alive. Setalvad was celebrated because the pressure of the government did not scare her away from trying to bring to book those who fanned the communal conflagration.

But Gujarat is not India, nor does Gandhinagar's power match New Delhi's. As Modi grew in stature, graduating from chief minister to prime minister, so has Setalvad. This is largely because his government, as it had been true of his dispensation in Gujarat as well, has persisted with the policy of trying to stymie her – the scrutiny of Ford Foundation's funding to her and Anand's organization, the Sabrang Communications, being a case in point.

David vs Goliath

From this perspective, she is no longer the opponent or victim of the chief minister, but that of the prime minister. She's David taking on Goliath. Her spunk now appears even more admirable, though not surprising given her courage, because she breathes fire against Modi the Prime Minister, the very embodiment of power. Even as the CBI raid was under way on the couple's premises, Setalvad

issued a statement: "This is a continuation of the persecution and witch-hunt first launched by the Gujarat police in 2014, then under the dispensation that rules Delhi."

Her rise in stature can also be gleaned from the protests of civil society and statements the political class has issued against the CBI raid. There was always support outside the Hindutva fold for her activism in Gujarat, but the raid has pitchforked her into the proscenium of the national political theatre. There, she will increasingly signify the indomitable individual will pitted against state power, of courage against fear, in case both Modi and she don't change their course.

It is limiting to freeze her and Anand as the doughty fighters of secularism battling Hindutva, or the fearless defenders of pluralistic India which the RSS-BJP seek to alter and redefine. These ideas their activism indeed represents. But it also represents the challenge to the culture of impunity that prevails in India, a culture that assures the powerful and privileged of not being punished for violating the collective conscience.

In this sense, Setalvad has helped India overcome the shame of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the perpetrators of which have gone largely unpunished. The efforts of Setalvad and others have helped secure convictions of 119 persons for their role in the 2002 riots. Among them are former Gujarat minister Maya Kodnani, Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangi and a clutch of people who dominate the local power structure. Citing these figures, former Additional Solicitor General of India Indira Jaising wrote, "This is a record of convictions for any communal riot in India."

It is indeed an irony that any comparison between the 1984 and 2002 riots has Hindutva camp followers point to the relatively high conviction figures in Gujarat to underscore the impartiality of the state government in pursuing the cases. This isn't true, obviously - the punishment handed out to the accused happened despite the state government's barely concealed attempt to subvert investigations.

Bridging divides

Setalvad's challenge to the culture of impunity is remarkable because she was, in many ways, to the manor born. Her family background is illustrious - her paternal grandfather was MC Setalvad, India's first attorney general, who subsequently headed the law commission; her father, too, was a lawyer of repute. In fact, her privileged background is often cited as the reason why she can persist with her activism in Gujarat, not unduly under pressure as she is to earn a livelihood.

Regardless of the truth of this assertion, the presumed privileged background of Setalvad doesn't detract from her activism. On the contrary, it highlights the possibility inherent in a class of people using their privileges to provide succour to the needy and the helpless, to which a large segment of those who suffered in the riots belong. Hers is a glowing example of a middle- or upper-class person using his or her resources to instil hope in the downtrodden and bridge the chasm between the classes.

Setalvad is also a compelling argument in the drawing room debate involving Muslims. Her quest to secure justice for the victims in Gujarat is often cited to silence those Muslims who portray Hindus to be perennially hostile to the community. She is an argument to the visiting Muslim NRI whose idea about the status of his or her religious brethren is based on the periodic portrayals by the media. In such discussions 2002 always creeps in - against the undeniable partisan role of the Hindu-dominated Gujarat administration in it stands the post-riot, counter-narrative of Setalvad and her comrades.

She becomes a tool to shatter the stereotyping of the majority community. The debate goes along this line – if the administration allowed Hindus to riot, then the Hindus, led by Setalvad, have struggled, at a great personal cost, to win justice for Muslims. Stereotyping of communities has been always an important factor, as also a device, to widen the communal divide in India.

Obviously, whether or not Setalvad subscribes to her Hindu identity is for her to tell. But identity is also about how an individual is perceived by others. For most, she is Hindu and Gujarati. Her husband is Muslim, whose writings are as critical of Hindu communalists as of their Muslim counterparts. Their personalities, their ideologies, their activism, their togetherness represent the idea of cosmopolitanism India has always celebrated.

It is altogether another matter that in this high tide of Hindutva their togetherness will get classified as love jihad. And that perhaps explains why the Sangh is so bitterly opposed to inter-faith marriages – because, as Setalvad-Anand have shown, such a union undercuts, even mocks, the very idea of the Hindu rashtra.

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P.S.

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