

STIGMATISING SOCIAL PROTESTS

S G

What is common between Ashok of Komu Sauhardu Vedike, (a forum for Communal Harmony), Kadiyal Shamanna, a farmers leader from Malnad region and Kalkulli Vittal Hedge who is leading an anti-displacement struggle of tribals who would be affected by creation of Kudremukh National Park. ? Well, all these people working in different parts of Karnataka on different issues of people's concern, discovered one fine morning the similarity in which they are viewed by the powers that be. And of course, the realisation was not very pleasing.

In fact they were appalled to find that they are part of a list released by Karnataka police which happened to be a list of 'sympathisers of extremists'. The mischievous manner in which the list was released caused tremendous uproar in the media and civil society. The police which was already under over its alleged involvement in fake encounters of innocents supposedly to 'control naxalite menace', compelled it to formally withdraw this list presenting some facile explanation.

Any sane person can guess that the list might have been formally withdrawn, but the government has made its intentions clear. It has no qualms in terrorising the whole idea of social protest organised even within the boundaries of constitutional rights. While Ashok, Kadiyal Shamanna, Kalkulli Vittal Hedge could be said to be lucky that the police did not venture out to book them under some black law after releasing their names to the public, Roma, Shanta and Malati cannot be said to be that lucky. These women - who have been active in the backward district of Sonbhadra (U.P) among deprived sections of society - were booked under a black law called 'National Security Act' (NSA). Perhaps the only 'crime' committed by these dedicated women was that they were making the tribals and dalits aware about their constitutionally mandated rights. And since dalits and tribals had started claiming land which belonged to them because of the new awakening, the land mafia active in the area felt threatened.

One very well knows that the whole struggle launched by the likes of Roma was being fought under the banner of Dr Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Bai Phule, Birsa Munda and Rani Lakshmi Bai and had never resorted to any kind of violent means. Questioning this attitude of the powers that be where even 'such non-violent and constitutional struggle is becoming impossible in large parts of the country today' noted political scientist Aditya Nigam (www.Kafila.org) writes "It is the state and the police that are producing Maoists by the hour. It is not without reason that former Prime Minister VP Singh had to proclaim in utter exasperation that he too wants to become a Maoist."

Any concerned observer of the interaction and interplay between various organs of the state and people's movements or civic actions led by individuals would state that there is nothing unusual in the move by the Karnataka police or for that matter UP police. Police personnel in other part of the country could be

said to be 'programmed' to follow similar pattern. The case of Dr Binayak Sen which has elicited reaction at the international level is a case in point.

It has been more than three months that Dr Binayak Sen, a paediatrician and human rights activist belonging to Chhatisgarh and who is the national vice president of PUCL (People's Union For Civil Liberties) has been put behind bars taking advantage of the draconian provisions of Chhatisgarh Public Security Act and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (a substitute for POTA which the government had to let lapse because of public pressure). Dr Binayak Sen who happens to be a recipient of the famous Paul Harrison award for working for community health, was arrested basically to stifle his voice and send a clear message to the defenders of human rights in the state that they should remain within limits. In fact, it was the consistent effort of all these people that the world came to know about the manner in which the state government is creating a mercenary 'army' of tribals themselves to precipitate internecine clashes. While the state government called it 'Salwa Judum' (Peace Festival), it was evident to the outside world that it is precipitating violence all over the state.

Definitely one can go on adding examples to this list demonstrating the similarity in modus operandi adopted by different regimes to condemn and stigmatise social protests. A different dimension of the whole phenomenon is visible when one takes a look at growing atrocities on dalits in different parts of the country. While discussing the ambit of violence against dalits and response of the state 'Human Rights Watch' in its path-breaking report 'Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables" (1999) reports :

State agents have acted directly and forcefully against those attempting to claim their rights. Dalit activists throughout the country face charges as "terrorists", "threats to national security", and "habitual offenders". ..Dalit activists are frequently charged under the National Security Act, 1980, the Indian Explosives Act, 1884 and even the Terrorism and Anti-Disruptive Activities Act (TADA).. The criminalisation of social activism in India is a pattern that has been previously documented by Human Rights Watch. (pp 153-154)

A classic case, which depicts the manner in which community leaders belonging to religious minorities are made an easy scapegoat, is that of Maulana Umerji, from Godhra, Gujarat. The year 2002 when Gujarat witnessed genocide at the hands of Hindutva brigade, Maulana Umerji became a face of the humanitarian work being done in Godhra to bring relief and succor to the riot victims. People who have visited Godhra during that tumultuous period would tell you how the Maulana tried to go the extra mile to help the victims. It has been more than four years that he is languishing in jail under draconian provisions of POTA. The police claim that he is one of the 'mastermind' of the 'attack on Sabarmati express' - an incident which itself has become controversial because of facts to the contrary. Post 9/11 scenario is witness to what can be said as 'internationalisation of this trend' where one is discovering to one's dismay that governments have been relying on broadly worded terrorism laws to crush social protests.

As noted by Joanne Mariner (www.counterpunch.org 17 th August 2007)" Political demonstrators in El Salvador and London have found police deploying a new weapon against them: laws designed to prevent and punish terrorism. In the

town of Suchitoto, El Salvador, during a mass demonstration in early July against a water decentralization plan, fourteen protesters were arrested and charged with terrorism.".. Demonstrators against Global Warming at Heathrow Airport, London found themselves at their wits end when police started resorting to stop and search powers contained in a terrorism law.

And he concludes with a somber warning :

"With fears of terrorism high, many governments now have tough counterterrorism laws at their disposal. But while the extraordinary powers granted to police and other state authorities under these laws are publicly defended by reference to the threat of terrorism, some of the actual conduct they apply to has little connection to the problem.

Governments apparently need to be reminded: political protesters are not terrorists. Rock-throwers are not suicide attackers. People carrying placards are not people carrying bombs."□