

'Emergency' Recalled

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Sushil Kumar Modi, an old Sangh activist and the present incumbent to the deputy Chief Minister's post in Bihar, is busy these days with an altogether different responsibility. He is heading the committee appointed by Nitish Kumar, which has been asked to find out modalities to honour the detenus during emergency. One hopes that he would be ready with the required modalities within next few days which would facilitate the state government to move ahead on this plan.

Many commentators have rightly analysed Nitish Kumar's extra emphasis on the plan despite strong opposition from his adversaries in the party and outside. For them this smart move has the potential of enabling Nitish Kumar to emerge as the sole carrier of Jai Prakash Narayan's legacy and the struggle of the people against the despotic regime of Congress. And thus despite criticism of various sorts Nitish Kumar does not seem to be relenting and in one of his recent 'Janata Darbars' he advised his opponents to change their mindset to see the importance of this plan.

One very well knows that it was only last year that the government led by Mulayam Singh Yadav launched a similar project and more than five thousand such people who were detained during emergency were duly honoured with the title 'Loktantra Senani' (fighters for Democracy). Question naturally arises what could be a correct position vis-a-vis this proposal of Nitish led government in Bihar. Would it be a simple 'Yes' or 'No' or one can qualify one's position with few caveats.

There is not an iota of doubt that the internal emergency clamped by the Indira Gandhi regime on 25th June 1975 to save itself from the impending crisis brought on by unfavourable decisions of the highest court and the growing mass discontent was one of the darkest chapters in the postindependence trajectory of democracy in India. Not only thousands and thousands of people belonging to different political and social formations were interned but most of the leading opposition figures were also put behind bars. The suspension of democratic rights, the clampdown on the press and the forcible sterilisation campaigns supposedly to control family size were few of the gory aspects of the whole episode. It is also a fact that the declaration of emergency gave rise to an underground resistance which was joined in by various shades of opinion.

Looking back it is clear that if people would not have put up resistance at various levels, the cause of democracy could have suffered further damage. And it is in the fitness of things that a true believer in democracy would make special attempts to express one's gratitude to all such people who had to face detention during this period. But will it be proper to extend this honour to even those people who exhibited tremendous cowardice during the period of detention and even expressed willingness to serve the 'emergency regime' if they were released from jail. Definitely while making any plan to honour the real fighters one needs to take into consideration this fact as well.

Any justice loving person would abhor the very idea of 'honouring' such cowards who 'preferred to crawl when they were asked to bend'. Individuals apart, as an organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and activists of its plethora of affiliated organisations proved to be 'pioneers' in tendering an apology. Time and again the not so

glorious role of the Sangh Parivar and its affiliated organisations during the Emergency comes under scanner.

It can appear incomprehensible to a layperson that while the activists of the Sangh Parivar were in jail its leaders in the words of Tapan Basu et al “revealed a curious duality”. Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar and others in their early ninety monograph “Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags” (Orient Longman, 1993) explain the way the top leaders of the RSS reacted. ‘RSS attitudes under the emergency revealed a curious duality, reminiscent of the 1948-49 days.’ While the RSS was banned and Sangh Supremo Deoras was put behind bars, he like Golwalkar in 1948-49, “...quickly opened channels of communication with the Emergency regime, writing fairly ingratiating letters to Indira Gandhi in August and November 1975 that promised cooperation for lifting the ban (on RSS). He tried to persuade Vinoba Bhave to mediate between the RSS and the government, and sought also the good offices of Sanjay Gandhi, (p.52)”

Bapurao Moghe, in an article in the Sangh mouthpiece *Panchajanya* (July 24, 1977) had also acknowledged that such letters had been written by the Sangh supremo Lawyer and political commentator A.G.Noorani in his book *The RSS and the BJP* (Leftword, 2000, Delhi) states that these letters “[w]ere placed on the table of the Maharashtra Assembly on October 18,1977.” He adds ,” He wrote to the prime minister, first, on August 22 congratulating her on her speech on Independence day ('balanced and befitting to the occasion') and begged her to lift the ban on the RSS. He next congratulated her ‘as five judges of the Supreme Court have upheld the validity of your election1 (November 11,1975).’(P. 31) It may be added that though Ms Indira Gandhi had won the case but it was not on the basis of merit but by a constitutional amendment with retrospective effect. In these letters he repeated his plea for the release of RSS detenus and lifting the ban on the organisation. He also underlined that the RSS ‘has no connection with the movements’ in Bihar and Gujarat. Deoras ends these letters by offering the services of ‘lakhs of RSS volunteers...for the national upliftment (Government as well as non government).’

A point which may skip attention is that in these letters is that Sangh Supremo Deoras was concerned with the RSS alone. And to save his organisation from the onslaught of an autocratic regime he was ready to declare that if the ban is lifted his men would be at the service of the regime. Neither does he ask for the release of all detenues nor does he ask her to lift emergency. It seems the only problem which the RSS supremo had was that his organisation was banned otherwise whatever the Indira regime was doing was good for him. When Ms Indira Gandhi refused to budge from her stand, the Sangh supremo shot another letter (July 16, 1976) in which he congratulated her for ‘your efforts to improve relations with Pakistan and China’ and also declared that she has been given some wrong information about his organisation. It needs investigation to see whether some sort of agreement was reached between Deoras and Ms Indira Gandhi or not through the mediatory efforts of the likes of Vinoba Bhave but one thing is clear that the RSS workers were instructed from the top that they give an undertaking for their release from jail. The undertaking went like this “Shri ..detenu class., prison agrees on affidavit that in case of my release I shall not do anything, which is detrimental to intenal security and public peace... I shall not do anything prejudicial to the present emergency.” (Sanghachi Dhongbaji, Baba Adhav, Pune,1977) According to leading Socialist activist Baba Adhav, Deoras had himself acknowledged at a press conference in Delhi that he had written two letters to Indira Gandhi. Madhu Limaye, a towering figure of the socialist movement

spent 19 months in three jails which were in RSS areas and knew of the RSS prisoners' letters of apology.

It is understandable that the Hindutva Brigade which has built its weltanshauung around the twin concepts of 'bravery and cowardice' would like to forget this past episode, when instead of demonstrating uncompromising defiance it had preferred to cringe. They very well know that if that is not done the whole edifice of the Hindutva politics can come crumbling down. But history as they say does not forgive and forget. It keeps excavating and bringing out the past, howsoever inconvenient it may be. The 'holier than thou' Sangh Parivar too cannot escape scrutiny.

If Mr Nitish Kumar is really sincere about honouring the fighters during emergency then first and foremost he needs to reorganise the very committee which he has constituted to chalk out the modalities to give pension to emergency detenus and ask its present head to put in papers. The world very well knows that Sushil Kumar Modi, who heads the committee, is part of the Sangh Parivar since his school days itself. A person who owes allegiance to an organisation which had directed its activists to give an undertaking to the emergency regime cannot be expected to do justice to the task given to him.

In fact it would be an insult to the broad majority of the one lakh forty five thousand detenus (only a few thousands belonged to the Sangh Parivar) who faced heavy odds inside the jails to further the cause of democracy.

Coming back to the pension issue for emergency detenus, Nitish Kumar has to decide whether he wants to really honour the true fighters or insult them by adding names of fake warriors in the list who wear their saffron lineage on their sleeves.

Today the Sangh Parivar may want concerned to believe that it led the democratic upsurge during "India's Second Freedom Struggle" (as they call the anti-emergency struggle in the Sangh Literature), it may wax eloquent about the way thousands of its activists were interned by the Indira regime but that will not hide the fact that its leaders were found to be wanting during that crucial period.

An irony of the situation is that while this period is frequently invoked in the political discourse, scholars of Indian history have not found it fit to examine it in a thorough manner. Discussions about it normally gravitate towards Indira Gandhi's authoritarian personality and the damage to democratic institutions at that time. It is natural that this personification of the darkest period in Indian democracy lead people to a blind alley and the socio-economic factors which led to this juncture and the real role of the various organisations remain uninvestigated. Result is that forces like Sangh Parivar have been able to construct a mythocogy of their alleged bravery during that tumultuous period.
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