

How democratic is India?

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There was a total, and largely peaceful *bandh*- thank God for it- in the Telengana region on 30th December to demonstrate support for the formation of the state of Telengana. All bus, truck and railway traffic came to a stand still. Those who organized the *bandh* will claim victory and assert that the demand for Telengana has full popular support. That may well be true. But would we know how many patients in need of medical help were unable to get that help and how many fatalities happened because of that? How many daily labourers were denied an opportunity to get their daily wages for the day, including those employed under the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA) scheme? What was the loss to Gross National Product and what could have been the opportunity cost of that amount in terms of poverty alleviation? Those who organized the *bandh* are not accountable to the people for the damage they have done to the economy and the suffering they have inflicted on the people. Fortunately this was a one-day *bandh* and it was by and large peaceful but for some violence in Karimnagar where a government office was attacked, some bank ATMs were damaged and three private schools were targeted. In the last few weeks both Telengana and the rest of Andhra Pradesh saw large-scale violence involving destruction of public property and burning of public transport vehicles and other forms of violence costing tens of crores of rupees. Such violence is common place in our 'democracy' with political leaders calling for disruption of public life and use of violence in the name of exercising their democratic right of protest. Often such violence results in killings and registration of cases against those who instigate it. Our politicians call these cases as ones launched out of political vendetta. There is no regret and no self-introspection about their conduct which deliberately and knowingly leads to certain violence again, again and again.

Violence is in the blood of most of our politicians and legislators. This is evident from the way they disrupt the proceedings of legislatures, both at the centre and the states. "*Yadha Raja thatha Praja*", goes the ancient Sanskrit saying. Unruly, disruptive and violent as our legislators and political leaders are, so are their political followers for whom they are the role models. Disruption of legislatures, enforcing *bandhs* through threats of violence, permissiveness about public property destruction and resort to mob violence at the slightest excuse have become the routine political discourse of the country. The soft state of India has not produced the political leadership which will uphold the democratic values and fight the undemocratic violence in our politics and governance.

Look at the national hypocrisy in shedding tears for an innocent teenager having been molested by a senior police officer, his harassing of the family, driving the girl to suicide and the delay of years in delivering justice in the case. Or the violence that has erupted on account of a senior police officer having raped a tribal woman some twelve years ago

and having absconded thereafter. These are cases of violence of persons in power against helpless fellow human beings. Who is this police officer and who are the politicians and administrators who were permissive about the child molestation and rape? Most probably they were college student who hit others with stones, burnt buses, damaged public property during *bandhs* and political rallies, not only got away with it but was appreciated by the *netas*, and then got into the IPS. The ministers and administrators are also those who came up from the ranks of bus-burners and stone-throwers, and those who withheld milk from the children through *bandhs*. Our political culture is a sadistic one. It is only a single step from glorifying violence in the legislatures through disruption to practicing violence through bus-burning and stone-throwing, and from there just another step to child-molestation or rape. When lawyers indulge in violence and that violence is condoned, that same society cannot uphold and maintain a system of orderliness and abiding by law. If charge-sheeted politicians cannot be stopped from standing for elections and becoming Cabinet ministers, how will such ministers stop an IPS officer under investigation from being promoted to become the DGP? If in the name of *bandhs* one can cause fatalities by preventing patients from getting timely medical aid, how do we expect the products of such a system from having such human sensitivity as to not satisfy one's own bestial ego by not molesting a teenager or not raping? Those who are indulging in political violence are doing so to feed their monstrous egos and impose their will over others through violence or threat of violence. And pretend that they are doing all this mayhem for the benefit of the *aam aadmi*.

Mahatma Gandhi preached non-violence not because this was a tolerant and lawful country of peaceful people, but because this is a country of intolerant and violent people. The British were able to rule India with just a few thousands of Britishers because they provided law and order in a lawless society and earned the respect and consent of the population for their rule. Today the law and order system we have is a British gift and in the last sixty two years our politicians have not been able to come up with a modernized law and order, law enforcement or efficient justice delivery systems.

There can be no democracy without law and order and efficient justice delivery system. Law and order should not only be enforced but seen to be enforced. When day after day presiding officers of legislatures are seen to be helpless on the television against the deliberate disruptionism of legislators, it is generating a clear message to the children growing up, the bureaucracy and to the workers that disruption and indiscipline have no penalties in this country. Democracy implies disagreement and protests, even demonstrations of protests. But they will have to be non-violent. Disruption of parliamentary procedure is violence while walk-out is not. A peaceful street demonstration is feasible, as done in other mature democracies by people marching in a single file holding placards under police supervision without holding up regular traffic. Disrupting traffic is violence.

The justification for this violence very often is that orderly non-violent protests do not evoke responses or result in redressal of genuine grievances, while bus-burning, property-destruction and mob violence often do or give an appearance of doing so, as we see in the case of Telengana itself. There is some truth in this charge. But it is difficult to say

whether the lack of response to democratic protests or demands is the result of electing a political class of violence practioners. The country today badly needs a leadership which can take it along the democratic path without itself being sucked into the political culture of violence.