Dance of the Devils

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Five decades ago Babasaheb Ambedkar had disowned the Constitution and condemned it as a useless document. Today, with the right wing trampling on the spirit of the Constitution even while celebrating Ambedkar as the architect of the document, his denunciatory words ring true.

Babasaheb Ambedkar once said, “We built a temple for god to come in... but before the god could be installed ...the devil had taken possession of it.” His words were in explanation of an earlier outburst in the Rajya Sabha, where Ambedkar denounced those who called him the architect of the Constitution. By this time Ambedkar had not only disowned the Constitution—accusing the Congress of having used him as a hack—but also condemned the document as useless.

The devilry of the rulers has grown manifold, since then. If Ambedkar had been around in the past few months, he would have either given up his life in disgust like Rohith Vemula of University of Hyderabad (HCU) or got charged for sedition and being anti-national like Kanchay Kumar of Jawaharlal Nehru University.

This is not to say that things were very different until a few months ago. The fact that it did not take even three years for Ambedkar (who once exhorted his followers to shun agitational methods and follow only the Constitution to undo the injustice meted out to them) to be disillusioned shows matters were bad enough soon after independence. India’s new rulers adopted the hardware of colonial governance and embellished it with high-sounding constitutional phraseology, but replaced Western liberal software with Brahminical cunning. In doing so, they effectively reversed the meaning of democracy, capitalism, socialism, freedom and secularism.

In the first four decades after independence, though, Brahminical assertion was somewhat muted. With the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its coming to power at the centre—with a clear majority in 2014—the masks are off. Brahminism is now brazen like never before.

A three-day cultural extravaganza of a self-styled guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, from 11 to 13 March, concluded unhindered with none other than the Prime Minister of secular India conferring his blessings and publicly castigating those who criticised the jamboree for damaging the Yamuna floodplains. But was this controversy the handiwork of a few zealous environmentalists?

The Art of Lying

The extravaganza involved a blatant violation of law and defiance of the constitutional authority of National Green Tribunal (NGT). Once the controversy broke out, many acts of omission came out into the open. It showed how authorities had erred in acceding to the organisers’ demands. The Delhi Development Authority under the Union Ministry of Urban Development had granted the organisers of the event permission on an application that had suppressed facts. The NGT that was against any event on the ecologically fragile Yamuna floodplains—based on an understanding derived from a report of a committee headed by A K Gosain of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi—had wanted the Art of Living Foundation to deposit Rs 120 crore as reparations for damage. The organisers ignored that demand. The NGT stepped back and lowered the reparations to Rs 5 crore. But Sri Sri wanted to have his way and threatened that he would rather go to jail than pay a penny as fine. Though the god-man eventually paid Rs 25 lakh this was more of a face-saver for the NGT than an embarrassment for the Sri Sri.

Another equally serious, and perhaps more ominous, issue related to summoning the army to build pontoon bridges for what was essentially a private gathering; serving and retired army generals and other concerned citizens protested at the misuse of the service of army engineers and combat equipment but to no avail. The rulebook—“Regulations for the Army, Paragraph 301, Page 100”—permits civil authorities to seek the aid of armed forces in exigencies related to maintenance of law and order, ensuring supply of essential services and providing assistance during natural calamities such...
as earthquakes and floods. But it also allows them to call on the armed forces for assistance in “any other situation.” This catch-all contingency was invoked by the defence minister to seek the army’s help in organising Sri Sri’s cultural tamasha. The fig leaf of the rulebook, however, could not hide the fact that it was a political quid pro quo. Sri Sri had made no secret of his support for Narendra Modi during the 2014 general elections. Although army generals (V K Singh, for example) have been Hindutva supporters, never before had civilian authority abused the army so blatantly.

**Cronies of the Devils**

Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living is a commercial organisation that markets spiritual products, made out of the raw material sourced from Hinduism, to the world. The mela at the Yamuna floodplains was a marketing event that showcased Hinduism. State support to such an event was in clear contravention of the Constitution. The Prime Minister tried to cover up the misdemeanours of his government by comparing the army support to the Art of Living jamboree with the aid taken from the defence forces during the Kumbh Mela. While state support to the Kumbh Mela, beyond the demands of law and order, should also be criticised, the Art of Living jamboree can in no way be compared to the Kumbh. The latter represents the religious tradition of the gullible masses that could have been progressively dampened if the government had promoted a scientific temper as mandated by the Constitution. It has, instead, facilitated obscurantism.

Another set of cronies of the devils is represented by Vijay Mallya, that ultimate hedonist, who revels in merrymaking at the expense of public money. Mallya’s loans turned non-performing assets way back in 2011, and in 2014 the Kolkata-based United Bank of India declared him a wilful defaulter. This stricture was, however, short-lived as the Kolkata High Court invalidated it. The upright executive director of the bank, who initiated this move, was hounded by various authorities with a litany of charges and his pension was stopped after he retired in March 2015. Later the State Bank of India and the Punjab National Bank also declared Mallya a wilful defaulter.

Mallya, who not only defaulted on bank loans and payment of employees’ salaries, but also on statutory dues like income tax, service tax and provident fund monies, could have been easily arrested. But the devils not only allowed him to roam around in defiance of public opinion but also got him elected to Rajya Sabha.

There was much outrage after he left the country. There was also a lot of drama, a large part of which was over irrelevant details and suppressed the basic fact about the government’s complicity in letting Mallya go free in spite of his many crimes. Mallya, however, is neither the only such defaulter nor is he the biggest of them. The Mallya episode is actually symptomatic of the ills of crony capitalism coming out into the open. In India, capitalists do not invest in productive capital; they invest in devils’ networks that allow them to loot public money with impunity. According to a report by icici Securities dated 16 March 2015, the total problematic assets of banks are a whopping Rs 10.31 lakh crore, the public sector units accounting for most of the amount. The State Bank of India, the strongest of them, has 60% of its net worth as stressed assets and the Indian Overseas Bank 221% of its net worth.

**Devils v People**

Ravi Shankar and Mallya are just the manifestations of the devilry Ambedkar talked of over half a century ago. The people, supposedly the sovereign of this country, suffer the scourge; their plight is perhaps best represented by what is happening in Chhattisgarh, where a virtual war is on between the state and the Adivasis branded as Maoists.

Take the case of Soni Sori, a tribal teacher in Bastar, not a Maoist sympathiser but an Aaam Admi Party candidate in the last election. Her only crime has been that she spoke out against the oppression of her fellow Adivasis. She was arrested and sexually tortured earlier. A public figure now, a few weeks ago she was attacked with a chemical that disfigured her face. Her aged father, sister and entire family were arrested and harassed to the extent that her journalist nephew has threatened to kill himself in public.

The case of the Jagdalpur Legal Aid Group (JagLAG), a team of women lawyers, which has been working tirelessly since July 2013 to provide free legal aid to the Adivasis, may also be indicative of the state of devilry. The administration built up propaganda against them describing the lawyers’ group as a “Naxalite front.” The lawyers were publicly vilified as defenders of “bloodthirsty Naxalites” by the police vigilante group, Samajik Ekta Manch, a more vicious version of the notorious Salwa Judum. They were harassed with anonymous complaints. The local bar association deemed that they are outsiders and prohibited them from practising. They had managed to obtain an interim order from the State Bar Council to practise. From February this year, however, the police adopted new tactics of pressuring their landlord and harassing people who had been helping them. All this forced the lawyers to pack up and leave Jagdalpur. The Constitution (Art 39A) mandates the state to ensure legal aid to its citizen but the devils will not permit it. Another outsider, a journalist with the online news magazine Scroll.in, who had been extensively reporting on Adivasi issues, police brutalities and sexual violence committed by security personnel against Adivasi women in the area in recent times was similarly harassed and made to leave Bastar.

All this in the name of Ambedkar’s Constitution!