

Demonising Dissent

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It is no secret that the second tenure of the UPA government has been a disappointment at many levels and to almost all quarters. In what is turning out to be an “annus horribilis” for the government, the closing months of the year seem to bring no respite from the continued revelations of scams and evidence of financial skulduggery at different levels of administration. Attempts to distract from these by “reform” measures designed to attract foreign investors have so far proved ineffective, at least as far as the current response indicates. But the public disappointment is not just because of these – it is because of the larger failure to move on progressive legislation or put its energies into policies that would actually improve the conditions of the majority of citizens as well as those who are particularly marginalised.

Instead, the government seems hell-bent on further adding to the sense of people’s alienation, almost as if those in power have a death wish. Aggressively unpopular measures are announced without batting an eyelid, and then only partially reconsidered after angry responses. Thus the recent announcement about capping the number of subsidised LPG cylinders that households can access in a year, and then declaring yet another hike in the price of the non-subsidised cylinders. Indeed, although the latter move has been temporarily suspended, there is no certainty that after a breathing space (apparently forced by the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat elections) there will be no attempt to increase those prices once again.

The Prime Minister and other Ministers tell us that all these moves are necessary because this is a time for “tough measures” – but strangely, all the toughness seems to be directed at public spending that affects the mass of the people. There is absolutely no sign of such toughness when it comes to policies that affect the rich elites or large capital. So, for example, diesel prices are raised, even though this will necessarily translate into higher prices of food and all other essential goods, even though a tax policy that does make much more sense – a big hike in taxes on diesel-driven luxury cars or on luxury cars in general – is not even on the table.

Similarly, a completely sensible move to tax the capital gains from transactions relating to Indian assets that have been made in explicit tax havens like Mauritius is speedily withdrawn after some large companies and their servants in the media complain about it, with only the fig leaf of a hastily prepared report from a compliant economist to justify the retraction. Other examples of such double standards abound, suggesting not just that this is a government that is far more interested in placating and incentivising big business (both national and transnational) than meeting the social and economic rights of its own people, but that it is also increasingly much more blatant and open about these priorities.

This may be related to one of the more surprising sources of recent disappointment with the UPA, which is still not adequately recognised in the public eye. This is the growing intolerance of the central government towards dissent, and its increasing use of methods that verge on the authoritarian to curb and constrain those who speak out against its policies in particular areas. In another egregious expression of its double

standards, the central government increasingly uses the language of nationalism to oppress those who protest against its policies, even as it bends over backwards to do “whatever it takes” to keep foreign investors happy.

This was particularly evident in the government’s response to the protests against the nuclear plant at Kudankulam, which were speedily branded as “anti-national”. The completely justified safety concerns of the local population as well as the demands of those displaced by the project were brushed aside not only as so much ignorance, but even tainted by association. The “foreign hand” was brought in to discredit NGOs and social movements who have put in decades of exemplary service directed to supporting and advocating for local people, and any of them that had received any foreign funding (no matter how trivial the amount) were punished.

Ironically, the same Prime Minister who some years previously had dismissed concerns about some potential negative impacts of foreign investment in India as harking back to a fear of the East India Company, used this very argument against those who opposed this project. He expressed his views in an interview to the American journal *Science* (in February 2012): “There are NGOs, often funded from the United States and Scandinavian countries, which are not fully appreciative of the development challenges that our country faces...The atomic energy programme has got into difficulties because these NGOs, mostly I think based in the United States, don’t appreciate the need for our country to increase the energy supply... The thinking segment of our population certainly is supportive of nuclear energy.”

So, not only were all those who raised genuine concerns about safety and private liability for any mishap thus dismissed as unthinking, but even opposition to GMO technology was targeted in a similar manner, as being driven by “foreign interests”. It is interesting that the foreign private companies that have been actively promoting GM crops were not seen as a problem; only the NGOs and others who were raising concerns about them were seen as operating against the country’s interests.

Since then, other bizarre measures have been taken. In August, at one stroke around 4,000 organisations lost permission to receive foreign funding under the FCRA Act, in many cases for what turned out to be completely unjustified or even mistaken reasons. While the measure has been described as routine, the resultant mess is still being sorted out. The attempt to intimidate many NGOs and others who have been critical of various government policies is evident in this.

Bureaucrats involved in these moves have been known to state that India no longer needs foreign aid – and certainly this is true, that if we want we can and indeed must find the internal resources that are essential to complete our development projects and provide basic amenities and essential needs for our entire population. However, that is not the same as saying that individual organisations within the country should not be allowed to access any external funding to pursue their goals if they are not exactly what the government wants. This would reduce funding for social organisations to official and corporate sources, which in turn would mean that those opposed to corporate interests or to particular official policies would not receive funds for such activities. This is the simplest way of dealing with dissent: just starve it of funds!

This belligerent attitude to home grown dissent that may get some foreign funding has been accompanied by a very thin-skinned attitude to any sort of foreign criticism. Scholars and independent analysts based in India who point to any problems with the

state of the economy or of the inadequacies of the current development process, and are then published in foreign media, are decried as shaming the country to outsiders - as if covering up the cracks for the external gaze would automatically make things better internally.

More insidiously, the government is now taking a much more overbearing and controlling attitude to foreign scholars and journalists who come into the country for research or study. Scholars who have been critical of aspects of Indian policy are grilled when they apply for entry visas, and are increasingly being denied visas. Journalists who come for short trips are subjected to all sorts of conditions by the Indian consulates abroad, who must be operating under instructions from New Delhi. They must specify what topics they will cover in their investigation (with “no deviation from the original synopsis/programme submitted to the Consulate” and declare in advance which cities they will travel to – with no deviations allowed. They may be required to have a Liaison Officer to accompany them, whose expenses within the country they will have to cover. And in several cases, those who seek to cover sensitive subjects (such as nuclear power or GM, two subjects on which the Government has become especially touchy) must submit their reports and analyses for prior approval before publication!

Obviously, this is creeping authoritarianism. The sad fact is that the more the Government comes under attack for different reasons, the more it seeks to lash out at its opponents, and the more it seeks refuge in clearly problematic assertions that they are all “anti-national”.

As the ancient Greeks would have said, whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. Or – just in case this phrase is seen as yet another example of the foreign hand – vinaashkaale vipareet buddhi.

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