

A Sinister Pattern Underway*

Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey

“In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act” — George Orwell

The controlled voice of Ravish Kumar on a blackened screen and his stark report on NDTV India on February 19 made for a powerful statement. It brought back memories of June 28, 1975, 41 years ago, when The Indian Express published a blank editorial, making its point stronger than words could have. The two statements are distanced in time and differ in context. But the similarities stare us in the face — both are strong symbolic protests against the assault on the principles of the Indian Constitution.

Attacking the inconvenient

No party can afford to express its lack of faith in the Constitution — not even the Hindutva-vadi Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The art of doublespeak is a prerequisite of arbitrary power, and the BJP is using it in full measure. The pretentious [statements made by the BJP](#) on November 26, 2015 (Constitution Day) extolling the virtues of the Constitution ring hollow when measured against the acts of the party and its cadres on the ground. Issues such as “[beef-eating](#)”, “[love jihad](#)”, “[ghar vaps!](#)” are ratcheted up to a high emotional pitch, as a means to circumscribe cultural spaces, linking these issues to ‘patriotism’. Unruly elements unleash violence, and the ruling party ensures impunity for the perpetrators. This collaboration between the government and the ruling party’s cadres is clearly visible today from Delhi to rural Rajasthan, where the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) works.

Everything is projected through the lens of a narrow Hindutva definition of nationalism, leaving no room for tolerance and pluralism. Questioning the death penalty is attacked as anti-national; studying in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is anti-national; being a human rights worker in Chhattisgarh is anti-national; the ‘right to report’ is anti-national; and asking for transparency and accountability is anti-national. The propagators of this nationalism see the Constitution as an uncomfortable impediment that must be challenged by undermining its institutions and targeting its defenders. This deliberate orchestration must help us understand that it is not just the inconvenient (‘sickular’) person or collective being intimidated; the Constitution is under sinister attack and our secular democracy is at stake.

Hatred in the hinterland

It is sometimes hard to understand where the attack will originate from — and why. On January 16, a yatra for accountability organised by the Suchna Evum Rozgar Ka Adhikar Abhiyan — a network of social sector organisations travelling across Rajasthan — [was unexpectedly and inexplicably attacked by a violent mob](#) in the small town of Aklera. The 30-odd members of the mob who beat men and women taking part in the yatra with lathis and bricks were led by Kanwar Lal Meena, the current BJP MLA of Manohar Thana (Jhalawar district). The yatra focussed on access to development and dignity for poor and marginalised communities. It is difficult to understand or explain why an accountability yatra of this nature should provoke such an attack.

It is becoming increasingly clear that anyone who dares to raise issues of freedom, justice and equality is seen as a threat. For the BJP, it appears as if democracy is becoming a problem, and the Constitution is ideologically inconvenient. In Hyderabad, Rohith Vemula strongly linked issues of caste with democracy through the Ambedkar Students Union. In New Delhi, [Kanhaiya Kumar raised issues of class and poverty](#) through the All India Students’ Federation. If you happen to be from a background that explodes the myth of social harmony and economic opportunity, your existence is inconvenient. The demand for dignity

as established by the guarantees in the Constitution is deemed anti-government. Through contrived and planned campaigns, the BJP is doing its best to establish that being critical of its government is tantamount to being anti-national.

Aklera is accustomed to witnessing 'engineered riots' (pre-planned assaults unleashed on vulnerable minority communities). A cell-phone recording of the January 16 attack documents a local bystander explaining the attack to another by saying "they must be Muslims from outside"! The criminal record of the MLA who led the attack — accessed through RTIs filed — reveals more than 18 cases registered against him, including leading mobs into mosques, people's homes, smashing property, forging documents and desecrating religious texts of the minorities. He has even been charged with holding a loaded pistol to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's head in 2006 while demanding the reversal of an election result. The MLA's party membership and Hindutva politics explains his impunity. Manohar Thana is located in the Chief Minister's home district, and her silence raises many questions.

Painted iron signboards in Manohar Thana similar to those found in the Narendra Modi-ruled Gujarat of 2002 proclaim: "Hindu Rashtra mein aapka swagat hai (Welcome to the Hindu nation)". The first and obvious target is religious minorities, but Hindutva's real objective is to destroy any opposition.

Reclaiming the Constitution

The dream of India was born with the clearly articulated concept of freedom — of speech, worship, assembly, and freedom from discrimination, want, inequality, and injustice. The modus operandi of using everything including state power to crush and intimidate any action that may arise from a different world view is the death knell of democracy. Before another hollow celebration of Constitution Day this year, the ruling party must be held to account for the unjustified acts of its cadres supported by the state —in the University of Hyderabad, in JNU, in the Patiala House courts, in Jagdalpur, in Aklera, and in places across the country. Nationhood in India is inextricably connected to the uncompromising commitment of the state to secularism and its constitutional principles. When these orchestrated acts of violence and intimidation are implicitly supported by a partisan state, the very fabric of the nation is undermined.

In Aklera, Mr. Meena destroyed the camera used to shoot the yatra. However, videos shot on smart phones, now with the police, show him leading a gang and thrashing prominent MKSS activist Shankar Singh with a lathi. And yet the MLA has not been arrested. Even the BJP MLA from Delhi, [O.P. Sharma](#), and many of the lawyers who beat up journalists and others in Patiala House [continue to enjoy](#) the implicit [support of the government](#). The happenings in the Patiala House courts demonstrate that neither the law nor proof, not even the Supreme Court matters when you have the state on your side.

The responsibility vests in the government and the ruling party and they are accountable for acts of omission and commission. As for the rest of us, the time has come to understand that the freedom won so hard, and with so much faith, is under threat unless we collectively protect our constitutional rights. We need to understand that those who struggle in order to establish constitutional principles of equality and justice are the architects and builders of a free, strong, and democratic India.

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