

FROM OPPOSITION TO ULTRA NATIONALISM: THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHEM AND TRICOLOUR

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English Translation

The recent press conference of four senior judges of the Supreme Court brought into the open, rather uncomfortably, certain defined positions within the highest court of the land: that were hitherto discussed only in whispers. The pronouncement made by Justice Dipak Misra's bench on the 30th of November 2016 directing "all cinema halls in India (to) play the National Anthem before the feature film starts" appears, therefore, to represent one point of view. The honourable judge, who later became the Chief Justice of India, declared then that "all present in the hall are obliged to stand up to show respect to the National Anthem" as it was an opportunity for citizens to express their "love for the motherland." The other point of view was voiced by Justice Chandrachud of the Supreme Court eleven months later when he declared it was unnecessary for a citizen to "wear his patriotism on his sleeves". This order of 27th October 2016 remarked that "the next thing will be that people should not wear t-shirts and shorts to movies because it will amount to disrespect to the National Anthem... where do we stop this moral policing?" He had, incidentally, shared Justice Mishra's Bench in November 2016 and this subsequent categorical judgement is, therefore, an interesting example of the dynamics of India's judicial system and the evolving concept of 'justice'.

Anti socials masquerading as ultra nationalists soon utilised the mandatory order to play the national anthem to rough up those they suspected as not being sufficiently 'patriotic'. To be frank, staring at a rather unaesthetic digital display of a fluttering synthetic flag did not generate sufficient voltage either. The behaviour pattern of the current dispensation also contrasts rather sharply with the sensitivity that government had displayed earlier in 1963, when cinema halls were first advised to play the national anthem. This was just after the shocking attack by China when a strong national sentiment had gripped India spontaneously, without the need for patriotic injections. From the archived files of the period, it appears that the Public Relations Committee set up by the National Defence Council to improve the mood of a demoralised nation recommended that a standard recorded version of the national anthem be played in film auditoria, with the national flag if possible. But the 1963 order of the Home Ministry issued on 29th June was only an advisory rather than a diktat. Its wordings were "State governments are requested to persuade the cinema houses" with the expectation that it would work. Besides, the anthem was only to be

played at the end of two shows, the matinee and evening, when audiences got up anyway, to leave: with no element of compulsion or vigilantism.

As no standard short film of the moving national flag was readily available, the Films Division was directed to produce two versions, a colour film for the “main halls in the big cities” and a black and white one for all other halls in these cities. Cinema halls in the rest of India could play only an authorised gramophone record. The profuse notes kept on files and the numerous letters exchanged between officials of the Home ministry, the Information & Broadcasting ministry, the All India Radio and the Gramophone Company of Kolkata during these eight months of 1963 presents us with insights into the bureaucratic obsession for being correct, detailed and, of course, free from controversy. The files also preserve for posterity nuggets of history like how babus sitting in distant Delhi knew which 26 film theatres of Kolkata qualified as “main halls”. These included Metro, Elite, Globe, New Empire, Lighthouse, Minerva, Hind, Paradise, Priya, Basusree, Bijoli, Bharati, Indira, Purna, Sri and a few others. The second category of 71 ‘other halls’ of Kolkata included Aleya, Ajanta, Bharati, Chitra, Regent, Prachi, Uttara, Tiger, etc, but most names of both categories are just memories, except rare exceptions like Priya. People may soon forget the origins of Ujjalar Chanachur and Bijoli Grill. In 1963, the Films Division promptly produced the desired films that were sold to the halls, at 50 rupees for the colour and 32 for the black and white. The gramophone record that was marketed for cinema halls outside the metropolitan towns carried three sound tracks of 52 seconds each of the choral version of the national anthem where 60 artistes participated. As the reverse side of this record carried the same national anthem played by the military band, records tell us how bureaucrats spent sleepless nights wondering what calamity would befall if the cinema halls played that side by mistake.

As we all know, during wars patriotism rises to a peak but the fact that the wave recedes when national crises are over does not mean that citizens become unpatriotic. Playing the national anthem in cinema halls followed such patterns and since India has fortunately been free of wars since 1971, the practice was discontinued. But as a sudden akal bodhan of patriotism is now sought, it may be appropriate to look up a bit of our history. It is matter of record that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Dal or the RSS that gave birth to the Jana Sangh and its successor, the Bharatiya Janata Party, did not participate in the nation’s freedom struggle quite deliberately. We cannot, therefore, be certain whether the current overdrive of pumped up patriotism is an act of atonement or an attempt to superimpose on historical memory with retrospective effect. In fact, in August 1947, the RSS's mouthpiece, Organiser declared that the Indian national tricolour will "never be respected and owned by the Hindus. The word three is in itself an evil, and a flag having three colours will certainly produce a very bad psychological effect and is injurious to a country."

The logic is flawed as several holy Hindu symbols have three and even the post Vedic trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar are integral to Hindu belief and

worship. Even the earlier issues of Organiser dated 17th and 22nd July had also stated the RSS's opposition to many such national issues. In fact, the second Sarsangh-chalak or head of the RSS, MS Golwalkar bemoaned in his book, Bunch of Thoughts, that "our leaders have set up a new flag for the country. Why did they do so?... Ours is an ancient and great nation with a glorious past. Then, had we no flag of our own? Had we no national emblem at all these thousands of years? Undoubtedly we had. Then why this utter void, this utter vacuum in our minds?" Golwalkar did not, however, tell us what ancient flag or national emblem of India we had lost. The RSS has all along favoured the Bhagwa Dhvaj, the saffron 'split flag' over the national tricolour, as it represents only Hinduism without any doubt.

When exactly did the RSS remove its opposition to the national flag and why? History tells us that Sardar Patel, whose statue the ruling party now plans to set up as the tallest in the world, had slammed down on the RSS and banned it immediately after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination on 30th January 1948. He did not budge in the next one and a half years despite pleas from Golwalkar. It was only on July 11, 1949 that he lifted the ban after the RSS pledged to stay away from politics; not be secretive and abjure violence. More important, it had to profess "loyalty to the Constitution of India and the National Flag". It is strange, therefore, for the RSS and its political creation called the BJP to be dictating after 70 years to all Indians how and when they need to display their patriotism.