

AFTER A REPUBLIC DAY TO REMEMBER, WILL THE PRIME MINISTER FINALLY READ THE SIGNS?

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It has surely been quite a different Republic Day this time, and its unfortunate events will not fade as easily as the details of more spectacular performances on Rajpath. Not only because of the unexpected action that took place way beyond the agreed venues. But with the internet down, or certainly not at its best, and real-time coverage tapering off, one is not certain what exactly happened in Delhi from 2 pm onward.

24×7 colour news television has certainly grown a lot since it made its debut in the war in Kuwait in early 1991 – 30 years ago, and well, that’s a lot of time. But most footage and reportage appeared to be from behind the safe security of the well-armed police. This is evident from the lengths of the shots of agitating farmers or whoever else were assuming their role. Having faced law and order in the raw, on both sides of the barricade, the numbers of farmers and tractors appeared too little to threaten the Delhi Police and whatever else it has commandeered from outside. The distance of the cameramen from the really hot action-spots also revealed more than just the physical dimension of the problem. On the other hand, the footage captured by some foreign channels in the thick of things and their studied neutrality in reporting were so admirable.

All said and done, the agitating farmers did break into Delhi, in a manner of speaking, a few hours before their agreed hour of entry. One is not sure whether it was because they wake up much earlier than those billeted in the ‘police lines’ or because of their impatience or impetuosity. But if such a large group of loosely-organised farmers had done so after prior planning, it is surely a classic failure of police intelligence, that equals the “massive intelligence failure” at Pulwama. It is unimaginable that the concerned snoops had not been able to penetrate such amorphous groups in such a long time, and not been able to forewarn their uniformed colleagues that the farmers were planning to violate the agreed script.

This explosion of protest was, after all, on the 61st frustrating day of the farmers’ so-far strictly Gandhian protest. Any regime that expected utter docility and perfect discipline even then is living in its own created paradise. This delusion had overtaken Indira Gandhi in the past, as she had mandated that she be told what she wanted to hear. When rulers impose on organic lines of governance, including advice and prognosis of dangers, they insulate themselves from ground realities at their own peril. ‘Intelligence’, as the term implies, is a tool that thus fails these hegemonies who do not measure up to all its meanings.

One is certainly not condoning the breaches or the flare-ups and definitely not the grievous assaults on policemen. A hundred must have suffered for little fault of theirs though one is not sure how many were injured in the scuffles and from the long arm of the law. The destruction of public property means taxpayers suffer, but the Delhi Police discovered to its dismay that handling these matters is surely tougher than framing criminal and sedition charges against those not so guilty. What the police had set up so cockily as immovable barriers to prevent protesters from entering the city were tossed away by the hefty and the determined. These case studies and erroneous tactics would have to be re-examined in police seminars and workshops for quite some time to come.

The failure of the farmers' leaders to discipline their supporters or whoever was up to dangerous mischief was abysmal. No one can ever condone such violence but one could at least anticipate that Red Fort and ITO could be targets, once agitators came into the city from multiple directions. The first has always held great iconic value, for the establishment and for those challenging the state and/or its policies. Having said that, one must say that the administration displayed commendable patience by not taking up the gun, because that would surely have led to worse consequences.

What was so stark was that most TV anchors expressed a lot of indignation and some burst into emotionally-charged, high-decibel outbursts of rage against those who challenge the regime. Their on-the-spot representatives with cameras appeared equally incensed and provided more inflammatory material. While this may be in line with the newly acquired role of this media – to churn out running invectives, prosecutions and judgements – their cameras were either not corroborating the sentiments or not being provocative enough. The media's age-old role of not exacerbating riotous situations is fast dwindling, as TRPs and 'patriotism' rule the screen, even after it is being brought out in the public domain that the first can also jump higher, for 30 pieces of silver. Even in this new age of regime-prompted rage, we may do well to remember that credibility still matters to many, as much as the blindly devoted require their regular fixes of incendiary visuals to sustain their irrational highs.

The television camera clearly showed, for instance, that the national flag was fluttering high and proud from its appointed flagstaff on Red Fort, even when a frenzied supporter clambered up, rather dextrously, on another pole to foist his flag of defiance. This was on a shorter and subordinate pole affixed outside the fort, on the ramparts. But the anchor almost choked as he kept on narrating that our sacred national flag had been defiled by some blasphemous invader. Such open distortions and provocative anchoring may earn kudos from the present powers that be, but the media person besmirches their own reputation forever. Besides, they are collaborating with the divider-in-chief in the ruinous mission to fragment the multi-ethnic nation that defied all prophets of doom to emerge out of splinters and coalesce. This happened because so many sacrificed so much.

The Sikhs, who appear to be most prominent in this historic struggle of the farmers, have been constantly sniped at and poked on grounds of their affluence, conspiracy with Khalistanis, obscurantist opposition to brilliant reforms and sheltering of despicable middleman. As one of India's proudest and hardest people, who braved the sharpest of winters in the open, facing water cannons and rains with equanimity, they have ignored the taunts of those who have never matched either their record of sacrifice or boldness.

The Jats, who are as robust and hard-working, may be less prominent as their turbans do not stand out so colourfully. But they are as determined. Their contribution to India and its food security through the Green Revolution, is as commendable. So are those of several other farming communities that are protesting against farm laws that were hustled through. Ironically, this pre-planned ham-handing was executed by the only prime minister in history who kissed the floor of parliament before entering it for the first time, and then went out undermining this august institution of democracy, and many others as well, with a ruthlessness never seen before.

The fact that the disorganised protest is retreating does not indicate that the crisis is over. In fact, it now calls not for obstinacy or continued contempt. Victimisation or encouraging the deliberate defaming of farming communities and all opposition will only worsen the situation. We now require a patient handling that transcends the craftsmanship of just words and the proven excellence of election-management. If there is any hidden statesmanship in the prime minister, it is time for it to break free and reach out to those who entered the hallowed city to demonstrate their utter seriousness. For once, the signs may be read more astutely.