

## **MODI'S UNHEROIC NATIONALIST IDOL**

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On December 30, last year, we were treated to the most unusual spectacle of the Prime Minister of India sitting on the floor or a cell of a jail, his legs crossed over each other, and his palms joined in prayer. He was, however, not praying to God — he was actually worshipping his guru, Veer Damodar Savarkar, who had once been imprisoned in this cell and his eyes were transfixed on his portrait that was propped up a few feet away. Savarkar, who coined the term 'Hindutva', is regarded as the father of this ideology and it was he who led generations to dream of and to agitate for a Hindu Bharat.

The prison that Narendra Modi was visiting was the Cellular Jail of the Andamans, the dreaded Kala Pani that India can never forget. It was here that hundreds of freedom fighters were incarcerated, the cream of India's youth, and except one, none of them is known to have ever begged the British for mercy. And the only one who pleaded with the Viceroy, repeatedly and fervently, to please release him from jail was Savarkar, Modi's hero.

The Government of India's 1975 publication entitled Penal Settlement in Andamans records on page 213 VD Savarkar's mercy petition of 14th November 1913, addressed to the British government. Savarkar's fervent plea was "if the government in their manifold benevolence and mercy release me, I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the English government."

Without mentioning this abject surrender to the British, Modi tweeted "I visited the cell where the indomitable Veer Savarkar was lodged. Rigorous imprisonment did not dampen Veer Savarkar's spirits and he continued to speak and write about a free India from jail too." Incidentally, the BJP government has already named the main airport of Port Blair in the Andamans after Savarkar and much of the 'sound and light' show at the Cellular Jail focusses on him — not on the countless freedom fighters who underwent the trauma of the toughest

form of imprisonment without ever breaking down. Many, in fact, died within these premises.

What we need to recall on the 68th anniversary of the promulgation of the India's Constitution, is that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the RSS, that formed the Bharatiya Janata Party that rules India today, was opposed to the national flag and the Indian secular polity. It had not even participated in the most important stage of India's freedom struggle, the Quit India movement, and KB Hedgewar, the founder and chief of the RSS, had issued clear orders to his cadre not to cooperate with Gandhi. CP Bishikar, the biographer of Hedgewar, quotes him as having said, "Patriotism is not only going to prison. It is not correct to be carried away by such superficial patriotism." In fact, records preserved in India's National Archives mentions that certain sections of the British police considered the RSS as friends who were loyal to them.

In August 1947, just before the day when India finally attained Independence, the RSS's mouthpiece, *Organiser*, declared that the Indian Tricolour "will never be respected and owned by 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." If three is evil, is the Hindu Trimurti also evil? Two earlier issues of the *Organiser*, of 17th and 22nd July 1947, had also mentioned the RSS's opposition to the national Tricolour flag. The second RSS supremo, MS Golwalkar, who was the undisputed leader, had been quite vociferous in his opposition.

In his book, *Bunch of Thoughts*. Golwakar had stated quite clearly: "Our leaders have set up a new flag for the country. Why did they do so? It just is a case of drifting and imitating...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." Guru Golwakar was perhaps referring to the saffron 'split flag' of the RSS, known as the Bhagwa Dhvaj, that it wanted to foist as the national flag in lieu of the nation's culturally-composite tricolour.

Had Sardar Patel not banned the RSS for 18 months in 1948-49 after Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu Mahasabha fanatic (the RSS, incidentally, celebrated the heinous murder), the RSS may never had changed its stand.

It was only when Sardar Patel arrested RSS cadre in their hundreds that Golwalkar was finally compelled to profess “loyalty to the Constitution of India and the national flag” in July 1949.

It is tragic to witness how the RSS and the BJP now terrorise those who, they feel, are not honouring the same Tricolour that they had opposed. Obviously, the BJP-RSS has no national heroes of its own, as this combine played such a dubious role in the national movement.

It has, therefore, made icon-poaching a national phenomena and desperately tries to unscrew leaders like Sardar Patel and Subhas Chandra Bose from the pantheon of mainstream nationalism. For over seventy years, the RSS has taken active part in Indian politics, first through the Jan Sangh and then through the Janata Party and finally as the BJP. Democracy needs a rightist option as much as it needs the left, but all shades of politics have to accept the plural polity and the secularism promised and guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

This, unfortunately, is not being adhered to and a reign of terror has been unleashed on minorities and Dalits as well as on secular and liberal forces. The only phase of independent India's history when the RSS's political wing played a somewhat positive role was during the Emergency of 1975-77, but then its supporters could fill the jails as the organisation had the financial clout of traders and businessmen to provide support to the affected families. The Hindu right that betrayed Gandhiji's national struggle may celebrate the Mahatma's 150th birth anniversary on a grand scale this year, by way of atonement, but the questionable roles played by Savarkar and Golwalkar will remain etched forever in our historical records. From time to time, elements within the Hindu right family show their true colours when they publicly glorify Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse — not once, but repeatedly.

So, when we see a Hindu fanatic shooting at Gandhi's statue and garlanding Godse's, as actually happened in Aligarh on Gandhiji's death anniversary a few days ago, this subterranean streak comes to the fore. Their hatred for Gandhi and his unshakable belief in secularism will never die.

But, even history cannot decide whether to laugh or cry when the RSS dominated government now turns around and chargesheets Kanhaiya Kumar and his fellow students of Jawaharlal Nehru University under the colonial law of 'sedition' for being 'anti-national'.

And even when there are now more relevant laws to tackle terrorism and anti-Indian activities, this regime has openly declared in Parliament on the 5th of this month that this legacy of British imperialism shall continue to rule. After all, it evokes a dash of nationalist romanticism for those whose political ancestors took no part in the national struggle. Now, they can freely hound and punish those who dare to raise their voices too loud.