

A million mutinies

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It was an amazing dialogue. I was annoyed, irritated, enraged. The setting was a mock public hearing organised by Tarun Bharat Sangh to enthuse the villagers who had picked up the courage to tell the government off. The unofficial bench consisted of a retired judge, retired government officials, and people from the civil society like me. The question was: were the villagers of Hamirpura correct in disobeying government orders?

The background to the dialogue was incredible: while all Indians, including river-worshipping Hindus, are hell-bent on destroying every single river of the country, here was a village, which through the dint of its water harvesting work, together with a number of upstream villages, has recharged the groundwater to such an extent that a small rivulet that was lying dead for over 50 years is now flowing round the year again. Amazing. Brilliant.

To my mind, they have shown greater wisdom (*margadarshan*) than, say, India's military scientist, Abdul Kalam. They are the true Bharat Ratnas, telling India how to manage its ecological security in the 21st century. But no appreciation from the rotten government for them. In the mid-1980s, people started building *johads*, traditional structures to harvest rainwater. The irrigation department immediately flexed its muscle. Every stream, channel or *nala* belongs to us, it said, and how dare you build a structure across it? After the villagers dared to go ahead and revive the river, they came along to say that all the fish now belong to the government and calmly auctioned it off.

This is an official loot of nature. The government destroys natural resources; when villagers revive these, it reasserts its ownership. But, in this case, it so happened that the villagers of Hamirpura were life-worshippers and did not want any fish to be killed. They told the Rajasthan fisheries fellows to buzz off. You will get the fish over our dead bodies.

Were they correct? What right do people have over their resources?

With a Father of the Nation who talked about the country as a collective of half-a-million Village Republics, the answer would have been obvious for India. But, no. The judge said the villagers must learn to work with the government, which must control the river. It flows, after all. There are interests of several villages involved. It has to take care of them. An ex-bureaucrat who came along said, "You know, you people are good guys. So, I guess you can do what you want. But I can tell you that there are so many bad guys around. We can't let them take over our natural resources. Government must have control."

For me, it was a pain to listen to these trite and banal arguments, which, given today's situation, verge on being downright fraudulent. Tell me one instance when the government has ensured proper sharing or use of river waters in the country? Delhi imperiously rips off water from the farmers of Haryana. India bullies Bangladesh with impunity. Point out one instance where the government has actually kept rogues under control. Most of the times, it is itself in cahoots with the rogues. I politely asked the judge, "If I, with all my education and influence, find it so difficult to deal with the corrupt and arrogant bureaucracy, you are asking these poor villagers to deal with it?"

I told the villagers that they must not only fight for the right over their natural resources; they must also fight for laws that allow them to do so. When a Britisher had once asked Gandhiji, "What do you think of the Western civilisation?" the wonderful old man had replied, "I think it is a good idea." I told the villagers that if we were to ask

him today, "What do you think of Indian governance?" I am sure he would hang his head in shame and say, "I think it is good idea."

I suggested to the villagers that they should form a River Parliament of all the villages along the river so that having revived it, they can take care of it. They can then become the governors of the river. And this is nothing dramatic. All over the world there are nearly one thousand rivers that straddle more than one nation. And efforts are being made to manage these rivers through river basin associations. What can be done for international rivers can also be done for inter-village rivers. And they can tell the government to buzz off.

I told the judge that if we want to face the challenges of the 21st century, we will have to start 'reinventing government' very fast. Indian bureaucrats have become so incompetent that they today do not even understand, let alone study, what is meant by governance. Yet these characters are supposed to govern.

The manner in which the government has neglected the problems of poverty and illiteracy and left millions of people to wither away -- and is now leaving many millions more to die of pollution -- is absolutely incredible. The Indian political-bureaucratic system has killed probably 50 million people in 50 years of independence and will continue to murder at even higher rates in the future. It is a delusion that there is even a government today.

The judge said, "You are making the villagers Naxalites." "No, Gandhians," I said. Even the best of Indian intellectuals are so enamoured of *Raj Shakti* (state power) that they have no idea what *Lok Shakti* (social power) can do. But that is what we have to build. My deepest respects for the village of Hamirpura.

-- Anil Agarwal

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