

Arrogance of Power

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Indians who fought to win freedom and establish democracy know how precious both are. Most of them are dead, but have left behind archives of rich history to educate those of us who not only take both for granted, but make it our mission to abuse democratic principles and violate the tenets of the Constitution of India.

It was, therefore, with a sense of pride that one sat through the ten hours of debate in the Rajya Sabha on the civilian nuclear energy agreement, during which our MPs sought to convince a stubborn government that this deal with India was simply not acceptable. The arguments varied, and have been outlined in these columns too many times before to bear repetition, but speaker after speaker from political parties across the spectrum sought to convince the Prime Minister that he should reject the deal and respect the sense of the House.

The pride converted into disgust and despair when the nation was confronted just a day later with the Ugly Indian (read Narendra Modi) justifying acts of violence that should have ensured his immediate arrest, and appealing to the basest instincts of a mob by making them shout for the blood of those he has managed to project as "the enemy." And instead of endorsing the demand for action under the law of the land, a legitimate political party justified his election speech, while the state cowered (and continues to cower) in its inability to take action.

To go back to the first. The Rajya Sabha did the nation proud. The speakers from across the political spectrum came armed with facts to point out how the nuclear deal went against the interests of India, how it impinged on Indian sovereignty, and how it went against every principle that the country valued and cherished. One is using slightly words that are now considered archaic in our political jargon, to re-emphasise the commitment with which the MPs urged the government to drop the deal, or at least not move forward with it until it had been able to get a national consensus. The sullen Prime Minister, who sat through the ten hours as if he had not registered a word of what was said, was asked repeatedly by his senior colleagues from all political parties (except of course the UPA that found itself completely isolated) not to go ahead, and to respect the "sense of the House." His only contribution actually to the debate was when, stung by the strong arguments of BJP leader Yashwant Sinha, he jumped up to retort, "When you were finance minister and went to Japan the finance minister there did not meet you." The remark demonstrated a certain pettiness that left the members astounded. As it was, the Japanese finance minister had met Mr Sinha and the Prime Minister is now facing a breach of privilege. More so, because he was also in the same government that he was now publicly belittling. Excellent speeches were heard in the House from Sitaram Yechury, Yashwant Sinha, Arun Shourie and Digvijay Singh amidst others. The Congress speeches were notable only for the strong defence of the US intent, and of course of US law inside Indian Parliament.

The MPs brought with them a sense of seriousness and sat through till near midnight to argue their points. The next day minister of external affairs Pranab Mukherjee summarily rejected the demand to take the sense of House into consideration and try and reach a national consensus before proceeding with the nuclear deal. It was a reasonable demand, but one that Mr Mukherjee took not even a second to reject. He was still speaking when as to one man the entire House, except for the minority of UPA MPs, stood up and walked out of the House. It was crystal clear to even the blind that the majority in Parliament was against the deal, and that newspapers could no longer write prompted editorials saying otherwise.

So where is the democracy that an individual is elected to the post of Prime Minister to preserve? How is it that the executive in Indian parliamentary democracy actually thinks now that it has the authority to go through with an international treaty that is not acceptable to Parliament? The only acceptable course that was left after the debate was for the Prime Minister to rise and humbly accept the will of the House, and make a commitment that he would not proceed with the nuclear deal until and unless he was able to obtain a consensus. But that is too much to expect from governments run with the arrogance of Dynasties, and represented by nominated leaders who do not have to face the electorate for a vote. So that takes one directly to Gujarat and the Ugly Indian. An elected leader whose every word is poison for secular harmony, and who is using the pretext of democracy to violate democracy. And what is worse, the BJP and the so called Sangh Parivar, instead of restraining the man, and calling him back, are encouraging and supporting his attempts to divide the nation, to terrorise and victimise a community, to hurl abuses and threats publicly, and to exhort crowds to kill and maim. And what is probably even worse is that those empowered by the people to take action are sitting back and allowing this to happen. There are mad and dangerous men who dot the historical landscape of a nation from time to time — Germany had Hitler — but who have to be dealt with. India has a great Constitution, with the state being powered by the law to deal with such individuals and political parties who show little respect for secularism and democracy, and insist on dividing the country through violence. If the Congress had taken to the streets just after the murder and rape and mutilation of 2,000 odd men and women in Gujarat in 2002, when national and international opinion was aghast, Modi today would have been an isolated man, in jail or an equivalent hell, despite the support from the BJP. That is also the truth of history, if the state hesitates to take action, the mad men flourish. If governments act, and laws are invoked, mad men dissolve like cheap plastic under a little heat.

The Ugly Indian now confronted with some opposition for the first time since 2002, is already ranting and raving. The problem is that his are not empty threats, and he has successfully managed to reduce the minorities in his state to trembling shadows of existence. It was heartening to hear a demand for his arrest being made in Parliament, but the silence from the government did not speak well for secularism. The Congress argument is: We are fighting him electorally, that will be a bigger defeat than his arrest. Well, what if he is not defeated, and wins the elections? Will the Congress be able to act against him then? There is no tomorrow under the law. If it has to be effective, it should be invoked at once, without fear and without favour. It will be interesting to see how the Congress party responds now on the ground. In the last elections Congress president Sonia Gandhi refused to meet the victims of the violence lest it alienate the majority community. In these polls she is hitting out at Modi and his ilk, but it remains to be seen whether the opposition continues. One casualty has been the decision not to send son Rahul Gandhi for the campaign in Gujarat, and keep him confined to Delhi and possibly Himachal Pradesh. The second casualty of the Ugly Indian's rhetoric is awaited.

The people of Gujarat getting ready to cast their vote have been fed for so long on the politics of hate that reality for them is a blur they cannot fathom. The absence of an effective Opposition — and the Congress gave up this role completely for six long years — has done incalculable damage to the polity and to Indian Democracy. Democracy has to be protected and nurtured. Those in power have to carry the balm to treat the wounds and the aches and the pains suffered by "democracy" over the years. But when governments throw away the soothing medicines and pick up the knives themselves — be it by ignoring Parliament, be it by politicising the judiciary, be it by indulging in violence, be it by discriminating between the peoples of India — democracy comes under real danger. For the doctors have become the assailants, and there is no one left to protect the people who are the mainstay of any democracy.

