

There's something wonderful about entertaining people on vacation. Everyone is there to have a good time.
Jennifer Hudson

Targeting the whistleblower

When it was made mandatory for citizens to get Aadhar cards containing confidential biometric personal data for getting all government-related facilities, the people were assured that the data would be treated as absolutely confidential and it would be impossible to access such data by anyone. Since then it has been established beyond doubt that it is possible to hack Aadhar data by unauthorized persons and sold to anyone for a consideration. Earlier, the Government and the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) which issues these cards, denied such reports of leakage of Aadhar data but now this malpractice has been proven beyond doubt. A reporter of The Tribune of Chandigarh has exposed that such data can be and are being sold for just Rs. 500.

When the report appeared in The Tribune, something quite unexpected happened. Instead of going after those who were doing this illegal business, the Government lodged an FIR against the reporter for leaking confidential data. When there was a chorus of protest from the journalist community from all over the country and the Editors' Guild of India passed a strong resolution saying that the step was "clearly meant to browbeat a journalist whose investigation on the matter was of great public interest" the Government changed the FIR. Instead of the reporter of The Tribune, the FIR was lodged against 'unknown persons'. What is intriguing is that the culprits doing this business have still not been named or nabbed or prosecuted. They are going about their business as merrily as ever.

Instead of finding out the origin and methods of this malpractice, the Government has gone against the whistleblower and targeted him for bringing out facts which are highly embarrassing for it. The hue and cry raised by the journalist community has forced the Government to say on record that it is committed to free Press and that it does not intend to curb the freedom of the Press. Both claims sound unconvincing in the face of facts. Obviously, the Government does not want its skeletons to come out of the cupboard. The Congress joining the chorus of protest is outright hypocrisy because the Aadhar scheme was the brainchild of the Congress and it is the Congress which introduced it and made it mandatory. If the Congress comes back to power again, will it scrap the Aadhar scheme? Obviously not. Nobody is concerned about the violation of privacy of a citizen when the Aadhar card is hacked into. Every political party wants to score Brownie points against its adversary. That is the ploy.

Trump's stance, Islamabad's reaction

REFLEX ACTION

Sankar Ray

The 45th US President Donald John Trump's 60-word tweet, accusing Pakistan of siphoning US \$3 billion-plus aid to Afghan terrorists giving them "safe heaven" and "given us nothing but lies & deceit" has been volleyed back by Pak Minister of Foreign Affairs Khawaja Asif in twitter: "He can hire a US based Audit firm on our expense to verify this figure & let the world know who is lying & deceiving." This rebuttal was expected as Special Assistant to the Pak Prime Minister Dr. Musaddik Malik assured that Islamabad would respond to US in line of international diplomatic norms. But keeping up diplomatic dignity, the Pakistan Foreign Office summoned US Ambassador David Hale and lodged its protest against President Trump's tweet.

Trump's bumptious-as-usual stance united Pakistan's ruling and the Opposition parties through the provocative statement from the White House. Former Pak Ambassador to USA and ex-minister Sherry Rahman, a senator representing the Pakistan's People's Party, reminded Washington that the "coalition support funds" have NEVER been counted as AID in any accounting by Pakistan, nor will it be seen as part of assistance. It was compensation on expenses incurred in joint action on border". In her tweet, the chair of the non-politicised think tank stated in a bantering tone that Pakistan "never promised a rose garden next door in Afghanistan, nor can it create one. The problem lies in expecting such while zigzagging American policy goalsposts with a new toggle jack". PPP Chief Billawal Bhattu Zardari, participating in the tweet war, claimed that the PPP government launched Pakistan's first, most extensive and most successful anti-terror operations adding, the US is "no longer interested in defeating terrorism".

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader took a jibe at Trump telling "the world's strongest military force has nothing to show off its 16-year long presence in Afghanistan but failure and is incapable even of a graceful exit". Cashing in on the patriotic response from the Opposition - apparently smelt by the government, Islamabad chooses not to walk into Trump's provocative assertions, a construct of 'baseless allegations'. The tactical stance is the outcome at an urgent meeting of the National Security Committee

of the Pak Federal cabinet, chaired by PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi at his residence, attended by Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Interior Ahsan Iqbal, Defence Minister Khurram Dastgir, Minister for Defence, Chief of the Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, his second-in-command General Zubair Mehmood Hayat, Chief of the Naval Staff, Air Chief Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi, Chief of the Air Staff Marshal Sohail Aman, the PM's advisor on finance, revenue and economic affairs Miftah Ismail, National Security Adviser, Lt.

General Nasser Khan Jamali, Pakistan's Ambassador to the US Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry and other top senior civil and military officials. At the end of the lengthy deliberations, the extended NSC observed amid serious disappointment that the close interaction with the US leadership, anticipated as a sequel to the initial pronouncement of the policy on South Asia by the new boss at the White House for a better understanding of each other's perspectives, as the best way forward to achieve durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. This was reaffirmed by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defence Secretary James Norman during their visits to Islamabad. The recent statements and articulation by the American leadership, the meeting concluded, are completely incomprehensible as they contradicted facts, struck with great insensitivity at the trust between two nations built over generations, and negated the decades of sacrifices made by Pakistan.

The NSC handout was issued by the Foreign Office stating that a consensus is that Pakistan would remain committed to playing a constructive role towards an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, not just for the sake of its own people, but also for the peace and

security of the region and international community. Hardliners, albeit minority, are not mum. Former minister during the Musharraf regime, Jahangir Khan Tareen, born in Comilla, now in Bangladesh, interpreted Trump's tweet a reflection of complete bankruptcy and hollow leadership of Pakistan today. These lackeys of the Sharifs are responsible for the manner in which the US has treated us today".

A very interesting feedback came from an activist of the Progressive Writers Association and freelance writer Khalid Mahmood to this scribe. "Pakistan and the USA friendship was established by Muhammad Ali Jinnah who sent his Finance Minister Malik Ghulam Mohammad to the USA for aid and arms. The Pak American friendship was established to block Soviet Union and Socialism. Pakistan dexterously performed this job and earned tons of hard cash. And now, Pakistan services are not needed anymore, therefore total balance of dole-out ledger is shown. Secondly, President Trump, like our many home grown demagogues, is not a student of history. Whatever USA doled out to Pakistan had been wisely reciprocated to save American vested interests. Not a penny of US aid was spent for the welfare of masses. If the USA does not create anxiety among our hawks, it is very unlikely in the current circumstances to buck up Taliban and hardliners. Symbolically, New Year Eve celebrations at Lahore and Karachi Bahria Towns passed off without any suicide attacks by the Taliban".

Based in Gujranwala, Mahmood thinks, "China would not enter this sort of scuffle." Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang's reaction endorses this point. Beijing is happy to see Pakistan engaging in international cooperation, including counter terrorism, on the basis of mutual respect so as to contribute to regional peace and stability. "China and Pakistan are all weather partners. We stand ready to promote and deepen our all-round cooperation so as to bring benefits to the two sides. We believe as neighbours China, Pakistan and Afghanistan are closely linked not only geographically but also in terms of common interests. It is natural for us to enhance communication and exchanges," he quipped. (IPA)



Artist engaged in Mural paintings during a programme organised by 'Vasthuediya Gurukulam' at the museum premises as part of Loka Kerala Sabha, a conference for expatriate Keralites, in Thiruvananthapuram

RSS focus on farm crisis

The tragedy of farmers and peasants has become so grave during the Modi government that even the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh has finally raise the issue with the BJP leadership. At a recent meeting of senior RSS leaders, attended by BJP president Amit Shah, it virtually pulled up the leadership and expressed apprehensions that the issues of economic distress and unemployment in the farm sector could damage the electoral prospect of the party in the 2019 general election.

For some time the Sangh has been upset with the functioning of the prime minister and had also asked him to amend his style of functioning and redraw his priorities. It is disappointed with the outcome of the Gujarat polls, which the BJP nearly lost. The feedback from its frontal groups made the RSS assert its authority. Sangh nurses the feeling that the situation could have been avoided in Gujarat had Modi taken care of the plight of the farmers. It feels that he could not handle the paitidar issue properly. The RSS feels the party had to suffer due to the anger in the rural areas over the farm distress and restlessness among unemployed youth.

At least for the past one year Sangh has been highlighting the difficulties in the farm sector: The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh and Swadeshi Jagran Manch on a number of occasions had asked

Modi not to push anti-farmers and anti-labour policies. They held that faulty economic policies were responsible for the plight of the farmers and youth.

The Sangh's frontal bodies also complain that while Modi has not been responsive to the need for pro-people and pro-farmers policies, his government adopted a proactive stance when it came to big business houses and industrialists. The Modi government abandoned the idea of amending the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act in 2015, but the BJP ruled states changed the law to make land acquisition easier for industrialists. The BJP always ignored the voice of the kisan unions.

The UPA government had salvaged the economic situation of the poorest peasants to a great extent by introducing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). But Narendra Modi abhorred the idea and described funds allotted to the scheme as "living monument of UPA's failure". The allocation for the fund was slashed. It was only in the 2017 Union Budget that some raise was provided. The BJP has never been soft towards the kisans or peasants, as it did not treat this class as its support base or vote bank. It has been close to big landlords and money lenders, who have antagonistic relations with the labourers and poor

peasants. This was primarily the reason for the Modi government's dislike for NREGA, which is essentially meant for poor farmers. The farmers had to suffer two years of drought, during which agricultural growth stagnated: It was only 1.2 per cent in 2015-2016. The growth rate did increase to 4.1 per cent in 2016-2017, but by then the rural economy had been badly affected by demonetization. Peasants desperate for cash had to sell their produce at very low prices.

Post-demonetization, they had to borrow huge amounts from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates; many were forced to sell their land. Though as a political rhetoric Modi in his public speeches highlighted support to farmers, he did not take any initiative to mitigate their problems. Whatever he did for them was purely an exercise to keep them away from the Congress. During the Lok Sabha elections in 2014, Modi had promised to provide them with minimum support price (MSP), but once in power, he conveniently forgot the promise.

FOCUS

Arun Srivastava

The farm sector would not have faced this alarming situation had the Modi government kept its promise.

The violent protest by farmers in Madhya Pradesh's Mandasaur district is testimony to the fact that the state government did not care to protect the floor price of pulses. MP farmers leader Shiv Kumar Sharma, who left the RSS-affiliated BKS, blamed the BJP's policies for the farmers' discontent. When the farm loan waiver was announced, some of the leaders objected on the ground that the money was being misused. But these people maintained silence when industrialists looted the banks of lakhs of crores.

The tragedy of Indian agriculture has been the inability of the farmers to break out of the clutches of traders and middlemen. In most cases, the prices offered in the mandis are much lower to their investment. There is an urgent need for agriculture marketing reforms. On November 20 a massive rally of the farmers was organized in Delhi by the All India Kisan

Sabha. Only 27 per cent of the peasantry gets institutional credit, with the rest dependent on money lenders - traders, contractors and middlemen for their credit needs. Around 82.50 per cent of families in the farming community are below the poverty line. An insight into the agricultural crisis would make it clear that it is the gift of the IMF and World Bank. According to the World Bank's lending report, India has easily been the largest recipient of its loans in the history of the institution, and these conditions form part of the broader World Bank-backed development plan for India.

There is no denying the fact that India's farmers are held hostage to neoliberal capitalism. Facilitated by the WTO and the US-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, there is a deliberate strategy to make agriculture financially non-viable for the small farms to impose the World Bank sanctioned model of agriculture.

The number of jobs created in India between 2005 and 2010 was 2.7 million (the years of high GDP growth). Data released by the Labour Bureau shows that in 2015, jobless 'growth' had finally arrived in India. Agricultural distress has become a permanent feature. The non-availability of remunerative prices to farmers on agricultural produce continues to be a vexed issue. (IPA)

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