

REMEMBERING  
GANDHI

As the world pays tributes to the father of the Nation on his birth anniversary, let us address elements who are criticizing him and questioning his doctrine of Ahimsa as a potent moral force against the aggressor. 75 years after India gained independence, these self-styled critics are living in a changed world; they don't take into cognizance of the global situation and domestic compulsions at that time when Mahatma Gandhi chose non-violence as a practice over bloodshed and violence. It was a world riven with prolonged wars. The First World War had changed the world in a big way and the clouds of the Second World War were hovering over the skies. The wars had led to the killing of millions of humans and massive destruction yet the purpose for which these were fought was never realized by any warring side. The wars had redrawn the boundaries of the nations across Europe and yet nothing changed. The theory of violence and might as a means of achieving political ends had failed miserably.

In this situation, Gandhiji gave a new idea that the human spirit is the biggest power that can bend the mighty powers. Also, he was a practical leader. He knew the Indians could not fight with bare hands with the well-armed British police. Also, he knew a violent movement is difficult to be controlled and there is no point in shedding blood. He was proven right. The Mighty English government had to give independence to India and acknowledge the fakir-styled Gandhi was a power to reckon with. Gandhi never advocated a weak human spirit or acceptance of injustice, as it is alleged. It's for this doctrine that Mahatma Gandhi is a global icon for peace. There is hardly a university in the world where his statue is not installed. The world acknowledges his contribution to giving an alternate model of fighting injustice and it works.

## Women's power on the decline in Modi's BJP?

Sunil Gatade

At last, the Women's Reservation Bill has sailed through Parliament. Despite much talk, it has not led to a feeling of a new dawn for the Indian woman or a fair deal for her. It is understandable given the fact that there are several ifs and buts before its implementation. Some experts claim it could be implemented only in the 2039 elections, 16 years from now. So, it is but natural that women and a sizable political class have taken the Narendra Modi government's landmark measure ahead of the Lok Sabha elections more than with a pinch of salt.

Interestingly, the occasion warrants a look at the status of women leaders in the BJP, which proclaims it is the world's largest party. This unmistakably shows that under Mr Modi's watch, women's power is on the decline. The influence and authority of women leaders, especially those in the BJP, are diminishing in an era of the "strong leader".

Despite crying hoarse by the powers that be about "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao", the last 10 years might be the period in Independent India when the fair sex could be at its lowest ebb. The law on triple talaq as well as the campaign against the hijab in educational institutions was more of a gimmick in the "New India", out to make a political buck through the communal divide. The Manipur ethnic strife and the handling of the women wrestlers' protests against controversial MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh did not exactly endear the BJP with women.

This is not to say that it was all milk and honey for the fair sex when the Congress was in power.

Omen have taken a secondary position in the BJP. However, it must be admitted that Mr Modi handed over Gujarat to Anandiben Patel as CM when he moved to New Delhi in May 2014. It had more to do with the excellent chemistry enjoyed by the PM with Anandiben, the seniormost minister in his government in Gujarat.

No doubt, India now has a woman President in Droupadi Murmu. She is the second woman President after Pratibha Patil. It looks like Ms Murmu has been given the top post for being a tribal. Her being a woman has become an added advantage. She is the first President hailing from the Scheduled Tribes.

Strange, but true. Women are increasingly taking a backseat or are being forced to take a backseat in politics. There are very few who are calling the shots. At



present, India has only one female chief minister, Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal. Jayalalithaa used to be the other CM who died some years back. Mamata Banerjee is one of the tallest women leaders in the country, who had carved a niche by being a street-fighter when the CPI(M)-led Left Front was entrenched in power in West Bengal.

Mayawati was once seen as the first possible Dalit PM, but the graph of the BSP supremo has been declining for the past decade since she ceased to be the chief minister of the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh. Without naming Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati had once boasted that she was a far bigger leader than the former Congress president, who had got the position due to her legacy.

The tragedy is that women leaders in the BJP are seen more as those with the blessings of the top leadership instead of being leaders in their own right. Finance minister Nirmala Sitaraman is the lone woman in Narendra Modi's kitchen Cabinet. She is a political lightweight and a relative newcomer to the BJP.

Smriti Irani is another minister who has had "passenger" ministries in the past decade, except once when she was put in charge of the key HRD portfolio. It created a huge controversy. Ms Irani's claim to fame in more recent years was the defeat of Rahul Gandhi from his pocket borough of Amethi in the last Lok Sabha elections.

Sushma Swraj, one of the BJP's seniormost women leaders, died soon after the last Lok Sabha polls. She was ailing for some time and was kept out of the Modi

2.0 government despite her making it known that though she was not contesting the Lok Sabha polls, she was very much in active politics.

Vasundhara Raje is possibly the only BJP leader who has made a place for herself in politics. The 70-year-old leader has been the chief minister of Rajasthan for two terms. She was not made the CM candidate.

In poll-bound Madhya Pradesh, it looks like the BJP has long forgotten former CM Uma Bharti as well as former Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan.

Maneka Gandhi was not included in the Modi government 2.0 and has never been known to be a force in BJP internal politics. Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, a BJP MP from Bhopal and the prime accused in the 2008 Malegaon blasts case, has more than survived due to the apparent blessings of the leadership.

Now, Sonia Gandhi has taken a backseat after being at the helm of the Congress for over two decades since 1998. She carries much influence and respect across the political spectrum after heading the UPA for 10 long years from 2004. Her daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has not been able to make much of a mark as a leader despite having charisma.

Mahua Moitra of the Trinamul Congress has emerged as a firebrand orator in the Lok Sabha. There have been promising women leaders including Mehbooba Mufti, who had been J&K chief minister. Supriya Sule of the NCP, K. Kavitha of the BRS and Kanimozhi of the DMK. Like Vasundhara Raje, they all hail from political families.

That was not the case with K.K. Shailaja, who was Kerala's health minister during the Covid-19 pandemic and did commendable work on public health. The Marxist leader had declined the Ramon Magsaysay award for herself.

In Maharashtra, that the BJP and its Shiv Sena ally led by CM Eknath Shinde do not have a single woman in their Cabinet despite many rows is itself a sad commentary.

Notwithstanding some photo ops and grand announcements, the last nine years have not seen much action for a better deal for women in various fields, including in politics. If winning the hearts and minds of women voters is central to the BJP's growth strategy to stave off electoral stagnation after a decade in power and cement its dominance at the ballot box, then much more needs to be done. Only event management will not be enough.

## The insufferable arrogance of writers

Shashi Warriar

When my friend Murthy turned up the other morning with a friend I welcomed him in before heading for the bar to bring out his favourite tippie. He raised his hand to stop me at the door, saying, "Please show me the restroom."

That was strange, because he'd been there several times already. However, I asked him to follow me and led the way. As soon as we were out of earshot of his friend, he whispered, "He's teetotal. Don't even mention a drink!"

The friend, dressed all in crumpled white, iPhone in hand, was a corporator from a nearby large municipality. "Everyone knows me," he bragged. "I've been working very hard for my people."

I remembered him because his name was in the news every time an election came around. His nose for victory was as sharp as Murthy's for scotch, for he'd been on the winning side for the last five elections... His sole strength was the ability to judge when best to jump a sinking electoral ship. There had been a newspaper article just a couple of days ago saying just that. "There was an article about you," I said, "in such-and-such daily, just a few days ago."

For a moment I thought he was going to have an attack of apoplexy, but he regained control of himself. "It's nonsense," he said. "These writers just make up these stories and pretend they're real."

"There didn't seem anything made up in that report," I said. "The writer quoted sources, including yourself. I have the paper lying around here somewhere if you want to check."

"I don't need to check," he said, his voice rising in anger. "It's not fair. There's a context to everything. If the reporter doesn't mention the context, why quote me except to damage my standing with my people? The rains have been poor this year. I am the best person to ask the state government to give us enough money to deal with the drought, but they don't want me to succeed."

"Why are you the best?" I asked. "Because I know everyone!" he replied. "Everyone in Bangalore is my friend, across all parties! Everyone knows that I live cleanly. I eat simple food, wear simple clothes... I don't drink or smoke, or have any bad habits. They trust me!"

I'd never looked at it that way. His history of jumping ship - constituency in tow, of course - made him a formidable presence in local politics. And since practically everyone in every party that ever ruled had been a fellow-party member at some time or other, he was friends - or enemies - with everyone. "Right!" I said. "So they all know exactly who you are, and what you're doing."

He smiled. "See!" he said. "I'm so happy you understand. This is the meaning of transparency. Universal

friendship."

"What an excellent principle!" I said. "My people know it," he said, "so they vote for me always. They know I'm there for them."

"Right," I said. "There was a report some weeks ago that said that your constituency has been getting the largest grants for development in the state. I remember that very well."

"See?" he said. "Some writers do the right thing! They talk of things that matter!"

"Yes," I said. "That report also said that there's nothing in your constituency to show for all the development money spent in it. It's no better than any other in terms of quality of life, or infrastructure... It said that the constituency has performed poorly with cleanliness, the roads are all in bad condition after the rains, schoolchildren aren't fed properly, and the beach is being mined illegally for sand."

"Nonsense!" he said, his face turning red. "These writers are ignorant and arrogant! Let me take up these points one by one. What can I do if people from other places come dump their garbage in my area, or if contractors build substandard roads, or headmasters steal school funds? As for the sand mining, the police have said that there is nothing in those allegations!"

He paused to take a breath and I edged in another two bits. "But there are photographs of large pits on the beach

where the sand has gone, and truck tyre tracks running right up to them."

"I don't have the resources to check every inch of my constituency," I said. "If I could get another few crore rupees I would do that, but the government gives me just enough for urgent requirements."

"The report said that the surveillance cameras at the beach don't work, or they point in the wrong direction," I said.

"I don't know anything about the technicalities of cameras," he said. "I work for the people, and I know the people. I have to depend on others for technical guidance."

I didn't know that he had to get technical guidance to point a camera in the direction of what he wanted to shoot, but who was I to question him? His margin of victory in the last couple of elections had been in two digits, which, in constituencies of tens of thousands, was very small. "What about the people who didn't vote for you?" I asked. "Are they also yours? And the writers who live in your constituency?"

"Everyone is mine!" he said. "Writers are also my people. I tell all writers, even those outside my constituency: give up your arrogance, and I will make your life easy. I will give you material for you to write. When you write it, I will make sure that it is published, and that you get paid for it. That's what every professional writer wants, isn't it?"

## Forget redefining refugee charter; UK should scrap its Rwanda policy

Farrukh Dhondy

"The womb has its hungers  
The passage knows the code  
Procreation's long journey  
One more for the road!"

From *The Song of Suleiman*, by Bachchoo

Winston Churchill had said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.

We can assess his contention by surveying today's world. In the UK both Labour and the Tories pursue policies which don't spring from any conviction, but from the calculation that they'll win them votes. The last leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, certainly proposed policies that sprang from his convictions and which he thought would lead the country to social equality.

It didn't pay off. His overwhelmingly victorious opponent BoJo appealed to the voter's xenophobia, saying he'd "get Brexit done" and deny Johnny foreigner the right to come to the UK. Prejudice serves democracy. And democracy bows to prejudice?

Consider Iran or Afghanistan -- where there's no democracy but fanatical religious regimes.

Or Russia -- a mafia state whose population are fed imperial fantasies? We are compelled to agree with the old XL Bully dog.

Which brings us back to Britain and its opportunist, if failing, home secretary, the Goan-Indian-descended Cruella Braverman. Following her predecessor Gujarati-origin Priti Patel, with endorsements from PM Hedgie Sunoch, she attempted to implement the policy of sending a handful of the asylum-seekers who arrive on Britain's shores by mafia-run dinghy boats, to Rwanda. The cost to the taxpayer of such a deportation policy would be £169,000 per deportee.

The latest statistics say the government would need to spend £1.8 billion to send all 11,000 targeted people who have arrived in the UK across the Channel this year.

Cruella's intentions have been challenged and scrapped. Under Priti Clueless' watch, the aborted flight to the East African country is believed to have cost up to £500,000, on top of an upfront payment of £120 million paid to the government in Kigali as part of a "migration and economic development partnership".

The whole Rwanda nonsense is a po-



litical stunt, an attempt to demonstrate to a public which Cruella and Hedgie firmly believe is anti-asylum seekers, that they are doing something firm and unfriendly to dissuade the wretched of the earth from landing on these shores.

And now the latest twist in this political stunt. Cruella has launched an attempt to get the United Nations to change its definition of "refugees". In the wake of the Second World War in 1951, the UN passed a Refugee Convention which was signed by 146 countries and incorporated over seven decades into UK law. She launched her critique of this convention on a trip to Washington on Tuesday, September 26, speaking at the right-wing "think

tank" American Enterprise Institute. Cruella contends that being gay or being a woman, and being in a country in which gay people and women suffer extreme discrimination, is not tantamount to them claiming persecuted status.

Obviously in very many countries, for instance Britain, feminist movements still contend that women are discriminated against. And yes, one may agree with Cruella that this sort of discrimination should not qualify them for refuge in another country such as Rwanda or, OK, Norway. But, gentle reader, we all know that being gay in certain countries or espousing certain religious beliefs such as con-

verting from Islam to Zoroastrianism, carries the death sentence for homosexuality in the first case and apostasy in the other.

If a gay couple or an aspirant Zoroastrian is in danger of being detected by the regime's religious enforcement brigades and is in danger of being imprisoned and executed, wouldn't this mortal danger qualify for refugee status under the terms which have passed into British law for seven decades?

Then there is the case of women who want to live as free citizens and not be tortured and killed by the religious thought police as has happened in Iran? Can they not claim to be refugees if they find themselves feeling death by capital punishment misogyny?

According to the United Nations office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 108 million people were forcibly displaced last year as a result of persecution, conflict, violence and significant human rights violations. They're not all seeking refuge in Britain or indeed in the rest of Europe. Very many of these are in refugee camps in one country or another.

Of course, gentle reader, I understand the anxiety of the British public

and of Cruella's political stunt in characterising asylum seekers as free-loading economic immigrants. But how many of those that land on these shores are such?

Let's put this Hedgie-Cruella ploy in its political, opportunist or Goebellian context: the same Tory government has agreed that 5.4 million Hong Kong citizens who hold HK British passports are eligible to come to the UK and claim full British citizenship. Not that very many will make their way here. Still, there are 504,000 Hong Kong and Ukrainian refugees already in Britain.

Cruella and Hedgie make no mention of these as opposed to Cruella's description of the boat-comers as "an invasion". This despite the fact they outnumber the boat arrivals by a factor of 2.88. There are no votes in attacking them.

These 175,000 asylum-seekers are kept in camps or state-provided accommodation awaiting reviews of their cases. These reviews can take years. It's not the UN's refugee charter that needs reform. It's Cruella's home office procedures and some respect for truth and humanity over attempts to win votes through political stunts.