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Farmers' agitation: Will the Gandhian tag stick?

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Whether it is the media or the intelligentsia or government – myth-making seems necessary to control the prevailing discourse. And in India it is doubly significant, for we live in a land of myths. Now that the protesting farmers at the borders of Delhi have gone back home after having secured their chief goal, attempts have been made in certain

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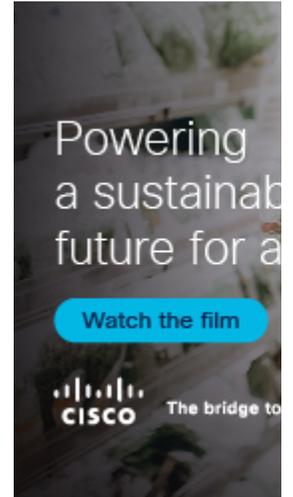
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quarters to build up a myth in order to glorify the event and have it etched in positive terms in public memory. For this purpose, the myth of Gandhian Satyagraha is sought to be foisted on the farmers' agitation. Paeans are being sung about it but will this Gandhian tag stick is the big question.

The concept of satyagraha is a lofty one and is based upon morals and values. In his statement before the Disorders Inquiry Committee on Jan. 5, 1920, Gandhi had said about satyagraha: "Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force. In the application of satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and compassion. And patience means self-suffering." So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself. It is widely known that Gandhi took truth as the end and non-violence as the means. However, the way truth and non-violence have been ascribed to the recent agitation does not seem to conform to the Gandhian principles.

The farm union leaders point out that theirs was a non-violent agitation

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throughout its span. Now, Gandhian framework of Satyagraha was based on the spiritual approach – to cleanse the soul through fasting or bearing the cane or bullet charge of the colonial regime without retaliating in kind. It laid emphasis on tormenting the self rather than the other to exert moral pressure on the adversary to change his heart. In the case of the farmers' agitation, even if we leave out the sporadic attacks in which the hand of a police personnel was chopped off, or a labourer tortured to death, the element of violence is writ large over the entire canvas of the agitation. We saw how for more than a year, the farmers stayed put at the borders of Delhi, putting to inconvenience thousands of daily commuters living in the vicinity or the travelers from far-off places who had to visit Delhi. How many patients might have died while being transported to Delhi hospitals due to jam at the borders is anyone's guess.

The industries in those areas were mostly closed rendering jobless the workforce. These innocent workers were not the colonial lackeys but they suffered due to the whims of the farm union leaders. A number of times, the locals protested but did not get any succor. The height of violence was reached when using tractors as bulldozers, the farmers stormed the Red Fort and did the unthinkable. With

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these facts on the table, how can one argue that the protests were non-violent? With the government still not using violence to stall the stormtroopers, one wonders who really was non-violent. Just compare it to the Chauri Chaura incident in which when some satyagrahis killed the colonial sepoy, Gandhi abandoned the non-cooperation movement.

The second important attribute of truth is the end which satyagraha seeks to achieve. The myth-makers would believe the truth to be on their side. However, the truth value was taken away from this "satyagraha" because the farmers all along insisted on scrapping the laws before they agreed to end the agitation. The government did try to convince them, but when such a pre-condition was laid down, logic was held hostage which hardly paid tribute to truth. If frank and sincere discussions had been held with the press covering the talks, we would have been better assured of the search for truth. Instead, whenever some unsavoury incident involving farmers was pointed out, farm leaders would simply deny the involvement of farmers!

Truth was also not being observed when it was claimed to be the agitation of farmers of India as a whole. The protesting farmers were mainly from Punjab, joined later by farmers from the



Jat community of Haryana and U.P. Clearly, the caste factor worked which Gandhi would not have approved of. Even the tenant farm workers of Punjab who mainly belonged to lower castes did not join in sizeable numbers unless otherwise brought in by their landlords. Thus, it was mainly the show of big landlords who could leave the regular agricultural work to the workers and stay put at the Delhi border. The scrapping of the farm laws suited big farmers and arhtiya community. The lavish langar and amenities provided free of cost were financed by them and certain NGOs. Compare it to the Gandhian satyagraha when Gandhi would choose to starve himself.

Truth again became the casualty at the hands of our opposition parties. It is known that almost all parties had put the abrogation of the colonial-era mandi system in their manifestoes and yet they changed stand overnight. It is the irony of the Indian democratic system that when a party is in opposition, it can simply deny or distort what was said in its manifestoes. The politicians instilled in farmers the feeling of distrust towards the government. Accusing the government of letting loose a reign of oppression through lathi charge, teargas, even firing and blowing up the figure of deaths to 700 was not factually correct. The daily



newspapers reported a fraction of these deaths due to old age, cold, corona or other diseases. The sympathizers of the farmers' agitation need to shun their biased views in the interest of smooth working of democracy.



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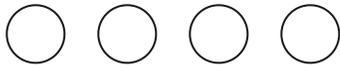
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