

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



Chowkidar? Protecting Who from Whom?

Chowkidars, as we understand, are watchmen, whose services are hired by people who need protection. And, of course, different people need protection for different reasons. But what kind of protection must the head of the country provide, and to who, and from whom? The Constitution of India proclaims that we, the people of India, have solemnly constituted ourselves into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic. So clearly, the Constitutional imperative is for those in governance to protect people from want, starvation, violations of bodily integrity, targeting as a community, discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex, sexual orientation, ableism, ageism, or any other axis, violation of freedom of speech and expression, among other things.

But what we have seen in the last five years is a grand display, at the national level, of the practice of hiring chowkidars by the rich and powerful'. And for this reason, the BJP's 2019 election campaign with a video on the theme '*Main Bhi Chowkidar Hun*' (*MBCH*) exhorting everybody to protect the nation from terrorism, corruption, dirt and social evils, sounds so hollow. The video, in fact, includes the Statue of 'Unity' of Vallabhbhai Patel as requiring protection, and ironically there is news streaming in that the workers who are maintaining the statue remain unpaid, although Rs 650 crore has been kept for the maintenance of the project for the next 15 years. This is apart from the fact that public sector undertakings ONGC, IOCL, BPCL, HPCL and OIL contributed to the construction of the statue from their CSR funds, leading to a rap from the CAG? What does protection of this Statue of Unity then symbolize? What kind of chowkidar is he that causes ONGC to drown in debt, by forcing it to acquire a non performing gas block from Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation for 8000 crores?

By the *MBCH* campaign, Modi is, in fact, re-affirming the protection of an entity called the nation -which is about an imagined community with trappings of caste class, and sex superiority — and not the protection of the republic whose Constitution of India binds him to uphold and protect the values of sovereignty, socialism, secularism, and democracy, which means right of the people constituted into a sovereign republic to life and livelihood, to food, to freedom of speech and expression, to decide their own destiny. And when Modi has exhorted people to also be chowkidars, he is, in fact, exhorting people to serve the rich, as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd has suggested in his article which sharply points out that only the rich have chowkidars in general, and it is exactly the rich in India who have a chowkidar in Modi.

For who has Modi protected but the Ambanis, by circumventing due process in arriving at the Rafale deal? (Incidentally, the then Defence Minister, the late Parrikar, was inaugurating a



mobile fish stall in Goa on the day the deal was inked) Why, as a result, the Ambanis are reported to have even got a favourable tax settlement in France, while the common people of the Indian Republic such as small vendors, workers in the informal sector, local artisans, continue to be milked for revenue with all kinds of policies and taxes –direct and indirect, the ill conceived demonetization and GST being prominent among them.

What kind of a chowkidar is Modi, that he has not protected people from pollution and instead presided over legislation like the National Waterways Act and Sagar Mala Projects that provide grist for the coal mines and coal berths for the Adanis and the Jindals, and pull away rivers from sustainable use by local people? What kind of a chowkidar has he been to ink bilateral and multilateral agreements with foreign countries on almost every trip abroad, without consulting the people, specially farmers and fishing communities who pay the price by way of loss of land, resources and livelihood?

What kind of a chowkidar has he been that he has increased insecurity amongst the minoritised peoples of this country, who have to look over their backs to see who is watching what they eat, what food they store at home, their religiosity, or their agnosticism, or their atheism? What kind of chowkidars are they who make a mockery of the Constitution and provide for 10% reservation for the upper castes? What kind of chowkidars are they who reinforce the barriers to social mobility even in the villages that they call model villages through predicating the benefits of a model village on forced performance of caste based occupations, thereby protecting the status quo of casteism? Even if the social evils they claim to protect people from, be casino gambling and the like, then, is the slogan supposed to be creating an auditory and optical illusion when casinos are thriving in Goan rivers, with more in the pipeline near the Mopa Airport and along the proposed marinas?

What kind of chowkidars are they who take away the very lives and livelihoods of the people they are supposed to protect with unsought weapons of infrastructure like highways, flyovers, bridges, and berths, that are but a facilitation for quick transportation of the mega-traders' goods and a passport to rampant destruction and disappearance of little states like Goa? By fomenting a development politics that creates an invasion with uncalled-for infrastructure that in turn creates a physical as well as a demographic imbalance in Goa? What kind of chowkidars are they who refuse to recognize the need for special status for a state like Goa that is at a different historical juncture and is facing the prospect of being wiped out of existence?

Are we being presented with a macho imagination of 56-inch chests, swelling with pride as they see the outcome of the hatred they have fomented, through mob lynchings and rapes. This is nationalism, and this nationalism is different from sovereignty. Sovereignty is about

the right to self determination of peoples, not about vanquishing imagined 'national' enemies without and within, by surgical strikes, making them disappear, arresting them under a draconian law like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, instead of repealing that law.

And while all this discussion is on about chowkidars, no one is talking of homemaking and survival work. You cannot value protection above survival work. Homes in India have to have food on their table. This includes subsistence cultivation for many, and such survival activities have to be recognized in order to prevent displacement which happens without an inventory of the resources and skills available in any place, and a sustainable use of these. Both protection and survival work are important. Prime Ministers and Governments are not expected to affirm survival of the fittest, but survival assistance and protection to the ones that need it.

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