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Greenpeace India isn't anti-national

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Greenpeace India has been in the news repeatedly in recent weeks. It is unusual for a campaigning organization to feature in all mainstream news channels over a prolonged period. The reason for this unsolicited publicity was the totally unprecedented action of the Government of India, to prevent Priya Pillai, a campaigner with Greenpeace India, from boarding her flight to London. Priya was scheduled to speak to a group of British parliamentarians about the ecological and social disruption that would be caused if Essar, a UK-listed company, was allowed to do mining in Mahan region of Madhya Pradesh. When Pillai took the government to court for this violation of her right to travel and freedom of speech, the government, in what must be one of the most convoluted pieces of logic in recent times, argued that Pillai's submission to UK parliamentarians could invoke sanctions against India and that dissent was okay if it was carried out only within the country.

Fortunately the court saw through this argument and in a landmark judgement, cleared both Priya and Greenpeace (GP) India, upheld their constitutional rights, and clarified that dissent did not constitute being anti-national. However, the incident unleashed a veritable barrage of debate – from those who protested this assault on democracy, to those who spouted venom against all these “dangerous anti-national groups”. Just a few months before this, similar controversy had broken out when GP India and many other groups were targeted by the Intelligence Bureau, which argued that their activities against coal mining, nuclear power stations etc were costing India 2-3 per cent GDP points, and that foreign forces were behind this. Soon after GP India's access to Greenpeace International funds was blocked. Here too, the court intervened on a petition by GP India, judging that there was no basis for the block.

We are seeing repeated attempts by the Indian government to intimidate that part of civil society which has the guts to challenge it on matters of development and governance. Naming and shaming, selective leaks to the media, direct and indirect warnings, attacks on fund flows and tax exemption status – these and other methods



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warnings, attacks on land rights and tax exemption status in these and other instances have been used by a government that appears to be increasingly paranoid about allowing freedom of speech and dissent. It is this that we need to examine and remain alert to as responsible citizens engaged in these issues.

While in this instance it is GP India that has been mainly targeted, the attempt to muffle dissent is not limited to one organization or regime. Several groups, including a number of international NGOs active in India, have been told in one way or the other to 'behave', or else.

One must add that this kind of intimidation did not start with the BJP. Two years back the UPA government tried blocking the fund-flow of the campaign group INSAF, only to be defeated in court. Indira Gandhi's Congress government's suspension of civil rights during the infamous political emergency is, of course, the darkest such period. But since then, governments have been more circumspect about muzzling dissent and freedom of speech. With the BJP coming into power with such a brute majority, and wanting to fast-track industrialization at any cost, there are ominous signs that such restraint might no longer apply.

Regardless of the 'victory' in these cases, clearly the government at the centre has not yet given up; for instance GP India has been targeted over the last few months by the Income Tax authorities. The more sinister side of the trend is intimidation, spreading falsehoods and creating bogeys. One of the favourite tactics is to label groups as 'anti-national', something that has always been easy in India if the relevant organization is protesting against 'development' projects and taking foreign funds.

The 'foreign-funded' bogey has also to be challenged for what it is, a tactic to divert public attention away from the governance and developmental failures of the state. GP India has repeatedly shown that the majority of its money is generated within India, from thousands of individual Indians, but both media and government have chosen to downplay this.

And if a 'sinister foreign hand' is indeed involved, which one is it: the one that forces the Indian government to relax its labour and environmental standards, and allow corporations to ride rough-shod over the human rights of Adivasis and farmers and fisherfolk and Dalits; or the one that helps civil society protect these rights?

The 'anti-national' bogey has already been exposed as being completely hollow. Peoples' movements and civil society organisations that challenge a model of development entailing massive environmental damage and social disruption are asking the right questions. They have shown that there are far more responsible ways to achieve food, energy, housing, and livelihood security. GP India, for instance, has energized a full village using decentralized renewable sources, in Bihar. It has shown how rooftop solar power can meet a substantial part of Delhi's needs. And hundreds of other organisations are demonstrating such sustainable, equitable models in all sectors (see www.vikalpsangam.org).

INDIAN SUPPORT

Greenpeace and Greenpeacers have been maliciously painted as dubious entities intent on damaging 'national interests'. A quick survey will reveal an extraordinary array of men and women, young and old from every conceivable walk of life, who are part of this global commitment to save the earth and those who dwell on it. These are truly eco-warriors who are willing to take impossible risks, face violence and jail sentences, to save whales, battle powerful corporations in the Arctic and the Amazon, challenge governments to act on climate change, stand up to sustain the ecological basis of life. They have long argued what governments are only now waking up to, that humanity is on a dangerous collision course with the only earth we have, and drastic corrective steps have to be taken.

For us, as former and current chairs of the Greenpeace India Board, it would be true to say that as citizens with a conscience, there was no escape from standing up to the predatory combination of corporate commercial interests in collusion with governments, who were totally exploiting and decimating our fragile ecosystem and displacing millions of people, all in the name of 'development'. We have done this with several organisations, GP India being one of them.

The search for solutions has led us to make common cause with others with shared similar concerns – both in India and abroad. This indeed is the true meaning and the power of globalization, *not* the wholesale take-over of our lives by global corporations and finance. The growing imperative of global warming and climate change was an added urgency which drew us from our different spheres, to becoming part of one global Greenpeace, an entity which demonstrated courage, conviction and strategic vision to challenge both governments and corporations the world over. And to make this challenge based on a philosophical vision of non-violence – our credo in Greenpeace being NVDA

based on a philosophical vision of non-violence – our ideas in Greenpeace being non-violent [or non-violent direct action].

Finally, it is Greenpeace’s core principle NOT to accept financial support from corporates or from government, that greatly attracts us. The founding fathers and mothers saw both these entities as those primarily responsible for massive environmental degradation and destruction worldwide. Instead they went to the people – Greenpeace is basically a member-driven organisation – and herein lies our intrinsic strength. Far more than the 70 per cent of our financial support that flows from ordinary folks like you and me, it is the power of this collective voice of the people of India that will ensure the conservation of our precious heritage and natural resources. Figures just released have reinforced our sense, that despite, or because of, this recent crackdown by government, the public expressed their unequivocal support for the work of GP India, by registering a *rise* in the quantum of financial contributions.

It is important to locate our many personal decisions, trajectories and stories within the larger framework of economic, political and ecological battles which are today being fought not just across India, but across many parts of the world. We are proud to be associated with this and other organizations that are asking the right questions, and showing that there are much more sustainable and just ways of meeting human needs. We are simply fulfilling our responsibilities, enjoined upon us by the Indian constitution and even more so by the fact of being human beings, of protecting democracy and human rights, and the ecological basis of all life.

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