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EARLIER IN TEHELKA

Tehelka Magazine, Vol 4, Issue 44, Dated Nov 17, 2007

Will The Nation Stand Up?

Public individuals and corporations in India should be ashamed of their silence

KUNAL BASU

Writer

IN 1985, UNRULY students at Columbia University, Cornell and Syracuse set up shantytowns on their campuses that resembled poor black settlements in South Africa, and demanded their university divest funds from companies that did business with the apartheid regime. Companies like Pepsi, General Motors, Nestlé, Citibank, Mobil, and Union Carbide. Within a month, the campus fire had raged like an inferno through America: ordinary citizens, faith leaders and unions echoed the divestment cry. It was the single biggest push, Desmond Tutu said later, that was needed to topple the white regime. More than 100 companies were forced by their shareholders and customers to leave, and the capital flight was estimated to be around \$10 billion. Apartheid South Africa and Gujarat — the similarities are striking. Both purveyors of surging economies, both rotten to the core: proud owners of brute power based on false logic (White Supremacy and Hindutva), and machineries that work best when there are people to kill and murderers to hide. Both with a middle class that was in perpetual denial, politicians who danced the polka at election time, and a few conscientious objectors. There is a key difference, of course. South Africa had the ANC; a Mandela is yet to be born in the land of the Mahatma.

The Sensex is shameless. In the very week that we heard Bajrangji boast about the womb murder on TEHELKA tapes, it climbed to an obscene 20,000 points. Actually, it tells a poignant tale: we are no longer a civilisation, just an economy, an 'emerging economy' as experts would have us believe. Year after year in Oxford where I teach, I meet the emerging citizens — those that make their parents proud by earning foreign degrees, and none among them would dream of building a shantytown that resembled the burnt hovel of Naroda Patiya. Give them a hint, and they'd rattle off the names of the top ten Indian billionaires; few would've heard of Teesta Setalvad — the pride of a victory on the cricket pitch far exceed the pride at justice delivered.

Illustration: Anand Naorem

Just as the companies were forced to leave South Africa, kicking and screaming against their will, it's time to hold them culpable for their presence in Gujarat — both Indian and foreign firms. What does Ratan Tata have to say about the first genocide on Indian soil? Why has Mukesh Ambani, the richest man in the world, displayed such poverty of words? Where have all the 'leaders' of corporate India vanished when we are at a crossroads? How much business risk is involved in uttering disgust at inhumanity? If the example of the divestment movement is any measure, it's the grassroots that have to lead, to take the fight from Parliament Street to Dalal Street.

Forget the likes of Tatas and Ambanis, the sound of silence has been deafening. What about those whose names linger forever on the lips of both the victims and the perpetrators? Why hasn't Amitabh Bachchan spoken up? Why hasn't Lata Mangeshkar? Why has the Master Blaster chosen not to unzip his kits? If they aren't a part of Civil Society, then to which society do they belong? Shah Rukh Khan might be 'too handsome to be in politics,' is he too handsome too to lash out against those who regret killing just a few hundred and not a thousand innocents?

It isn't unusual for mega stars to make major noise about injustice Marlon Brando boycotted the Oscars in 1972, and sent a Native American woman in his place to denounce the genocide of indigenous peoples. The winner of the best actor award for The Godfather showed he was a true Shahenshah when push came to shove. Not counting the likes of

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Dylan and Baez — products of rebellion themselves — successful artists have time and again walked on fire and paid the price. Chaplin had to leave Hollywood because he fought McCarthy; Nadine Gordimer, Pedro Almodóvar, Garcia Marquez, Arundhati Roy, have all erred on the right side of the cost-benefit equation of protest.

THERE'S NOTHING more shameful than to be impartial at the time of cholera. Remember Tommie Smith and John Carlos? In 1968 in Mexico City when the Star-Spangled Banner was playing, they raised their black-gloved fists from the medal stand to salute a martyred Martin Luther King Jr and the Civil Rights Movement, and were crowned not simply the fastest men in the world, but as icons of their age. While it's heart-warming to hear that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has denounced the demons of Gujarat, we are still waiting for quite a few big guns to fire. It's time for a Sen-Naipaul treatise to be hand-delivered to Raisina Hill; for the 'Coffee' and 'Rendezvous' shows to invite the real heroes of our society — the likes of Ashish Khetan; having done the patriotism bit, for AR Rehman to now set *Inqilab Zindabad* to tune.

But why do we need the stars? First, as the much flaunted 'glue' to our national identity in post-colonial times, they themselves should be concerned if there's risk of that glue wearing off. Also, there is no denying the shock, and (hopefully) dawn of good sense if Tendulkar, Bachchan, Mangeshkar, Ambani and others were to write an open letter to their fellow citizens saying they were pained by the suffering of innocent people. In the absence of a god, maybe the demigods could do some good. It could tilt the balance a wee bit away from pure demagoguery. Yes, they'd have to bear some risk: burning of movie halls where their films are screened, a sudden wave of booing from the crowd, a drop in share price, irate demonstrations before their homes — the kind of things that Aamir Khan had to endure following his public stand on the Narmada dam. But then, why shouldn't they take the risk? Why shouldn't they put their mouths where their money comes from — from the wretched of India? Why should all the risk be borne by a young journalist, recently married and with a young child? Why should the sword hang on him when a slip wouldn't merit more than a few lines in the papers?

As in a bomb blast, it's the aftermath which is crucial — what's lost, what can be and should be recovered, what precautions, and how soon justice. And so the TEHELKA probe should unleash forces that have hitherto lain dormant. It must pit collective goodwill against the masters of subterfuge. It's important to keep plugging for public protests, divestments, judicial probes — fighting silence with shock. It's vital to go over the top. The alternatives might be closer than we think — Satyagraha or civil war.

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