

Guilty by Association!

PK VIJAYAN

Vol. 48, Issue No. 40, 05 Oct, 2013

P K Vijayan is with the Department of English, Hindu College, University of Delhi.

G N Saibaba, a faculty member of the department of English, Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi, is the latest victim of the Indian state's policy of undermining all radical opposition as "guilty by association".

On 12 September 2013, the university residence of G N Saibaba, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi (DU), was raided by a police team comprising of the Maharashtra police, the Delhi police and personnel of some unidentified intelligence agencies. The "search warrant" for the raid stated that the residence was being used to deposit "stolen property". As it turned out, the raid was actually to search for any material that would link Saibaba to the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI (Maoist)]. By their own admission, the police had hoped to establish that Saibaba was in communication with the Maoist leadership, that he is the coordinator of the urban activities of the said organisation, and other such points of culpability.

In the days following this raid, the media have been abuzz with all kinds of "information" provided by the Gadchiroli police, most of which (subtly and not so subtly) imply Saibaba's guilt - but none of these reports, and the documents provided by the police that they cite, has actually managed to prove anything conclusively. The obvious reason for this is, of course, that the good doctor is not actually guilty of any of the ridiculous charges - whether of holding "stolen property" or of engaging in "internet chat sessions" with the top leadership of the CPI (Maoist)! Nevertheless, the whisper-cum-smear campaign being conducted by the police and intelligence agencies in the media, has had enough success for reporters to repeatedly ask Saibaba whether he is, in fact, in touch with the Maoist leadership; whether he is a member of the central committee of the party as claimed by the police; whether his political activities are in fact aimed at furthering the Maoist cause, and so on. One particular refrain amongst some journalists was: "There must be something the police have on him, else why would they come all the way from Gadchiroli to raid his house in Delhi?" In other words, it is clear that the police rumour-mills are working with such zeal to create an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt that (as they hope) when they do attempt to arrest Saibaba, they will be able to do so on even the flimsiest of grounds, without too much protest in the media. Rather fortunately for Saibaba, large sections of the media have remained relatively immune to this diabolically Goebbelsian attempt at manipulating it, and

through it the public opinion at large.

Goebbelsian Method

However, the strength of the Goebbelsian method lies in its persistence: Joseph Goebbels is himself reported to have said: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." This is neither a new opinion nor one particularly unique to Goebbels: personalities as varied as Vladimir Lenin and George W Bush have expressed similar views. But Goebbels is reported to have gone on to say (and this is worth quoting in full detail:

The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State. It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and a psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. They are mere words, and words can be molded until they clothe ideas in disguise. Propaganda has only one object, to conquer the masses. Every means that furthers that aim is good; every means that hinders it is bad ... You can make a man believe anything if you tell it to him in the right way ... Nothing is easier than leading the people on a leash. I just hold up a dazzling campaign poster and they jump through it...The people must begin to think as one unit, react as such, and put themselves at the disposal of the government wholeheartedly...To belabour the people so long until they succumb to us.

This is reportedly an excerpt from *The Goebbels Diaries*, collected by Ludwig Lochner. Whether or not Goebbels actually said all this, it certainly captures the modus operandi of the Indian state in general, and of the police in this particular instance. There is good reason to believe that, in the absence of any real proof of criminal culpability, the state's whisper-cum-smear campaign will be persisted with till a suitably hostile environment is created, in the media as well as in the public imagination - then it will swoop in for the kill.

A crucial factor in making this happen is the psychological power of association. It began with the arrests of Hem Mishra and Prashant Rahi in Gadchiroli, on the grounds that they were associated with the Maoists. Because Saibaba is known to be associated with Hem Mishra, who is alleged to have confessed his association with the Maoists, it "naturally" meant that, by the inexorable logic of association, Saibaba too was associated with the Maoists. These series of associations are also extended in other ways: by suggesting, for instance, that Saibaba is known to the arrested Maoist leader Kobad Ghandy; or by highlighting his vociferous criticism of police and paramilitary action, in the name of tackling Maoist "insurgency", against tribal communities in central India. By repeatedly locating Saibaba in an associative context of Maoist personalities and incidents in the media and in the public realm, a Pavlovian process of conditioning is initiated, whereby even the

most critically alert consumers of this propaganda slowly, even in spite of themselves, get conditioned into associating his name with Maoism and the Maoists. Repetitious association gradually overcomes and displaces any empirical or logical challenges to the insinuations and implications registered by the process of association, permitting these to emerge as the “truth”.

This is a particularly effective method in a nation in which associational forms like kinship, caste, region, religion, ethnic affiliation, etc, have traditionally been the primary means of identifying and of identification. Not only do these forms locate identity through association, but they also generate specific expectations of conduct, values, affiliations and even social rank through that process of association. Thus for instance, Muslims are often associated with Pakistan, leading to a general expectation of either communalism or anti-nationalism or both from this mythologized figure. In short, this particular process of association is intended to generate prejudice through the production of a mythology of associations. In this particular instance, the mythology is not that of “Islamic terror” but of the new “threat to national security” in the form of the “red terror” of Maoism. By locating Saibaba in this mythology, it is quickly forgotten that he is also identified by his colleagues and students as a dedicated and committed teacher, as an active and engaged researcher in Dalit literature, as an activist of long standing and considerable repute, nationally and internationally, on issues of human, democratic and civil rights, and as a vocal and insistent defender of the rights of tribal communities to their land and livelihood – in short, as a person with an identity and a public image completely at odds with that being constructed for him now by the police and the intelligence agencies.

The last sphere of his involvement is of particular significance: tribal lands have been under threat for several years now, ever since Indian and multinational corporates turned their collective rapacious gaze on the wealth of minerals and other resources that lie buried under tribal lands. It is now a well-known fact that hundreds of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were illegally signed by the Indian government with a host of such corporates, to permit them access to these lands to mine and expropriate the minerals – illegally, because these lands are under the protection of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. The only obstacle to what has been described by a Government of India report critical of the government's own policies, as “the biggest grab of tribal lands after Columbus”, is the resistance by the tribal communities themselves. This resistance has taken many forms, only one of which is the armed resistance of the Maoists. But by labeling them all Maoists, and by associating any form of protest with Maoism, the powers that be have aimed to undermine all forms of protest. This has now taken on a note of urgency: after all, next year is election year.

Vilification and Demonisation

Saibaba is the latest victim of this policy of undermining all opposition as “guilty by association” – but he is certainly not the first to suffer from this politics: another good

doctor, Binayak Sen too was one such vociferous protester, and worked actively to bring medical help to the abjectly poor and backward tribal communities. He too was subjected to precisely this form of character-assassination and then found guilty of being a “Maoist sympathiser”. The state then proceeded to level so many charges against him that this good doctor now, although out on bail after several years in jail, has withdrawn completely from public life, and is spending his time in legal battles. The state has effectively silenced him. No doubt Saibaba too faces the same future. These two individuals are themselves only the more well-known of thousands of others, mostly tribal people but many non-tribals too, who have been implicated in false cases, arrested on fabricated charges, held without proper legal defence, and in many cases, subjected to brutal custodial torture. The case of Soni Sori, who too was similarly charged and subjected to savage rape and torture in custody, is a vivid reminder of the viciousness with which the state can act.

Saibaba happens to suffer from 90% physical disability: he would be particularly vulnerable to such viciousness. It would be easy to forget this, along with many of the other ways in which he is defined as an individual much respected and liked in his community of students and peers, as well as admired for the courage and forthrightness with which he has spoken and written on a variety of issues, including communalism, caste injustice, reservation policies, gender and sexual violence, etc, and not just against the excesses of the state. If his voice is silenced, especially through the diabolical process of constructing a mythology around him that will render ineffective any proof positive to the contrary, it will be a sad day for democracy in India. The fight to protect the rights and liberties of Saibaba must in this sense be understood as an important battle in the larger war against precisely this form of vilification and demonisation, that permits the state to manipulate the opinions and perceptions of its subjects.