

The Politics of Lies

Mudrarakshas

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Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, famous for two years for maintaining a smug silence, even during the most terrible and destructive incident in our country's history, is now speaking, and with such vigor!

During the past two decades the Congress(I) Party has nourished a flock of flatterers, and they are all talking, too, just like Congressis did after the Allahabad High Court brought down its decision against Indira Gandhi. At that time the leaders of Congress herded in people by trucks and busses to the Prime Minister's Residence, and the style and tone of their speeches to them in support of Indira Gandhi is the exact same style and tone of the speeches they are giving now in support of Narasimha Rao.

Why is this happening? Because on 16 June the stock broker Harshad Mehta declared that on the fourth and fifth of November, 1991, he gave Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao a bribe of ten million rupees.

The Prime Minister's recent statements are strange, ludicrous and even childish. He said he was like Sita ji and had just come out of his trial by fire. First, no one laid a charge against Sita's character before her trial by fire. Since Ram was a symbol of social and political leadership, he himself chose that path as a way of clearing up the suspicions of the common people. Narasimha Rao, however, is making such statements in order to confuse the people, and it is offensive for him to invoke the name of Sita in the context of a securities scandal.

The alibi used by the Prime Minister and his supporters is so weak. What kind of an alibi is it to say that at the time he was allegedly given

the money he was not even at home, he was someplace else. In criminal law that has to be the lamest, and most common, alibi. How often has it been “proven” to criminal lawyers and judges that at the time the crime was committed the murderer or the thief was at his usual movie theatre, in a different city or even in the police station itself!

And the comments of the Prime Minister himself hardly have the ring of truth about them. For example, who is going to believe that in the Prime Minister’s Office documents are not safe for more than two weeks. And if that is in fact the case, then the only conclusion one can reach is that every two weeks the confusion in the Prime Minister’s Office becomes so chaotic that no one can find anything anymore. Besides, everyone knows that every governmental office is brimming with useless documents five to ten years old.

All these concerns, however, are merely fallout from the affair. Something else is most worrisome. The Prime Minister’s supporters have laid the greatest stress on the fact that when a stock broker like Harshad Mehta makes a charge against a respectable personage like the Prime Minister, then the former should never be believed. The reputation of someone involved in a securities scandal is nothing compared to that of the Prime Minister.

But why should that be when high officials of the nation’s most important financial institutions, including the State Bank of India and the Reserve Bank, were arrested? Why were criminal proceedings brought against them? Why were they sent to jail? And why did the Parliamentary Investigative Committee include even the Prime Minister’s son in the scope of its hearings?

The reputation of the criminal has no bearing on the case. It is nonsense to refuse to learn something about the crime from him or to question the reputation of his partner. When a thief is arrested, his partner, who bought the stolen goods, is often arrested on the basis of the testimony and positive identification of the thief himself, and the police constable, too, is arrested for taking his cut of the theft in the form of a bribe. When those two are arrested, they are not allowed to defend themselves by saying that the reputation of the thief is beneath contempt and his testimony therefore is inadmissible.

The same thing occurred during the Bofors Affair. That time, however, the charges were laid not by someone involved in the scandal but by journalists such as N. Ram and the former Finance Minister. The ques-

tion of reputation did not arise. Instead of a systematic investigation of the charges, however, the government of Rajiv Gandhi claimed that the charges were only political manoeuvres, and at every step of the way they obfuscated the situation.

The current Prime Minister is making the same allegations. His pronouncements about taking a bribe of ten million rupees sound like those of a spoiled brat. In one speech he vigorously stated, "It does not stick to me. (*mujh par cipki nahin.*)" One should hardly expect a Prime Minister to make such a ludicrous statement. It is acceptable to an extent for someone else to say that on his behalf, but if the person suspected of taking a bribe himself says that, then it seems even more so that just the opposite is the case.

That's not all. The Prime Minister is giving this whole affair the same kind of political spin that Rajiv Gandhi did to the Bofors Affair. He and his party are alleging that this is an elaborate plot hatched by the Bharatiya Janata Party in order to destabilize the Government. People will not yet have forgotten that the Congress(I) and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had often stated that the Bofors Affair, which amounted to over 5,000 crores of rupees, was brought about in order to destabilize the nation and the Government.

That is a peculiar statement. This current scandal has involved the son of the Prime Minister himself, a number of banks, such as the Reserve Bank of India, the State Bank of India, the Syndicate Bank, Canara Bank and Yuko Bank. It has involved the former Petroleum Minister Satya Prakash Malviya, and current Cabinet Ministers such as P. Cidambaram and V. Shankaranand. The Joint Parliamentary Committee has laid the blame for this scandal on the negligence of the current Finance Minister. Isn't it particularly ridiculous, therefore, to claim that it was a plot to destabilize the country? And even if we were to believe that, then we would also have to believe that in this plot to destabilize the country the major player by far was the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and that it is his own economic policy that is destabilizing the country.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee itself, while investigating this securities scandal, made a comment on the irresponsible statements of Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. Last year he stated that the Government's liberal economic policies had caused the sudden rise in share prices. That statement had a profound effect on the stock market and led

directly to unprecedented scandals.

Expressing its dissatisfaction with Manmohan Singh's statement, the Joint Parliamentary Committee stated that he forgot the influence on the country's economy that any statement of his could have. This comment by the Committee is extraordinary. Its clear denotation is that the particularly irresponsible statement of the Finance Minister brought about the conditions in the country's economy that made this enormous scandal possible. If we believe the Joint Parliamentary Committee, then it is P.V. Narasimha Rao's government itself that brought about this scandal and laid the foundation for the destabilization of the country.

Now Mulayam Singh Yadav, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and Subrahmanyam Swami have jumped into the mess. Mulayam Singh is supporting Congress(I). He supported the Congress(I) candidate in Lucknow's mayoral election. And even more so than Congress(I) itself, he backed the so-called Soma Yagna that P.V. Narasimha Rao had Candraswami perform and during which the proclamation was made that a temple would be built on the very same spot that the Babri Masjid had stood. That is the Mulayam Singh who sides with P.V. Narasimha Rao in the Harshad Mehta affair.

Subrahmanyam Swami stated that Harshad Mehta gave the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party three crores of rupees. Everyone knows that if Swami ji has a falling out tomorrow with P.V. Narasimha Rao, he will say he got the money from Rao.