

While we were silent

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A story of destructive governance and citizens who did not speak out

First, the UPA came for the roads sector. They destroyed contracting. They slowed down road construction. They left highways half built. We did not speak out. After all, the only reason the NDA could have started the golden quadrilateral is because they wanted to spread Hindutva.

Next, they came for the airline sector. They let Air India suck more money from taxpayers. They let bad regulation destroy the private sector. They let crony banking sustain bad bets. They ensured India would never be an aviation hub. We did not speak out. After all, flying is what birds do, not humans. Besides, aviation is bad for climate change.

Then they came for the power sector. They confused creation of mega capacities with actual generation. They had no rational pricing plans. They were arbitrary in the awarding of licenses. They could not make up their mind whether they wanted to protect the environment or destroy it. We did not speak out. After all, the only power that matters is political. Electricity be damned.

Then they came for education. They promulgated the RTE after 100 per cent enrolment. They expanded capacity, but cut-offs still rose. They regulated in such a way that there was a glut in some subjects and a shortage in others. They confused university buildings with building universities. We did not speak out. After all our, our low quality education left us incapable of speaking out.

Then they came for industry. They turned the clock back in every way and waged open war. Ensure that regulations become more complex and uncertain. Ensure that input costs rise. Ensure crummy infrastructure. Promulgate a land scam policy known as SEZ and sell it as industrial policy. They encouraged FDI. But they forgot which one they wanted: outbound or inbound. But we did not speak out. After all, India is a rural country.

Then they came for employment. There was some growth. But they decided that the only good employment is that which has the hand of the state. So the NREGA's expansion was seen as a sign of success, not failure. By its own logic, if more people need the NREGA, the economy has failed. But we did not speak out. After all, the more people we have dependent on government, the more we think it is a good government.

Then they came for agriculture. First, they create artificial shortages through irrigation scams. Then they have a myopic policy for technology adoption. Then they decide India shall remain largely a wheat and rice economy; we will have shortages for everything else. Then they price everything to produce perverse incentives. But we did not speak out. After all, why worry about food production when the government is giving you a legal right? Is there anything more reassuring than social policy designed by and for lawyers?

Then they came for institutions. They always had. This has been Congress DNA for four decades. They drew up a list of institutions that remained unscathed: Parliament, the IB, bureaucracy and you name it. They then went after those. They used institutions as instruments of their political design. They demoralised every single branch of government. But we did not speak out. After all, this was reform by stealth. Destroy government from within.

Then they came for inflation. They confused a GDP target of 10 per cent with an inflation target. Inflation will come down next quarter, we were told. Then they tried to buy us out. Inflation: no problem. Simply get the government to spend even more. Then they pretended inflation is a problem for the rich. Then they simply stopped talking about it. We did not speak out. After all, for some, inflation is just a number

Then they came for the telecom sector. They got greedy and milked it. They got arbitrary and retrospectively taxed it. But we did not speak out. After all, new communication can be a threat to government. Besides, we can always revert to fixed lines. More digging is good.

Then they came for financial stability. They produced a large deficit. They brought the current account deficit close to an unsustainable point. They nearly wrecked the banking sector. They created every macro-economic instability you can imagine, which makes investment difficult. But we did not speak out. After all, what would you rather have: macro-economic stability or a free lunch?

Then they came for regulation. It was back to the 1970s. More arbitrary regulation is good. More rules are good. Uncertainty makes business more adept. The answer to every administrative problem is enacting a new law. Multiple regulators are good because they represent the diversity of India. We did not speak out. After all, just like the religious confuse piety with mere ritual, the virtuous confuse regulation with outcomes.

Then they came after freedom. They promulgated more restrictive rules for everything: freedom of expression, right to assembly and protest, foreign scholars. They used

sedition laws. They kept the architecture of colonial laws intact. They said they stood against communal forces. But then they let Digvijaya Singh keep the communal pot boiling. They matched BJP's communal politicization of terrorism at every step and then some. We did not speak out. After all, if they are not Hindutva forces, they cannot be a threat to peace and liberty.

Then they came for virtue itself. They preached, from the very summit of power: avoid responsibility. It will always be someone else's fault. They legitimized being corrupt: you are entitled to it if you are the party of the poor. They encouraged subterfuge to the point that members of the cabinet were subverting each other. They pretended that integrity is a word that does not mean anything. To independent thinkers, they said: why think when there is 10 Janpath? We did not speak out. After all, virtue and thinking can both be outsourced.

Then they came for the poor. They visited their houses and slept in their homes. They liked the experience so much they decided to become growth sceptics. Enact policies that keep India in poverty a little longer. But we did not speak out. After all, once the poor have been used as an argument, all else is immobilized.

Then they came for the citizens. They used the secularism blackmail to reduce our choices. If you are not with us you are evil they said. Then they infantilized us. You are not capable of exercising choices so we will make them for you. They acted as if we were so stupid that the three topmost leaders felt no need to justify themselves to us. But we did not speak out. After all we do have the vote.

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