

# 2007: A Time to Reclaim Our Country, Our History, Our Freedom, Our Rights

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The year 2007 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's First War of Independence. It is also the centenary year of Bhagat Singh's birth, and the fortieth anniversary of the Naxalbari rebellion. The Central Committee of the CPI(ML) has called for celebrating the confluence of these three great anniversaries with a countrywide "Our Country, Our History - Our Freedom, Our Rights" campaign. A big Inquilab rally has been planned in Delhi on 23 March, the day Bhagat Singh and his comrades Sukhdev and Rajguru embraced martyrdom seventy-six years ago with the clarion call "Inquilab Zindabad! Samrajyavad Murdabad!" (Long Live Revolution! Down with Imperialism!). The campaign will be aimed at rekindling this spirit of history in the midst of the ongoing popular struggles of the present and for this purpose the campaign will highlight a ten-point people's charter comprising the key demands of these struggles.

Why is it important for us to celebrate this history? The current Indian ruling elite is afraid of, and at any rate uncomfortable with, this history and this is why they want us to forget this history or know it only in a distorted and mutilated manner. So celebrating this history is not just remembering the past but waging a struggle against the present-day rulers who have a different historical inheritance and who want our history to remain subordinated to their history.

British colonialists had dubbed 1857 as a case of 'sepoy mutiny' when fanatic Indian soldiers driven by blind religious passion and hatred had attacked their European officers and other British civilians. They would like us to believe that the mutineers had no sense of what they were doing and were just a bunch of killers who had to be and were brought under control by the superior military and 'civilisational' might of British colonialism. Western historians today are also tempted to see 1857 as a case of 'Islamic jihad' against Christianity and Western civilisation. The official Indian history today does recognise 1857 as the First War of India's Independence, but it does its best to try and suppress the distinguishing features - the militant anti-colonial spirit, the popular participation and the emerging national character - that made the war of 1857 so greatly remarkable.

The insurrection of 1857 had certainly been initiated by the soldiers from the barracks of Bengal, but in no time it had spread not only among armed regiments across the country but most importantly among peasants, small traders and other sections of the Indian people. It was not a revolt of a few disgruntled kings and feudal rulers - rather many kings and feudal rulers collaborated with the British and helped them put down the rebellion. It was not an attempt to restore Muslim rule in India, much less was it an Islamic jihad against Christianity. The majority of the soldiers and the peasants and traders backing them up were Hindus and it was they who got an old and reluctant Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler, to provide a symbolic leadership to the revolt. And the revolt was characterised by its conscious and concrete expressions of unity between the two communities with the rebels defining themselves as 'Hindus and Muslims of Hindustan. In fact, an integral aspect of the new strategy of control forged by the colonialists in response to 1857 was the deliberate fomenting of communal hostilities.

The revolt did not succeed in its goal of overthrowing the British rulers, the mutineers obviously did

not have the kind of organisation and preparation needed for that kind of victory, and the objective conditions too were not ripe enough. But the fact that they succeeded in holding on for nearly two years in different parts of the country clearly shows that the revolt was far from being just a sporadic or accidental outburst of mass anger. History tells us that the mutineers had their own committees which issued directives for the people, they had their own song which emphasised people's unity and the goal of freeing the country from British plunder. The soldiers most of whom were essentially peasants in uniform struck a chord of ready resonance with the peasantry and this gave the whole revolt a powerful peasant content and ensured popular participation on a significant scale. Even militarily the war of 1857 moved on from regular warfare to guerrilla warfare with the British Army holding in large parts of the country "nothing but the towns" while the insurgent armies gradually dissolved into "smaller bodies of from two to six or eight thousand men, acting to a certain degree, independently of each other, but always ready to unite for a short expedition against any British detachment" (Frederick Engels, July 6, 1858). 1857 thus went much farther than being merely a reaction of pre-modern India to British occupation and plunder, it gave us the first glimpse of a modern India in its embryonic stage.

Let us not forget that we are here talking about a period that was indeed quite early for the kind of powerful national liberation struggles that eventually ended the colonial era in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the revolutionary battles of the working people that the world saw in the form of the Paris Commune in 1871, or the workers' and peasants' soviets that appeared in the course of the Russian Revolution in February-November 1917. For colonial India in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the revolt of 1857 had indeed reached an extraordinary height and given the British rulers their first major shock. Benjamin Disraeli who went on to become Prime Minister of Britain in the 1870s told the British parliament on July 27, 1857 that what had been happening in India was far more than a military mutiny, it had all the signs of a national revolt prompting him to deliver a long speech on his "considerations on the decline of the Anglo-Indian Empire."

The British rulers were quick to learn their lessons from the shock of 1857. The East India Company was abolished, changes were made in the mode and method of British rule in India, and in the form of the Indian National Congress the British developed a safety valve mechanism so that India did not explode ever again. From the high of armed insurrection, India had been brought down to the lowest political level of petitioning for petty relief and reforms. For sections of the Indian elite, political awakening may have its genesis in the art of petitioning taught by the British, but the great majority of the Indian people had already made a political beginning with the national revolt of 1857 and all the local revolts that preceded and followed it. In subsequent years, this difference between these two trajectories grew often into sharp contrasts between the revolutionary and reformist schools within the freedom movement.

The difference was not confined to the question of methods of movement, it pervaded the entire understanding of the vision of India, the definition of India's national identity. While the insurgents of 1857 rose against the colonial plunder of India, the Congress essentially saw British colonialism as the harbinger of modernity in India. It saw the plunderer as nurturer and Manmohan Singh acknowledged as much during one of his recent speeches at Oxford University. The ideological predecessors and founders of the Sangh Parivar went one step further and they saw British occupation in terms of liberation of so-called Hindu India from centuries of perceived Islamic domination. This is why the RSS kept aloof from the entire quest for India's independence. This umbilical cord of dependence, this craving for imperialist blessings, continues to define the Congress-BJP attitude to today's American empire-builders, they cannot think of an Indian future beyond the strategic umbrella of American domination, let alone throwing up any kind of resistance or challenge to US imperialism's campaign of global war and global plunder.

The insurgents of 1857 would never brook such bankruptcy that equated independence with a

shameless surrender to and collaboration with imperialist powers. It would have never allowed communal division to determine the history, geography or politics of the country. Bhagat Singh and his comrades resurrected the spirit of 1857 and gave it a firm socialist, anti-imperialist orientation, completing the conceptual transition from Gadar to Inquilab (revolt to revolution). They visualised independence as a combination or convergence of political liberty and social emancipation and when they saw the dominant Congress leadership waver and betray on both scores, they warned us against the consequence of the bhure Angrez or the brown sahibs usurping power and monopolising the fruits of freedom for a few robbing the majority of their resources and rights. Today the brown sahibs in power are naturally mortally afraid of the memories of 1857 and the trail blazed by Bhagat Singh and his comrades. It is not surprising that a police official in Maharashtra should see even the act of selling the books of Bhagat Singh as a criminal offence and act of sedition.

Neither the British nor the Indian rulers could however ever destroy the spirit of 1857 or the legacy of Bhagat Singh. Following Gandhi's withdrawal of the movement after the Chaurichaura incident, peasants have repeatedly organised and revolted under the communist banner. From Tebhaga in Bengal, Telengana in Andhra to Punnapra-Vayalar in Kerala, the history of India's freedom movement was full of glorious instances of peasant power and militancy. The people also never forgot the military tradition of 1857 and just before the British left they were once again confronted with the great naval mutiny of Bombay and the heroic campaign of the Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian National Army. The tragic communal bloodbath and partition of 1947 and the consolidation of a pro-imperialist bourgeois-landlord rule in post-colonial India did mark a setback for the quest for real freedom and democracy, but powered by the relentless and determined struggles of the peasants and workers, the Indian people did not allow the rulers to dictate terms and kept up the revolutionary banner of anti-imperialist resistance and radical social transformation. Forty years ago, Naxalbari signified the most concentrated and courageous expression of this revolutionary quest in post-colonial India.

Like 1857, Naxalbari too did not succeed in winning ultimate victory in the revolutionary campaign it had unleashed, but the fire lit by Naxalbari has definitely turned into a new light for the Indian people to challenge the darkness in which the rulers want to drown the country. It was Naxalbari which taught us to look at the oppressed people not as victims but as fighters and heroes, and rediscover the history of the people by rejecting the history of the rulers.

Today when the rulers have teamed up with the US imperialists and are waging a desperate joint war on our resources and rights, it is surely time for us to rediscover our glorious history and rekindle the great spirit of people's resistance against loot and oppression, injustice and imperialism, Let the imperialists and our rulers tremble before our history, we are here to reclaim our country and our history, secure our freedom and win all our rights. Let us welcome 2007 in all its glory.

### **Ten-Point Campaign Charter**

The people's charter to be highlighted in the course of the campaign will comprise the following major points:

- (i) scrapping of SEZ policy and defence of peasants' inalienable right to cultivable land;
- (ii) stopping peasant suicides and starvation deaths;
- (iii) strict implementation of NREGA, and its extension to the whole of the country on improved terms;

- (iv) legal guarantee for right to education, right to work and right to health;
- (v) restoration of alienated tribal land and rehabilitation of all project-displaced people;
- (vi) embargo on indiscriminate entry of foreign investment, especially in sectors like education and retail trade;
- (vii) regularisation of unorganised workers and guaranteeing their basic rights;
- (viii) end to violence and discrimination against dalits, adivasis, women and minorities and ensuring greater opportunities for all disadvantaged sections;
- (ix) scrapping of black laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act and end to state-sponsored violence against the people like Salwa Judum in Chhatisgarh;
- (x) scrapping of Indo-US nuclear deal and reversal of pro-US foreign policy.

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