

The Weekly

## OBSERVER

## Of global bondage to oil

"You beat your maid with a stone?" my friend asked, partially hearing me.

"No, no-the maid beats my clothes against a stone slab each morning to wash them in India," I told my friend last summer. He raised an eyebrow, "the maid"?

In Canada, human labour is neither cheap nor available. We have machines of the cold heartless variety that run on electrical power and purr softly to the human touch. The down side of this dependence on machine, of course, is the addiction of the West to oil, that precious black blood that powers global economies.

These days, as the global price of oil hovers nervously around the \$100 per barrel mark, this addiction is rearing its ugly head. I hear that gas in the United States has reached around \$3 a gallon at the gas pump; it used to \$2.50 a gallon in 2006.

Perhaps this is the work of a weakening US dollar: since oil is traded in US dollars, as the dollar depreciates, the price of oil will shoot up. Or perhaps it is because oil comes from nations whose supplies are running out even as world demand increases.

Whatever the reason, the world is in a race to shrug off its dependence on a liquid whose supply is dangerously volatile. Much of the supply comes from unstable territory-Nigeria, where oil has triggered civil wars and violence in the oil producing regions; the Middle East, where Kurd-Turkey skirmishes have caused fears of a spill over into the oil producing nations such as Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; Iran, whose drive to acquire nuclear capacity (whether to support its energy needs remains to be seen) is perpetually accompanied by veiled threats from the United

States; Yemen, where a recent attack (on November 6th) on an oil pipeline pushed up global prices; Venezuela, with its strong anti-capitalist roots; and Russia, the second largest exporter of oil, where President Putin is on an autocratic drive to ensure that oil production and pricing are in the hands of the Kremlin.

The supply is not matched by demand, which is rather like a run-away horse with blinkers on. The International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts that the world's demand for oil will increase by 50 - 60% by 2030. Much of this rise will be powered by India and China and their breakneck economic expansions.

That oil is subsidized in India means that oil prices for the common man will not increase any time soon. As one person put it, the government that increases the price of oil will collapse. Thus, the global hike in energy prices will not hamper either India's economic growth or its ever-increasing appetite for energy. Demand for oil from India (and China) has been increasing by 4% every year, about twice as much as in other nations.

On November 30th, the OPEC has decided to increase production of oil in response to the price hike. This is even as oil supplies run down, stocks of natural gas get depleted, and coal, while abundant, comes with severe environmental costs.

In this scenario, which sounds increasingly like an impending crisis, perhaps it is time the West weaned itself off oil and followed conservation policies with a little more commitment. The West needs to ratify international climate change accords instead of debating it. And perhaps it is time for Indians to realize that their lesser dependence on fossil fuels is a blessing in disguise, in a world in bondage to oil.

## What's your opinion on Sanju Baba?

ITIKA SHARMA

The concept of opinion polls in newspapers and TV channels is amusing. Whether these are true voices of the masses or simply the paper/channel putting forward their ideologies in the name of 'people's voice' is certainly debatable. At times these appear to be nothing more than just space and time fillers.

A recent favorite for these columns was the Sanjay Dutt issue. For days together, newspapers published columns quoting 'opinions' of people on the streets and the celebrities about the super star under dark clouds. It is ironical that when Dutt was put behind bars and six years imprisonment was levied on him, these 'opinionated' people gave statements that six years is very long and he had already learnt a lesson. Now when he is out, the same columns read that it is a failure of the system and talk about the thousands of cases pending in the courts and the common men behind bars for similar cases.

So is this concept only a modernized version of scandal mongering? To build a scandal if this happens and to build one if that happens too. Reporters tracking these columns somehow succeed in finding a hoard of masses disagreeing to whatever the situation maybe.

A help that such columns have offered to Dutt is popularity for free. There have been questions ranging from what do you think about Dutt's clothes (that he wore to the court) to the judgment given. A leading newspaper website hosted a poll asking, "The Sanjay Dutt verdict upholds people's belief in judiciary. Agree / Disagree / can't say". Another one has the great question of - Is it his religious actions and consultation with the numerologist that have helped Dutt so far? Agree/ Disagree/ Can't Say. An even more interesting one reads - While playing one on screen, has Sanjay become a khalnayak in real life? Agree/ Disagree/ Can't Say.

The most ironic part of an opinion poll is the 'can't say'. If you cannot say, then what's your opinion? Isn't an opinion poll supposed to put forward an opinion? But then as a time and space filler, "can't say" is certainly an indispensable opinion to hold. These opinion polls have helped Dutt to gain public attention. Every time the case is forgotten and left for the courts to handle, an opinion poll triggered by the media pull the masses attention back to it. Despite comprehending the intensity of the crime he committed, celebrities and even politicians term it as a 'mistake' (in the opinion forums). A logical opinion (A RARE FEATURE) about this case - "It sure is true that actor Sanjay Dutt has suffered a lot for more than 14 years. This is enough for anyone to realize his 'mistake.' And is that not what the judiciary punishes a criminal for?"

## "Gandhian" legacy flourishes with Rahul at helm

NAMITHA VISWANATHAN

Another scion from the Nehru family has taken over the leadership of All India Congress Committee.

Towards the end of September, the Congress party declared that young leaders would be given important posts in the party. Many reshuffles were made, and Rahul made the General Secretary of the AICC. Young leaders like Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot, Priya Dutt, have been inducted into the party. Almost a quarter of the party is now below forty, and many others in their forties. There are also speculations doing the rounds that Rahul Gandhi would be the next Prime Minister in the Congress government, following his family tradition.

It was but natural that the next-in-line Gandhi should enter active politics and take over more difficult jobs, with mother Sonia not becoming popular enough for the party to work wonders in the national elections this time. His brief cameo in the UP elections, though it brought the party no great success, was a springboard for the young leader to prove his leadership qualities and raise his popularity graph among the people of the country. The Congress High Command required a change in strategies to make it gain grounds, and so Rahul was bound to be dragged deeper. He would surely be the one the party is banking on in this

elections-the young face for the middle class to hope from. But nowadays, with coalition governments being more practical as well as likely, the Congress may just be preparing to gain enough seats to reach the majority party mark. It is desperately trying to remain the key player and not just another party.

Rahul had already announced earlier last year in Hyderabad that he was ready to accept responsibilities in the party. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had appreciated him for his contribution in spreading the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to many remote parts of the country, in a 50-minute speech at the AICC session in Delhi on 17 November 2007. Mid-November, Rahul Gandhi also made a speech asking for the party to become 'meritocratic', with advancement being linked to performance, and give opportunities to youngsters. Rahul also appealed for more youth to join the Congress party. But then, the young leader has not been very vociferous about policies and action plans. So his visions (if any) have not become clear enough. He has definitely made enough controversial statements to grant him constant media attention. Like, he is reported to have said that only the practical and verifiable conditions among the 'Ten Commandments' of the Congress should remain in the list. His comment that sycophancy can get no one

anywhere with him, put the party in bad light. The statement apparently implied that the practice is still prevalent. He also said that the Babri Masjid would not have happened if anyone from his family were in power then. Next, addressing a public meeting during the UP assembly elections, he said, "You know that when any member of my family had decided to do anything, he does it...I belong to the family which has never gone back on its words...Be it the freedom struggle, the division of Pakistan or taking India to the 21st century." This created a lot of hullabaloo, because it suggested that partition was because of Congress. During all this, the senior members of the party have come forward to clarify his statements and help the young man walk around his words. The same people who were the advisors of his father Rajiv Gandhi are now with him too.

The country still doesn't know what to expect from him. It's too early to envision him as the next Prime Minister or expect him to bring about major changes in the nation. His great-grandfather Pundit Nehru was a pioneer - a visionary who guided India soon after her independence; his grandmother Indira Gandhi was the iron lady of Indian politics; his father Rajiv Gandhi was a far-sighted but low profile PM; and his mother Sonia Gandhi is a mix of her husband and mother-in-law. It is yet to be seen what young Rahul would turn out to be.

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