

AIDEU M C RAJ

ADIJAN DREAMER BEGINS HIS NEW JOURNEY

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It is difficult to believe despite knowing the fact that he is suffering from cancer, we felt he would overcome. M C Raj, the dreamer, intellectual and weaver of word is no more. He passed away in Bengaluru on June 6, 2017 morning leaving behind a family as well as all those who cherished his vision and dream project. Some of them had known him for long as he was doing community work at Tumkur that he alone with Jyothi started in 1984. Many of us linked to him since the process of Campaign for Electoral Reforms in India (CERI) started. He was passionate about it and worked hard to develop a team which would lead political discourse on this issue in India. Raj was not merely a grassroots activist but a community leader with a vision and an intellectual who has got deep understanding of the issues that he was talking about, particularly related to 'Adijans'.

Though I came in touch with him a few years before the inception of CERI, what fascinated me was his ideas and vision for community that he termed as Adijan. The Dalit Panchayat movement that he built along with Jyothi in Tumkur is an example of his deep understanding of the community psyche. He was definitely a gifted person. I have rarely seen a person who could be engrossed in serious discussion with an entire group and yet weaving his fictional characters at the same point of time. His capacity to define a situation was simply superb as he never lacked words which look like floating every time he spoke. He would bring new words in conversations and amazed each one of us who worked with him.

Hailing from a very humble background, as his father was a daily wage worker in a leprosy hospital in Tuticorin district of Tamilnadu, he was influenced by European and Indian Catholic Nuns who dedicated their lives to the lepers. As he once told me in a conversation, he combined his love for the poor with a strong addiction to Marxian ideology. He once said, *'people tested us of our commitment to them. They made sure that our actions were congruent with our words. Once they made sure of our truthfulness they were ready to give their life for us. With every successful struggle their confidence in us soared high.'* He always remained proud of the fact that both he and Jyothi have been so closely working with people.

I think that was his biggest strength. We know that working with people and remaining at the grassroots is a very tough job particularly when you are at one place as your work become visible and mere talks will not help. We all have seen their work

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in Tumkur and how the Dalit Panchayat movement grew there. Raj used this strength of being with people and trying to understand their psychology which reflected in his work. He said, *'It's not simply love that's in question. The oppressed psyche is constantly on the lookout for a symbol of their liberation. It does not accept anyone who claims to be such a symbol. It knows innately and intuitively who can effectively represent their aspirations and negotiate with the oppressors on their behalf. We are happy that we fit the bill of the people on this score. We are happy that we were able to combine it with a bit of charisma that is an essential ingredient of the liberation symbol. Our engagement with the society on behalf of the poor was not born out of an academically designed strategy. We developed our strategies of development organically as we learned at the feet of our people. This helped the people to own their development efforts.'*

As a person deeply engaged with communities at diverse level, I was fascinated with positive energy and building of new alternative by Raj and Jyothi in Tumkur. One thing that made him different from others in various social movements is his persistent support for a fair representation of women in the organisation and at different level. At the time when all individual rights are the talk of the town, Raj and Jyothi attempted to focus on community ownership issue. In fact he told me that *'initially we got involved in regaining the lost land of individual members of the Adijan Panchayats. Such success led to entire villages taking up huge land struggles. But the government would approve land only for individuals. We employed street fights, lobbying with the bureaucracy, direct negotiations with the landlords and court cases. We have till now recovered 11902.20 acres of land. There was a time when we initiated the idea of community ownership, but it remained only an idea as most people were either landless or had lost their land. Our priority was to retain the recovered land in the hands of the Adijans and other poor. We have a long way to go to even take the first step toward community ownership of land'*.

It was interesting to listen to him defining the 'Adijan' identity and how that differed with the Dalit identity. I once asked him as what is the difference between the two and he responded by saying that, *'we arrived at the Adijan identify after extensive reflections and discussions for many years. This was a consequence of building a resurgent culture of assertion and celebration. Very positively and creatively we unearthed the latent strength of the Adijan poor and built the Movement on their strength. We dismissed the Freudian path of focusing on the removal of weaknesses. Instead we took recourse to the Jungian approach of scientifically identifying the strengths of the Adijans one by one. It led to greater and bigger success of the Adijan struggles for entitlements and land rights. An inevitable sidekick was the permeation of a greater sense of dignity. A receiving people gradually became a giving people contributing generously to their development out of the meagre resources they had. A new self-image of celebrating people emerged. Such resurgence made the identity of a broken people (Dalit) redundant. Coupled with this was the cry from a few communities in India to give up the Dalit identity.'*

Being oppressed is historical. But, to say that we are a broken people amounts to giving an undue credit to the forces of caste hegemony. Dalit represents what has happened to us from others. Adijan represents what we are from the beginning. It is internal. We delayed announcing it for many years not to create any confusion. When we found the time ripe we made an announcement’.

Raj spoke with confidence and that came to him with his deep sense of conviction and understanding of the entire Adijan purview from a communitarian perspective which made a bit different from the conventional Ambedkarite perspective that wish to delink communities from their ‘traditional’ ‘occupation’ and caste identities. I had always had problems with his theorisation and we discussed it very candidly. Many times, we felt that he was using the traditional methods which are very much against the modern democratic thoughts of Ambedkar but Raj never hid his thoughts. He was capable in speaking politically incorrect things. He said, *‘if Ambedkar saw Adijan history as a subjugated history, then I must say that his view was jinxed. Being subjugated is only one side of history. Ambedkar refused to see the strength of his people. Like many NGOs of today he could not wage a battle in society if he saw the brighter side of the Adijans. That’s why he could not sustain his negotiation on separate electorate. Instead he surrendered to the idea of reserved seats. Pathos and ghetto are strong tools at the hands of Adijan leaders to promote themselves.’*

He was firm when he said, ‘dominant communities don’t want to focus on culture and history because they are smeared with violence and blood. They don’t want the rest of the world and their children to know their history. What will they show as their culture? But Adijan history and culture are filled with inclusion, resilience, primacy of women and nonviolence. We should have the courage to take these to the negotiating tables as our innate strength. Being educated in Western universities, it is possible that Ambedkar subscribed to the dominant ideas of history and culture. If we look at Adijan leaders like Mangooram, Ayyankali, Muthukuttyswamy, Sri Kumara Gurudevan, Sri Narayana Guru etc. who have laid tangible paths of liberation have based their efforts on history and culture. Ignoring culture and history by oppressed indigenous communities will lead to subjugation. Thus in an effort to liberate the Adijans from subjugation, intellectuals like Ambedkar may have subconsciously paved the path for their postmodern subjugation. It’s unfortunate. Looking at Ambedkar as the only icon of Adijan liberation undermines other Adijan leaders of greater worth. Forgetting history will obliterate precious lessons and ideology that they cherished. Perhaps it’s what the dominant caste forces want to happen.’

He knew my position but then he also realise that despite all that I had an open mind to receive diverse opinion which came to me through my understanding of Ambedkar who was undoubtedly an argumentative Indian. And if I could say someone who could be rightly called from that tradition is M C Raj who was unambiguous on his differences on certain approaches of Ambedkar. He was of firm belief that Adidharmis had their own religion and cultural values so there was no need for them to go to Buddhism. He said, *‘much before Buddha arrived on the scene Adijan*

people practiced nonviolence. Buddha and Gandhi appropriated it from the Adijans. The Adijans didn't have a formal religion. But they had their belief system and worship. It was a cosmic religion based on the essential belief of the cosmos being the ultimate. There was no belief in a divine being as a person. They believed in cosmic powers. Later it developed into a fertility cult based on the belief that Earth is the mother of all beings. There was also a strong reverence and worship of the ancestors. It clearly shows that the Adijans were proud of the legacy left by their ancestors. If people are proud of their history and culture, who are the 'Dalit' leaders to say that we do not need them? One may identify this belief and practice of Adijans as Shamanism. Just as Charvaka, Buddha too borrowed his atheism and nonviolence from the ancient Shamanism of the Adijans. Buddhism is only an extension of Hinduism, either glorious or rebellious. Hinduism's philosophical trajectory is Karma, Samsara, and Swarga. Buddhism's philosophical trajectory is Karma, Samsara and Nirvana. Buddhism is different from Hinduism only on the question of Swarga. Buddha's Nirvana is once again borrowed from the Adijan's cosmism. In his later avatar, Buddha was only a primitive Shankaracharya'.

He further said, 'in my perception Ambedkar made a serious mistake of converting to Buddhism, taking the Adijans to a path that belongs to the caste forces. RSS accepts the conversion of Adijans into Buddhism with a glee. We have historical evidence that conversion to any religion is a regressive path. Conversion has led only to a double subjugation. Ambedkar has definitely misread the implications of conversion.'

Of course I had serious differences on this issue with him. I asked him whether it is possible to annihilate castes in India and his answer remained much more pragmatic. He said, '*let us simply acknowledge the truth that annihilation of caste is a wild goose chase. Caste can never be annihilated and there is no need of doing it. Even if it has to be annihilated why should Adijans waste their time and energy on this useless exercise? It's one of the worst intellectual deviations that Babasaheb has provided to many half-baked 'Dalit' intellectuals. They can hold on to this log of wood all their life while the rest of the community can drown in the flood of caste cauldron. There is no problem with people clinging on to their caste. Let Brahmins be Brahmins, let Kshatriyas be Kshatriyas, let Vaishyas be Vaishyas and let Shudras be Shudras. Let them not come on the way of Adijans being Adijans. Let there be a constitution to govern all these communities.*'

I think slowly we all coming to the point where it seems that let us not try to change people. Let each one of us enjoy our own identities as long as they do not discriminate. He was unambiguous that, '*Constitution should be agreed upon and be supreme in the instruments and mechanisms of national governance. Let each caste community govern itself with its culture and norms. Let there be no interference in the way other communities govern themselves. Let there be a constitution to protect people from dominant intervention in their internal affairs. Let all people abide by common laws as envisioned in the constitution.*'

The Campaign for Electoral Reform in India (CERI) was his big idea where he and all the colleagues who were part and parcel of it, felt that is the only way to take India forward united as the current First Past the Post System is a manipulative process where dominant communities will always use division of votes to attain power in order to exercise their power politics. He wanted a constitution where diversity and differences are accepted part of national life. Raj wrote to me, *'I am speaking of a new constitution when this truth of differences is accepted in national life. Only then shall we be able to show the door to people like Modi and to forces like RSS. No single culture should be allowed to have a sway over the formation and implementation of the constitution. This is possible if we have the PR system. Do not threaten the Brahmins and do not play one caste against another. Let there be negotiations on peaceful co-existence. Let there be constitutional provisions to bring to books those who deviate from negotiated positions.'*

Raj is no more today. But in these years he wrote and defined things enormously. One was just mesmerised by his skills to define things and provide alternatives. He was definitely an intellectual whose feet were on the ground which provided him so much strength and power that he would come with unique ideas and share with his colleagues. The most powerful point that he mention and which for sure, is the only way to protect idea of India is to celebrate diversity, to make it our strength and not allow it to be hijacked by those who want to impose monoculture on us. India's current crisis is its electoral system which needs to be reformed. We never felt the need for its as for now as the current dispensation is fast moving towards the American model of democracy, which is the presidential form of government, which would be far more dangerous with supreme power in the hand of one individual without much check and balance in India. If we remember M C Raj and respect his enormous contribution in this direction then CERI must rebuild the movement and spread across the country engaging with political parties, intellectuals, community groups and students to protect idea of India, its plurality and most importantly, its democracy.