

Kashmir Times SPECTRUM

A golden era of education reform in Ladakh is coming to an end

ECSTASY AND AGONY OF SECMOL

By Sonam Chosjor

April 26, 2007: The Britishers had left India in 1947 after ruling India to its ruin. Such was the magnitude and the intensity of their colonization of India that the presences of their hostile legacies are felt on a daily basis even after 60 years of its independence. They left behind them a hostile police force, and an oppressive and powerful bureaucratic structure both of which in a vicious nexus with the power-hungry politicians still tyrannize and alienate the common masses in independent India. Rakeysh Omparkash Mehra's pathbreaking movie *Rang De Basanti* brilliantly tells this agony of independent India. The theme of the move is aptly summed up by the title of Shiv Khhera's book: Freedom is not Free.

Yes, we have attained freedom from the Britishers but not from our own rulers, policemen and bureaucrats. The 'Politician-Bureaucrat-Police nexus' estrange the common masses upto an extent that they are yet to realize the value of citizenship, freedom and democracy. What is clearly evident is that freedom does not come in one stroke: Every generation has to fight for its own freedom, for, so far, we have only witnessed a transfer of power from the Britishers to our own rulers, not freedom per se.

How the powerful officers oppress the powerless people can be seen from the way the Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) had to face the wrath of authorities. Before making any comment further, it would be pertinent to know the genesis of the issue.

Genesis of the Problem

On April 3, 2006 in a conference on "Youth and Employment" organized by the District Industries Department, Leh, Sonam Wangchuk (as one of the speakers) made a remark that all government officials including the DCs and Chief Secretaries live on tax payers money. This irked the authorities. Wangchuk subsequently apologized realizing his responsibility to do so. It is desirable that the entire issue should have been disposed off once the person who made a controversial remark realized his mistake and apologized. However, unfortunately the story did not end here. The authorities declared Sonam Wangchuk an anti-national and made many other serious allegations.

Ecstasy of SECMOL

Now, let us look at the credibility of the man and his organization being dubbed as anti-national. SECMOL came into being in 1989 and was a brainchild of Sonam Wangchuk. He with the help of some other fellows started to improve the state of government schools in Ladakh where majority of Ladakhi students study. In the course of its journey (from 1989-2007) the organization and the man behind it was hugely acclaimed both nationally and internationally for changing the face of education in Ladakh drastically. For me, three noble initiatives of SECMOL have been as under:-

(a) Initiation of Operation New Hope (ONH) with an aim of integrating and coordinating the three important pillars of education (Government, Community and Civil Society), and making them work cooperatively to achieve its broader goal of the 3Hs - a

skilled Hand, a bright Head, and a kind Heart. It became the official policy of the Ladakh Autonomy Hill Development Council, Leh in 1996.

(b) The second initiative was the re-writing of the school textbooks and change of medium of instruction to English. The re-writing of the textbooks upto primary level with Ladakhi examples and stories was to enable the children to get an easy and solid foundation of education. The change of medium of instruction (from Urdu to English) was to lessen the burden and pressure the students had to face immediately after 9th standard (when the medium used to change from Urdu to English). This policy is now being adopted by the J & K Board of School Education and is being implemented throughout the state in all the government schools.

(c) Third radical step was the setting up of Village Education Committees (VEC) and arranging Teachers' Training. VECs were meant primarily to enforce and monitor transparency in schools at village level so that teachers remain accountable to their duties. It was, however, not an anti-teacher mechanism (as believed to be so by many teachers), for one of its primary purposes was to take care of the convenience of the teachers in villages. The teachers' trainings were provided to facilitate the teachers with new and student-friendly tools of teaching and learning.

At a broader level the agenda behind all the above-mentioned programmes was to help people realize their stake in government schools. Because despite the huge investment made by the government in the government schools, the private schools were far ahead of them with lesser monetary and human resource investments. So the people had to be awakened to take their due share from the government schools.

In recognition of the drastic change brought about in the government schools in Ladakh through the aforementioned new initiatives, Sonam Wangchuk got huge popularity and recognition (which, I believe, could not be digested by many of his rivals). The following honors stands testimony to his good works:-

- * 'Man of the Year' by The Week, in 2001
- * Nominated to the Governing Council for the National Mission for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India in 2004
- * Awarded Ashoka Fellowship for Social Entrepreneurship in 2002 by the Ashoka Foundations USA.
- * Awarded Governors Medal for Education reforms in Jammu & Kashmir in 1996
- * Awarded Green Teachers Award by the magazine 'Sanctuary Asia' in 2004
- * Selected for the 'Asia 21 young Leaders' Summit Seoul, Korea in 2006
- * Two documentary films made on his life and work by Doordarshan (PSBT) and ETV.

Apart from these, Tehelka (hailed as one of the best sources of news by the London based newspaper, The Guardian) hailed SECMOL's work as a model for public education system in India. Renowned magazines like Cultural Survival, Down to Earth, Outlook, The week and Sanctuary Asia have hailed the work done by SECMOL from time to time.

Given this kind of a background and recognition nationally and internationally, it is completely surprising to brand this man and the institutions as anti-national.

Who is an anti-national?

In India while attaching the tag of anti-national to someone, the spirit of nation and nationalism are often being overlooked. Rather those in power use the letters of some

draconian acts like the Official Secrete Act (OSA) to brand someone anti-national on very trivial grounds. For those who are not ready to accept this line argument, I will give two examples (one national, and one very local) to justify the point.

Firstly, anyone who is interested in knowing how draconian laws torture innocent citizens on flimsiest grounds should go through Iftikhar Gilani's prison book, *My Days in Prison* (Penguin, 2005). Iftikhar Gilani, head of bureau of The Kashmir Times in Delhi, was arrested on 9 June 2002 for sharing some information with a Pakistan-based research institute. The mainstream national media lose no time in declaring him as an agent of ISI, and within days he was avowed as a terrorist in the form of a journalist. He was imprisoned without bail under the draconian and much-abused Official Secrets Act (OSA). He was in Tihar Jail for seven months where he was even compelled to clean toilet flashes with his shirt, and was subsequently forced to wear the same shirt.

After seven harsh months of imprisonment, the government withdrew the case in January 2003 in the light of strong protests by civil right activists and some media personalities.

Later on, it became clear that the information he shared with the Pakistan-based research institution was abundantly available on the official websites of Government of India (GoI). Later on, it was also affirmed that during the course of his trial, the IB fabricated evidence, and the Directorate General of Military Intelligence (DGMI) was inconsistent in his statements and remarks. The second example is much more local, but was also highlighted in the national media. During the Kargil War (1999), a group of Jammu and Kashmir Police (JKP) (headed by a sub-inspector) arrested two persons (Sukay Bulu, a Buddhist; and Mohd Ali, a Muslim) from this writer's village, namely Achinathang (about 140 Kms away from Leh). This writer happened to be there in the village when the police raided their houses. The Police recovered a little quantity of dynamite and one ancient rifle from one of their houses. It is important to make it clear here that most of the families in villages in Ladakh own/uses dynamite for leveling the rocky terrain to make houses and fields; and many families own ancient rifles (more as an antique piece) which generally are in too bad shape to kill even birds with them.

However, the next day (29 June 1999) an unbelievable (at least for me) news item appeared in the Kargil Special segment of The Indian Express saying that the police have recovered huge arsenal of weapons and arrested many militants from Achinathang and Turtuk areas of Leh. That was completely unbelievable and very shocking because both the persons who were arrested (and declared militants) were hard-core nationalists. Just days before their arrest, they had been voluntarily serving the Indian Army in the rocky mountains of Dha Hanu as porters- carrying rations, cloths and ammunitions to the army so they can fight war in the difficult geographical terrains where there were no motorable roads.

But both of them were put behind the bar. They were released, later on, after many days in jails; and (given the triviality of ground of their arrest) a year later, the charges against them was dropped. Both the persons were too innocent that they do not know even to this date that they were once dubbed as militants in the national media. If they (in the future) happen to know this, I am very sure, that day is going to be the saddest day of their life.

Both Bulu and Ali were arrested by a team of JKP headed by a sub-inspector (SI). Now if an SI and his team can dub innocent citizens as militants, what officials with

much more powers like DCs and SSPs can do is well understandable. Moreover, later on, some reliable sources told me that the arrest of Bulu and Ali was conspired by a family from our own village, (having links with some influential persons and police) to settle their personal grudges.

Now Sonam Wangchuk is facing the heat of being declared 'anti-national' alleging him of having links with 'China and some other countries'. Given his track record as a social activist and reformer, it is completely unbelievable.

In all the above three cases (of allegation of anti-national), one thing is very similar and clear: All the persons, against whom charges of anti-national were framed, were responsible and dutiful citizens.

Iftikhar Gilani's story tells how (despite serious allegations and abuses of ones civil rights) important it is to uphold the rule of law as a responsible citizen and seek justice through the same;

Bulu & Ali performed their fundamental duty of rendering service to the nation during national crisis by working voluntarily as porters to help the Indian Army defend the nation. Despite being illiterates they had this sense of duty towards the nation which many of the literate and powerful (read officer) citizens always tend to forget/neglect.

Sonam Wangchuk's story tells that how a responsible and dutiful citizen can empower other less empowered citizens through social reforms. In Wangchuk's case, he undertook the responsibility of reforming the education system so that many citizens are empowered to realize the status of a real and responsible citizen.

One more thing is similar in all the above three cases: How easily some irresponsible officers misuse and abuse the laws to their end.

There are many more Gilanis, Bulus, Alis and Wangchuks whose stories are untold & unknown, and who suffer from similar physical and mental tortures in democratic India.

It should not be difficult for us (if we apply the logic of true nation and nationalism) to differentiate between a nationalist and an anti-national. For me, the test of a person's nationality should not be reduced to the letters of the draconian laws and the whims of the egoistic and powerful officials: it should be judged by the true spirit of nation and the duty one renders in the national interest. Going by the spirit of nation, all the persons accused in the above cases were truly nationalistic. Anti-nationals were those officials who misused the draconian laws to their end.

Double Standard of the Ladakhi Leaders

The deeds of SECMOL and Sonam Wangchuk were very much hailed by the Ladakhi leaders until very recently:

Thupstan Chhewang, the present MP from Ladakh and the ex Chief Executive Councilor (CEC), said in an interview to the magazine Down to Earth (Nov. 2003): "SECMOL has shown us the way."

Chering Dorjary, the present CEC, Leh, in a letter dated 18 July 2006, hailed "SECMOL's effort in the . education reform movement to strengthen government school system in Leh ." and "for constituting Village Education Committees in all villages". He also requested SECMOL, in the same letter, to continue its "support to the Hill Council in future also by providing . expertise in teachers training and mobilizing VECs . to help achieve the goals envisaged in the Ladakh Model of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan".

Rigzin Spalbar, the previous CEC of Leh Hill Council, in a letter dated 15 August 2005, expressed his appreciation for Wangchuk's "remarkable contribution in drafting the Vision Decrement for Ladakh", which was titled Ladkah 2025: A Roadmap for Progress and Prosperity.

Asgar Ali Karbalai, CEC Kargil, in a letter dated 12 Aug 2005, sought the "expertise and service" of Sonam Wangchuk and SECMOL to help improve the education system in Kargil district.

I have seen many other high profile leaders of Ladakh hailing Sonam Wangchuk as one of the most visionary persons in Ladakh.

Now, very surprisingly, these leaders who used to speak very high of SECMOL and Sonam Wangchuk have gone deaf and blind in the hours of his crisis. It appears now that the contribution of the man and his organization has become totally irrelevant for them because someone in authorities has called him 'anti-national'. But why? It's not difficult to answer: Unfortunately, the leaders are too much conscious of their political equations, powers and privileges that they have preferred to be mute spectators to the forced end of an era of education reform in Ladakh. Education, which is an issue of great significance for the common masses, has no priority in their scheme of things. What they prioritize is their vote bank politics with the help of every possible means-communal clashes, agitations etc.

Agony of SECMOL

Despite the dramatic improvement brought about by SECMOL in the education system of Ladakh, many people criticize it on the basis of propagandas and rumors spread by some vested interest elements against it. Constructive criticism is always a healthy sign of a democratic society. However, when criticism is just for the sake of criticism, or for some personal or parochial interests, it hurts the society at large. Moreover, when criticism comes from everybody who is nobody, and not from anybody who is somebody, it hurts the most. The following facts also add to the agony of SECMOL:

Because of the kind of reform it is indulged in, SECMOL has nothing tangible to show the people in terms of the work it has done in the last 19 years- not because it has done nothing. Education reform (or for that matter any social reform) is such a thankless job in which one has to wait for decades to show some tangible and concrete results. It's not like a bridge or road constructed with the patronage of a politician which are visible to the common people overnight.

Some officials of the education department and teachers are now also against SECMOL because the reform it brings in the education system hurts the vested interests. The change of status quo through a reform movement always hurts those who benefit from the present system. In our present education system, the insincere teachers and officials tend to benefit from the lack of a proper mechanism to enforce transparency. The vested interest teachers (of course not all the teachers) today stand against SECMOL because one of its goal is to enforce transparency in the education system as a part of the broader agenda.

All the propagandas against SECMOL are being planned and executed in/or around Leh town by many vested interest elements having no stake in the government schools because their children study in lucrative private school. Closure of SECMOL to them,

and of course to the leaders (who generally strategize and operates their political games from Leh), does not matter too much: only the innocent people of rural areas, whose children study in the government schools, will be the biggest losers.

The common villagers, who have the biggest stake in the survival of SECMOL, are too innocent and voiceless to take a collective and spontaneous mass action to save the movement. Even if they try to let their stand know, they are suppressed.

Unfortunately, for the leaders of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), the Ladakh Muslim Association (LMA), the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) and the Indian National Congress (INC), it takes only a communal issue to mobilize people, not a serious issue like education.

The end of a Golden Era?

SECMOL has announced its closure for the lack of support from the local government and local leaders, and for the high-handedness of the District Administration. With this an era of a golden reform in education, which showed great promise and potential to the common people of Ladakh, will come to an end. Unfortunately, this situation has come because of a few black sheep; and more unfortunately, Ladakhi leadership did not try to save it. Will the leaders and the future Hill Council Governments in Ladakh be able to fill up the vacuum created by SECMOL and carry forward its wonderful vision? This is a million dollar question. Given the apathetic and lethargic attitude of the leaders, it would not be wrong to be pessimistic.

Whatever the post-SECMOL era has in store for the future of education in Ladakh, this is not the way SECMOL should have ended its marvelous work. Even if it is on the verge of leaving its vision half-finished, it deserves a great farewell and a huge applause.

Given the political state of affairs in Ladakh as it is now, the difficult task of saving SECMOL appears to boil down to the person who is the most improbable to do it: the DC. However, given the larger interest of the common people, it would be pertinent for the DC to forget his personal grudge against Wangchuk and take a cursory glance at what SECMOL has done over the last 19 years to change the face of education system in Leh; and then settle the issue once and for all. Otherwise the poor people will always curse him in the future for his miss-deeds.

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