

PERSPECTIVE ON CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTBackground

The present Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) came into existence as the Delhi unit of People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCL & DR) in January, 1977. The PUCL & DR was formed at the National level in October 1976, during the emergency, under the chairmanship of late Jayaprakash Narayan. The national body consisted of representatives of all major opposition parties that opposed the internal emergency in addition to some well known intellectuals. Till the emergency was lifted, in March 1977, it's exclusive demand was the restoration of constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberties, and the release of all political prisoners. It had branches all over the country (one estimate put the number at sixty). In essence it was a response to the extra-ordinary atmosphere created during the emergency by the government's intolerance of all forms of dissent. At the same time it was also an attempt to forge unity among diverse forces on the issue of civil liberties and democratic rights. In that sense the formation of PUCL&DR was a response not only to an immediate situation but also to a long felt need.

But as soon as the emergency was lifted the national body became defunct. One important reason for this sad development seems to be the fact that major opposition parties of the time, after coming to power, felt no need for the continuation of an organisation like the PUCL&DR. Following the national body almost all of its branches became defunct, save a few exceptions.

Among the notable exceptions was the Delhi unit of PUCL&DR. Shortly after the lifting of the emergency, in August 1977, the Delhi unit conducted a national convention on the release of political prisoners. Later throughout the Janata period it took up various issues like the repression on minors in Chattisgarh, workers in Kanpur, agricultural labourers in Pantnagar, Muslims in Aligarh, tribals in Singhum, peasants in Telangana.

The re-emergency of Indira Gandhi at the centre changed the attitude of the leading members of the hitherto defunct national body of the PUCL&DR. They began to envisage a keen interest in its revival. This resulted in the formation of a new body different in name, basis, structure, composition and approach, from the old body. Thus the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) came into existence in November 1980. The approach of the new body, both in its understanding of the civil rights movement and of the nature of the organisation, did not give scope for the Delhi unit of the former PUCL&DR to join it. (This was true of several other civil rights organisations working in various parts of the country). Thus in March 1981, the Delhi unit of the PUCL&DR came out with its own constitution and called itself the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR).

Organisation

Organisationally, the original PUCL&DR was not a membership based organisation. It had only a convenor, appointed by the national body (Late Shri Vishnu Dutt, in case of Delhi) as its main

functionary. As such it never had a defined objective, nor a constitution, nor clearly defined functions, nor specific structures within which it was to conduct itself. But the Delhi unit, for its convenience, elected an ad-hoc body and even formed some sub-committees to conduct its activities. Initially, during and immediately after the emergency, it had a large number of activist participants, but their number dwindled over time, perhaps, due to the withdrawal of organised political groups and parties from the civil rights front.

The organisation took up various forms of activities in furtherance of its cause. Such forms include representations to authorities, signature campaigns, public meetings, demonstrations, legal assistance and appointing fact finding committees to investigate the specific cases of repression. All of these activities were aimed at increasing the public awareness either directly through participation or indirectly through the media and the parliament. Besides it also coordinated with sister organisations like CPDR, BOMBAY, AFDR, Punjab, APCLC, Andhra; PUCL&DR, Raipur, etc. Many of the reports published by the organisation were also published in various Indian languages.

Dilemmas and Problems

During the course of its existence, this body became aware of many dilemmas and problems that today are confronting the civil rights movement in India. In essence they are of two kinds: first, regarding the scope of the civil rights movement, and,

second, concerning the role of political parties and groups in any civil rights organisation.

Firstly, in a social system like ours where a majority of the population lives without basic requirements to survive and is denied the right to live with dignity, any lofty talk of liberties in disregard of their struggle is likely to remain empty. Hence it is necessary for civil rights organisations to struggle not only for the protection of fundamental rights of the constitution but also to fight for their enforcement and extension. In addition to the fundamental rights, a civil rights movement must also strive to make the directive principles of the constitution enforceable and justiciable as well. This makes it imperative for the civil rights organisations to go beyond the symptoms of a social conflict, into its very origins. Thus it is necessary to go into various facets of repression - social, economic and political - irrespective of the political party or ideology involves in the conflict.

Secondly, a civil rights organisation propelled, mainly, by one or more political parties or groups, has its own dangers. The attempts by them to further their own interests to the extent of deterring the common cause is likely lead to an internecine fight between conflicting trends within the organisation. This may result in intense factionalism for the control of the organisation. Besides it may reduce the civil rights movement to succumb to a role which subserves the changing short term needs

and constraints of the dominating political groups. (In fact this is what happened with the National PUCL&DR during the Janata interlude of 1977-1980). Consequently the organisation will tend to atrophy and its credibility will be seriously undermined. At the same time one can not visualise the growth of a civil rights movement in total disregard of the political situation and parties. In fact it is necessary to include all political and ideological shades in the movement for its effective functioning and credibility.

Needless to add, all these possible situation were actually faced by the present organisation at one time or other in the past.

PUDR AND PUCL

It is only in this context that one can appreciate the differences between PUCL and PUDR. PUCL does not seems to be aware of any of these problems, probably due to lack of experience as a functioning body. The three major differences between PUCL and PUDR can be identified as below.

I. PUCL makes a dichotomous division between civil liberties and democratic rights, thus excluding the latter from the civil rights movement. It does not realise that it is necessary to understand the social, economic and political needs of the people (some of which are reflected in the directive principles of the constitution) in order to appreciate the need for a movement for their rights. A false dichotomy of this kind only gives scope to exclude the day to day struggles of the people from the

perview of the civil rights movement. The PUDR refuses to exclude democratic rights from the civil rights movement.

II. PUCL envisages the civil rights organisation as a conglomeration of opposition parties by admitting members as representatives of political and mass organisations irrespective of their potential or actual contribution to the cause of the movement. This forces the civil rights organisation to play a subservient role. It also becomes vulnerable to debilitating conflicts, to credibility erosion, and even at times, its total paralysis.

PUDR welcomes members and sympathisers of all political parties and groups but they will not be admitted as representatives of their respective organisations.

III. PUCL envisages a structure whose initiative comes from the top few. Its functionaries at different levels are appointed by its leadership and are not elected by its members. This is the only source of their legitimacy. PUCL gives no scope for local initiative at all. (In fact PUCL made dissolution of existing civil rights organisations as a pre-condition for any unity). But PUDR believes in a structure which evolves, through its activities, by the choice of its members, by a process of elections.

The above three major differences did not allow the PUDR to dissolve its identity and merge with PUCL.

Thus, PUDR's approach consists of a concern for the rights and liberties of the masses in the context of their socio-economic needs and political aspirations. It attempts to build

awareness among the public about the repression in its social context and, makes an effort to keep this attempt free from the expediencies of political parties. In furtherance of its cause it is willing to cooperate with other civil rights organisations including the PUCL. Besides on specific issues, it is also willing to cooperate with political parties, their mass organisations and other social organisations. In fact both in the past and in the present it has an impressive record of such cooperation.

At present the PUDR is a small organisation with meagre means. It needs and deserves an active support from the conscious public for the furtherance of its cause. Only then it can hope to contribute, in a meaningful way, to the ongoing struggle for civil liberties and democratic rights in India.

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