

## ZAPATISTAS IN CHIAPAS

The New Year of 1994 brought with the news that a new uprising had taken place in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. On January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas raised the banner of revolt partly declaring 'independence' and attacking certain police and military targets. The Government of President Salinas in Mexico, as well as perhaps the entire world, was caught by surprise by this development. <sup>The</sup> Most surprising element was the timing of the uprising. Mexico's trade agreement with North America, NAFTA, was approved by US Congress recently, and the free trade alliance between Canada, US and Mexico, became effective from January 1, 1994. The liberalisation and regionalisation of economic enterprise in the Northern American region was taking effect from January 1, 1994, the day of <sup>the</sup> uprising. <sup>The</sup> Zapatistas made January 1, 1994, a symbol of their uprising.

For some days, the Military Forces of the Mexican Government attempted to engage the 'rebels' in heavy military combat. But within days, the Zapatistas uprising in Chiapas gained wide-spread support from other indigenous populations in Mexico and beyond as well as a large majority of the Mexican people themselves. Since then, up and till last week, President Salina's special representative, a senior leader of his Party PRI, has been negotiating a peace treaty with the Zapatistas through the local Bishop as an intermediary.

The uprising of the indigenous people in Chiapas has some very important and distinctive characteristics. First of all, the uprising is based on widespread consultative and consensus process of more than three hundred indigenous communities living in this poverty-stricken state in south-west Mexico. While the armed rebellion symbolises only the visible form of violence, there are hundreds of thousands of indigenous people behind this uprising.

Secondly, the issues facing the uprising are varied and complex. The Zapatistas have asked for political reform. Mexico has been ruled by a single party - PRI - for the last three decades and the last Presidential elections were widely seen as being rigged. This demand for <sup>the</sup> Democratic opening up of the system of political governance is unique in itself. What is even more complex is that the Zapatistas themselves do not intend to contest elections. They have asked for a Democratic process where other organised political parties can freely participate and citizens of Mexico can vote without fear or favour. Thus, the position of Zapatistas whereby they decline to take over the State power is a peculiar dimension of this surprising.

Thirdly, the Zapatistas have demanded that their historical and traditional access to community land be restored. Over the years in many indigenous parts of Mexico, the traditional rights of indigenous people over community land, forests have been usurped, many a times illegally. For example, in the nearby state of Oaxaca, in the Chimalapas area, 60,000 hectares were controlled by illegal cattle-randers. Many of these illegal occupants of land have developed their own private armies as well as receive protection by the State Military against the wishes of the indigenous people.

Significant agrarian reforms had taken place in Mexico after the revolution of 1910. In those agrarian reforms original rights over communal lands of the indigenous communities were recognised and enshrined in Article 27 of the Constitution. The State was also obliged to offer land for agriculture to those peasants who needed so. In 1991, the incumbent Government modified Article 27 of the Constitution in order to dilute the rights of the indigenous people over their communal lands. The Zapatistas were demanding restoration of their traditional rights and access to communal land which is the source of their sustenance and livelihood.

And lastly, the Zapatistas were asking for freedom from State control and manipulation, regulation and suppression. They were asking for "Enough", a slogan that is echoing throughout Mexico today. "Enough" of interference, regulation, control by the State and its agencies. They are asking for freedom within their own space, within their own land, within their own communities.

Similarly, the methods used by the Zapatistas in this uprising and during the process of peace negotiation with the Government of Mexico are equally interesting. Firstly, the Zapatistas were prepared for a long violent struggle against the Mexican Military. This violence had to stop within a week, because the Mexican Government, and particularly President Salinas, was under pressure from international sources to negotiate. As part of the of NAFTA, Mexico is representing a peaceful and inviting posture towards international capital and the rebellion of Zapatistas was causing doubts towards this pursuit. The presence of CNN and other international media in Chiapas within hours of the uprising also brought vivid and continuous global electronic coverage of the positions, demands and methods used by Zapatistas. Under such circumstances, it was difficult for continued massacre of ZAPATISTAS by military violence. Even today in Chiapas more than 400 media persons, many from international sources are present and filing their reports on a daily and weekly basis.

The second interesting information dissemination strategy developed by the supporters of ZAPATISTAS in Chiapas is the use of E-mail. Under the electronic mail -INTERNET - hundreds of pieces of information on a daily and hourly basis have been put out for global access. It is noteworthy that nearly 200 supporters of Chiapas uprising in Chiapas in Mexico city and

elsewhere are on a daily basis feeding information on the Internet in order to inform the world about the current situation in Chiapas. This has obviously helped to disseminate information worldwide and brought international pressure on the Government of Mexico to negotiate and dialogue with the Zapatistas.

Thirdly, the process of leadership and representation of the discontent of the indigenous community is a very fascinating exercise in itself. The spokes-persons of the Zapatistas are always covered with 'masks' so that their actual faces and identities are never known. They have adopted a label "Sub-Commandante Marcos". Whoever acts as a spokes-person, takes on this identity. This is helping to remove the personality/celebrity status to individual leaders in such a movement. It of course also protects their real identity and provides security.

Similarly, in the peace talks, a group of Zapatistas have represented the concerns of the Indian Community in the presence of the local Bishop. But no decision is taken by these representatives till they have had an arduous and long process of consultation with all the indigenous communities which are a part of this movement. Thus negotiations concluded in the first week of March will require a month of consultation in the forests and jungles in far-flung indigenous communities before they can be ratified by 1st of April 1994. This consultative and 'Democratic' style of functioning makes it difficult for the Government of Mexico and its negotiators to pressurise or coopt the negotiators on behalf of the indigenous people.

There are several implications of this Zapatista uprising in Mexico to the conditions and circumstances obtaining in our own region. First and foremost is the continued significance of land, forest and water to the lives of indigenous communities and the struggle for a tribal identity. Rebellions of indigenous people in India, as elsewhere in our region, have always been around the issue of access to and control over natural resources. Even in today's circumstances customary and traditional rights over land, forest and water of our tribal communities are being systematically eroded and marginalised by the State and its machinations. The lesson from the Zapatistas is that this is unacceptable worldwide even in 1994.

The second implication is in terms of the requirement of diversity. The model of State-led development in India and other countries of our region proposed a singular view of what is good life for all. It ignored cultural diversity and social pluralism. The Zapatistas are demanding to be able to lead their own life style in their own free space. Their demand of 'Enough' from the State regulations and penetration in the regions, communities and cultures is not very different from similar voices raised in India and elsewhere in our region. The diversity of our cultures and communities requires political space and freedom to evolve a preferred life-style within a commonly agreed

societal framework. Unilateral and continued penetration by the State and its machinery in the lives of tribal communities has only resulted in erosion of their life-styles and maldevelopment of their communities.

Lastly, the Zapatistas have demanded dignity, not power. The Zapatistas are challenging the traditional concept of uprising since they do not want to capture State power. They do not want the power to control others. They want the power to live in dignity. It is this sense of selfworth, self-esteem and dignity that is so important to all our communities and people that centralised top-down models of governance and development continue to ignore, erode and undermine. The voice of the Zapatistas resonates throughout our communities in India and elsewhere as the voice in search of human dignity and freedom.

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