

Dear friends,

Things are bad! We all know that. Cricket match ... Painting Exhibition ... Film Show ... Newspaper Offices ... Church Establishments ... in fact things have been terrible for a long time. Specially for those of us who are living under the rule of the Shiv Sena, the worst of the jingoist forces, the reality is a series of last straws. Every time, week after week, after receiving some news of vandalism we think this is it ... things cannot be worse, they cannot go lower than this ... but every time they surpass themselves.

When a metropolis like Mumbai is held at ransom by a motley group with the active protection from a partisan government and a viciously communalised police force, all other voices of protest sound extremely feeble. Things get worse, due to an apathetic media and a people caught under the web of fear. But still, sometimes hope rises from the most unexpected quarters when KKKD

unassuming people rise to the occasion, take risks and actively protest, ignoring the Sena's blood thirst. We cling on to such incidents for our sanity. Following is one such incident which we would like to share with you.

After the vandals' attack on Fire, some of us got together with a feeling of rage and acute helplessness. No method of protest, which was within our capacity, seemed adequate, far reaching and beyond a routine gesture. Finally we planned to print an anonymous poster and plaster the city with it. The idea of anonymity came partly due to the fear of backlash and partly stemmed from the wish of making numerous ordinary people a part of it. The response was tremendous. Word was spread. Financial contributions started pouring in from all sorts of quarters. Students, management trainees, small traders, journalists, professionals working within film industries, performers, painters came to our office to make contributions after hearing about the campaign from stray sources. No written appeal was sent to anybody, no acknowledge

ment of receipt or bill could be given (a part of anonymity), but Rs. 1,00,000/- was collected within three days through small contributions. An artist working with an ad agency volunteered to design the poster, a former political activist running a printing press agreed to roll 20,000 posters at cost price.

But when the final moment came the workers in the press refused to roll the posters. 'We can't take the risk, we are family people' was the refrain. As you can see in the enclosed poster no press name/address was printed, the owner and the workers were promised full protection of identity - but by then the rot in the psyche of average people had set in. After much running around a press ran by a trade union rolled them clandestinely on a Sunday. 20,000 posters of 2' X 3' were ready. Then we approached a professional poster pasting agency. We wanted 20,000 posters to be on the walls in one night, in the hope that the city would wake up one morning to see the anonymous posters, the voice of its citizens.

To our dismay, no posters went up. It was a moment of extreme anxiety for all of us who had spent sleepless nights over the campaign and were now waiting to savour the fruits of our labour. The next day, the agency returned the posters and the advance money paid to them. Their workers too were not willing to take the risk of pasting a poster which even mildly accused the Tsar of Mumbai, the Thackeray. Though they financially contributed to the campaign as a gesture of solidarity, they refused to take the physical risk.

By now we were desperate. 20,000 posters lying around in our homes. So then we approached a leader of a political party of the Dalits. The cadres agreed to do the job. Next night 12,000 posters went up the walls only to be brought down by dawn. The police force along with the Shiv Sena workers tore them off systematically. Three activists were arrested on the ground of 'breaking law and order by sticking inciting posters'. 'We have received calls from Matoshri (Thackeray's residence)' was the

reason cited by the police.

But the ball had started rolling. Following a newspaper report on the plight of posters, people picked up the thread at various levels. Rs.50,000 more was collected and 10,000 posters were printed all over again. For 15 days thereafter, ordinary people came out in support of the campaign, and stuck the posters in their locality. The police did not know which clue to follow, which colony to protect. 10,000 copies of the posters were printed in a smaller size to paste in buses and trains (sample of which are enclosed). Muslim women with unassuming faces, college students with their usual pranks, white collar professionals with their respectable attires - who all could they stop, arrest! Finally media had to take note - television and newspapers reported the incident as a poster campaign against the tyranny of the Shiv Sena.

It is a small victory at the cost of immense anxiety and hard labour. But it saved us from a feeling of total despair and sense of inadequacy. It was very important to know that the people of Mumbai would not let the city die in the hands of ideological terrorists. The fight continues in many ways.

We thought we would share with you this small measure of success even while we realise that the path ahead continues to be thorny.

With regards

Flavia Agnes
Chayanika Shah

(Circulated to all Secular groups and NGO's in the country)

24th December, 1998

