

The Murder of G.N. Saibaba: *What They Could Never Kill Went on to Organize*

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GN Saibaba died yesterday, only a few months after finally being released from prison. He spent the majority of the past decade in an Anda cell in Nagpur, where he was systematically denied medical care and faced conditions that amounted to torture. The Anda cell is meant to break prisoners mentally. Many don't make it more than a year, Saibaba left, 10 years after first being imprisoned, his body badly damaged from his incarceration, but his mind sharp as ever and his political convictions unshaken. But while the torturous conditions in prison could not break his mind, a decade of denied and deferred medical care took its toll on his body. After only a few months out of prison, Saibaba tragically died at 58 years old, in what amounts to a murder by the Indian state.

To call Saibaba's death murder is not hyperbole; killing Saibaba was, in fact, the explicit desire of the state. Back in 2017, during Saibaba's sentencing, the judge expressed his regret that he could not mete out a more severe punishment. Sai was sentenced to life in prison; the only greater punishment would be a death sentence. As far as the judge was concerned, death was the only appropriate punishment for a professor who stood on the side of the people. This official, speaking with the voice of the Indian state, expressed its murderous desire to crush the resistance of the wretched of the earth and those who fight with them.

In this sense, Saibaba was not only a person, a professor, a husband, and a father, he was a symbol of the long-tradition of popular resistance in India dating back to the British Raj and long before. In working to murder Saibaba, the Indian state sought to set an example, to cow down any other intellectuals who would dare to support, identify, and join with this popular resistance. Rather than detached academic study, Saibaba took part in the people's struggle for a better world, in their struggles for an India free from the chains of feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism. For this "crime," he had to die.

In India, resistance and struggle is a living tradition, which continues strong to this day. Hundreds of millions mobilize annually in the fight for a better life and a better world. And to crush this resistance the Indian state and ruling classes have not only the second-largest army of the exploiters in the world, but also a paramilitary force which *is even larger than the Indian military*. Hundreds of thousands of troops are deployed in the jungles of India to crush the Naxalite movement and the broader adivasi resistance to displacement. Likewise, hundreds of thousands of troops are stationed in Kashmir.

The state's murder of Saibaba is, in this sense, just another expression of its murderous and genocidal intent towards the people. It would have, perhaps, been too blatant to kill wheel-chair bound Saibaba in a fake "encounter" as the state so often does to poor adivasis. Even Arnab Goswami's audience might have balked at fabricated images of Saibaba dressed in an olive-green uniform and harrowing police narratives of him opening fire on supposedly courageous CoBRAs. But in the end, they did try to frame Saibaba for "waging war against the state." In reality, it is the Indian state which is waging a war against "its own" people.

In the name of "development" and "ease of doing business" a few tens of millions of adivasis and a few hundred million poor farmers and peasants have to be driven off their

land. To fulfill memorandums of understandings to MNCs, the jungles have to be clear-cut, the ground strip-mined, and the new factories built. Mass production of iPhones for the U.S. and Europe will make a few capitalists in India quite rich. The introduction of genetically modified seeds and the elimination of MSP will help to “modernize” Indian agriculture, even as it worsens malnutrition.

But the people won’t go quietly into the night, as the past few decades have shown. They have taken up defiant slogans like “we will give up our lives, but not our land.” So the Indian state has responded with drone strikes, new Central Reserve Police Force camps, “cow vigilantes,” shootings of protesting farmers, lynch mobs, “strategic hamlets,” encounter killings, “search and cordon” operations, and much more.

When intellectuals like Saibaba stand with the people against these atrocities, the state responds with the same murderous rage. It may be veiled and disguised in the sophisticated language of jurisprudence, but beneath the surface the logic is the same. Saibaba’s death testifies to this, as do the deaths of others like Father Stan Swamy, an octogenarian Jesuit priest who died in prison after the state framed him on trumped-up charges in the Bhima Koregaon case.

At the core of all of this is the battle for India’s future. What sort of development will occur? What sort of new India will emerge? Will it be the New “Divine India” of Ram Mandir where profit is sacred and data is the new oil? It is easy enough to see that this is the paradise that MNCs have long sought after. This is the New India that Savarkar dreamed of after learning of Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany.

But what place is there in this “heaven” for the dalits? Saibaba knew well, and wrote about it in his poetry:

The hairy magistrate
behind the golden
high table passed his verdict
banishing the Mahar and the Chamar
from the future smart cities
for life and after-life.

The Mahar was taken to Heaven,
and the Chamar to Hell.
Both were entrusted
with the holy work
of cleaning the shit of gods
every morning and evening
for life and after-life.
And in the rest of the day,
they have to only clean the sewage.

Saibaba was fighting for a different logic of development, and a different India. Not the New India of Ram Mandir, Ambani, Adani, smart cities, 100% FDI, and iPhone factories. But the India, which is being built in the jungles of Dandakaranya, the India fought for by the farmers surrounding Delhi. It is an India built on the logic of development that serves the interests of the people, not to ease the doing of businesses. It is an India free from caste, free from Hindutva, free from encounter killings, and free from lynch mobs. It is an India where the whims and profits of MNCs do not dictate agricultural policy. Saibaba gave his life for this future, for this India. He died with his body broken but his dignity intact and his spirit strong.

It can be hard for an American audience to understand Saibaba's conviction, his stand, and the popular struggles of which he was a part. Too often, people saw him just as a victim of an unjust system, as someone to be charitably pitied. Saibaba rejected this view, stating, "I don't need sympathy, I need solidarity." And solidarity with him meant also taking a stand on the side of the people in their struggles.

The liberal humanitarian attitude is socially determined; it is based on a profound historical amnesia and a distinct class perspective. During periods of reaction, it is a typical attitude of the progressive activists and intellectuals in imperialist countries who are deeply disconnected from the popular struggles in their own countries and around the world. Their degree of disconnection from these struggles is generally equaled by their lack of knowledge of the history of popular struggles. They do not understand that oppression does not make people passive victims, it generates resistance, and this resistance ends monarchies, topples empires, and shakes the world. In India, far outside of the scope of most Western media and press, the wretched of the earth and prisoners of starvation are rising and fighting for not only better India but a better world.

A few decades ago, Swedish author Jan Myrdal was asked to write an introduction for the American publication of his 1980 book, *India Waits*. He noted that an American audience would have no difficulty understanding his writings on India if they had read authors like Mark Twain who took up an anti-imperialist worldview and sided with the people in popular and revolutionary struggles. Later in the same book, he quoted from Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, in which Twain wrote of the French Revolution:

The were two "Reigns of Terror," if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the "horrors" of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? What is swift death by lightning compared with death by slow fire at the stake? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror—that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.

It is this long slow reign of terror in India that Saibaba, saw, opposed, and exposed for the world to see. It was for this reason that the Indian state branded him a "terrorist," threw him in jail, and killed him. For India isn't just a country where the state drone strikes "its own" people and deploys hundreds of thousands of troops to drive the indigenous people off their land. It is also a land of prisoners of starvation, where the adivasi and dalit populations have malnutrition rates so high that they meet the UN criterion for famine. It is a land where substantially more than half the women are anemic and where stories abound of malnourished mothers who "eat last and least" give birth to malnourished children who often perish before they have a chance at life.

It is also a country in which some of the richest in the world live, and where, in recent years, the biggest celebrities and business-people from around the world have flocked to

attend opulent weddings, paid for by countless deaths from “hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break.”

In India, these deaths take many forms. For example, each year, crushing debt leads to countless suicides for many farmers and very well-counted profits for a few lenders and banks. This long, cold, and heartless terror has also taken the form of millennia-old caste-based discrimination and Brahminical culture, which has cast a long and barbaric shadow across the subcontinent. This grotesque shadow has now been refashioned and rebranded into modern Hindutva fascism, with chest-pounding strongmen and supposedly holy Yogis leading mobs of cow vigilantes to commit unspeakable atrocities against dalits and Muslims.

Meanwhile, heads of big multinational corporations and small-mind children of U.S. presidents applaud how the new rulers of modern India have improved the “ease of doing business.” How many children had to starve to ease this doing of business? How many forests had to burn to extract that coal? How many young adivasi girls were raped in the concentration camps to clear the way for “development”?

All this Saibaba saw, and all this Saibaba exposed. Twain lamented “that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.” But Saibaba taught others how to see this, and taught it well. He taught it as an activist and as a professor. He taught it in his speeches, in his writing, in his classes, and when he toured abroad. Saibaba taught the people of the world, and the wealthy and powerful feared his teaching. They feared his eloquence when he called on the people of the world to unite to stop “Operation Green Hunt” and compared this war on India’s people with the “Red Hunt” carried out by the U.S. government against the indigenous people in North America. They feared his word so much that they threw Saibaba in prison, deprived him of his wheel chair and his medicine, and tried to break him. But he kept on teaching. In prison, he taught through his poetry, which alone could generally escape jail uncensored.

But Saibaba also taught us all by example, with his indomitable spirit and his unflinching belief in the people. He knew that if the adivasis could endure the brutal state-sponsored lynch mobs of Salwa Judum, then he could endure the torture of the Anda cell. And he did. He persisted, nurtured by his conviction that it is right to rebel against reactionaries and that even though the road to liberation is long and tortuous, the future remains bright. It is impossible to read his poetry, even that written during his most difficult days in jail, and not be filled with his revolutionary optimism.

This optimism was not idealistic naivety or a simplistic belief that magically everyone will live “happily ever after.” Saibaba’s optimism was objective, it was based on a real political conviction, which Saibaba drew from his studies, his own experiences, and the experiences of others. The courage of the adivasis in their struggle for jal-jangal-jameen inspired him. The heroic resistance of dalits against Brahminism steeled his conviction. The battles of workers across India from small mines to big factories taught him. And he was energized by the willingness of students to put aside career aspirations and instead serve the people.

Thus Saibaba not only saw the vicious reign of terror that the rulers of India (and their foreign sponsors and partners) have brought against the people, but also the indomitable

spirit of a people who refuse to be slaves to capital, caste, or empire. And it was on this unshakable faith in the people that he based his revolutionary optimism.

An inherent challenge of being human is our short life-spans. We live a few decades—or maybe a century if we are lucky—but the social forces which shape our societies and our consciousness develop over centuries and millennia. Saibaba, despite dying far too young, saw clearly the social forces capable of changing India for the better. India, where one-sixth of humanity lives, is pregnant with a potent force of social transformation. This is evident in the fact that, in India, the largest strikes in human history have taken place over the past few years. It is clear from how the farmers mobilized in their millions to stop the Three Black Laws. It is evident in the struggles of the adivasis against the constant encroachment of new CRPF camps into their forests.

Sadly Saibaba died too young to see the birth of the better India which he fought for. But he saw clearly the embryonic form of the forces capable of making the better India a reality and dedicated his life to this struggle. He saw that the Naxalbari path was the path for India and he lived and acted in accordance with an unshakable conviction that the people move mountains and change the world. He died for this conviction, was killed for it. But what he fought for remains as do his words and works remain. Saibaba called out, and continues to call out to all of us, in the words of *The Internationale*:

Arise ye pris'ners of starvation
Arise ye wretched of the earth
For justice thunders condemnation
A better world's in birth!
No more tradition's chains shall bind us
Arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall;
The earth shall rise on new foundations
We have been naught we shall be all.