

On the occasion of President Ho's 60th year of India Visit

Relevance of President Ho and India

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I must admit that I am not an academician yet I have an in depth study of world politics inclusive of the current affairs. I was impressed by few great statesmen like George Washington, Jawaharlal Nehru, Fidel Castro, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Marshal Tito etc., but I candidly confess that there had been certain great qualities in Ho Chi Minh, his ideas and life style that distinguish him from the other statesmen.

I am yet to solve this puzzle, why knowingly or unknowingly Ho Chi Minh was criminally ignored and undermined by the intellectuals, academicians and of course, Communist Parties of India.

There are dozens of books on Marx, Lenin, Mao etc. but seldom one cared to write about Ho Chi Minh and his ideas. There are only countable books on him in India. This writer, with utmost humility, would like to take the credit of writing Ho Chi Minh's biography in Hindi and English.

I minutely observed that Ho Chi Minh was far more relevant then and now. Indian context, with alterations according to the local conditions. For instance, Ho Chi Minh was the first to say that Marxism and Leninism were not a dogma or a Bible that

needs to be followed blindly. He believed in implementing it according to the ground realities of a particular nation. He also said that the world revolution may not take place at a time. He did not only present his ideas but implemented the same successfully from time to time in his country.

Besides being a great and successful statesman, Ho Chi Minh was a versatile and had multiple qualities. He was a warrior and an expert on guerilla warfare. He was a playwright, dramatist, an actor and director as well. He was also a poet, composed songs that could arouse the sentiment and spirit of his people to fight against oppression and any sort of foreign intervention and aggression.

He was a dreamer and since his childhood he dreamt of his country's independence and welfare of his fellow countrymen.

Born on 19 May 1890 at Kim Lien village, Nam Dan district, Nghe An province in Central Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh's real name was Nguyen Sinh Cung which was changed to Nguyen Tat Thanh during his youth and then again many years later into Nguyen Ai Quoc or Nguyen the Patriot. His father Nguyen Sinh Sac, an old progressive scholar was respected among

his compatriots for his deep-seated love for his country and fellow countrymen.

As a student in Hue, Ho Chi Minh was greatly inspired by the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity upheld by the French Revolution. Subsequently, as a teacher in Phan Thiet province he had the occasion to go through the Chinese translation of the works of J. J. Rousseau and Montesquieu and he decided to go to West, to the land of that famous revolution that had aroused the world with a hope to find out the right course for the cause of national salvation.

During this period in 1911 he went to Saigon (presently Ho Chi Minh city) where he had to remain underground for sometime. It was here that he met a woman comrade and they both fell in love with each other. Unitedly they both kept on with their good work in organising people against the French interventionists. To avoid arrest at the hands of French colonial rulers, he went underground but kept on organising and uniting the people against imperialist power. The rulers on the other hand were making great efforts to arrest him but every time Ho Chi Minh escaped the arrest.

While he was underground in Saigon, an Indian trader Gupta family, that was living there for years extended its help to Ho Chi Minh, who was then known as Nguyen Tat Thanh.

Ho Chi Minh decided to move out of Vietnam and to organise support and co-operation for Vietnam's liberation in foreign countries, particularly France. He also thought it worthwhile to study the conditions prevailing in various countries.

Saigon, during those days, was a major sea-port of Vietnam where ships from various countries used to arrive. Ho Chi Minh duped the police and intelligence officials and as a cook in one of the vessels left the port. As mentioned earlier one Indian trader Gupta, settled in Vietnam had helped Ho Chi Minh escape the country. (Subsequently, this incident was incorporated in one of the movies made in Vietnam). It seems, this was the first and pleasant encounter of Ho Chi Minh with an Indian which had an everlasting impact on him about India.

In June 1911 he boarded a French merchant ship as a cook and left his country to visit various places like France, England, Spain, Portugal, Algeria, Tunisia, Congo, Dahomey, Senegal etc. He even crossed the Atlantic to visit New York, Boston, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. He was highly moved to see the working people as victims of oppression and exploitation everywhere which led him to conclude that "people may be of different colours but they belong to only two races viz. the exploiting race and the exploited race and that the proletarian friendship was only the true friendship."

To make necessary preparations for a revolutionary movement in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh went to Guangzhou in China where he made a headway by imparting political training to the young expatriates. In June 1925 he founded Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League where more people came from Vietnam to join the training. During his sojourn in Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh published a book titled *Duong Kach Menh* (The Path of Revolution) and a paper *Thanh Nien* (Youth) which not only played a vital role in charting the course of

Vietnamese revolution but which may serve as a source of inspiration to the toiling and oppressed class world over.

All this while Ho Chi Minh kept on travelling to various places that included the Soviet Union, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Ceylon and Thailand and also published many of his writings. His writings for the French Review Correspondence International included articles on the movement of Indian peasants and workers and on the crimes of French colonialism.

As the prevailing situation called for a full-fledged political party for Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh convened a conference for all Vietnamese revolutionaries in Hong Kong on 3 February 1930 which saw the merger of different communist organisations into a single party - the Communist Party of Vietnam.

In October 1938, when new world war conditions were developing, Ho Chi Minh proceeded to China from the Soviet Union and devoted himself once again to the training of Vietnamese revolutionaries.

On 28 January 1941 he secretly crossed the border into Vietnam. This was his first home-coming after a long exile of thirty years, a period that he spent in various foreign countries as a revolutionary organiser while seeking a way to bring about independence and freedom to his Vietnamese people.

Off and on, he prepared war strategy with his colleagues at an open place under moonlit night usually near the frontline area and thereafter proceeded to his abode enjoying the moonlit night. On one such occasion he wrote a poem, that is given below, which was quite an inspiring one

and which stimulated the guerilla fighters to a great extent.

"In the spring full moon festival, the moon is shining

River water mixes with the sky colour, adding more spring to the river

On the river, we discuss our military strategy,

At late night, when we come back,

We carry full moonlight back home"

He was so concerned with the happiness of his people that when his physicians confided in him that he may not survive for more than two days, he advised the authorities and the government to withhold the news and let people enjoy the revelry of the National Day, that was due next day and in case he died, his death may be declared after the said celebration was over.

As a President of Vietnam, he had announced:

Now, what are the most urgent problems facing our government? First, the famine. It is the most shameful legacy left by the French and Japanese. More than two million Vietnamese have already died of hunger. How shall we save the rest? I suggest we mount a nationwide food production drive. All arable land should be planted with vegetables, sweet potatoes, manioc, and maize. But since a new harvest can be taken in only three or four months, we must immediately start collecting rice to aid the famine-stricken areas. Let all my countrymen - and I'll be the first to do so - give up a meal once every ten days. The saved rice will go to the poor.

Second, illiteracy. One of the ways the French held our people in slavery was by keeping them ignorant. An ignorant nation

is a weak nation. Yet it takes only three months to learn to read and write our native Vietnamese. I suggest launching a mass literacy campaign right now.

Third, we should hold general election as soon as possible so as to guarantee the people's democratic rights. All citizens should have the right to elect and be elected irrespective of property status, religion or ethnic background.

Fourth, in trying to weaken our people, the colonialists taught them the use of alcohol and opium, and corrupted them with other vices. We must educate a new type of man who would be devoted to his country. I suggest an education campaign to make all our people hard working, thrifty, honest and truthful, and to root-out the disgraceful leftovers of colonialism.

Fifth, I suggest abolishing the three most humiliating taxes : the poll tax, the market tax, and the river-crossing tax. Opium smoking should be banned.

Sixth, we would proclaim freedom of religious worship."

Millions of people responded to his call and engaged themselves wholeheartedly in its implementation?

As I had mentioned earlier Ho Chi Minh had an in depth knowledge about India and its conditions. He wrote various essays in various names supporting the freedom movement of India and against the oppressive policy of the British. For instance in 1918 he wrote about the non-violent movement of India against the British colonialists besides supporting the total textile industrial strike of Ahmedabad and Bombay.

Ho never had the occasion to meet Gandhi but still had a great respect for him.

Although he had his own reservations regarding the Gandhian theory of non-violence yet he had supported the non-violent movement of Gandhi to a certain extent. Both did not exchange too many correspondences except a congratulatory note that Ho Chi Minh sent to Mahatma Gandhi on his 77th birth anniversary.

In the year 1946 on his way to Paris for negotiation his aircraft landed at Calcutta (Dum Dum) Airport for refueling. He stayed overnight at the Great Eastern Hotel (presently known as Lalit Great Eastern Hotel). On the request of Indo-Vietnam Solidarity Committee, the management of the hotel had been kind enough to install recently a plaque commemorating the said event.

The office of the undivided Communist Party of India was situated at Dacres Lane, about 400 meters from the aforesaid Hotel. No one knows, how Uncle Ho came to know about it and he ventured to pay unwarranted visit to the office of the Communist Party of India. A few leaders of the then Communist Party of India, including Jyoti Basu, were having a chat at cup of tea when suddenly Uncle Ho's private secretary made an announcement - 'Please meet President Ho Chi Minh from Vietnam'. Everyone present there were stunned for a while and then a seat was offered to him and tea was served in a terracotta cup. Uncle Ho spent about half an hour and had an elaborate discussion with the Indian Communist leaders, who were extremely surprised to note the vivid knowledge of Ho about the Indian conditions. Finally, he confided that the office of the Communist Party of India was situated in a narrow lane with only one exit and few metres away from the Governor's

House and the Police Headquarters, which was not strategically safe. In case of police raid, it was impossible to escape.

Ho Chi Minh was well aware of the problems that were faced by India and during his visits to India in 1946 and 1958 he left an indelible imprint and influence on the minds and hearts of the Indian people, who had a great admiration and respect for him. He derived inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and had a close friendship with Nehru and at the same time he always advocated for the close ties between the people of India and Vietnam.

In 1937, Uncle Ho met Motilal Nehru, father of Jawaharlal Nehru, in an International Conference for Peace in Brussels, where they had an elaborate interaction with each other about India and Vietnam. When he met Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954 in Hanoi, he apprised him in detail about his interaction with Motilal Nehru. With pleasant surprise Nehru replied to Uncle Ho that his father had told him about his meeting with Ho but not in that detail. He admired Uncle Ho's memory.

Ho was very much concerned with the prevailing situation in India. He wrote numerous articles on different occasions supporting struggle of Indian people against British Colonialist. He supported textile strike by the workers of textile industry in Ahmedabad and Bombay. He also supported the non-violent movement called by Mahatma Gandhi in 1919 apart from these above mentioned articles, he wrote articles after articles in various newspapers and magazines supporting Indian struggle.

During that period the mode of communication was not much developed.

The foreign media did not consider Indian happenings, worth reporting. Apart from this whatever Indian news was published in foreign media, was published days after the happenings. For instance, the execution of iconic Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh was totally ignored by the foreign media and obviously Ho Chi Minh was unaware of this incident. Sometimes, Ho Chi Minh wrote articles about Indian happenings based on whatever little news was available to him through media.

Calcutta had an emotional bond with Vietnam. Here, I would like to mention an incident when thousands of youth, students gathered in front of Senate Hall, Calcutta University and were determined to march towards Dharamtalla Street disobeying police resistance to express their solidarity with Vietnam and its people, who were fighting against French colonialists. Police lathi charged and opened fire on the demonstrating students. Two students were killed and 21 were injured in the police firing.

Next day there was total strike in undivided Bengal in protest of police firing and atrocities over students.

This solidarity movement continued till 1975 when the war was over and Vietnam was unified.

Although Ho Chi Minh was highly concerned about the welfare of the oppressed people all over the world, yet he was more inclined towards India. While serving a prison term in China, he wrote a poem to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was also undergoing imprisonment in India, expressing his moral support and sympathy. The poem is being quoted below:

*While I was thriving, you were an activist,
You were in prison, I was jailed,*

*Thousands of miles apart, we have not met,
No words spoken, yet sympathy we both
shared.*

Above mentioned incidents and episodes show that Ho Chi Minh had a special attachment for India and Indian people. He always supported the Indian freedom struggle and every cause of India on the international arena.

On invitation from Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India President Ho Chi Minh visited India on a state visit from 4 February to 17 February 1958 and left an everlasting impression of his austere life style, amiability and affability on the people of India, who still talk about it. While travelling from Delhi to Agra by train, Ho embraced the driver of the locomotive. While in Calcutta, he squatted on the floor of the Raj Bhawan, where he was staying, to have a group photograph with the fourth class employees. It was a gesture, not at all common with the visiting heads of states.

On 4 February 1958 Uncle Ho's aircraft landed at the Palam Airport, New Delhi where he was received by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India and members of his cabinet viz Lal Bahadur Shastri, V. K. Krishna Menon and even Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru etc. President Ho Chi Minh was accorded an exemplary warm welcome that was not accorded to any foreign Head of the state earlier. Despite having mild fever President Dr. Rajendra Prasad was to host a dinner as per protocol in honour of President Ho Chi Minh, but when Uncle Ho learnt about Dr. Prasad's fever he insisted that he rest rather than being present in the

Dinner and he made him agree. Such was the emotion shared between the two leaders.

On 7 February 1958 while addressing a press conference, President Ho Chi Minh declared: "Goa should be returned to India..."

During his 10 days' state visit to India President Ho Chi Minh utilised every minute to know more and more about the economy of India, its development through his various visits to Indian dams, factories, dairies, medical research centres etc. He met Indian political leaders from various parties besides govt. officials, common men including the driver of his car, locomotive driver, fourth class employees and the hospitality staff of the government of India.

Wherever he went and whomever he met, he and his austere life style left an everlasting impression and all were charmed by his amiable personality.

He highly detested elitist mannerism and behaviours and often discarded the prescribed protocol. In 1958, during his official visit to India red carpet was laid in his honour but he refused to walk over it and also modestly refused to sit over gold-silver studded throne chair in a state function organised in his honour, in spite of the request by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

During his visit to India he used to cordially meet and shake hands with the driver of the special train that took him to Agra and with other fourth class Government employees e.g. orderlies, gardeners etc. to the utter embarrassment of the Protocol Officers as such a behaviour by a foreign dignitary was beyond protocol guidelines.

During his sojourn he did not only visit the famous tourist spots like Taj Mahal etc. but also made it a point to visit and closely

watch various dams, industries and scientific research centers. He was so curious and inquisitive that he kept on asking questions to have an in depth knowledge and one common question that he asked everywhere was whether it was possible to have Indo-Vietnam co-operation in respective particular fields.

During his official visit to India he was so overwhelmed that he chose to address people from heart extempore rather than reading formal prepared speech.

In his press conferences he repeatedly stressed that the people of India had every right to liberate Goa which was the integral part of India, from the Portuguese rule.

In feudal system there is inequality, women are subjugated, labour is looked down upon and man enjoys freedom to exploit man. It is feudalism that distinguishes between men in the names of castes and sub-castes. Riding on the stilts of religion and casteism feudalism has a deep penetration among the society. It is very difficult to fight it out since it's an enemy placed in the household itself. If the society of any country is free from feudalism and religious fundamentalism, it may unitedly face and fight successfully with any external power, howsoever mighty it might be.

Vietnam is glaring example, who could successfully drive out the colonialists, imperialists and expansionists under the pragmatic policies and most able leadership of Ho Chi Minh. It could be possible as, except a few vested interests, Ho Chi Minh could unite the people of Vietnam. Since it was not possible under feudalism. Ho Chi Minh liberated them from the clutch of

feudalism. Through education he aroused their consciousness to realise the importance of independence and equality and which prompted them to build a healthy society based on equality and justice.

During his state visit, Ho Chi Minh planted saplings at Rajghat, Delhi, Raj Bhawan of Calcutta and Indian Statistical Institute of Calcutta. He did not plant the sapling symbolically but undertook all the manual labour involved in it beginning from digging the soil to planting the sapling and finally watering it.

Whichever site he visited, be it Bhakhra Nangal Dam or Haringhata Milk Dairy; Indian Statistical Institute or School of Tropical Medicines in Calcutta, he minutely observed the work in progress and enquired about minute details from the officials and ordinary workers, so that he may implement the same in his country as well.

He had remarked during his state visit: in this visit, we have had a chance to get into touch with the Indian people of all walks of life. We have met workers in many factories, peasants at rural improvement projects, scientists and artists etc. We have found that everyone is full of patriotism and eager to work to build prosperous India. We heard the voice of peace everywhere we went, many friends expressed profound sympathy with the Vietnamese people and uttered heartfelt knowledge about the good development of your age old culture at present and have seen more clearly your great construction projects. We are extremely elated at your great achievements, because we regard them as our own. We are greatly confident of the talent and creativeness of the 400 million

Indian people of India, who are constructing their land and are striving together with other brotherly nations to safeguard world peace.

While departing from Calcutta to Rangoon (Myanmar), Ho Chi Minh delivered a very touching farewell speech which is being quoted hereunder:

Dear Kith and Kin,

Dear Indian brothers and sisters, we are highly honoured to have a talk with our Indian Kith and Kin. Our friendly visit to the great India has attained good results. We have met honourable President Rajendra Prasad, have exchanged opinions intimately with venerable Prime Minister Nehru, an outstanding leader of India, a cherished and esteemed friend of Vietnamese people. We are of one mind about important international issues and about those issues in the friendly relationship between our two countries.

Ten days have passed so quickly. A proverb in Vietnam puts it 'When sad at heart, one finds the time passes very slowly. When cheerful at heart, one finds the time passes very quickly.' With the warm welcome, the thoughtful arrangement and the whole hearted care of Government and people of India, we find that time passed very quickly. We will bear in mind forever the beautiful image of our brotherly India. We will bear in mind forever the warm friendship that our Indian Kith and Kin youngsters and children conferred on us. On returning home, we will report all that we have seen and heard of to Vietnamese people and convey all the affectionate of the Indian Kith and Kin to our Vietnamese compatriots.

We are going to leave your country, but our hearts are still very reluctant to part with you.

We sincerely thank President Prasad, Prime Minister Nehru, the numerous members of the Government of India for their warm welcome. We also thank the Governors, Chairmen and Ministers of various regions, the Mayors, the officials and employees of all levels of the Government in the places where we have been as when as liaison officers and airways employees who have taken care of us whole heartedly.

Good bye our Kith and Kin, Good bye our dear brothers and sisters of the great Republic of India. Finally, Uncle Ho gives the Indian children, many kisses.

Long Live the unshakable friendship between the people of Vietnam and India.

Long Live the unity among the Asian - African nations

Long Live World peace

Jai Hind.

13-02-1958

The present generation of India and Vietnam seems to be almost unaware of the unique relations shared between their countries during the liberation war of Vietnam. People of India in general and Calcutta and West Bengal in particular had from 1947 to 1975 wholeheartedly supported the cause of Vietnam's liberation and on numerous occasions had expressed their solidarity with their Vietnamese brethren in their struggle for independence. Almost every writer, poet, dramatist or cartoonist has eulogised the struggle of the people of Vietnam for liberation through their varied writings, poem and plays.

In 1971 a unique incident had taken place in Calcutta when the local people had spontaneously demonstrated and rechristened the Harrington Street at the cross-section of Jawaharlal Nehru Road where the US and British Consulates are situated as 'Ho Chi Minh Sarani' after the name of Uncle Ho.

Calcutta is the only city in India where in 1991 a bust of Ho Chi Minh, that was donated by the Government of Vietnam, was installed in a square in the central district of Calcutta near the Ho Chi Minh Sarani and the said bust was inaugurated by the legendary guerilla war strategist Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap in the presence of the then Prime Minister of India Chandra Sekhar and the Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu besides thousands of the local people.

Ho Chi Minh had a special relation with Calcutta. He had visited this city thrice. First in 1911 he stopped over the city while he was going to Latin America, Africa, Europe etc. disguised as a cook in a ship. Next time he stopped over the city while he was on his way to Paris for negotiations with the French Government. He had then stayed in the city for 2 days and a night and had toured the city, visited Communist Party of India's office, then situated at Dacres Lane.

A query may arise in the readers' mind as to how relevant are Ho Chi Minh's ideas under the present changed world. The answer is quite simple that we are living today under an oppressive world and society where the breach between the rich and the poor is unimaginable and based on human injustice. Social media has gained a lot of space in today's world, which was not so during Ho's time. During those days oral

or rather mouth to mouth publicity was the lone social medium to express.

I believe the need of the hour is to propagate the exemplary humility and most austere life style of Ho Chi Minh through various platforms of the social media so that the people may unite and fight against those who indulge in pomp and show through extravagant expenditure to bridge up the wide breach between the rich and the poor.

It is however painful to observe that the memories of their great statesmen are gradually fading. There is hardly any discussion except academic ones about Ho Chi Minh. There is no Ho Chi Minh Centre in any university in India nor there is any NGO committed to spread the ideas of Ho Chi Minh. The Communist Parties in India and the progressive intellectuals have criminally avoided Ho Chi Minh, who happens to be far more relevant today to create a healthy society based on equality and justice.

Whatever he asked his countrymen to follow, he believed and practised in his own life. I am quoting some quotes taken from his speeches and writings which will enlighten the readers.

"On this world nothing is more precious than the people. In the world nothing is stronger than the forces of solidarity of the people."

"Nothing is more precious than Independence and freedom".

"Nothing can prevent the sun from rising, nobody can run counter to the will of the people."

"All men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with certain

inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

“There is no limit to learning; We must learn continuously to progress. The more we progress the more we have to learn.”

“If we want to carry our propaganda among the masses, we must learn the way the masses speak because only in that way can our message be understood by them.”

“In society nothing is more beautiful and glorious than serving the interests of the people.”

His biggest contribution to Vietnam Society is that feudal system of the society was abolished and religion was side lined through constitution without attacking directly on it.

People may ask about the relevance of Ho Chi Minh and his philosophy under the present global scenario. To me, the answer is very simple.

Ideas and philosophies are discarded. Crony capitalism is replacing the capitalism. Wealth is accumulating among few families while a vast section of people are deprived of even the minimum basic amenities required to survive. I believe, this is the area where one realises the relevance of Ho Chi Minh and his philosophy.

The technology today is far more advanced than during his time. The social media has become one of the biggest weapon to enlighten the people about the policies of the governments controlled by the crony capitalists that are responsible for the social injustice and inequality. To fight against these evils people-centered philosophy of Ho Chi Minh is the only answer. Instead of blindly following his philosophy, one only needs to implement it according to the prevailing local conditions with modifications from and there.

The ideas and philosophy of Ho Chi Minh, in salvaging the nation and society from the shackles of any sort of foreign domination and feudal system that neither recognises dignity of labour nor the right to equality of mankind for establishing a healthy civil society based on equality and justice, are still relevant for those Asian and African countries where the aforesaid conditions prevail.

Comrade Ho Chi Minh may not be physically present today but he is immortal in his ideas and philosophy, that are the heritage of mankind.