

CHANGING THE DISCOURSE

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The recent election results in the three Hindi belt states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have proved that Narendra Modi is certainly not as invincible as he was being made out to be. But they have also proved that voters are split right down the middle, as the difference in the total votes secured by the two major parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, is literally hair-thin. One may analyse the reasons for the results till kingdom come, but the fact is that after 2014, two Indias emerged that are so aggressively different from each other that they can hardly converse. They scream at each other as never before and what we are witnessing at present is nothing short of a civil war of ideas and beliefs. Never before has the very atmosphere been fouled with such abusive language. The liberals claim with proof that the Hindu Right started it all, but the liberals also need to introspect.

It is also true that having tasted power, the Right spews viscous expletives at the 'sickular', but one must also remember the sheer contempt with which Left liberals have held them for the past half a century. It is a fact that the Left-dominated academia and intelligentsia accorded neither an inch of space to the Right, nor an iota of respect or regard. It is also true that the Right always thrives on hatred against 'the enemy' all over the world and this is exactly how it works in India as well. The continuous provocation and campaign of hate and the numerous instances of violence inflicted on minorities in all BJP-ruled states are proof enough. But what is more alarming is the sheer contempt with which the Hindu Right views the constitutionally-protected principle of secularism. In the 64th year of the constitution, once the extreme Right Hindu was in power, it made it clear that India has really no place for secularism and has to be a 'Hindu only' state. Some feel that the divide between the 'secular' and 'believer' was always simmering below the surface, as India had been playing around dangerously with two secularisms, the Nehruvian and the Gandhian, far too long without taking a definite stand.

Gandhi knew that the Indian masses were deeply steeped into religion and took every word and episode of the Mahabharat and the Ramayan to be true. He couched his political idiom in the language of the masses so as to touch their hearts. He referred, for instance, to the rule of law and justice as 'Ram Rajya'. He had no qualms in referring to god as Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram — for he added simultaneously that Ishwar Allah Tero Naam. But the Mahatma's faith in secularism was also unshakable. The Congress had several other leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghosh and Madan Mohan Malaviya who publicly propagated the essence of the Vedas or the Bhagavad-Gita as part of their politics.

On the other hand, the secularism that Nehru had believed in was the Western rationalist and clinical one that was basically non religious or even anti-religion. On page 373 of his Autobiography, Pandit Nehru declared unequivocally that “the spectacle of what is called religion not only in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror”. On page 377 of the same work, he called it “narrow and intolerant of other opinions and ideas; it is self-centred and egoistic”. We may do well to remember that this secularism had arisen in the West out of some seven hundred years of struggle by rationalists and liberals against the Church’s hegemony over belief and ideas. This non-religious brand of secularism had finally won after some of the bloodiest religious wars and the short point is that India has not gone through anything similar to be in a position to really appreciate its value and to imbibe it unquestioningly.

The fact, however, remains that it was this Nehruvian secularism that fired the imagination of the Indian intelligentsia, that Ashok Rudra had once described as ‘the ruling class’. While the government and the secular parties actually balanced both Hinduism and Islam and declared, for instance, paid ‘public holidays’ on the days of major festivals of all major religions, the intellectual class usually kept a contemptuous distance from religion. It is my submission that India would have managed to survive with inherent contradictions that it has done so well till now, had it not been for the dangerous adventure that the state television of a ‘secular polity’ indulged in the period between 1987 to 1990. This was when Doordarshan’s tele-series, Ramayan and Mahabharat achieved almost cent percent viewership, which really disturbed the delicate balance. The Hindu party took it as an endorsement of Hindu pride and capitalised on this ‘new consciousness’ with its instant war cry Mandir Hum Wahi Bananyenge. The rest is painful history that led to 6 December 1992 — when the demolition of Babri Masjid rudely shattered liberal India’s unshakable faith in secularism. The fact that this triggered the era of riots, counter riots and terrorism really did not matter — the extreme Hindu fringe was now aping the Muslim fundamentalists and the jihadis — it was proud of its act and demanded more ethnic cleansing. It took a quarter of a century of mistakes by liberal India, for the genie of 1992 to grow so gigantic as to seize power.

The first such mistake was to assume that whoever spoke of Ram or Hinduism was a zealot and communal — which is what drove the vast majority of god-fearing Hindus to the Right. Nehruvian secularism has to learn to give up its pet hatred for matters religious, if it wants sanity to return. So intractable is its rejection of religion, especially of the majority religion, that many liberals would really be shocked to learn that this is what Gandhi has said in 1924 — it appears on the first page of What is Hinduism. “Hinduism will burst forth upon the world with a brilliance perhaps unknown before. Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions. Its creed is all embracing”. This is so close to what millions of re-charged Hindus have been saying, perhaps not in such simple prose. Incidentally, the assertive Hindu is a new and large breed that liberals would have to learn to live with, without taking offence. Many are well educated ‘closet Hindus’ who had held their tongue for decades in the first half century of the Indian Republic, and they came out of the

secular woodwork of India once they sniffed power. Many of them have been on a rampage in public and on the social media since 2014 — trolling, cursing, hating.

It is for history to judge whether successive secular governments have really been pro-minority and have indulged in blatant vote bank politics, but our immediate need is to explore how to get the two warring Indias to talk once again, across the table, in a parliamentary language. Liberals must think more, as they are capable of thinking clearly, and have always declared that they believe in “justice for all”. The first baggage that they need to shed is branding god-fearing Hindus or Muslims as fanatics or supporters of fanaticism. No sir. Once they learn to live with the real Indian, who incidentally views their Western ethos with deep disdain, and once they talk the language of Gandhi, half the problem would be solved. A small band of hard-core fascists will always exist, but once liberals learn to view religion as the very soul of India, they could delink the masses of believers from those who feed on faith.