

# **THE DIRE NEED FOR A NATIONAL CONVERSATION**

Jawhar Sircar

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Now that Pranab Mukherjee's controversial visit to the RSS headquarters at Nagpur is over — after creating the desired flutter and sending out several nuanced messages to different targets, we may do well to focus on the best takeaways from this very risky gambit. He underlined, once again, the unique position he commands in Indian politics, more so after having occupied the highest post in the land. No one else could ever have swung it and all criticism or speculation only magnified the event and its publicity. Let us remember that Gandhi could easily have made salt at Bombay's Chowpatty and got arrested immediately — which would really be not such a big deal. But by dramatising his 'walk from Sabarmati to Dandi' over 25 long days, he ignited high-octane speculation; galvanised a self-doubting people; attracted national and international media attention to the patent injustice of British imperialism and also monopolised the narrative. Statesmen rise above politicians by skilfully converting events of their choice into landmarks in political history — to magnify the message they seek to convey.

Whatever may have been his political or other reasons, the two acts of Pranab Mukherjee that stand out are (a) that he dared to cross the Rubicon of political untouchability — Advani had done something similar is praising Jinnah and (b) that he reminded the lion in its den, while subtly bearding its mane, that "a dialogue is necessary not only to balance competing interests but also to reconcile them". He repeated that "only through a dialogue can we develop the understanding to solve complex problems (of divergent strands) without unhealthy strife — within our polity". We will now have to bear with the inevitable cacophony of passionately differing views on what exactly he said, as each of his sentences is ripped out and analysed, flogged or appreciated or twisted, but let us analyse the plea for a 'dialogue'. The last four years have surely been the bitterest in post-Independent India — the most strenuous one for liberals, democrats and pluralists as they watched with horror the jackboots of the aggressively intolerant trample all over their long-cherished and lovingly-nurtured values and institutions. The fact that our system's auto-correctional mechanisms just crashed and no retribution has really appeared is the greatest worry — as the civil war of ideas spills out to the streets, with knives and guns. Liberals have never been a match in street battles — they know it. Recent electoral swings against the regime have given some hope, but it would certainly be myopic to ignore the depth to which cancerous cells have penetrated our body polity and to assume that future electoral victories, if any, will blow it all away. A long, painful period of chemo-therapy of the polity is simply unavoidable and this calls for both periscopic vision and realistic planning — that lie beyond just electoral adjustments or social media campaigns.

Let us move a bit away from ourselves to others equally tormented. Columbia university's Mark Lilla hit the nail when he pleads for an urgent "national conversation on 'identities'" in a fractured polity. "We need to have a conversation about something — which is a euphemism for avoiding...a real conflict", he says, in his latest book *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. Lilla insists that "identity issues are something that's been simmering below the surface for a very long time and this flash out from the Right, very suddenly, just brings home....(its) incendiary nature and how.....passions are excited". Now that liberals have seen the devastating results of their dogged and contemptuous dismissal and denial of 'identity' — the Hindu identity, in our case — it may be time to revisit the previously non-negotiable apartheid against Right-wing Hindu fundamentalism. Or else, the deep divide in Indian society and politics in the Modi era, that is only increasing every month, may lead invariably to a situation too terrible to imagine.

Can we start by introspecting and trying to understand if there is any truth in the charge of the Hindu-Hindi brigade that we are actually the privileged, western educated, creamy layer that has dominated power, academia, media and the arts far too long? That Left liberals have, indeed, monopolised the discourse and the goodies of State support far too long? That we hardly ever co-opted the votaries of Hindutva and the Right into our discourse or even permitted them to share the same table. Let us also confess that Left liberals in academia and the media have always been more comfortable with their western colleagues than with fellow Indians whose English came with heavy accents, Hindi or vernacular. By running down anything that is remotely linked to Hinduism or the 'genius' of ancient India, they have actually pushed the Hindu Right towards greater absurdities. For instance, DD Kosambi was marginalised by his fellow Marxists for "going native" and dabbling with non-prescribed subjects like Indian religion and folk beliefs — even though he employed copy-book methodologies of Scientific Socialism. Ram Manohar Lohia was similarly dismissed as a Hindi-belt rabble rouser by this Europe-trained tribe, in spite of his impeccable Ph D from Germany. His insistence that, in the Indian context, caste matters more than class ultimately catapulted his supporters to power in many States and at the Centre, for several decades, but he is still shunned by both academics and journalists.

Anything to do with worship is derided by Left liberals as hangovers of obscurantism — without realising that the average Indian actually 'breathes religion' all the time. Critically dissecting the Ramayana and the Mahabharata may publicly demonstrate our secular credentials, but it does block out any meaningful discourse on how these largely-fictional epics have really knitted together 'the idea of India'. Those who sincerely believe these tales are 'genuinely historical' are not, *ipso facto*, irrational or 'communal' — they are often more 'secular' in their approach than their counterparts in other religions. The tragedy is that most liberals stay far away from the deeply religious life of India for fear of excommunication by the intellectual elite or being out of sync with a discourse that has largely been set by highly overpaid 'Tenure Professors' of American universities or the Oxbridge alumni. But, the fact is

that the West has already gone through several painful historical encounters with religion for centuries — often very bloody — to reach its current state where religion is decoupled from daily existence. But India remains steeped in religion and soaks in its idiom — so, when liberals ignore it, they are, in effect, ignoring reality. And, this truism applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to all religions in India: not just to Hinduism.

We may not succeed immediately, even after this severe self flagellation — but we can at least slow down this steady, relentless drift towards a *Kurukshetra* where two irreconcilable, antagonistic ‘Indias’ fight it out to the bitter end. Liberals like Shashi Tharoor and Pavan K Varma have taken the plunge, through their recent books, *Why I am a Hindu* and *Adi Shankaracharya: Hinduism’s Greatest Thinker* — enticing a debate and attempting to recover Hinduism from uneducated trolls. We cannot give up hope so early as India is, after all, a wondrous equilibrium that resulted from an untiring process of dialogue — between originally-hostile forces and ideas. It is, indeed, a metaphor for the ‘management of contradictions’ — that has worked tirelessly through argument, accommodation and assimilation.