

SECULARISM IN DANGER

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It would not be correct to view the recent communal riots in Delhi that claimed 50 lives as a failure of the government of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. It is actually a major victory of this regime and the whole idea was to demonstrate what this government is capable of inflicting on minorities and its other opponents. Let us see if we can pick up the many messages that Modi and Shah have given us through this riot.

The first message lies in its deliberate selection of the national capital for the mayhem, as the regime wanted to demonstrate to the rest of the nation that it has graduated above the level of riots at mufasil towns and states. It has absolutely no worries of being castigated by the domestic media, as it has financed, inspired and manufactured its own genre of Modi-worshipping channels and newspapers, and effectively broken the backs of most of the others. As for adverse foreign reactions, its standard drill is that the diplomat-turned-Sanghi foreign minister takes his leader's approval and then issues an unnecessarily aggressive response, after which bhakts, trolls and fanatic overseas Hindus pick up this 'line', to mercilessly attack the foreign nation or media.

No arrests were made even after dozens died, but when the courts and some brave media houses forced the regime to take some action, belated steps were taken. But the most publicised arrests relate to Muslim rioters, as the Goebbelsian narrative insists that Hindus are victims. The fact that from the names of those killed that it is clear that Muslims who suffered the most does not matter and this selective bias will always remain. This is the second message that the regime has given us. To make this discrimination legitimate, it has complained direct to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court against a hard statement made by the fiercely secular activist Harsh Mander, by simply ignoring thousands of other incendiary speeches and social media made by its own rabid supporters. All Harsh said was that he was losing faith in government and the judiciary.

This government's third strong message lies in its shameless refusal to arrest Kapil Mishra whose open provocation of 23rd February made at the site of the riot, in the presence of senior police officers, actually set northeast Delhi on fire the very next day. This regime assures immunity or reward to its own law-breakers and rioters, as is evident from the manner in which Sadhvi Pragya, who was accused of terrorist activities leading to manslaughter, was not only cleared of these very serious

charges by hook and by crook and given an instant honour thereafter. She was made an honourable member of parliament. It will not surprise us if the chief provocateur of the Delhi riots, Kapil Mishra, is freed of all charges and then made a Minister by this regime. After all, if the chief minister of Gujarat during whose time the devastating riots of 2002 occurred, can get such a promotion to the topmost post, why can others who thrive on riots?

The mention of courts reminds us of the fourth warning that the government gave during the riots. It was clearly directed to upright judges, like Justice Muralidhar of the Delhi High Court who had pulled up police officers for deliberate inaction and had taken the trouble to examine the fiercely provocative audiovisual recording of Kapil Mishra's speech. This fourth message is that this government can get such independent judges transferred overnight, with the concurrence of the highest court and it will, therefore, do more such transfers if judges take concepts like 'justice' seriously.

The fifth message that we deduce is even more dangerous. It appears that the Supreme Court is tossing around in deciding the criticality of issues before it. The utter enthusiasm with which the court decided where the Ram Mandir should be built is certainly not evident in deciding on the legality or otherwise of the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution. Even six months after the total clampdown on civil liberties in Kashmir the court has not found time to deal with this grave issue. That protesters of Shaheen Bagh were squatting illegally on the road did not miss the eagle eye of the Supreme Court and the ladies had to make way, but the court could not find time to understand why harassed housewives were compelled to leave their home and hearth to protest against a grossly inequitable Citizenship law. This means that an indulgent judiciary has empowered Modi to thrust down on the people of India whatever he can sail through parliament with the brute force.

The sixth message of this regime delivered to us even before the Delhi riots is that there is no point in approaching any constitutional or statutory institution for relief as Modi has swiftly and systematically destroyed the neutrality of almost every national institution. He has packed the top slots of national public institutions like the Election Commission, the CBI, the RBI, the CVC, the CAG and the CIC-RTI. He has ensured that he remains unfettered to break down the constitutional system and that no relief is available anywhere to those who dissent.

Narendra Modi interpreted his second electoral victory in 2019 as an endorsement to set up a Muslim-mukt Hindu Rashtra. While many Indians were surely fed up of a disunited and quarrelling opposition that could and genuinely wanted a strong leader, this mandate is not a communal and for eliminating Muslims. But his blind fans are not willing to admit this. People voted for a clean and efficient government and had hoped for millions of jobs and also for economic prosperity. In all ages, some people have a fascination for leaders who project themselves as messiahs and it is, therefore, not a wonder that many Indians who were tired of our

inefficient democracy secretly pined for a dictator like Modi. They are comfortable with the systematic abrogation of rights, very much like the bird in the golden cage, who was unmoved by the free bird's passion for liberty. While Modi is the second authoritarian leader at India's national level, we must admit that in the states, we had and have equally autocratic chief ministers who are no less dictatorial. Though a powerful section of Modi worshippers literally worship Modi this group does not yet possess the strength to destroy our plural democracy. They can try to harm it and that is precisely what they do all the time.

At the same time, we have to admit that there has been an unprecedented swing in the attitude of many Hindus who do not consider it indecent any more to openly blame Muslims for a lot of ills, real or imagined. The caution that most Hindus exercised in public, even a few years ago, during the secular decades has just disappeared with Modi's arrival. We are now confronted all the time with the rabid intolerance against Muslims, which is actually proudly flaunted. The most disconcerting fact is that this campaign of hatred is actually led by the most educated class that who spews venom. It is hard to believe that after receiving the finest of education and even after being nurtured in a liberal, tolerant and plural society, they could be so poisonous and nurse some much xenophobia. Does it mean that India's age old proud secular tradition has been buried?

To begin, we need to be very clear what exactly we mean by secularism, because there exist two conflicting definitions. In the West and also in Socialist countries the term 'secularism' stands for a state that follows a 'no religion' policy, in the sense that religion is not permitted or encouraged to impact public policy or public affairs. In the Gandhian model, however, secularism stands for equal treatment of and equal respect for 'all religions'. The total distancing of religion from public affairs in the West could emerge after several centuries of bloody religious wars. Science and rationality could finally win the very painful battle against the Church and this led to the Age of Enlightenment. This spurred technological breakthroughs, large-scale industrialisation and economic prosperity, often at the cost of exploited colonies. Even though India did not go through centuries of historical conflict with any Church, or against Hinduism, per se, Nehru and his foreign-educated compatriots enshrined the Western brand of secularism in the Indian Constitution. Nehruvians worshipped reason and science and kept a safe distance from religion, especially Hinduism. Our problem actually begins with this very commendable decision, because it distanced the intelligentsia from the Hindu masses, that were soaked in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, without necessarily being communal. Nehru led the group that wanted Indian secularism to be free of religion Nehru was distinctly uncomfortable with the over-religiosity of Indians and any mentions in his autobiography that "the spectacle of what is called religion not only in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror" (page 373) and that religion was "narrow and intolerant of other opinions and ideas; it is self-centred and egoistic" (page 377). Marxists and other leftists or socialists were strong critics of Congress's economic and political policies, but where religion was concerned, they agreed with Nehru's

atheism. Consequently, Western-educated 'no-religion' liberals, atheist Nehruvians, hard-core leftists and even locally-bred plural-liberal streams merged seamlessly to uphold secularism that kept an antiseptic distance from religion.

But Indians of all religions are so steeped in their faith and the masses cannot be expected to understand the nuances of Nehruvian secularism. Even so, the Nehruvian 'no-religion' ideology held its unchallenged sway over post-Independence India, because what was followed in practice in governance was an 'all-religions' policy, which was closer to Mahatma Gandhi's belief in 'all religions'. His deliberate use of the Hindu idiom in politics is well known and Gandhi accepted the deep religiosity of the Indian people, whether Hindu or Muslim. He used bhajans; invoked characters from the epics; invoked Ram Rahim or Allah and frequently used terms like Ram Rajya to convey his political and nationalist message. In reality, the Indian State followed Gandhi's 'all religions' policy and celebrated the major religious festivals of every religion by declaring them as compulsory holidays. But, even during the heydays of 'secular' rule, no effort was taken in to explain or understand the significance and beliefs of 'other religions' nor their customs. Thus, the required emotional bonding between religions did not take place. For a long, long time, therefore, Ram was a part of the secular mainstream but it is only when theoretical Nehruvian secularists distanced themselves from him, was Ram appropriated by Hindu communalists and made their chief weapon. To understand when Ram was taken over, we need to visit 1989, and then discover that it was full 25 years after aggressive Hindu politics began that year, could we produce a Prime Minister like Narendra Modi. In other words, we had full quarter of a century with us but could not utilise it to stem the communal tide.

To trace the critical developments in 1989, we need to go a little back to 1986, when the 'consciousness' that led to 'aggression' was stoked. The same Congress that had shattered electoral records to win the Lok Sabha elections of November 1984, received a battering and started displaying panic once Rajiv Gandhi was accused of bribery in the Bofors gun deal. This is when Rajiv passed the retrograde the Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce) Act, to appease Muslim hard liners. He was severely criticised for this Act that nullified the progressive orders of the High Court and Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case, declared that divorced Muslim women must be maintained by their ex-husbands. The 'secular' Congress's reversion of this order is among the many irritants that rankle Hindus, which the BJP soon capitalised. In late 1986, Rajiv Gandhi's minister in charge of information and broadcasting, Ajit Kumar Panja, approved the commissioning of a religious serial, Ramayan, on state-controlled television, Doordarshan. This violated the age-old policy of the secular state not to glorify one religion. The serial started its telecast from January 1987 and went on till July 1988 and we all know how tremendous popular it was among the people. In playing to the gallery, the television version of this epic and the next one, Mahabharat, that followed it from October 1988 to July 1990, did not or could not reflect India's argumentative and intensely tolerant culture. As we know, popular television serials harp more on emotions and reduce everything to 'lowest common

cultural denominators'. The remarkable fact is, however, that the magic of this new wonder called colour TV actually brought Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman to 'real life' before the common Hindu, as never before. It metamorphosed distant bookish characters, whose tales were confined earlier to monotonous recitals by pundits and old people, into vibrant, real-life, close-to-touch 'deities'. The fact that Doordarshan inadvertently helped the Sangh parivar jump on the backs of the new wave of popular religious enthusiasm has hardly engaged the attention of Indian scholars. Several foreign academics like Christophe Jaffrelot, Barbara Stoler Miller, James Hegarty, David Ludden, Victoria Farmer and Philip Lutgendorf have, however, hinted at or examined the relation between this decision of the secular Congress and the outburst of communalism in India.

1989 was the landmark year when a new nine-year old party, the BJP and its associate, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, utilised the legend of Ram to the hilt. They brought the small, dusty town of Ayodhya, where Ram was believed to have been born, into national focus. To understand how the party increased its number of Lok Sabha seats from just 2 to 85 by the end of the 1989, let us start with January. The VHP announced that its determination to set up a Ram Mandir at the disputed site in Ayodhya and that it would hold its sacred shilanyas ceremony in November. The All India Babri Masjid Action Committee, in turn, set up 'defence squads', but the Hindu programme received even more strength from millions gathered at the Prayag Kumbh Mela immediately thereafter, and from the Sant Sammelan that lent full support. The Sangh strategy was to arouse all Hindus by painting them as victims, not only under Muslim and British rule, but also under the 'pro-Muslim Congress'. They insisted that only the Sangh parivar could retrieve Bhagawan Ram's birthplace from the clutches of 'Muslim invaders'. The year-long campaign turned belligerent and the secular forces were completely on their back foot, as they failed to gauge how much the masses had been mesmerised by the Ramayan serial. Having kept an antiseptic distance from the Hindu epics and Puranas, Left liberals just could not understand how a mythical character could re-define and kindle so much Hindu fervour. Doordarshan, incidentally, kept running the Mahabharat serial throughout 1989 and well into 1990, infusing weekly shots of holy adrenalin into Hindus. The Sangh parivar's unique and imaginative campaign of requesting every Hindu or group to subscribe to just one brick for the temple, worked wonders, despite the scorn of secular forces.

Excitement and tension ran high throughout the year and incidentally, the two major events of November 1989 are terribly inter-twined. The Sangh parivar organised its long-awaited Ram Shila Pujan to demonstrate its serious commitment to building the Ram Mandir and the BJP sailed through the Lok Sabha elections that very month — bagging a whooping number of 85 seats. Ram had indeed blessed them. The party emerged as the indispensable ally of VP Singh whose minority government (December 1989 to November 1990) depended on the large chunk of BJP seats, that went on expanding its base during the 'sunny days' a government they had popped up. We will not get into greater details of how Singh was arm-twisted by

the BJP for this support and how he retaliated by splitting the Hindu votes, by shrewdly accepting the Mandal Commission Report in August of 1990 and reserving 27 percent in education and jobs for 'Other Backward Castes' (OBCs). The cornered BJP responded by riding the Ram-Ayodhya wave and its President, Lal Krishna Advani, criss-crossed the country in September-October of 1990 with his war chariot, the Ram Ratha Yatra. This whipped up war-like passions and mass hysteria and led to several police firings, communal riots and hundreds dead. But, the BJP had finally managed to shake the monopoly of the secular-democratic narrative after more than four decades. It is needless to recall the destruction of the masjid on 6th December 1992, which led to large scale riots and counter riots and terrorism, like the serial explosions in Mumbai. These broke down Hindu Muslim relations in secular India, but history will not forget the shamelessly abdication of responsibilities by Narasimha Rao's 'secular' Congress government. Only the two Yadav governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh girded their loins to combat the outburst of communalism, while secular intellectuals only protested and published ineffective booklets.

We have just raced through these facts to explain that we had 25 long years to fight the communalism of the Sangh parivar, but we failed. In at quarter of a century between 1989 and 2014, secular parties had held power for most of the time and even the six years of Atal Behari Vajpayee's rule was more liberal than poisonously communal. But neither they nor the Left intelligentsia, that was outsourced the task of scripting what was to be taught in educational institutions, could construct any appropriate response. The deliberate distancing of the Left liberal forces from religion left the field wide open to the Hindu Right, and all they did was to exploit the secular syllabi of schools and colleges that portrays Muslims as invaders. No concerted attempt was made to explain that all our Indian Muslims are definitely sons of the soil over several generations and the vast majority are converts. We failed to drive home the fact that India has had countless other foreign invasions and incursions and that these have merged into our culture, enriching it. We have brushed under the carpet since Nehru's time the real story of how Brahmanism has defeated Buddhism, not always peacefully or fairly, but this recounting would have explained that, like all religions, Hinduism too had its history of aggressive behaviour. We were not told why the greatest architecture of the pre-Islamic India, namely, the wondrous Buddhist edifices at Amarawati, Taxila, Ajanta, Sarnath, Sanchi, Bharhut and Bodh Gaya had all been lost, destroyed and erased from our historical memory. These had to be discovered painstakingly, one by one, in the nineteenth century by British archaeologists. Hindus have never been explained why Hindu history had completely obliterated their existence, mentally and physically, and why it had injected complete amnesia about the great Ashoka. Had James Prinsep not reestablished his very existence in 1837, we would not know how Hindu India had wiped him off, just because he was a Buddhist. If we could set aside and forget the unpleasant history of Hindu-Buddhist acrimony and physical destruction, why cannot we accept the Muslim invasion, as after all, they are totally 'Indian' and the vast majority are indigenous converts ?

It is already too late. We have to first admit that we too have a role in the unchecked rise of communalism in India. Secularists had assumed that their philosophy would be prevailing for ever and ever. So, we must begin the counter-struggle by admitting our own mistakes, that we have just done in this piece. Only after that can we come up with our war strategy but we need to stop this habitual criticism of fundamentalists and their depredations as it does not help. Our battle is for us to plan and fight for every inch we can regain, but friends, the journey ahead is long, dangerous and really toilsome.