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The ambit of fraternity and the wages of oblivion

It is often forgotten that fraternity is among the basic values inscribed in the Preamble of the Constitution of India

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‘These principles of liberty equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy,’ said B.R.Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly, in 1949.

It is often forgotten that ‘fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation’ is, along with Justice, Liberty and Equality, among the basic values inscribed in the Preamble of the Constitution of India whose first line asserts, ‘We, the People of India’ have solemnly resolved to ‘secure’ to all the citizens of India.

The responsibility of the individual citizen

B.R. Ambedkar provided its rationale with remarkable foresight: ‘We must begin by acknowledging the fact there is a complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of these is equality’ and as a result of it we would enter into ‘a life of contradictions’ on January 26, 1950.

However, practical adherence to this commitment was given shape only by the Forty-Second Amendment (1976) in Article 51A (e) on Fundamental Duties. It makes it the duty of every citizen of India ‘to promote harmony and the spirit of common among all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities.

Significantly, the responsibility for bringing this about does not rest with the state but seems to be the responsibility of the individual citizen. We, therefore, need to comprehend the meaning and relevance of this pious wish. How has it become a political principle of relevance?

A poet summed it up neatly: *Unka jo aqeeda hai who ahl-e-sayaaasat jaanen; Mera paigham mohabbat hai, jahaan tak pahunche* (The politicians’ creed, the politicians know/ (Mine is the message of love, be it heard afar)

The idea of fraternity is based on the view that people have responsibilities to each other. It was defined after the French Revolution in the following terms: 'Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you; do constantly to others the good which you would wish to receive from them.' The vagueness of the definition suggests that, despite its place in the revolutionary slogan, the idea of fraternity was not clearly understood. It is generally seen as an emotion rather than a principle.

In the Indian context however, as understood and articulated by B.R. Ambedkar, there is a sense of the imperative in the emotion. This is reflected in the wording of this section of the Preamble where the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation both necessitate this emotion, and thereby lend a sense of urgency to it. It thus becomes an essential ingredient of citizenship that can be evaded or neglected at the cost of the concept itself.

The shape of inequality

An aggravating factor, often overlooked, is the shape that inequality takes in different segments of our society. It is economic on one plane; on others it is regional, caste and religious. Some are spelt out, others understated, still others assumed. Sociologists have identified nine categories of people who are determined to be socially and/or politically and/or economically excluded. These particularly include Dalits, Adivasis, women and religious minorities.

Recent studies on religious minorities who constitute around 20% of India's population have traced discrimination relating to them to perceptions that relate to the very origins of thinking that brought about the partition of August 1947. They argue that violence was not merely accidental but integral to the foundation of the nation and that the need for fraternity coexisted with the imperative need for restoring social cohesion in segments of society.

Much blame for the haste displayed by decision-makers has been written about on the basis of the documentation made available subsequently and, at this distance of time, its validity cannot be dismissed altogether.

A primary concern of the Constitution-makers related to cohesion and integration of the units of the new Republic formally described as 'A Union of States'. In the words of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, 'the inspiration and the stimulus came from above rather than from below and unless the transplanted growth takes a healthy root in the soil, there will be a danger of collapse and chaos.' This was amplified by V.P. Menon as the integration 'of the minds of the people'.

In a speech in the Constituent Assembly on December 22, 1952, B.R. Ambedkar dwelt on what he called 'Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Democracy'. He listed these as: absence of glaring inequalities; presence of an opposition; equality of law and administration; observance of constitutional morality; avoidance of tyranny of majority over minority; a functioning of moral order in society, and public conscience.

Over time, uneven development has characterised the States of the Indian Union. Regional and linguistic diversity characterises them. And so does uneven economic development and progress, resulting in uneven levels of education, employment, social cohesion and contentment.

Question for the leadership

Seventy-five years on, a candid assessment of the state of the Republic makes us cogitate on evidence of regional diversity, assertion of linguistic identity and emergence of diverging political orientations. While the first two are physical and social realities, the third is a product of thriving diversity. Each is real, each is also disconcerting from the viewpoint of federal governance hitherto practised, and each seeks accommodation in a divergent framework.

Where does this take fraternity? Article 51A(e) of the Constitution does not differentiate between citizens on any of the categories mentioned above and makes it an all-encompassing duty. Its ambit therefore is universal; its observance, by the same logic, has to begin at the base of the ladder of citizenship rather than the top but does not spare the leadership from the obligation to promote and practise it.

Has this been done in practice? How often have social and political leaders of opinion promoted fraternity, incidentally or specifically, locally, within the region or nationally? The record is depressing; hence the ease with which non-fraternal patterns of behaviour seem to emerge in our society. Does this promote national integration, rhetoric apart? Was the bloodshed of 1947 ('10 million or one in every 35 persons in the subcontinent') a forerunner of lesser ones that followed?