

Rollback the distrust, remember the core values

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Societal relations are fragile and need constant nursing; social peace is a pre-requisite for progress

Sanity, said a line in an old movie, exists in every contract. It is so in every social compact that precedes the establishment of any society or social grouping. One is reminded of it by recent reports of expressions of hostility and downright hatred by a section of our people against another. Are these expressive of atavistic impulses of yore or generated by more recent trends seeking social hegemony premised on an imaginary past?

Foundational values

The basic values of India's Constitution assert the principles of justice, equality and fraternity and are reiterated by all sections of social and political leadership. Yet, those who profess to be their followers tend to forget them time and again.

We have in recent weeks witnessed social debates and contestations, normal in a democracy, derail into aggressive assertions that typecast fellow citizens as enemies or undesirable creatures. The trend even finds its reflection in pronouncements of public figures and officials. Both have been prone to forget that even if a citizen is charged with an offence against the law or found to be guilty of it by the due process of law, he or she does not cease to be a citizen and stands deprived of rights and duties of citizenship. The conclusion is inescapable that the sole purpose of such typecasting is to find an excuse for an administrative failure and instead cast a slur, stigmatise and socially degrade a group of fellow citizens.

The trend is so pervasive that it finds expression in sections of our citizens living in foreign lands; it is so aggressive that it offends local sentiments and norms of behaviour; so alarming that it has invited reaction from otherwise friendly local hosts and compelled our authorities, belatedly, to state the official position at the highest level.

This ailment of the mind is being reflected in the discharge of normal duties by officials at different levels and is alarming enough to induce a group of 100 of our most eminent former civil servants to appeal, recently, to State Chief Ministers "to instruct all public functionaries to be particularly vigilant to prevent social boycott of any community in the State and to ensure that all the entitlements including medical and hospital care, rations and financial assistance are available equally to all those in need".

Why is this happening? What have we forgotten or disowned?

The plurality of our society and its diversity is an existential reality. The imperative of coexistence and tolerance has been accepted down the ages. Sages and society leaders have reiterated it time and again. We need only to recall Swami Vivekananda's advocacy of religious pluralism, to his vision of India "being the junction of two great systems — Hinduism and Islam — having a Vedantic brain and Islamic body".

Approach worth reiterating

This same approach in a more practical sense was reflected in the Inter-communal Unity Appeal made in October 1923 by a group of Indians led by Lala Lajpat Rai, Mufti Kifayatullah, Swami Shraddhanand, Maulana Azad, Kasturba Gandhi and 95 others. All sections of our public need to be reminded of its pragmatic approach:

"If any individual or group of individuals belonging to any community commits an act of violence against, or attacks the person, property or honour of women or places of worship (mandir, mosque, church or gurdwara, etc) of his neighbour or townsman or helps those who indulge in such misdeeds, he is, from the religious point of view, guilty of a great sin; and that it is the duty of co-religionists of such offenders to stand up and resist such miscreants and to protect those who are so attacked."

Why can we not show the mirror in this shape to our professedly religion-minded public and urge it to follow in word and deed? The present approach of distrust is disquieting, resulting in resentment, and injection of suspicion and viciousness in social relations. It impacts adversely on the promotion of fraternity. Is it serving any purpose, either of fighting the pandemic or of expediting the process of proceeding against those who may have transgressed the law? Alternatively, is it serving a political purpose?

History tells us that human relationships are fragile and need constant nursing; the same holds for societal relations. We have in our own times witnessed the fragmentation, even destruction, of societies elsewhere. Social peace is thus a pre-requisite for progress and development. Let sanity prevail. Let this be our motto.

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