

The choice is narrowing the circle or widening circle

The nation must remain diverse and inclusive, continuing to build itself on the principles in the Preamble

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An editorial comment recently opined ‘India is witnessing the progressive normalization of minority baiting’. Some developments in a related context lend credence to it.

Recent happenings within the country and their reactions in lands far and near tend to pose the problem. The sequencing is relevant and must not be interchanged. The reactions beyond our shores were not autonomous and were induced by what was said to audiences at home, by whom it was said, and why it became critical and induced reactions, immediate and over a passage of time.

Neighbourhood impact

One aspect of the matter, understandably played up in the domestic media, is the reaction in the Gulf Cooperation Council and Persian Gulf countries with whom India has extensive and diverse political and commercial relations. These also provide gainful employment to many million Indian nationals whose remittances are an important source of foreign exchange remittances, in turn sustaining millions of households. Each of these has been quantified. In strategic terms, the region is India’s extended neighbourhood; so is the case with Malaysia and Indonesia and Brunei in Southeast Asia.

It is evident that the malaise (while being domestic in its origin) has global dimensions. Its external manifestations are aggravated by modern means of communication. By the same logic, the correctives have to emanate in the context of domestic perceptions and practices.

An emerging disquiet

Muslims are our largest religious minority, constituting 14.3% of the total population and numbering over 200 million. After Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, they constitute the largest Muslim group anywhere in the world.

They are spread all over the country and are well integrated, but of late, signs of evident disquiet have been evident in all segments of the community.

The reason for this are the remarks uttered in media debates by two spokespersons of the ruling party reflecting on the personality of the Prophet. After a lapse of over a week of deafening silence, one of these persons was suspended and the membership of the second dispensed with. Both actions are viewed as inadequate by the community. No reaction has emanated from senior levels of government. The silence of institutional bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission of India and of the National Commission for Minorities is intriguing; so is the apparent reticence of the judiciary.

On the contrary, the use of strong-arm tactics and bulldozers to counter public demonstrations seeking firmer action against alleged culprits is suggestive of bias and has been aptly summed up in a candid editorial comment: 'there is little doubt that the demolitions amount to an abuse of power, a challenge to the rule of law and are inherently illegal due to the absence of due process or proportionality'. Some observers have even opined that the bulldozer is an instrument to silence the minorities since its use in similar cases involving non-minority public is wanting.

What then could be the intent? Would it be to discipline, and thereby give rise to a feeling of denial with all its consequences?

Furtherance of hate

The operative constitutional principle in social behaviour should be the promotion of equality and fraternity. In actual practice it is the contrary; this results in furtherance of hate by denigration. In an earlier period, this used to focus principally on regional types and linguistic expressions. This was found to be troublesome since retaliation in kind was often quick and in equal measure. The alternative was to denigrate faiths or socio-religious practices in competitive one-upmanship. An easy target in this was the numerous but socially and economically weaker segments that could even be mocked in terms of assumed backwardness. And, since most of our fellow citizens have reverence for traditional belief, 'experts' were soon discovered for these target areas. The public's addiction to popular television and its

concocted levels of debate (premised on a preference for the brash and the articulate) invariably produces the desired results sought in some sections.

Indic versus non-Indic

A categorising segment of recent origin is the differentiation between Indic and non-Indic. This, put together with the existential diversity of faiths, seeks to divide fellow citizens between those who pursue Indic faiths assumed to be of Indian origin and those who subscribe to Christianity and Islam allegedly of external import. The argument is premised on a certain reading of Indian history and the sociological issue is sought to be premised on what constitutes Indianness, ignoring that our society is ‘a mosaic in which primordial cleavages both intersect and intermix with contemporary socio-economic segments’.

This ideological effort, in a quest of ‘purifying exclusiveness’ is premised on our reading of history. A relevant question is whose history — of India defined in the period of British rule, or of India traditionally defined as Bharat? The latter would include many segments of southern Asia covered today by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. Furthermore, and in terms of what is sought to be presented as our history would also include parts of Afghanistan and even of Iran since the latter was depicted by M.S. Golwalkar as ‘nothing but the base of Aryabhumi’. One consequence of this would be to categorise Ghazni, Khilji, Lodi, etc. not as foreign invaders but as domestic brigands who committed acts of loot and plunder and even succeeded in establishing kingdoms. Nor can the landmass of Bharat be described in terms of faith alone since there was a period of several centuries when Buddhism was the dominant religion. Furthermore, in the centuries when the rulers were Muslims, no effort seems to have been made to carry out mass conversions; on the contrary, the influence of Sufi saints was more pervasive.

The Indian reality of migrating groups seeking greener pastures since times immemorial qualifies our nomenclature of a ‘civilisational state’ and is better depicted in Raghupati Rai Firaq’s couplet: *Sar zamin-e-hind par aqwam-e-alam ke Firaq/Qafila baste gae hindostan banta gaya* (Caravans from nations of the world kept coming and contributed to the formation of Hindostan)

Linguistically, India has also been called ‘a land of linguistic minorities’. The Linguistic Survey of India and the research of Ganesh N. Devy bring forth the regional diversity of living languages. This lends credence to outbursts against linguistic homogeneity that is attempted periodically in the guise of national unity.

In multiple senses, our national choice thus lies in an ever-widening circle and in resisting all attempts, however well meaning, in abridging it. India is and must remain diverse and inclusive, and continue to build itself on the principles inscribed in the Preamble.

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