

Menace of Political Intolerance in India: An Anathema for Democracy

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Abstract : Right to dissent and tolerance of dissent are sine qua non of a liberal democratic society and is considered to be one of the key political virtues of the modern era. But the most serious challenge India faces today is how to deal with a widespread impression that 'an atmosphere of intolerance' overlaid with 'shades of authoritarianism' pervades the country. The common refrain is the danger posed by majoritarianism, at the expense of minorities of every hue - religious, ethnic and linguistic.

A curious debate in the recent past has been, "has the world's biggest democracy become an intolerant nation?" The reality is that intolerance is a serious issue with important ramifications -- both social and economic.

This paper attempts an analysis of the string of isolated incidents, disparate in nature since the past few months, in different pockets and its ramifications on the democratic tradition of our country highlighting on the fact that our elected rulers, irrespective of party colour, are getting increasingly intolerant of diversity of opinion and are not hesitating to high-handedly use state-power in order to silence criticism and to gag voices of dissent.

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Right to dissent and tolerance of dissent are sine qua non of a liberal democratic society. A liberal democracy is one in which all groups in the country accept the fact that in a free country, people can have different opinions and beliefs and shall have equal rights in voicing them without fear of legal penalties or social sanctions. The importance of tolerance lies in the fact that it is considered to be one of the key political virtues of the modern era. In words of Jürgen Habermas, however, not only the term tolerance designates the general disposition to treat another person with respect, more specifically we use it to refer to a political virtue in our dealings with citizens who are different. It is held to be the political, if not moral, principle mediating between the competing moral claims of individuals and communities alike. Political tolerance, then, is thought to mandate specific obligations for individuals and communities which when fulfilled result in a peaceful, civil and ultimately a more democratic society.

Tolerance plays a significant role in democratic theory. In 1954, in the midst of the infamous McCarthy-led Red Scare in the United States, Samuel Stouffer initiated the modern study of political intolerance with a major survey of both the American mass public and local community leaders. Stouffer, like many others, observed the widespread political repression being undertaken in the name of protecting America and its values from the godless communists, and wondered whether such repression was supported by ordinary people.

Intolerance-the unwillingness to put up with disagreeable ideas and groups-has thus become a staple of research on the democratic orientations of citizens throughout the world, since intolerance in one form or another fuels the conflicts. And even where intolerance does not directly produce political violence, the failure of democratizing regimes to embrace political freedom for all, even those in the opposition, has become one of the most important impediments to the consolidation of democratic reform throughout the world. Democracy is of course a system of procedures by which majorities tend to have their way: the majority rules. Liberal democracies require mechanisms of aggregating citizen preferences within majoritarian institutions and this is perhaps the essence of the concept of democracy.

To the extent that a political culture emphasizes conformity and penalizes those with contrarian ideas, little tolerance exists, and the likelihood of political repression is high. This can in turn create what Noelle-Neumann (1984) has referred to as a "spiral of silence:"

Perhaps one of the most widely investigated questions in the tolerance literature has to do with the etiology of intolerance at the individual level. Many have contributed to identifying predictors of intolerance, ranging from Sniderman's work (1975) on self-esteem and social learning, to Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) on threat perceptions, democratic values, and psychological insecurity, to Stenner's book (2005) on the personality trait authoritarianism. Nearly all agree that some sort of closed-mindedness or psychological rigidity contributes to intolerance, even if the precise label attached to the concept varies across researchers. It seems natural to suggest that intolerance flourishes where the threat of groups and ideas is highest, yet the various processes involved have been found to be fairly complex and the simple relationship does not typically exist.

Symbiotic relationship between democracy and human rights is reflected in those articles of human rights conventions which specify that any restrictions on a particular right should be such as are "necessary in a democratic society". Human rights deficit which goes beyond this necessity takes the substance out of democracy and contributes to social and political alienation and marginalization, and provides a breeding ground for political intolerance. This is why the human rights catalogue includes the right of every citizen to political participation.

Indian culture teaches, preaches and practices tolerance. The framers of our Constitution were well aware of the need for politics that could transform a society rooted in caste and religious tradition. It was this awareness that led to a conscious choice of institutions and symbols that formed the basis of such a transformative articulation of politics. For instance, the national flag has Ashoka's Wheel of Law - a symbol taken from a Buddhist era - which was to function as a reminder for every citizen and the state to commit to dharma. Ashoka's dharma was a secular one, based on a collective morality that hinged on undoing the worst practices of Indian society. Post-1947, the commitment to secularism in India did not only mean a commitment

to freedom of religion, but also a commitment to do away with religious practices considered being at odds with liberalism.

What has complicated the project of secularism in India are two issues. First, the state may be neutral towards religion, but this does not mean that state actors and individuals in society are neutral towards religion. Second, there is no agreement in India that religion should be relegated to the private sphere. In fact, political appeals are often made through religious spaces and spokespersons. In India, the state cannot afford to be indifferent to religion because societal and individual decisions are still dictated by religious conditioning and imperatives. Religious neutrality has become an accepted behavioural script for the state, but not for society and certainly not for individuals (even when they are state actors).

The nation is today witnessing an abundance of exuberance, and this is possibly well-merited. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi's forays to several countries across the globe have raised India's prestige. India is today one of the few bright spots in terms of economic growth. The International Monetary Fund has projected that India's economy will grow faster than that of other major economies, China included. India's growth rate is expected to be 7.5 per cent in 2016, as against China's 6.3 per cent. The country has become the most favoured destination for foreign investment; its trade deficit has shrunk.

India's image should be that of a rapidly developing country which has embraced the ideology of democracy and freedom. The rising intolerance against religious groups and intellectuals stifles debate and progress, which in turn may create an element of doubt over the true identity of India.

Probably, the most serious challenge India faces is how to deal with a widespread impression that 'an atmosphere of intolerance' overlaid with 'shades of authoritarianism' pervades the country. From 'Latigate' to the 'Vyapam scandal, or more recent setbacks such as the striking down of the constitutional amendment setting up the National Judicial Appointments Commission. They arise from more fundamental issues that could have a long-term impact. Unless dealt with properly, the result could be the tarnishing of India's image as a pluralist and secular democracy - and the decline of a nation that prides itself on adhering to values enshrined in its iconic Constitution.

An overall ambiance of intolerance appears to have permeated our country at this time. Every day, almost without exception, newspapers have been carrying headlines about collectively executed misdeeds and even violence aimed at subjugating dissent or opposition to authority expressed by this or that private individual. Indeed, the intensity of this crisis of majoritarian intolerance appears to be such as would not easily find its match in the history of independent India. One of the latest events in this series is the arrest of an apparently 'leftist' singer-composer by Jayalalitha's police in Tamil Nadu for the 'crime' of satirizing through a song what he perceived as misrule in Amma's land and especially the way liquor business is promoted in the state. For this writer, domiciled in Bengal, this refreshes the memory of a similar incident that happened in 2012: a professor named Ambikesh Mahapatra was arrested by the Kolkata police for having the temerity to post on Facebook a cartoon satirizing the chief minister Mamata Banerjee and one of her party men. Mahapatra was later released on bail; the folk singer of Tamil Nadu has been denied even that.

Clearly, our elected rulers, irrespective of party colour, are getting increasingly intolerant of diversity of opinion and are not hesitating to high-handedly use state-power in order to silence criticism and to gag voices of dissent. Even the erstwhile British rulers of colonized India would appear more tolerant of criticism in comparison: If they had been as prone to arresting protesters or critics, writers and composers like Kazi Najrul Islam or Rabindranath Tagore would surely have been imprisoned more than once.

The ruler-or the ruling party-everywhere in the country is deciding on what is right and what is not and bulldozing everyone else into conformity and obeisance. The private individual is not being allowed to stray from this political and majoritarian straight path either to the left or to the right. And this Orwellian authoritarianism, this penchant to re-create the country's socio-polity on a unidimensional model is a malaise that afflicts rulers and parties of all hues. The mindset exhibited by Jayalalitha or by Banerjee before her-is no better or more forward-looking than the one motivating the words or actions of, say, Amit Shah in Bihar, the Sangh Parivar in Dadri or the Shiv Sena in Mumbai. It points to a sharply divided polity. This could spell danger, particularly in a multi-layered, multi-religious and multi-ethnic country like ours.

Many of the events relate to the period July to October, 2015, and the impact cannot any longer be ignored or regarded as routine. The common refrain is the danger posed by majoritarianism, at the expense of minorities of every hue - religious, ethnic and linguistic.

One of the early triggers, perhaps little noticed at the time, was the misplaced criticism of Vice-President Hamid Ansari's thought-provoking address to the All India Majlis-e-Mushawarat on the occasion of its golden jubilee. The orchestrated attacks by 'majoritarian groups', ignoring the fact that the Vice-President while referring to issues relating to Muslim identity and security also urged Muslims to think along plural, secular and democratic lines, seemed to signal the change in attitude. The subsequent murders of two prominent iconoclasts, M.M. Kalburgi and Narendra Dabholkar, added to prevailing concerns about growing intolerance. A number of intellectuals expressed the fear that freedom of expression was under threat, and that all signs reflected growing intolerance of dissenting opinion. More than 40 intellectuals and writers have returned literary awards or written open letters to protest the rise in intolerance and the assault on free speech. Nayantara Sahgal, nationally recognised writer and a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, announced her decision to return her Sahitya Akademi (academy of letters) award in a public letter titled The unmaking of India. In her letter, Ms Sahgal has condemned Prime Minister Modi for remaining silent about the "reign of terror" that has been unleashed in India and offered her support to "all dissenters who now live in fear and uncertainty".

Events during September seemed to signal a rise in 'pseudo-religiosity' and 'majoritarian inevitability' - two phrases being commonly mentioned in the public discourse. One related to the ban on the sale of meat during the Jain festival of Paryushan. The other was the lynching of a Muslim by a predominantly Hindu mob in Dadri (Uttar Pradesh), alleging that he had consumed beef. Several incidents have taken place that reinforce the perception that India's vaunted secularism is under siege. These include continued attacks on Muslims in the name of cow protection in different parts of the country, and the justification of the killing in the name of cow protection by Panchjanya Magazine, a known mouthpiece of Hindu extremists. All these incidents portray India as an increasingly intolerant society.

Protests sparked by the arrest of a Jawaharlal Nehru University student on the charge of sedition have been widely covered by the global media, which said the incident reflected the growing debate within India on democracy and intolerance. The protests erupted after JNU students union president Kanhaiya Kumar was arrested after some persons participating in a demonstration against the 2013 hanging of Afzal Guru shouted slogans about breaking up India into pieces. Many students believe the arrest is a "direct assault on their right to dissent.

Even India's central bank governor, Raghuram Rajan, made a rare foray into non-economic matters by calling for mutual respect and tolerance in public discourse. There is an increased understanding that the image of intolerance will only hurt India's economy, in terms of investment and trade, in the long term.

But perhaps the most painful assessment for India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi came from an analyst at Moody's Analytics, saying the country -- and Modi -- could "risk losing domestic and global credibility" if action wasn't taken. . Modi's government has also been criticised for failing to deliver economic reforms that would create more social development programs. The issue at hand is that many of the Hindu nationalist groups of the BJP party view Modi's progression as Prime Minister in terms of how much India is moving towards Hindu nationalism, rather than focusing on overarching issues of poverty and economic growth.

Sliding further down the slippery slope of dogmatism and majority domination, and intent on proving that 'might is right', the Shiv Sena in October compelled Pakistani singer Ghulam Ali to cancel his concerts in Mumbai and Pune on one occasion. On another occasion it manhandled former Bharatiya Janata Party ideologue Sudheendra Kulkarni for going ahead with former Foreign Minister of Pakistan Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri's book launch in Mumbai. Both events have dealt a serious blow to India's image as a nation that is inclusive in character, and capable of embracing contrary viewpoints.

Official reaction to these series of events has been weak and tardy, and this is a part of the problem. Condemnations of the incidents that have taken place have been few and inadequate, considering the incendiary nature of some of them. Even the Prime Minister's reaction to the Dadri incident and the Ghulam Ali concert seemed mild, considering 'the gathering storm'. Most unfortunate has been the tendency in official circles to paint the string of events taking place across the country with a political brush.

This has been exacerbated by the government's belligerence towards the protesting writers. Senior minister and the number two in the Modi cabinet, Arun Jaitley, calls the protest by the literary minds a "manufactured revolt" and "intellectual intolerance towards the BJP." Others call the anger against intolerance disguised left-liberal opposition towards the Modi government.

The government seems to be blind towards public opinion. The politics of the BJP are not new. The party captured national attention in late 1980s when it led a movement to demolish the Babri mosque, a 16th century structure in the eastern Indian city of Ayodhya, which Hindus claims to be the birthplace of Ram, an important god in the Hindu pantheon. The movement led to large-scale religious violence across the country and catapulted the party to fame in a short time. The destruction of the mosque in 1992 brought large political gains to the party, and in a very short span of time the party became an important actor on the national stage.

A well-known Indian historian, Romila Thapar, expresses deep concern at the present state of affairs. She says "we are now a society that fears the terror of extremist groups. They are terrorists, their function is to evoke terror and spread fear in various communities by killing and threatening people, while their patrons in mainstream politics protect them."

Indeed, the perception is gradually building that Modi is using the slogan of development merely as a mask and that the real agenda of his government is to convert the nation into a Hindu state. This view is further reinforced by the intrusion of hardcore Hindu extremists into government-owned educational institutions and academies. These groups are attempting to change history textbooks to highlight the Hindu identity of India and by the open patronization of groups and individuals who are averse to the secular character of the country.

The unprecedented uprising by the writers is not only an anger against intolerance; it is also a cry to save the soul of India. The workings of majoritarian violence and high-handed use of political power should stop immediately, the mud-slinging between rival political parties should not continue to vitiate public discourse and, last but certainly not the least, the international image of Indian democracy should be saved from getting sullied beyond salvage.

President Pranab Mukherjee's has been the only sober voice in this cacophony. He appealed to the nation "that the core values of India's civilisation that celebrate diversity, plurality and tolerance should not be allowed to wither away. He remarked that 'these values have kept us together over the centuries. Many ancient civilisations have collapsed, but the Indian civilisation has survived because of its core civilisation values and adherence to them'".

Those in-charge must understand that this is the age of connectivity, when millions feel connected intimately through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other apps. As concerns grow, sharing of individual experiences among lakhs of people using the Internet could lead to a mighty ground-swell of protest that could deal a blow to the institutions of State. No one in India can forget how the Internet had a transformative impact in Delhi in December, 2012, following the gang rape of a young girl. It almost brought to a standstill the government of the day.

The political culture of India at this time is characterized by an extreme intolerance of dissent and the insult to the spirit of democracy. That a pluralistic democracy has been at the core of the Indian story since independence can never be denied. A long tradition of pluralism and diversity going back to the deep past, and a constitutional framework committed to the ideals of democracy and secularism are one of the few things that India, still, can justly feel proud of.

Modi should understand that in order to realize his slogan of 'Make in India'-in order to significantly advance in the World Bank's 'Ease of doing business' rankings-he has to translate his words on 'unity among diversity' into action. He would fail to deliver on his promise of development if he continues to soft-pedal on the issue of communalism. He has to finally decide if he would take an unambiguous and tough stand on the culture of communal hatred and majoritarianism that the RSS stands for-or would waste his chance to prove that he is indeed worth the trust India reposed in him a year back.

India needs to reaffirm its commitment to pluralism and diversity.

Freedom is under threat in India and many of its right-thinking citizens are speaking out against the wave of right-wing violence and repression. L.K. Advani was moved to condemn what he said is "an increase in cases of intolerance" and suggested that democracy itself was under threat in India.

But much of the intolerance and extremism is directed inwards, at India's rich cultural and religious diversity. This year alone, two progressive voices have been silenced forever with the murders of Govind Pansare, in February, and M.M. Kalburgi, in August. Both men were known for their opposition to religious extremism and had spent much of their lives championing progressive causes. The lynching of a Muslim man in a village outside Delhi for allegedly consuming beef shocked not just India, but the world. In India-held Kashmir, communal tensions have been stoked by the revival of a long-dormant law banning the sale and consumption of beef.

The country is debating rising radicalism and the shrinking liberal space. Not long ago, the overriding mantra of the nation was development. Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a historic mandate in May 2014 by popularizing the slogan of development. When Modi was campaigning for the 2014 parliamentary elections, he ran on the slogan of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" - "Together with all, development for all." A major component of this policy was a guarantee that no religious discrimination would be tolerated. Despite the country being fully aware that the BJP leader presided over the worst ever religious violence in Gujarat in 2002 that claimed the lives of more than 1,000 Muslims, the BJP swept to power

Moreover, the situation was made more volatile by the bizarre public pronouncements by some senior members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). To cite a few examples, Manohar Lal Khattar, Chief Minister of Haryana and member of the BJP, said, "Muslims can continue to live in this country, but they have to give up eating beef", which certainly threatened the Muslims. Amit Shah, the BJP President's comment, "if by any chance the BJP loses....[fire]crackers will be burst in celebration in Pakistan", certainly calling into question the patriotism of 175 million Indian Muslims. Tarun Vijay, the BJP MP's statement, "Lynching a person merely on suspicion [of eating beef] is absolutely wrong", seemed to leave open the question of how to respond to a known beef-eater.

The real mystery is why the face of the BJP -- Prime Minister Modi -- has been aloof. He has yet to condemn such statements from his colleagues, and has only occasionally mentioned the need for Indians to be tolerant.

There are two schools of thought whispered around New Delhi. The first is a truly despairing thesis: that deep down, Modi believes India is for Hindus. Modi's roots as a member of the RSS -- the umbrella Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, of which the BJP is a political offshoot -- have left many assuming he shares the group's core goals of a Hindu nation with Hindu values, beliefs, and practices endorsed by the state to the exclusion of other faiths.

The second thesis is that Modi is a realist. Modi's first priority, the theory goes, is the growth and development he promised on the campaign trail. But he can't push through reforms without electoral gains in upcoming state elections. And Modi can't achieve those gains, goes the line of thought, without appeasing and enlisting the more hardline RSS factions of his party.

Theoretically, there is nothing obviously wrong about supporting any political ideology. However, Hindutva is not merely the statement of a political ideology. It is also a process wherein there is an attempt to make Hinduism and Indian nationhood almost coterminous. This is something that the Constitution framers were dead against, notwithstanding a massive debate in the Constituent Assembly where elected representatives from the right actively argued in favour of a Hindu nation, but were denied by Nehru and the Congress.

The problem is that tolerance is an independent, individual choice and cannot be forced onto anyone. Its exercise rests on perceptions an individual possesses about another community. In recent years, nothing has testified to the breakdown of religious tolerance in society than the various instances of communal and caste clashes. While tolerance is a sought after value by many in India, we have been unable to enforce it in society, or even broaden the appeal of being tolerant in society. Campaign speeches by our politicians that often invoke hate speech against particular groups do not help the matter.

One of India's founding fathers (and pious Hindus) Mahatma Gandhi understood this well when he wrote about beef, more than six decades ago:

"No one probably experiences a greater agony of the soul when a cow is killed. But what am I to do? Am I to fulfil my dharma myself or am I to get it fulfilled by proxy? ... To make a [Muslim], therefore, to abstain from cow-killing under compulsion would amount in my opinion to converting him to Hinduism by force."

Modi would do well to remember Gandhi's words, and not feel bound by either of the two theories being used to explain his silence. Tolerance is important not only to harmony within the country, but also to India's considerable soft power abroad.

The onus lies with the government to ensure freedom of expression and the right to dissent which are the hallmarks of democracy. It must not treat the present protest as a manufactured dissent. It must not suppress the views of people as they provide the right feedback to the government, not the political parties in opposition. He must listen to the pulse of the people and make decisions accordingly to ensure a vibrant democracy.

Rabindranath Tagore returned the knighthood to the British government in the wake of Jallianwalabagh massacre as a mark of protest. Hence, protests create awareness in the society and correct the leaders to govern well as per the aspirations and expectations of the people. Albert Einstein has rightly remarked, "The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything."

Modi must not remain a mute spectator to the unprecedented protests and dissents in India. He must rise to the challenge to crush the forces of intolerance. He must reinvent his image from a Hindu leader to a people's leader. People trusted him and gave him spectacular mandate which he must respect. He should not become a puppet in the hands of his own party members and dance to the tunes of the fundamentalist forces from RSS. If the present climate of intolerance goes unchecked, it will become a major problem for him and the Indian democracy. He must rise above petty party politics to send a stern message to the intolerant religious forces in the country. He must condemn attacks immediately. He must lead a hard path to set the house in order. He must implore the intellectuals and authors to take back their awards to create a climate of tolerance in India. He needs to speak out.

Indian religious leaders must avoid their irresponsible utterances to create a climate of tolerance and goodwill. In a democracy, all citizens have the right to express their opinions, but not to indulge in violence. India's greatest strength is to absorb criticism and evolve accordingly

Preserving the pluralistic fabric of India is, perhaps, the most vital task for the country today. This is one such moment when leaders across the political spectrum should

work together to sustain the inherent quality of a nation that has welcomed people of all faiths and all denominations for centuries. This is the time to take certain visionary steps rather than attempt to keep opponents off-balance.

Such people don't want tolerance, perhaps because trampling on someone's rights serves the majority well. It means that benefits and rights, economic opportunity and social equality are not properly extended beyond the majoritarian fold. A case in point being reservations, where only a small percent of reservations go to non-Hindu groups (like tribals); only recently have reservations been extended to Muslims in some States, via an incorporation into the State's OBC list. So, predominantly one religious group, Hindus, most often capture the benefits of reservation.

There is a grave need to instil, cultivate or build a culture of tolerance in society, broadly through legislation if necessary. Untouchability being deemed an offence went much further than religious reform movements over 200 years in fighting the practice, as did the legal abolition of sati. Creating institutional mechanisms to deal with hate speech is a great place to start.

As Soli J. Sorabjee, the former Attorney General of India rightly opined that our Constitution prescribes certain fundamental duties to be performed by citizens (Article 51-A). One duty of paramount importance which should be performed is the duty to practise tolerance. Otherwise democracy, a basic feature of our Constitution, will be under siege and the cherished right to freedom of expression will be held hostage by an intolerant mindless mob.

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