



Rising Intolerance – Civil Society’s Protest

Dr. B. Nagapadmavathy, SG Lecturer in History, S.K.S.D. Mahila Kalasala UG & PG
(Autonomous), Tanuku

Dr. D.M. Neeraja, Reader in Commerce, S.K.S.D. Mahila Kalasala UG & PG
(Autonomous), Tanuku

M.P. Karthik Madhav, I MBA, GITAMS Deemed University, Visakhapatnam

Abstract

Over the past few weeks, more than 50 writers, artistes, filmmakers and scientists have returned top awards alleging a threat to diversity and freedom of speech. The campaign began after the mob killing of a man in Uttar Pradesh’s Dadri over rumours that he had stored and consumed beef. Also, the murders of rationalists and were cited as examples of rising intolerance. A host of eminent personalities joined the debate on intolerance in the country, with music maestro Zubin Mehta, Infosys founder N R Narayana Murthy, RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan, Hindi film star Shahrukh Khan. Here an attempt has been made in this paper how the civil society denounces the attack on Free Speech, democracy and composite culture, all of these are foundational ideas and principles of the Indian Republic that has greatly valued its traditions of debate and tolerance.

Key Words: Assimilation and Tolerance, Civil Society, foundation ideas.

"Our country has thrived due to its power of assimilation and tolerance. Our pluralistic character has stood the test of time. Our ancient civilization has over the centuries accommodated our diversities, Multiplicity is our collective strength which must be preserved at all cost. It finds reflection in various provisions of our Constitution," - Sri Pranab Mukharjee, President of India.

Introduction:

The greater fear and apprehension, however, is about the possible breakdown of social peace; a growing climate of intolerance, bigotry and hatred towards those designated as the social ‘other’; and the brazenness with which organized groups are willing to use ‘all means’ to impose their preferred social vision and norms, confident that they enjoy both social and official sanction. At the moment it may be the Dadri lynching, ostensibly triggered by allegations of cow slaughter and beef consumption that is dominating media discussion. But Dadri is only the latest, and by no means the last, in a

series of gruesome incidents that have marked our civic life, including the killing of well-known rationalists and writers Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi. And while it would be unfair, and factually incorrect, to trace all this to only the regime in power, it does appear that not only has the scale and intensity of such incidents increased, the institutional response to these acts of constitutional impropriety and vandalism has weakened.

Rising Intolerance – Civil Society’s Protest : Even as this is being written, the campaign started by 40 writers returning the Sahitya Akademi Awards



to the government to protest against the growing climate of intolerance, is still unfolding. More and more artists, painters, filmmakers, scientists, historians and academics have joined their ranks in the past month to register their protest against intolerance. The protests are in response to a series of incidents that have occurred in the country, violating the constitutional rights of people. Official response to the events surrounding the politics of hate has been weak to non-existent, and this is a part of the problem. The Central Government says what the centre could do when law and order is the responsibility of the State Government. But the killing of Kalburgi and Akhlaq were no ordinary crimes. The issue is not about the responsibility of this or that government but the highly vitiated atmosphere prevailing in the country which has emboldened extremists. Punjab writer Gurbachan Singh Bullar, Sahitya Academy winner said he was forced to return the award because "literature and culture have become targets of calculated attacks which made me concerned and restless."

Those who returned their awards include Nayanatara Sahgal, Mangalsh Dabral, Rajesh Joshi, Ganesh Devy, N. Shivdas, Ajmer Singh Aulakh, Arundhati Roy, Saeed Mirza, Kundan Shah, Virendra Saini, Ajay Raina, Ranjan Palit, Manoj Lobo, Tapan Bose, Sanjay Kak, Madhusree Dutta, Pradip Krishen, Shriprakash, Vivek Sachidanand, P M Satheesh, Tarun Bharatiya, Amitabha Chaktavarty, Rafeeq Ellias, Sudhakar Reddy Yakkanti, Anwar Jamal, Sudheer Palsane, Manjoj Nitharwal, Irene Dhar Malik, Dr. Bhargava (Scientist) and Satyaraj Nagpaul etc. Many historians and Academicians from outside India

were also expressed their deep concern and anxiety over the shrinking space for the free expression and growing intolerance towards difference of opinion. They opined that in this occasion to not speak out would be a crime.

It is, of course, possible to diminish, if not dismiss the current outpouring of concern as 'manufactured hysteria; of interested parties – the English speaking, 'secular' intelligentsia unable to come to terms with its displacement by a 'more organic, provincial elite, rooted in the religious and cultural ethos of our ancient civilization'. We are also told that what we are witnessing, and experiencing, is nothing but a playing out of longer historical process of an anti-colonial struggle and freedom movement seeking to define and institutionalize the norms needed for a democratic, constitutional republic to enable harmonious living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society – a process that is particularly vexed in an ancient land leavened with long memories and deep animosities.

One should also not be distracted by questions such as, why now and not earlier, why on this issue and not another, and so on. Creative artists are not social activists or politicians, expected to respond to every public provocation, and also maintain consistency. As individuals, different people respond to different stimuli and in different styles, not always to do with self-interest. Some of this may take a more public form – returning awards, sitting on dharna, and so on; others may chose to reflect their concern through their artistic work. This does not make one mode of protest superior and ranking



them – individuals and their actions – is unfair.

Eminent historian Romila Thapar said, “She had twice refused awards during the Congress’s rule, and those questioning ‘Why now’ need to know that many of us have protested against many things including the Emergency, the killing of Sikhs, Ayodhya Issue, fatwa against Rushdie, the massive rape in 2012”.

Narrating a recent incident, Ms. Thapar said that when she was in Mumbai to deliver a lecture on secularism, she needed police protection, first time after 68 years of Independence. “This is what we have come to. Police officials feared my face will be smeared with ink. Why? Because I was going to speak on secularism”.

When intellectuals, artists, and writers protest against the government and its inaction in situations of communal conflict, they are making a political statement. But in doing so they are not acting as proxies for parties — they are speaking for constitutional rights that guarantee the freedom to live, express and think differently. These freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution are the very contrast of the core beliefs of majoritarianism, religious intolerance, social exclusions and their disregard for freedom of expression.

Furthermore, it’s an old ploy to pick on individuals and belittle them to discredit the protest and thus evade the critique of the government. It is diverting attention from the substance of the protest to the political motivations of the protestors. At one level, it is an individual protest, but at another level,

the protestors form a collective civil society response to the general atmosphere of intolerance.

Conclusion:

The “gathering interrogation” of the government by civil society represents a widely-shared critique of the government which speaks to a larger current of discomfort against the cultural politics of the right and rampant cultures of violence perpetrated by it. There is growing recognition that the attack on free speech and dissent are part of a concerted movement to impose a communal agenda on India. The issues at stake are not just free speech but pluralism, citizenship and rights. All of these are foundational ideas and principles of the Indian Republic that has greatly valued its traditions of debate and tolerance. This is a moment for asking questions and talking back to power, aggregating the growing intellectual opposition into a moral force that can provoke an unequivocal critique of discordant ideologies and politics.

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