

Living in Intolerant Times

We Indians don't get tired of boasting about our democratic credentials including our proud civilisational history and a salad bowl co-existential culture. And there are strong justified reasons for doing so. After all, it is India which has given many progressive philosophies and theories of peaceful co-existence to the world. Most of the leading religions have germinated in Indian soils and have grown up to provide muscular ontological cushions for human civilisations. However, lately there have been many disturbing developments which go against the very grain of our vaunted culture of tolerance and respect for divergent discourses.

Indians appear to be increasingly intolerant of dissenting perspectives. These trends have the potential to balkanise our country by warping our nation-building processes. There have been umpteen instances in recent times when there have been attempts of cultural policing by the self-appointed guardians of Indian culture. Be it booking unmarried couples from Madh Island and Aksa beach in Mumbai, banning porn sites, plan for imposition of prohibition, banning of books, censoring of films, art exhibition or Valentine day celebrations, Indians have been increasingly orchestrating a regressive mindset.

John Stuart Mill was right when he said, "My freedom to move my hand stops where your nose starts." We may not like a particular idea or act but there are legitimate ways to express our reservations or revulsions rather than acting in a way which shames our existence as a civilised society. And, all this is often done in the name of stopping people from hurting the sensibilities of other individuals or communities. After all, how can one justify prohibiting an artistic expression if the same does not violate a particular law or rule. The subjective interpretation of the said rule or law has often been the reason behind such objective acts of cultural policing. Today, if we have one religious extremism rising in reply to another, we go nowhere. After all, two wrongs never make a right. Gandhi was right when he said, "Eye for an eye and the entire world will be blind."

The recent quashing of section 66A of the IT Act which allowed arrests for objectionable online content or striking down of porn site ban by the Apex Court is a step in the right

direction as the same infringes citizens' fundamental rights of expression or privacy. There have been further instances of vigilantism when the Group Admin of a 'What's App' group has been arrested for undesirable posts or knifing of the Group Admin by a member. The members always have an option to opt out of the group in case of revulsion or of making a separate group rather than indulging in disproportionate reaction. The recent killing of the noted Kannada litterateur M.M. Kalburgi or the bloggers in neighbouring Bangladesh or violence against some expressions or acts in social media is yet another example of growing intolerance in our society.

We call ourselves the proud torch-bearers of an enlightened civilisation but we still have obscurantist thinking shaping our outlook thereby negatively influencing our behaviour to certain societal developments. As Indians we don't like amorous expressions in public including kissing, smooching or canoodling but conveniently wink at domestic violence including beatings of wife on the plea of it being a private affair. What else is an expression of love as represented by an embrace or a kiss? But we still have intolerant societal reactions to such expressions as exemplified by 'Operation *Majnu*'.

We are so intolerant and disrespectful of a divergent opinion that we immediately brand someone to be a quisling as was recently on display when the ilk of Salman Khan made some sympathetic statements for Yakub Menon. While none doubts the justification behind Yakub's comeuppance, but as an individual, he definitely had his friends and admirers who were entitled to their convictions and viewpoints whatsoever they maybe. If at all they made some statements of sympathy for a friend, why should a section of our society be so perturbed about the same? Mind you this country still has sympathisers for Nathuram Godse, the assassin who killed Mahatma Gandhi. A vibrant debate is a desideratum for a vibrant democracy as it is through clash of ideas and opinions that truth always emerges.

Voltaire was right when he said, "I do not agree with what you say, but I would defend till my death your right to say it." As citizen of a democratic country, we have every right to express our views howsoever wrong they may be as long as the person concerned does not do something to violate a rule or law. So, some Indians were right in expressing their disagreement with Salman's tweet, but they definitely had no business to agitate against the same by indulging in arson and vandalism. There are views of many great thinkers with whom the society does not agree but we still admire them. As a mature democracy, we need to be more restrained in our reactions otherwise we would be no better than those banana republics who believe in kangaroo courts and instant justice a la our '*khap panchayats*'.

After Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw shoes at the former US President George Bush in December 2014, several similar incidents were reported in India thereafter, the most celebrated being the 'shoe-throw act' by Jarnail Singh at a former Union Minister. Similarly, the face-blackening incidents involving some politicians and activists have also occurred in this country from time to time. Violence against RTI activists or mediapersons is the reflection of the same ailing mindset. Now, in all these cases, the perpetrator is often a small-time bumpkin who mostly undertakes such adventures to claim his 20 seconds of fame but the very fact that such acts transpire is only because of the vicarious pleasure we derive out of such incidents.

But for a silent societal approval, such acts would never recur. The extremism of a minority is often due to the passivity of the majority.

As we all know, intensity of recurrence of a societal vice is conditional upon society's permissive value system. If corruption, crimes against women or violence against public property keep recurring, it only means that societal conscience is still not greatly shocked by the same. Our value system somehow approves of speed-money, short-cuts, dowry, violence against women, nepotism, violation of traffic rules, littering, vandalism of public property et al and hence, their continuance. We continue to be a mute spectator as long as it does not affect us but we protest the moment they start hurting us. So a political party today decries and criticises opposition for immobilising the legislature but would not mind doing the same if the roles are reversed.

Isn't it high time that we start addressing such existential contradictions of our individual and corporate value systems? Most of these problems would go once our rules and laws are duly enforced as the half-hearted homeopathic enforcement of our laws is the prime reason behind recrudescence of these societal pathologies. One just hopes that these signs of being mired in history, to use the expression of Francis Fukuyama, would fade as we mature as a society. The government and administration have to be as much watchful as the citizens themselves to secure their individual and community rights otherwise we would soon be ruing the destruction of the civilisational leviathan called India.

Salient points

- India has given many progressive philosophies and theories of peaceful co-existence to the world.
- However, lately there have been many disturbing developments which go against the very grain of our vaunted culture of tolerance and respect for divergent discourses.
- John Stuart Mill was right when he said, "My freedom to move my hand stops where your nose starts".
- How can one justify prohibiting an artistic expression if the same does not violate a particular law or rule.
- Today, if we have one religious extremism rising in reply to another, we go nowhere. Gandhi was right when he said, "Eye for an eye and the entire world will be blind".
- While none doubts the justification behind Yakub's comeuppance, but as an individual, he definitely had his friends and admirers who were entitled to their convictions and viewpoints whatsoever they maybe. Mind you this country still has sympathisers for Nathuram Godse.
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Glossary

Quisling: a person who betrays his or her own country by aiding an invading enemy

Comeuppance: deserved reward or just deserts, usually unpleasant

Desideratum: something wanted or needed