

COMMUNAL CAULDRON : LESSONS LEARNT – WAY FORWARD

Understanding the Communal Cauldron

As the world comes closer to each other using technologies both real and virtual, differences are becoming sharper and Politics based on Difference using historical and new prejudices take center stage. Violence has become endemic to State functioning – legitimized by fractured democratic processes, which make mockery of human intelligence. National and International Institutions meant to safeguard or act as checks and balances to the abuse of power, namely Judiciary or Media are slowly being depotentiated or castrated.

Gujarat was a magnified recent reminder, Mumbai in 1992, Sikh Riots of 1984 in Delhi are blots in our history. But Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Ireland, Iran, Iraq and Bosnia are still part of our consciousness.

Communalism is the art and science of using the politics of **religious difference** to gain control over minds and enabling those who practice it to control reason, thought and deeds of one religious group at the cost of the other. Exclusion and discrimination are its intended impact.

The politics of **“difference”** essentially celebrates linguistic, ethnic, religious, caste chauvinism, promotes exclusion and discrimination and actively supports competition and violence among the excluded and discriminated, thus sealing their fate. In India, Muslims, Tribals, Dalits are the criminalized. A visit to any jail in India, would reveal that their percentage is four times, three times and twice their percentage of population respectively. This single indicator makes mockery of all so called Democratic institutions and **“Rule of Law”** which espouses equality and justice.

The politics of **‘difference’** in its return unleashes Emancipatory Politics and Movements which has an auto-lock devise. Emancipatory politics promotes political demands of reservation, exclusive allocation thus further supporting the very basis of politics of difference. The Cat and Mouse game goes on, the cauldron keeps boiling, the rich and powerful who practice this politics have a feast and the excluded and discriminated continue to get scalded. 57 years of Indian Democracy and all indicators of access to education, employment, health services show a yawning gap against the minorities, while the myths of their being untrustworthy to labeling them as terrorists become larger than life supported with more powerful, communication technologies.

All indicators still show that most communal violence has strong economic, motives. The political ideologues move and cajole the public to hate, create fear

of the other. Precipitating them into violence has always economic rewards. Gujarat was no different :

- a) Whether it was promise of transfer of illicit liquor trade in Ahmedabad for the Dalits.
- b) Whether it was attempt to take over wholesale fruit cartel in Anand District.
- c) Whether it was control over transport and street food business in a small temple town of Pavagadh
- d) Or even, event based looting by men and women coming in fancy cars of stores like Pantaloon.
- e) Or taking over land and water sources for agriculture in rural districts of Sabarkantha, Panchmahals.
- f) Or an entire restaurant trade owned by a specific Muslim community across 200m km long belt being burnt and later sold in distress.

A pauperization and ghettoization of an unprecedented scale has been achieved in Gujarat. In all 30,000 families moved into relief camps at the peak of violence. Not to mention over 2000 killed and scores of women raped as a retributive justice to 47 Hindus mindlessly killed in the train at Godhra. You pay with your lives to keep the politics of difference alive:”**Small Price**” as a run up to an Electoral battle.

Four new phenomenon were observed in the last Gujarat violence

- a) Large number of youth in the age group of 18 to 25 were out in the streets with head bands, flaunting their communal identity.
- b) An entire rural tribal belt cutting across four districts was the major arena of violence and not just the usually “**sensitive**” cities of Ahmedabad, Vadodara and few small, medium size towns. It is alleged that large scale mobilization was led by newly appointed youth as supplementary teachers hired in great numbers in the preceding two years.
- c) Large scale desecration and destruction of religious spaces of the Muslims, last figure shows 556 religious places damaged, of which there are 3 churches, 17 temples, 207 Masjids, 298 Dargahs and 31 Madrassas.
- d) Unprecedented use and visible demonstration of sexual violence as a subjugation tool and as a visible symbol of conquest on both men and women.

In a Democracy, Justice has to be done but also seem to have been done. While the National Human Rights Commission was the only statutory body who took a position and in two comprehensive orders dated 1st April 2002 and 31st May 2002 squarely put the responsibility of what happened on the State Government, but also gave a comprehensive list of recommendations to ensure justice,

rehabilitation and long- term measures like police reforms for institutional strengthening. The State complicity gets proven beyond doubt by it not accepting to implement any of them but to actually malign the Commission as being partisan through public demonstration and advertisements in the media.

National Human Rights Commission is the last Institution to step in when all others fail to perform. Its powers are moral and uses the instrument of public disclosure Nationally and Internationally. When it is laughed at, we laugh at Democracy and the Constitution of the country. The “**Normal Course of Justice**” meant that of the approximately 4,200 offences registered only 2000 have been prosecuted and where the likely percentage of conviction would not be more than one percent. The other 2,200 which include offences of arson, rape and murder have already been closed for want of adequate information/evidence. The legal battle goes on as faith in democracy erodes.

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Democracy is about learnt not assumed behaviour especially when the larger societal values are recovering from feudal, caste and colonial shackles. Therefore, democracy needs vibrant, inclusive and trustworthy institutions and not individual HEROES. Institutions, which are transparent, accountable and structured to promote democratic values and are run and participated by ‘**NORMAL**’ ‘**ORDINARY**’ human beings.

Civil society organizations (CSO’s): seem to have missed the bus several times and yet we need to refocus ourselves to face the challenges. Some directions and corrective steps would be:

- A. CSO’s have not sufficiently engaged with Micro level Public Institutions like schools, panchayats, local police, local judiciary or primary health centers other than taking an adversarial stand to highlight their non functioning. These institutions are learning grounds for democratic functioning and behaviour. Improving their quality and ensuring inclusion of all stakeholders is the primary task. Leaving them unengaged is letting these public spaces to be communalized. Politics of difference uses these primary institutions as the first bastion to be won by appointing their ‘**people**’, advocating their cause, and continue to discriminate and exclude.
- B. While CSO’s one reason to exist is to express dissent, its other reason to exist is to provide alternatives on the ground. Huge number of NGO’s fall prey to corrupt practices in getting Government grants instead of engaging people in fighting

corruption. Place of public argument is the village, community and not '**seminars**' attended by the own ilk of CSO's

- C. CSO's have kept away from potential civil society spaces, especially these controlled by religious minorities and majority secular values based religious organizations. Looking down on them as archaic or parochial or paternal can only help fracture the space, leaving them as easy prey to hard-liner, exclusive, protective mindsets. We forget that they have a far larger outreach and impact on society. Engaging and negotiating on the ground to make them work not just for their own sect or group but to look at reaching out across religious differences. We have been advocating Joint Ventures with Muslim Relief societies, large Muslim charities to work on education, livelihood, Legal Aid programmes for all disadvantaged as a first step to promote Transformatory Politics.

Civil society by definition has to promote **TRANSFORMATORY POLITICS** as opposed to Emancipatory Politics which may be relevant to start a movement but falls prey to exclusion after its initial success.

- D. In the last 20 years after each major incident of Communal violence, groups get together to take up relief, rehabilitation and legal services, and other knee jerk short term event based Communal Harmony programmes. There is a need to integrate work on communal work as a core competency, in terms of values and orientation, cross cutting all development initiatives. It means bringing more diversity in Civil Society Organizations from the Board level to Staff and creating open spaces to dialogue on these conflicts internally first and then with constituencies we work with.
- E. Much greater investment of time, people and creativity in promoting and visibilizing art, music, sports, and cultural practices which celebrate integrative diversity.
- F. While Gujarat and other parts of country has seen a proliferation of religious places or hostels, for single caste based communities there is woefully inadequate investment in creating new permanent visible symbols and physical spaces of communal harmony whether they be sports, cultural stadium or libraries, which are open to all. Neither are there enough efforts to publicize hundreds of myths and stories and practices which celebrate diversity. Mobilizing citizen and corporate resources to visibilize them need to be done urgently.