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**The ghost of communalism**

When the legendary Indian leader and first prime minister of the largest democracy Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru died in May 1964, the famous Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi paid him glowing tribute by writing a poem that heaped eulogies on his character and revolutionary zeal.

The poet thought that the death of a body is no death and that the ideas of Nehru would live on. His love for humanity and hate for communalism would be a guiding principle for Indian masses and politicians. His vision of a pluralistic society would be upheld by all sections of Indian society. His firm belief in secularism would widely be respected and practised by every citizen of modern India but alas these dreams soon shattered.

In September 1969, the pernicious tentacles of communalism gripped the Indian state of Gujarat, decimating around 660 people (unofficial sources put the death toll as high as 2000) and wounding 1074. It was the deadliest Hindu-Muslim riot that also witnessed the destruction of over 48,000 properties. Out of the 512 deaths reported to local police, 430 were Muslims. Most of the property losses were also suffered by the Muslim community.

For instance, altogether properties worth 42 million Indian rupees were destroyed during the riot, with Muslims losing around 32 million Indian rupees. Most of the victims of the violence were from extremely poor backgrounds. Sahir mourned the bloodshed by declaring the real death of Gandhi and Ghalib, asking his fellow countrymen to bury their bodies and ideas.

But the romantic poet, the admirer of beauty and life, did not know that the ominous shadows ugliness of communalism would penetrate several sections of his homeland. He would have never imagined that the land of Buddha, Kabir Das, Ramananda, Ramanuja and Guru Nanak would radically be transformed by the communal ideology and sheer bigotry of Bal Thakaray, L K Advani and a myriad other hate-mongers who considered only the people of one particular religion as human beings.

Little did he know that the songs of love, tolerance and universal brotherhood would be banned and replaced by the vitriolic political slogan of RSS zealots. The poet of the oppressed masses could never have thought that the less unfortunate of Indian society would fall upon the most unfortunate as a divine wrath, venting their anger against the people of their own class in the name of faith.

Today’s India is the land of Gandhi’s assassin. It is the state of a mass murderer who has the blood of more than 700 people on his hands. This is the country of RSS bigots for whom more than 600 million Indian poor do not matter. Their ideology is not to extend help and succor to millions of Indians who are bereft of basic necessities of life for decades. They are indifferent to the hapless and the impoverished whose sole dream is to have access to pure drinking water, clothing, shelter and free quality healthcare. These hate-mongers are not only pushing Indian society towards a conflagration by tearing down its social fabric but the region as well because their obscurantism only helps the retrogressive elements of Pakistan who in turn fuel communal thinking in the land of the pure.

This ideology spawned not just one riot but a long series of communal clashes which are not going to be tided over easily. For the followers of this ideology the more than 70 lives that were lost in New Delhi in the recent religious frenzy holds no importance. Their indifference to the communities whose lives have been shattered by the recent insane clashes is no more hidden. Their obnoxious designs aimed at seeking the hegemony of one community in a diverse society of the largest democracy may sound irrational to millions of saner elements across the world but for them this is the only objective that they want to achieve at all cost.

But before they achieve this goal, they will have done a great damage to their country. Their extremist agenda might appease their ego but it would create a situation which could push the ancient state towards anarchy and chaos. It is naive to believe that more than 200 million people and many millions who sympathise with them could be subjugated.

What is unfolding in India is not new. The country has witnessed a number of communal clashes in the past. In fact, there have been more than 12 major incidents of violence against minority communities with the massacre of Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination being the biggest since 1947.

The Christian community of the country was also targeted by saffron warriors who considered missionary preaching an attack on their dominance. The Dalits have also been a victim of Hindu extremist groups but now, in a bid to woo Dalits, extremists are also indoctrinating them with the hateful ideology of the RSS. Such a situation could spell disaster for a giant country like India that houses a myriad of diverse groups and religions.

India was not completely immune to the ideas of hate and bigotry but its intensity has been on the rise for the last few decades. The country did not have a harmonious atmosphere all the time. Religious animosity existed at some level, which was intensified by the reckless policy of rulers. The sacrilege of Somnath, its ruthless plundering and the decimation of around 50,000 people was one of the brutal acts that created acrimony between the two communities. The brutal policies of Aurengzaib and his bigotry deepened this sense of injustice.

The saner elements of Indian society should wage a relentless struggle to get any political party that exploits religious sentiments banned. It is against the Indian constitution to stoke religious hatred and seek vote in the name of religion.

But perhaps nothing concrete will happen until and unless the Indian ruling elite makes arduous efforts to redeem millions of Indians from the clutches of extreme poverty. The RSS uses the children of impoverished families for its nefarious designs. Its welfare projects are a cover that it employs to camouflage its indoctrination of hate and bigotry. Its six million members are working day and night to propagate this ideology of hate.

Until material conditions that lead to such situation are changed, nothing can be hoped. For this to happen, the Congress and other secular political parties will have to shed their tainted reputation and emerge as the genuine servants of the people – otherwise the ghost of communalism will keep on haunting Indians; not only this generation but future generations as well.

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