**A sense of history would help**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2022-09-20

INDIA`S fabled constitution is struggling with a very Indian flaw. It has too many filters to stop it from choking. The preamble promises a secular socialist democracy. Many are openly hostile to secularism. Others see socialism as an imposition.

And still others, given half a chance, would do away with democracy itself. The filters can`t be changed and shouldn`t be removed. They need to be cleaned and revitalised for democracy to be a humane contract. Currently, the opposition is struggling to abide by the promise the federation and its key tenets demand.

Many of my friends have stopped liking Arvind Kejriwal, calling him a BJP agent with roots in the RSS. I had a militant friend, a lef tist student leader from JNU, who came from the RSS fold. There are staunchly secular intellectuals that once belonged to the RSS. They make better Marxists than the born-in-the-family ones. Whether Kejriwal reveals himself as a pious Hindu is of no importance for the task at hand, which is to take the lowest common denominator on a frayed opposition platform.

Whatever be Kejriwal`s other lapses, he stalled the Narendra Modi juggernaut spectacularly in 2015 and continues to hold his ground. He has not killed Muslims or Christians or Sikhs to the best of one`s knowledge. He says he believes in Lord Hanuman and has gone to temples to display his Hindu-ness. Look again, what was the left doing in West Bengal with the annual Durga pujas? In Kerala, communist cadres are members of temple committees. Don`t be surprised if comrades there are taking out a procession of Lord Ganapati and the back of the decorated vehicle carrying the idol flaunts a beaming picture of Che Guevara. Let`s accept the fact that India is the way it is, a country steeped in religion. The Mughals mostly tried not to tinker with the beliefs, as also the British.

Rationalism is desirable but where`s the fertile ground, educationally and in societal terms? Kejriwal`s Aam Aadmi Party had a manifesto in recent polls much of which Nehru would be proud of. It may have an if fy interpretation of secularism but it doesn`t call secularism `sickularism` à la Hindutva. Count the blessing. AAP, despite my many friends` misgivings, says it is still firmly teth-ered to the constitution, and it emphatically warns against the politics of hate in various manifestos.

One doubts it would have won Punjab without being secular. What more could one want in these desperate times? On the other hand, we have normalised, not without a compelling reason again, the so-called secular alliance with the Shiv Sena even if it has Muslim blood on its hands. The Shiv SenaCongress-Nationalist Congress Party alliance was recently upended in Maharashtra by the BJP with mass defections of MLAs, a familiar ploy these days. Why must we miss his government? When Thackeray was installed as chief minister there was hope for freeing a few of India`s best intellectuals languishing in prison as Maoist suspects.

The Modi government overnight transferred thecases to federal investigators. True, Shiv Sena owned up to its role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid when towering BJP leaders pleaded innocence. Is Kejriwal worse than Thackeray as an opposition ally? Contradictions abound. Rahul Gandhi has embarked on a long overdue move to unite India by walking through the lanes and streets of its many states. While his own party waged the most deadly assault on the promise of socialism, Gandhi is in bad odour with the corporate media for calling out crony capitalism and its beneficiaries.

The trouble ahead for Rahul will be that he has so far been applauded in the friendlier states.

Tamil Nadu was where his walk began on Sept 7.

Kerala has come out on the streets as seldom before to support his quest. A truer test will come when he crosses into BJP-ruled Karnataka andother Hindutva-hugging states. Rahul Gandhi is taking a huge personal risk in the footsteps of early freedom fighters. They faced a ruthless ruler on their day as he does on his. It is a necessary risk, but one that hopefully would help cleanse the choked filters of democracy and bring the opposition together. There`s reason to worry about the outcome, however.

Of the important leaders whose help is required to forge a strong opposition unity, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is not an easy person to figure out. She has been close to Sonia Gandhi on occasion and on others an angry rival spitting fire at the Congress. Credible efforts must bring her on board, both for her intrinsic value as a singularly firebrand leader, and for the tremendous optics she brings with her strong presence.

By most accounts, Bihar is the best bet for the opposition team assuming the recently forged alliance between Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yaday`s party holds out. Opposition parties are not wrong in seeing the Congress as the weakest link in the emerging structure. While it has an impressive presence across India, Congress is the most vulnerable party for poachers. Perhaps the departure of (corporate-financed?) MLAs in several states to the BJP was a required purgative to cleanse the party. Time will tell.

An elephant in the room remains less discussed.

Key opposition leaders have overt or covert links with the more right-wing leaning businesses.

Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal may be exceptions. They need to work together but are not allowed to by their circumstances. Corporateowned NDTV spent an unusual hour on interviewing Kejriwal, a critic of cronyism but who spent the time scoffing at Rahul Gandhi`s walk. Kejriwal is rightly proud of his education policy for Delhi, whichisactuallyenviable.However,NaziGermany had free education for schools, and it was quality education too. A sense of history, therefore, would be as rewarding for Kejriwal as his education and healthcare policies are. The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

jawednaqvi@gmail.com