

Tackling the Threats from Communalism

The homeostatic societal checks and balance mechanism has been slowly evolving and has prevented any particular interest or force to rule the roost in a manner as to threaten the flourishing of other interests or forces. And in a highly inequalitarian and hierarchised society like ours, when the state fails to meet popular expectations, the people led by politicians, would naturally be left to their own resources and in a competitive democratic political system, identity politics come very handy as that is the only resource people have in a system where heads count. By pooling their numerical strength, they try to compete with each other in the political marketplace for value allocation in their favour. Scapegoating other communities or groups is only one of the many strategies employed by them to advance their interests and communalism is the natural outcome of such politics as the celebrated historian Bipan Chandra opines.

One strongly feels that the *panchayati raj* institutions aimed at the decentralisation of power would eventually see the percolation of power to the grass roots and would lead to people developing a stake in the system and once this happens, Indian political system would no longer be a hostage to the whims and fancies of the crooked politicians. After all, someone has rightly said that 'you can fool some people all the time, all the people for some time but you cannot fool all the people all the time'. The point is that there are so many interests operating in the society, that none would like to be left behind and in that scramble for power and increased share of the national pie all operate in a way to check and balance each other.

But as discussed above, there is nothing to be very despondent about. A country as huge and as diverse as ours is bound to have many teething troubles before it completes its journey from being a state-nation to a nation-state. India was fortunate enough, at least vis-à-vis her many time-twins, to have a leadership to start with which was relatively upright, scrupulous, visionary and committed enough to provide a solid foundation to the infant state and its prolonged presence only helped the matters. So, despite the growing instances of communalism, the national integration seems to be only consolidating. And there are many

signs to that effect. The very fact that today Indians all over the country enjoy the game of cricket and root for Team India proves the fact that the 'imagined community' that Benedict Anderson talked of has slowly been evolving. Pokhran-II led to the same pan-India rejoicing. Kargil further corroborated this. And if there was any scruple, the overwhelming positive response to the Gujarat earthquake and communal holocaust removed that. Often the silver lining in the political cloud has also come to be seen.

A section of our political class may be somewhat irresponsible, reckless and unscrupulous, but when it comes to the larger national interest, national integration and betterment, it has not compromised. Competitive party politics, sans real issues, falls back on easy resources for electoral mobilisation howsoever unethical and unscrupulous that might be. And people answer to such calls because that appears to them to be the only salvation amid the overall scenario of gloom and doom and also as the only way to ameliorate their condition. Once a basic equity is achieved in resource allocation and once our human resources get educationally and cognitively enriched, there would be little scope for such parochial politics. Caste, religion, language would, at best, be only one of the various factors in politics and would not dominate the political skulduggery the way it does now.

The growing stature of some right-wing organisations has also been the cause of concern for many. But the point is what could one do about it? Can one think of banning such organisations or their style of politics? Certainly not, more so in a democracy like ours. Banning or stigmatising them would only aggravate the problems further. As someone rightly said about someone that 'it is better to have him in and spit out rather than have him out and spit in'. So, our attempt should be at finding ways to restore them to the system. The massive membership of such organisations, if positively channelled, could prove to be a great national asset. Also, if their membership structure could be changed to reflect the sundry constituent units of Indian population, then it would be all the better.

Notwithstanding all those apprehensions about such organisations, some of them have greatly modified the content and style of their politics or activities, as they know only too well that with a confrontationist politics, which excludes a major section of the Indian society, they cannot hope to go very far. The way Indian society has become polarised lately, no political party can hope to form a government of its own accord. And for a right-wing Party, none would touch it even with a barge pole until it diluted its ideology and extremist political style. Some such parties have been slowly inching towards the centre of the ideological spectrum and have emerged as one of the principal political actors on the national scene. It also shows as to how the party system has been evolving in this country. Having only one dominant political party could create its own problems as happened in the heydays of the one-party-dominant system in the immediate aftermath of our Independence. It could not only get complacent about the overall developmental project, but could also start developing a sense of invincibility which could make it irresponsible and autocratic enough as to endanger the very survival of the system. Here, one would quickly like to add that the bloated fear about the loss of the era of stable government owing to polarised vote bank politics is also unwarranted. Stability is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for socio-politico-economic development of the

country. And asked to choose between stability and responsibility, one would readily plump for the latter.

A government with an absolute majority could become autocratic and conduct itself in an irresponsible way but the constraints of a coalition government force it to behave responsibly. And that is what should matter more. The multifarious societal forces would always be there to make it behave itself. Also, as long as there is a consensus on basic policies and values, instability should not be a cause for concern. Since 1989, several governments have taken their turns at the Centre, but the basic policy has remained the same. Despite all the rhetoric against the liberalisation and privatisation of the Indian economy, none has been able to reverse it.

So, even though the Indian nation state has been slowly emerging, consolidating and strengthening itself through the bumpy electoral politics in world's largest democracy, one would like to enter several caveats here. We not only need our leadership at every level, including political and administrative, to behave more responsibly than they have so far playing ducks and drakes with the many opportunities provided. A dedicated, committed and responsible leadership with a vision is what this country sorely needs rather than merely the military muscle. A leadership that fattens and grows at the expense of its people, which dwarfs its own people and erodes their capacities, would eventually discover that with pygmies (in terms of capacities) dotting the length and breadth of the country, it can't make the country great.

A democratic system runs on the principle of majority but the constraints of competitive party politics should not blind our political class so much as to lose sight of the larger interests of the country. Politics of vote bank should be positively and productively channelled towards the building of a cohesive and stronger nation-state, which can hold its head high in the Comity of Nations. And it would be in the interest of our political class to engage in responsible politics, as sooner rather than later the people are likely to see through their game plan and reject such politics out of hand. After all, wisdom of a minuscule political class cannot be more than the cumulative wisdom of the people of an entire country.

Also, our leadership has to do something about the institutional revival in the country and this has to be done in co-operation with the intelligentsia, media, industrial class and the civil society. If all of them act in tandem, we would soon be living in a developed India, an India in keeping with the ideals, values and principles enshrined in our Constitution, an India all of us have cherished and yearned to live in. And, of course, an India far untouched from the demon of communalism, which has so far been on the rise owing to the present day politics propelled by crass opportunism.

Salient Points

- In a competitive democratic political system, identity politics come handy as that is the only resource people have in a system where heads count.
- Despite the growing instances of communalism, the national integration seems to be only consolidating.
- When it comes to the larger national interest, our political class has not compromised.

- Once a basic economic and educational equity is achieved, there would be little scope for parochial politics.
- Stability is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for socio-politico-economic development of the country.
- A government with an absolute majority could become autocratic but constraints of a coalition government force it to behave responsibly.
- This country needs a committed and responsible leadership with a vision.
- Sooner rather than later, people are likely to see through narrow politicking and reject such politics out of hand.

Glossary

Homeostasis: tendency towards a stable equilibrium between interdependent elements

Inegalitarian: Characterised by inequality

Scapegoating: sacrifice someone for one's selfish interests

Holocaust: destruction or slaughter on a mass scale

Reckless: rash

Unscrupulous: dishonest

Stigmatise: regard as worthy of disgrace

Polarised: divided into two sharply contrasting groups or opinions

Multifarious: of various types

Yearn: desire

Play ducks and drakes: treat frivolously