



ACCUSATION OF INTOLRANCE UNDER NDA REGIME- WHETHER HYPE OR REALITY

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KEYWORDS

Frequently, each one of us is listening rant, discussion and debate in TV shows and newspapers, on raising spectacle of intolerance and politicians/ party's spokesman airing their contrary views as per their political agenda, lines and wisdom. It is said that views contrary to present political establishment draws sharp reaction, retribution, rebuke, assault, hostile propaganda and latent economic sanction against the person, institution and/or celebrities.

Series of hate instances happened in the country, in Mumbai, BJP ally Shiv Sena forced cancellation of a music concert by Pakistani legend Ghulam Ali and talks between Indian and Pakistani cricket board Chiefs were cancelled due to protest and safety concerns. Sudheendra Kulkarni, an Indian activist's face was blackened with ink for having invited a former Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri over his book launch. His name was used 36,000 times on Twitter. Ink and mobil oil was thrown at an independent MLA from Jammu & Kashmir Sheikh Abdul Rashid at the Press Club in Delhi by fringe Hindhu Outfit, protesting against the beef party held by him in Srinagar. Rashid was also beaten up within state assembly by BJP MLAs. Literary figure and writer Salman Rushdie tweeted. "Here come the Modi Toadies - railing against the most extreme online supporters of the Indian Prime minister, who he said were abusing him after he joined in a protest by writers against the intolerance of Hindu right-wingers. Thousands then repeated the phrase." (1) Cow Protection vigilante groups have mushroomed around the country. They are prone to taking over the role of law-enforcers. There are politician who openly talk about their hatred towards particular community.

More than 40 writers returned their prestigious literary prizes to protest against rising intolerance in India. This protest started when Hindi writer Uday Prakash returned the Sahitya Akademi award won in 2010 to protest against the Akademi's apathy over the murder of intellectual such as M M Kalburgi, who had criticised Hindu belief. Since then, the writers in dozens returned their prizes to the Akademi. Punjabi writer Dalip Kaur Tiwana has returned her Padma Shri. Film fraternity from many parts of country have also raised alarm about the rising incidents of communal tension in India. Many scientists, writers and filmmakers have since returned their awards in protest against growing intolerance within the country. Aamir Khan also joined the chorus of actors raising their voice against intolerance in the country. The 'PK' actor said that he was alarmed over the rising 'incidents of intolerance' in the country and that his wife Kiran Rao suggested moving out of India. Shah Rukh Khan received much flak for saying that 'there is extreme intolerance in the country'.

They are frustrated with the way the violent murder of an atheist writer, who had criticised Hindu belief, was handled. They're also upset with the banning of beef in some states and the murder of a Muslim man falsely accused of having beef in his fridge.(2)

There are many who are against the returning of awards as form of protest. Kamal Haasan, a Tamil actor was criticised for refusing to return his National Awards as a form of protest against communal incidents. The actor said that the move would just insult the

government who gave the award with love. Kareena Kapoor, a film actress said "returning an award would not solve any problem. We should learn to address the issue (of intolerance) rather than getting it upon ourselves. It is not a personal issue, it is the issue of entire nation".(3)

Aamir Khan's statement on intolerance has stirred debate and controversy. Other publicly and privately have voiced their concern that their society has become more polarised - and the government is doing nothing to allay the fears of minorities.

Aamir Khan's comments have sparked a fierce backlash. Protestors have denounced him, labelling him unpatriotic and a traitor. Politicians in the ruling party, BJP, have also voiced their objection. Minister of State for Home, Kiren Rijiju says Khan's comments on intolerance "only bring down the image of the country and the Prime Minister".(4) The ruling party also called the protest of returning awards a manufactured "paper rebellion against the government in the wake of a manufactured crisis". Did these writers protest against the Emergency, 1984 anti-Sikh riots, Bhalgalpur riots of 1989, or the UPA corruption.(5)

In a debate moderated by Times Now's Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami, panelists -- Dr Sudhanshu Trivedi, National Spokesperson, BJP & Political Advisor to Rajnath Singh; C R Kesavan, Spokesperson, Congress; Pavan Kumar Verma, MP, Rajya Sabha JD (U); Yogendra Yadav, Psephologist and Member, National Executive, Aam Admi Party; and Shahid Siddiqui, Chief Editor, Nai Duniya -- discuss the issue of US President Barack Obama's expressing concern about religious "intolerance" in India.

"US President Barack Obama Feb 5, 2015 said that the "acts of intolerance" experienced by religious faiths of all types in India in the past few years would have shocked Mahatma Gandhi. The comments by Obama came a day after the White House refuted suggestions that the US President's public speech in New Delhi in which he touched upon religious tolerance was a "parting shot" aimed at the ruling BJP. "Michelle and I returned from India - an incredible, beautiful country, full of magnificent diversity - but a place where, in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs - acts of intolerance that would have shocked Gandhiji, the person who helped to liberate that nation," Obama said in his remarks at the high-profile National Prayer Breakfast.

The US President, in a US-style Town Hall address in New Delhi on January 27, 2015 the last day of his India trip, had made a strong pitch for religious tolerance, cautioning that India will succeed so long as it was not "splintered along the lines of religious faith". The White House on Feb 4 strongly refuted allegations that Obama's remarks on religious tolerance was aimed at the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), saying the speech in its entirety was about the "core democratic values and principles" of both the US and India. Reacting cautiously to US President Barack Obama's concern about religious "intolerance" in India, government today said any "aberrations" do not alter India's history of tolerance."(6)

The intolerance debate also rattled India's Parliament in December 2015. Shashi Tharoor, Former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs said on December 2, 2015 in Parliament that for a government that is unduly proud of its international standing, the BJP administration in the national capital seems curiously oblivious to the great damage being done to India by global perceptions of the changed climate in a famously argumentative democracy. "Pick up or Google any major international newspaper of repute for stories about India in the last couple of months -- from the New York Times to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung -- and all you find are articles about the Dadri lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq, the murders of three nationalist writers returning their national literary awards -- given by the government-sponsored Sahitya Akademi or National Academy of Letters -- and the irresponsible statements of BJP leaders about everything from Hindu reassertion to the "cleansing" of Western cultural influences from India's ethos. The impression has gained ground that India is now governed by obscurantist and intolerant forces determined to put minorities, rationalists and liberals in their place -- somewhere not far from the trash can." (7)

The latest spate of negative international attention has surrounded the beef-banning hysteria being spread across the country by Hindutva forces, brought to a dramatic boil by a Delhi police raid on the Kerala House canteen whose menu had innocently announced "beef fry" (a reference to buffalo meat sourced legally from government-approved outlets). The police were acting to appease a complaint from the fringe Hindu Sena, a group emboldened by its success in bullying and intimidating the likes of hapless Kashmir MLA Engineer Rashid.

A Bangladeshi friend visiting me at the same time deplored the problems this was causing back home for Indophiles like him. "The Islamist fundamentalists in Bangladesh are emboldened by these developments in India," he pointed out. "They are having a field day fomenting hostility to a country they say ill-treats Muslims and acts against Muslim interests' and practices." The behavior of the Hindutva extremists has opened the door to critics to suggest that it is safer in India to be a cow than a Muslim. "(8)_{1 = \frac{D5\% - D95\%}{Dd}}"

Even Hon'ble President of India Pranab Mukherjee who has on many occasion in the past expressed serious concern on rising intolerance and hate in the country, yet again, on 20 the October 2015 expressed serious concern over rising instances of intolerance in the country. "Humanism and pluralism should not be abandoned under any circumstance. Assimilation through receiving is a characteristic of Indian society. Our collective strength must be harnessed to resist evil powers in society," Mukherjee said. "Indian civilisation has survived for 5000 years because of its tolerance. It has always accepted dissent and differences. A large number of languages, 1600 dialects and 7 religions coexist in India. We have a Constitution that accommodates all these differences," (9) the President said.

The Government seems indifferent and PM silent to so-called nationalist remarks of their leaders who one after other have mastered the art of raging controversies, giving statements, perceived by minority community as threatening, without realising consequences of their chants, on the hearts and minds of others, making them increasingly alarmed. Now the moot question for discussion is, whether India is becoming more openly and violently intolerant - especially towards the religious minorities.

As the intolerance debate is raging and religious bigotry has vitiated the air around us, it is desirable to investigate ancestry of the idea of tolerance. Although ancient India had strong traditions of cultic and religious syncretism, there is plethora of evidences to prove the prevalence of religious and sectarian antagonisms from ancient times.

In the 2nd century BC, Patanjali tells us that the relationship

between Brahmins and Buddhists is like that of snake and the mongoose and its violent manifestation is supported by a plethora of historical evidence. Similarly, Shaiva-Vaishnava antagonism also prevailed. The animosity between Shaivism and Jainism and persecution of the latter by the former is well documented in History. In the 11th century Alberuni tells us that the Hindus are "haughty, foolishly vain and self-conceited" and "believe that there is no religion likes theirs". (10)

The tolerant Hinduism seems to be of relatively recent origin and Hindus seems to acquired tolerance after repeated Muslim invasion from central Asia. The tolerant Hinduism acquired visibility in the Western writings on India as late as 17th century. Francois Bernier (1620-1688), the French doctor who travelled widely in India, was one of the early Europeans to speak of Hindus as a tolerant people. In the 18th century the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Von Herder (1744-1803), the forerunner of the Romantic glorification of India, referred to the Hindus as "mild" and "tolerant" and as "the gentlest branch of humanity". Around the same time, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) said that they "do not hate the other religions but they believe they are also right". Such views find a more prominent place in the writings of Orientalists like William Jones, according to whom, "the Hindus...would readily admit the truth of the Gospel but they contend that it is perfectly consistent with their Sastras". (11)

In the 19th century, some Indians notably amongst them Dayananda Saraswati also began to speak of the tolerance of Hindus, but they clearly placed Hinduism over other religions. Dayananda Saraswati, who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, claimed to believe "in a religion based on universal values... above the hostility of all creeds...". But as a champion of the Vedic religion, he sharply opposed all other religions: to him, He described Muhammad as "imposter", and one who held out "a bait to men and women, in the name of God, to compass his own selfish needs." He regarded Quran as "Not the Word of God. It is a human work. Hence it cannot be believed in." (12) He described Christianity as a "good religion. His analysis of Bible is based on the comparison with scientific evidences, morality, and other properties. He included that Bible contains many stories and precepts that are immoral, praising cruelty, deceit and encouraging sin." (13) Jesus "a very ordinary ignorant man, neither learned nor a yogi". His contemporary Ramakrishna (1836-1886) spoke of the equality of religions, but in his view "the Hindu religion alone is the Sanatana Dharma".

The disciple of Swami Ramakrishna, Vivekananda was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the Western world and is credited with raising interfaith awareness and dialogue. He was a major force in the revival of Hinduism in India and contributed to the concept of nationalism in colonial India. He laid emphasis on toleration and picked up the famous Rigvedic passage "ekaūsad viprà vahudhā vadanti" (The wise speak of what is One in many ways) in support of his vision that "India alone [was] to be...the land of toleration". (14)

In the early 20th century. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a Chitpavan Brahmin an extremist leader of Indian National Congress (1856-1920), for example, couched his views in the vocabulary of tolerance and quite often cited the above Rigvedic passage but, in reality, was a champion of militant Hinduism and organized Shivaji and Ganpati festival. Even the Muslim-hater MS Golwalkar (1906-1973) spoke of the Hindus as the most tolerant people of the world, although this sounded like the devil quoting scripture, for he identified Muslims, Christians and Communists as internal threats to the country. It would appear that these leaders, from Dayananda to Golwalkar, claim to use tolerance as a camouflage for Hindu belligerence: they privileged Hinduism over other religions and did not provide enough space to them. Unlike them, Mahatma Gandhi, who lived and died for communal harmony, genuinely found Hinduism to be the most tolerant of all religions even if his excessive pride in its inclusivism may have tended to make it exclusive.

Now the question requires serious consideration: Has India really become intolerant? Are religious minorities now unsafe? Are they being systematically targeted and marginalised? Are our constitutional framework is strong enough and can take remedial measures to restore confidence of citizens?

It is true that one Dadri does not make a country of 1.24 billion people intolerant. The clamour over banning beef, the disruption of Valentine's Day celebrations, the chopping-off of a professor's hand and the banning of the works of Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie are isolated, throwing ink at J & K independent MLA Sheikh Abdul Rashid are regrettable incidents and can not be termed as indicators of a nation's intolerance.

A nation is intolerant when its constitution and institutions are intolerant. The Preamble to our Constitution declares India to be a secular republic. In *Aruna Roy vs Union of India* (2002)(14) and *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* (1994), the Supreme Court declared secularism to be part of the basic structure of our Constitution; it held that secularism denoted the positive concept of equal treatment of all religions. (15) Gandhiji, father of our nation called it "sarva dharma samabhava" — equal respect for all religions.

Muslims constitute about 13.4 per cent of India's population. In several states, Christians constitute a high proportion of the population. Article 25 of our Constitution confers on all persons, including non-citizens, a fundamental right to freely profess, practice and propagate their religion. Articles 29 and 30 constitutionally protect the language, script and culture of minorities and give them the right to establish educational institutions of their choice.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, requires schools to block 25 per cent of the seats, free of cost, in favour of economically and socially backward students, including Scheduled Castes and Tribes. But this mandatory requirement does not apply to schools run by a minority community. Thus, a Ramakrishna Mission school has to allocate 25 per cent seats to poorer students free of cost but a St Anthony's school or an Al-Akbar matriculation school need not do so. Such exceptions can be made only in favour of minority educational institutions under Article 15(5) of our Constitution.

And nothing manifests India's tolerance for the views of the minority community, even if they are contrary to the laws of the land and the prevailing practices and customs of modern societies, more than the famous Shah Bano case.(16) After the decision of Supreme Court in 1985, on the agitation and demand of Muslim community; both Houses of Parliament then passed the ironically titled Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which took away the rights of divorced Muslim women to claim maintenance under the Code of Criminal Procedure. Parliament effectively overruled a Supreme Court judgment and restored the law as desired by the spokespersons of the Muslim community. And it is only the tolerance and respect for minorities, particularly Muslims.

Prime Minister of India during Lok Sabha Election coined the slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" meaning 'Together with all, Development for all'. Now the question is whether the Government is working as per PM's slogan or slogan simply remained slogan after thumping victory in Lok Sabha Election. Whether minority bashing is a political tool for polarisation of majority vote in favour of ruling government?

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor at a session on 'India Shastra' at the Jaipur Literature festival at Diggi Palace Jaipur on January 23, 2015 said "It is high time for the government to take its own slogans seriously and put India First. Civilizational pluralism and robust democracy are the pillars of India's great strength, and the source of its soft power and the respect in command in the world. India is known for human beings of different ethnicities and religions, languages and beliefs, working together under the same roof, dreaming the same dreams."

Tharoor said "I remember how, in the Calcutta neighborhood where I lived during my high school years, the wail of the muezzin calling the Islamic faithful to prayer blended with the tinkling of bells accompanying the chant of the mantras at the Hindu Shiva temple and the crackling loudspeakers outside the Sikh gurudwara reciting verses from the Granth Sahib -- and two minutes down the road stood St Paul's Cathedral. That was a daily sign of Indian pluralism. Today I am proud to represent Thiruvananthapuram, where in one location, Palayam Square, stands the Palayam Mosque, diagonally opposite stands St Joseph's Cathedral, and nearby is one of the oldest Ganesh temples in the state. And worshippers throng all three undisturbed, joyfully celebrating each other's special days.

If America is famously a "melting pot," then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast."(17)

The foundation stone of our democracy is pluralism and has been built on the foundation that a nation may celebrate differences of caste, creed, conviction, color, culture, cuisine, costume and custom and the difference is no way hindering building of democratic consensus. In a democracy every one has right to hold opinion and disagree. The basic ground rule is respect for difference and acceptance of difference. If we respect for difference than our diversity becomes source of country's strength, not a weakness. It is the duty & responsibility of the government to uphold that idea of difference and to strongly reject any attempt to dilute it.

The government today broke its silence over the recent debate on rising intolerance in the country, with Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley appealing for calm and restraint, and asking people to engage in "debate, not vandalism". He was addressing press conference over rising instances of intolerancysuch as lynchings over alleged cow slaughter and beef consumption have been reported from several parts of the country; ink and paint attacks have taken place on columnist Sudheendra Kulkarni and a lawmaker from Jammu and Kashmir-"Some of these issues are extremely serious, some can reflect on inter-community relations, others can reflect on sensitive areas such as Jammu and Kashmir," the finance minister said. "Therefore, there has to be a proper and civilised mode of discussing and debating these issues." "I feel it is extremely important that people indulging in this [behaviour] are strongly criticised ... those who are using these methods must introspect whether they are adding to the quality of Indian democracy, or reducing the credibility of India as a country before the eyes of the world."(18)

Raghuram Rajan, the then Governor of RBI said "Allowing intolerance to thrive will only stifle economic progress". The government, which aspires to grow at 9 percent, it is absolutely necessary to focus on reform process that brings economic progress and not to give room to politics which divide the society and ruin the precious time of Parliament over other issues. According to Bloomberg, "Moody's Analytics projects India's growth at 7.6 percent in the current fiscal year (2015-2016), below its potential of 9-10 percent. Closing this gap, according to the agency, will be tough as the global environment is weak and the Modi government has failed to deliver key promised reforms."(19)

The government should take serious note of the warnings from Raghuram Rajan, the then Governor of RBI and Moody's Analytics and try to address them, as intolerance have negative economic impact and may seriously jolt investor's confidence. The main task is to bring back the confidence and promote pluralism and do not give ammunition to political opponents to stall the growth-inducing reforms. In the era of Globalization, India can not showcase itself to the world as a land of pluralism, tolerance and Gandhianism, while promoting intolerance, communal hatred and minority insecurity in the backyard. It is high time for the NDA regime to know that they cannot promote "Make in India" abroad

while turning blind to hate propagation at home. Incredible India should not become Intolerant India.

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