

Peace-loving people need to break silence on growing intolerance

- **Abhijit Banerjee, Hindustan Times**

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Offering a voice to someone from the other side, even if it is someone you potentially disagree with, has become tantamount to sponsoring his views. Sudheendra Kulkarni, a long-term BJP supporter, is now a ‘Pakistani agent’.
(AFP Photo)

I was thinking of Gandhi. It was his birthday, and the horrible incident at Dadri had just happened.

What happened to Mohammed Ikhlq and his family is obscene, but what is truly frightening is the subsequent public reaction. Many politicians have spoken — including those who seem to want to use this tragedy to provoke more violence against Muslims — but I have not heard anyone speak out to defend the rights of those who choose to eat beef.

Indeed the only one who even tries to articulate a moral position on this is Lalu Prasad, who, correctly in my view, protested the distinction between acceptable meats and other meats, but came to the rather unhelpful conclusion that all meat-eaters are uncivilised. For the rest, this is something that is a sign of the BJP’s depravity or a bad mark on the nation, but no one in politics seems to want to defend the right of beef-eaters to eat beef.

Gandhi would have. As he said in a prayer meeting in Delhi just weeks before Independence, when the idea of India was up for grabs and there was pressure from Rajendra Prasad and other conservatives to ban cow slaughter, “In India no law can be made to ban cow-slaughter...I have been long pledged to serve the cow but how can my religion also be the religion of the rest of the Indians? It will mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus.”

Gandhi gave up his life for saying things like that. Despite that, and the general adulation he is now regarded with (even the BJP is pro-Gandhi now), and our long intellectual tradition of liberal thought (that Amartya Sen has emphasised), the fundamental

liberal principle of defending the rights of those who we disagree with has never really taken root in our political culture.

Opposition leaders have been quick to condemn the violence and even quicker to complain about the (political) motives of the instigators; the prime minister and the Union finance minister have expressed their dissatisfaction with such incidents because they undermine the country's development agenda. But no Hindu politician of any stature, and certainly no vegetarian politician with strong religious convictions, has found it worthwhile to use his political capital to defend the rights of the beef-eaters.

It's by no means just a Hindu problem. When was the last time a senior Muslim politician spoke up to defend the rights of his fellow muslims to commit what some furious fanatic would call blasphemy?

Nor is it just a problem of religion, as Sudheendra Kulkarni recently found out. Offering a voice to someone from the other side, even if it is someone you potentially disagree with, has become tantamount to sponsoring his views. Kulkarni, a long-term BJP supporter, is now a 'Pakistani agent'. In Maharashtra the mere mention of Shivaji's name without the appropriate amount of reverence gets you beaten up or banned.

And yet every time it happens, every time someone's right to speak and live as they wish is trampled upon by a mob, the reaction is predictably strategic. It becomes an occasion to attack the party that the perpetrators are most closely associated with; the party then either pushes back or tries to hush it up with murmurs of disapproval. No one takes to the streets to defend the right itself.

You can see why it does not happen. Suppose Modi were to speak out tomorrow in favour of protecting the right to eat beef (not that he has shown any inclination to...). The first reaction among his supporters would be incredulity — has he lost his mind... may be its all this foreign travel...?

Then the cynics will speak up — the Australians or the Americans must be paying him. Nobody will take it at face value because no one today does something like this — take a stand to emphasise a principle over what you personally like or what is politically expedient.

Even saying a few generous words about one's opponents has become so rare that whenever it happens people always suspect something devious ('he is sending message to his party's high command', 'he wants to switch boats', etc). Remember what happened to LK Advani when he stepped across the BJP's official line on MA Jinnah.

This, I fear, is the way to become another Pakistan.

In that country, a minority of murderous mullahs have managed to take over the adjudication of who is a true muslim and therefore entitled to be a real Pakistani. This was allowed to come about because the majority, who like people everywhere want nothing more than the right to live their life in peace and bring up their children for success, haven always opted to stay silent: First, to paraphrase Father Niemoller, they came for the Hindus and the average Pakistani did not protest because they were not Hindus; then it was the Ahmadis, then the Shias, the Sufis, and now increasingly anyone who disagrees with the most retrograde interpretations of Islam.

As Father Niemoller warned us many years ago in context of what happened in Nazi Germany, you keep hoping that they will stop with someone else, but in the end they always come for you.

We might think we are very different from Pakistan but we are not; we are the same people, with the same capacity for warmth and passion and intolerance and violence. Dadri is testimony to that.

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Tags

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