

Dangerous Liaisons

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The arrest of a serving army officer in connection with a terrorist attack targeting the Muslim community is a matter of deep concern. Every officer takes an oath to defend the country and its Constitution. The officer's code states that the country must come first, always and every time. Therefore, Hindu officers hatching a conspiracy to blow up Muslims plays into the hands of those forces which want to see the country divided down the middle on religious and communal lines. This is the kind of stuff that any inimical intelligence agency would dream of achieving. The bombing incident is a one off case in the armed forces even as it is emerging that other serving officers are involved. Investigations will take place and the law will take its own course. There is however a dangerous trend which is affecting the officer cadre. This is the hugely negative influence that the Hindutva agenda has achieved in the garb of patriotism and nationalism. The extent of penetration is obvious by the kind of mails being circulated amongst several groups in which serving as well as retired officers are participants. Muslims and Christians are routinely derided by officers who see them as acting against Hindu interests even though there are thousands of soldiers and many hundreds of officers who belong to these communities in service. The 'All terrorists are Muslims' syndrome is firmly in place. Never mind the ULFA, LTTE or Khalistanis and now Abhinav Bharat, the outfit allegedly responsible for the Malegaon blasts.

Till recently, the secular credentials of the Indian army had never been in doubt; therefore it was surprising to see the reaction of several senior officers when the muslim headcount controversy came out in the open a few years ago. A retired general even petitioned the Supreme Court to prevent data being provided to the Sachar Committee which was looking into the conditions of Muslims. Interestingly, the navy and air force had no problems in providing the figures. The army has only 3% of Muslims in the rank and file though the Muslim population is over 15%. The army reflects the views of society, so the anti-Muslim bias which exists across most sections was expressed by saying that the army is secular and not based on caste or religion so there was no need to consider any increase of a particular community.

The BJP jumped into the fray stating that this was going to communalise the army. The fact is that the fighting arms of the army except for some new raisings are based on caste and have a fixed class composition. For example, Jat Sikhs are recruited in the Sikh Regiment whereas lower caste Mazhabi and Ramdasia Sikhs are recruited in the Sikh Light Infantry. Almost every community has an infantry regiment named after it : be it the Jats, Sikhs, Dogras, Gurkhas, Rajputs, Marathas, Biharis, Assamese, Mahars, Punjabis, Madrasis and even the Nagas. The only pure Muslim regiment is the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry. There are very few fixed vacancies for Muslims in other regiments.

Muslims always formed a large part of the British Indian Army in pure and mixed regiments but most units went across to Pakistan though a large proportion of the population stayed on in India. The imbalance which crept in should have been corrected much earlier since every community has the right to participate in the defence of the country and also enjoy the privileges which accrue thereof. The government of the day bowed down and the issue was swept under the carpet. There is now a fairly aggressive ex-servicemen movement which is not averse to organising processions and hunger strikes to highlight demands relating to pay and pensions. This community is being politicised which may not be a bad thing by itself but such a group being influenced by extreme right wing propaganda in the name of nationalism can be dangerous and could lead to further incidents like the Malegaon blast. The meaning of the word 'secular' which has always been the strength of the armed forces is now taken to mean appeasing minority communities, specially Muslims. As a policy, the BJP has wooed several retired officers. A general is the Chief Minister of a state. Several generals have been given tickets to stand for elections. This is perfectly laudable but indicates a trend. Maybe the Congress should also consider a greater representation for retired officers. The presence and participation of several officers in the agitation in Jammu with regard to the Amamath Shrine controversy is an indicator of the political leanings of the officer cadre. Incidentally, the governor Lt Gen SK Sinha, a BJP appointee, managed to single-handedly achieve what militancy could not for two decades: total alienation of the population of the Valley. The Congress must be cursing itself for allowing him an extension. The army needs to look inwards and correct aberrations before it is too late. The consequences for the republic are frightening. It could cease to exist. □□□

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