

Democracy, Parochialism and Peace

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The way Raj Thackeray has provoked street violence in Mumbai and the way state government handled it has indeed shamed all those who stand for democracy and peace. It is not for the first time that peace in Mumbai has been broken. Citizens of Mumbai have experienced it time and again. Maharashtra Navnirman Sena is after all an offshoot of Shivsena and Bal Thackeray, Raj Thackeray's guru and his ideological inspiration, has done it many number of times.

Shiv Sena is not only a parochial force, it is also communal and takes pride in being supporter of Hindutva. MNS has at least, so far avoided brush with Hindutva and for the first time has manifested its aggressive parochial face and all the commen-tators agree that it has been done with a view of election next year. MNS could not make much headway in Mumbai Municipal corporation election and drew almost blank.

The MNS is eager to cut Shiv Sena to size and it can do so only by hijacking its regional chauvinist card, which Raj has done successfully or so it seems. Thousands of north Indians got panicky and many of them left for their homes in UP and Bihar. The state Government deliberately avoided taking action and when it arrested Raj it was for a few hours and he easily got bail.

It is said that the state government deliberately delayed action to cut into Shiv Sena vote bank. If Shiv Sena remains strong the Congress-NCP government is threatened. Thus by weakening Shivsena by letting Raj Thackeray's MNS prey on Shiv Sena Vote bank, the Congress-NCP Government can feel secure. The BJP has also reacted strongly and blamed the state government for delaying action to promote its own interests. The BJP's anger is under-standable as it is an ally of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and any threat to Shiv Sena is a threat to itself.

Mr L K Advani, opposition's candidate for Prime Ministerial post, denounced Raj Thackeray's regional chauvinism as divisive. What a charge! Mr Advani plays no less divisive politics. Raj is playing divisive politics between Maharashtrians and North Indians and Advani is apt at dividing Hindus and Muslims. All three i.e. BJP, Shiv Sena and MNS are playing narrow provincial or religious chauvinism.

In fact this is main weakness of Indian democracy today. Indian politics has been reduced to mere identity politics, be it caste, religious or regional identities. They revel in exploiting narrow sentiments. The ideals of the Constitution are part of political rhetoric or at best constitution can be invoked only in the courts, particularly the Supreme Court.

The Criminal procedure Code, though drafted by the British more than one hundred and fifty years ago, too, is an ideal document for maintaining law and order in the country. Like the Constitution it too, remains on paper as far as powerful politicians are concerned. Had Criminal procedure code been sincerely applied much of today's communal, caste and other parochial problems could have been solved. It is now quite usual for politicians to play these parochial sentiments to target easy votes on emotional grounds.

IPC section 153 A & B had been sincerely applied to all those who use narrow parochial ideology, neither there would have been 33000 communal

riots in post-independence India nor peace would have been so often disturbed in the country. But problem is one cannot prosecute any politician or government servant without prior permission of state government and state government would never grant permission without weighing its political implications.

One can cite numerous examples. If the Narsimha Rao Government had taken action against BJP leaders like L K Advani, Uma Bharti, Sadhvi Rithambara and several others under section 153 A of Criminal Procedure Code, neither Babri Masjid would have been demolished nor post-Babri demolition riots in Mumbai, Surat, Ahmedabad, Bhopal, Kanpur, and several-other places would have taken place thus sparing shame to the country.

It is well known that Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara were using extremely foul language to provoke Hindu sentiments against Muslims and it was repeatedly pointed out to Mr Narsimha Rao but he never allowed concerned authorities to take action. What happened as a result of such deliberate inaction is now history. The story of Gujarat 2002 is no different. But there state government itself was directly involved in provoking communal violence so who would invoke action against the culprits.

It would be in order to mention here that when Justice Suresh of Bombay High Court disqualified a Shiv Sena candidate on grounds of using religion to appeal to voters in Vile Parle constituency in 1995 election and also disqualified Bal Thackeray himself from voting for five years for making provocative speeches it had considerable effect on Shiv Sena rhetoric. It was from that time onwards that Bal Thackeray became somewhat cautious in mounting direct attacks on minorities.

Also, the election commission for decades ignored provocative speeches including Ramjanambhoomi rhetoric by BJP leaders and it helped aggravate the situation and two general elections were fought by BJP on communal rhetoric without any action by election commission. It was after Seshan, the then Chief Election Commissioner, began to take action that some restraint was observed by politicians in freely using communal rhetoric, if right from beginning action had been taken by election commissions from first general election in 1951 general elections would have been free of religious parochialism and secular democracy would have been more rich in content.

The Maharashtra Government too deliberately avoided taking action in time against Raj Thackeray's regional chauvinistic rhetoric that several north Indians were attacked and one Maharashtrian lost his life in Nashik. As pointed out the delay was deliberate to draw political advantage.

Politics is essential part of democracy but unfortunately in this country politics is all about power by any means, fair or foul. Secular democracy can have meaning only if politics is based on values, not on considerations of winning elections. Elections should be oriented towards issues, not to religious, caste or regional chauvinism. Unfortunately no election so far has been fought on issues. All elections have been fought on emotional issues though one cannot say people's problems were never raised.

There seems to be only one exception : post-emergency elections. Emergency was an overwhelming event and people were very angry against Mrs Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi who had acted as extra-constitutional authority. The then Jansangh had also merged with Janta Party which defeated the Indira Gandhi-led Congress and had taken vow at Mahatma Gandhi's

Samadhi for Gandhian socialism and secularism and thus no party was left to exploit parochial issues.

Some drastic measures are needed to re-orient elections towards secular values and people's problems rather than people's parochial identities. There is one dilemma, however. Those castes and communities, who have been left out and have been deprived of their just share in fruits of development or share in power, are bound to invoke their *primordial* identities to demand justice.

Such a dilemma can be resolved only by adhering to principles of justice to make democracy all-inclusive for all sections of society. One can also argue that Raj is trying to invoke Maharashtrian identity for justice to Maharashtra being left out from fruits of development. Even if it is so it cannot be resolved through street violence. No democracy would admit of it.

It should be resolved through political processes and particularly through constructive dialogue keeping common people's safety and security. Raj was definitely responsible for provoking street violence. It cannot be acceptable in any case. It would be wrong to say that gross injustice is being done to Maharashtrians in Maharashtra. North Indians do not hold plum jobs either in private sector or in public sector. Quite to the contrary; they all are self-employed being petty hawkers or milk vendors or workers in various private small-scale industries.

As for straining Bombay's infra-structure all statistical data shows that more Maharashtrians are migrating from various parts of Maharashtra than people from North India. All those who come to Mumbai contribute to its growth in their own way. Life in Mumbai will be severely affected if these North Indians are expelled or stop coming to Mumbai. And in this way people's right to move freely in the country will also be under attack. □□□