

Attacking Liberal Ideas

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Mobs on the streets of Shimoga and Hassan protesting against an article that appeared in *Kannada Prabha* allegedly written by Taslima Nasreen has once again kicked up a debate on freedom of expression and need to place some reasonable restrictions on that freedom. Taslima Nasreen has described the article *Purdah hai Purdah* to be distorted. She has in a statement clarified that she did not write any article for any Kannada daily. The article in *Kannada Prabha* carries statement that Prophet was against *burqa* and that she has called upon women to burn their *burqas*. Even if the article had been written by Taslima Nasreen, there is nothing provocative in the article justifying mobilization on the streets and the vandalism that the people of Karnataka witnessed. If Taslima Nasreen was factually incorrect in her conclusion that Prophet was against *burqa*, one needs to marshal evidence to the contrary and put it in public domain. That would not only correct wrong statements, but also instruct the readers how far to rely on the author's conclusions and views.

Many commentators have raised the issue of freedom of expression and often allege secularists to be partial towards Muslims. When M F Hussain is attacked and his paintings are torn and destroyed, the secularists see it as a attack on freedom of expression but they are silent when Talsima Nasreen or Salman Rushdie are attacked or there is a demand to ban their books by the Islamic fundamentalists. This charge is true but only to an extent. One cannot generalize—there are secularists of all varieties and hues. However, most secularists, it is true, have not condemned Islamic fundamentalists as vociferously when Taslima Nasreen or Salman Rushdie and their works are condemned, or for freedom of expression of the Dutch cartoonists drawing cartoons derogatory towards Prophet Mohammad. Most secularists react strongly when Shiv Sena or Bajrang Dal or VHP attack MF Hussain's paintings or these organizations demand a ban on the film. Some secularists argue that threat to freedom of expression and indeed threat to democracy and democratic rights itself is not from minority fundamentalism. Fundamentalism of minority community at best can cause some irritation and hiccups for a democratic state but majority fundamentalism can threaten democracy. But Minority fundamentalism often becomes existential justification for fundamentalist elements from majority community. Competitive fundamentalism together can erode individual freedoms and threaten democracy.

It is more than essential to first make a distinction between freedom of an artist and freedom of a politician who has based his/her politics on demanding privileges and better rights for a particular community over others or politicians who demand communal rights and privileges. Freedoms of both cannot be equated. Motives of both are different. While the artists merely express through their art, literature or other forms of expressions. Whatever Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie write, whether one agrees with them or not, every democratic minded citizen should uphold their freedom, even if they do not fundamentally

agree with what they say. In a democracy, individual freedoms and liberties are fundamental and even necessary for the progress of the society. Without dissent in medieval ages, those who faced the gallows and persecution of various nature for their views ensured that the society as a whole progresses. Galileo, Socrates, Sarmad, Sir Syed, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, or other dissenters are example of this. People need Taslima Nasreens and Salman Rushdies and M F Hussains how much ever they may disagree with them. Their views may not be palatable to this society but may be future generations may view them differently. But unless they are allowed to express themselves, how will the future generations have a choice? What will they chose from? Creative artists, thinkers, philosophers, academicians, historians are in business of studying their subjects and expressing their views. Their views and creations may help or benefit one or other side and may even be partisan and totally unpalatable to a section of society or indeed to the entire society. Just as they have a right to express themselves and free from any intimidation and fear, their consumers, patrons, readers have a right to know and enjoy artistic creations. India is not the only country where artists, academicians, thinkers live in fear with their freedoms restricted. The fashion designers who create and design veils and *burqas* find their freedoms restricted in France as *burqas* cannot be worn in public places. The architects who design mosques or structures with minarets find their freedom restricted as the whole nation with majority voted in a referendum against any future minarets.

However, one must distinguish between right of an artist to freedom of expression and right to promote hatred, ill will and enmity between two communities based on caste, religion, ethnicity, language or race. While this writer would stand up for the right of the cartoonists who drew a series of cartoons in Dutch paper *Jallands Postem*, it is foolish to argue that *Jallands Postem* had a right to publish the cartoons. *Jallands Postem* called for cartoons that depicted the Prophet of Islam, even if in poor light. The paper was abusing freedom of expression by openly calling artists to draw such cartoons for a reward. The intention of the paper was clearly to hurt the feelings of Muslims and evoke an adverse reaction from them. *Jallands Postem* was not even simpliciter providing a platform for already existing cartoons, it was calling upon cartoonists to draw provocative cartoons for a reward. *Jallands Postem* was in fact providing a platform for hate mongers targeting a religion. Had *Jallands Postem* provided the cartoon space for all dissenting cartoonists, against all that is sacred, the issue would have been on a different footing altogether. If Muslims all over the world reacted and demonstrated against such a campaign, it was only a reaction expected by the Dutch paper. To defend such abuse of freedom of expression by the Dutch papers will be self defeating and demeaning the freedom. However, some of the responses to publication of the cartoons also should be condemned - that of the terrorists kill the editor of the Dutch paper or the cartoonist. Any violence or hooliganism to achieve any objective no matter how much justified is condemnable.

No details are appearing in the media as to which organization mobilized the Muslim mobs on the streets in Shimoga and Hassan. It is interesting to ponder why Muslim mobs got mobilized only in Shimoga and Hassan and why not elsewhere particularly when *Siasat*, Urdu daily had also carried the news. There

are Kannada speaking Muslims in other districts and towns of Karnataka as well. However, the organization or individuals who mobilized the mobs in Shimoga and Hassan did not care to wait and check the veracity of the articles and its translations. They must have been more interested in scoring quick brownie points and deriving political benefits and there are always advantages in protesting on streets before one's competitor does. The organizations exploiting emotional and religio-cultural issues to mobilize large mob are less interested in the religion and more interested in throwing their weight around demonstrating their muscle power to the community as well as to the political class and bargain for fishes and loaves of electoral offices. Those who supported exclusive legislation for maintenance of divorced Muslim women, limiting maintenance to only 4 months of *iddat* period after the Supreme Court judgment in Shah Bano's case did not bother that the legislation did not in fact to limit maintenance to divorced Muslim women only to 4 months but provided fair and reasonable maintenance to divorced Muslim women *within* 4 months. After competitive mobilization and political upmanship, everybody involved in opposing the Shahbano judgment have forgotten that they had proclaimed from roof top that their religion was in danger if men were forced to grant maintenance beyond the 4 months of *iddat* period to a divorced Muslim woman. How much the politicians and the organizations mobilizing against Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie really care for Islam and how much they do out of political calculations is anybody's guess.

Media focuses on such divisive issues and therefore these political outfits, like Shiv Sena in Mumbai, get disproportionate coverage. The difference between popular perception of Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, VHP, Abhinav Bharat, Ranbir Sena, ABVP, Sri Ram Sene, various caste Panchayats and scores of other 'senas' on the one hand and Muslim political outfits on the other hand is that while these 'senas' are perceived as fringe elements of the majority community, the Muslim outfits are taken to be representatives of the entire community.

The liberals amongst Muslims do not get the same space that the divisive and communal get, except some articles. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan and Dr Asghar Ali Engineer, Sultan Shahin, Javed Akhtar, Javed Anand, editors of Urdu papers with large circulations like *Siasat*, *Shahqfat* the Bollywood actors and sports persons are just a few examples of the liberal voice within the community. But to know the liberal voice of the community one will have to look beyond the mainstream media and attend meetings of Muslims, listen to alternate forums where liberal Muslims express. Their task no doubt is made difficult by communal violence and growing communal forces in the country. In order to strengthen the liberal forces within both the communities, a larger responsibility falls on the state to create a conducive and non-intimidating environment where the liberals within all communities have equal opportunity and fair chance to compete and put across their views and ideas as well. □