

KERALA

Deepening Communal Divide

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Only one remaining secular space in Kerala is the meeting sessions of hard-core drinkers before and after arrack/toddy consumption in and around alcohol shops, says Mr CK Vishwanath. Thankfully, there remains such a secular forum in Kerala, where people of diverse backgrounds can meet and forget their differences and remain together on a common platform for some time.

Swami Vivekananda once called Kerala as a lunatic or a mental asylum during one of his visits. Nothing much has changed since then? Other than State achieving better rating at social and human development indicators, of course, this is not a small achievement! But when mafia-gunda - quotation raj being the reality and norm of the day on the one hand, on the law & order front, on socio-political front people are deeply divided over community, religious and caste lines.

Today's Kerala is a highly communalized state. Inter community and inter religious interactions are very minimal.

People are classified on religious, caste and community lines. The potential to garner votes based on identity matter more when a political candidate for an election is being decided.

Over a period of time, with this game played-out by all, divisions within society on the lines of identity based upon caste, religious and community has deepened, poisoning Kerala society, expanding communal divide, resulting in almost irreversible shrinkage of secular space.

Many actors are responsible for this kind of shrinking secular space. While not disputing the contributions made by Christian missionaries to Kerala's social development, role of contemporary Church leadership in communalizing Kerala society is a matter of concern which merits serious thought.

Similarly one needs to give serious attention to political parties that contribute parochial feelings among broader Kerala society. Just for instance, the name Kerala Congress itself is an example. That name is not attuned to Kerala people's nationalistic outlook; moreover their suspected - clandestine links with the Church leadership is yet another issue. It is generally believed that various political groupings under Kerala Congress (KC) brand name have much to do with Christian and Church's political and economic interests.

Support of religious and community leaders are a critical factor for winning elections in Kerala. Knowing this well and the strategy to adopt so as to gain maximum political clout, Churches always attempt to influence voting pattern and thereby electoral fortunes of candidates.

A bishop, if cannot openly declare support to a party or a candidate, often do express his leniency in a number of ways, just for instance, by posing for camera with the candidate to appear that photo in next day's newspaper, during electioneering time,

signaling believers whom should they vote. That may be an old gimmick and highly undoubtful, if bishops can any longer influence believers considerably.

But the larger civil society is divided and danger is already done and made. Division created will here to stay for a long time to come, at least till the ever growing IT generation taking strong strides to break up with the past and move forward with a large number of inter-caste, inter-religious and inter-community marriages. And of course through multicultural worksites especially in the newly sprouting IT and BPO companies!

The problem of communal poisoning arose because, it was a politics related to economic power, managing social infrastructural investments.

Managing a host of social institutions, commercially, is not an easy task. Clearances, extensions, permits, new licenses and a whole lot of things are involved. Here the need to have a political representative, who can help in such matters, is quite understandable, for a country, where dealing with regulatory mechanism functioning with a rent-seeking motto. It is good to some representation at political level to speed up matters and to at least partially overcome rent seeking behavior of people concerned.

There are two kinds of minority institutions in the country. One is a minority religious institute directly managed by the Church bodies. The second category is the institutions formed to grab minority benefits by investors, NRIs from minority community. It is the sprouting of such institutes and support given to them by the contemporary church leadership often causes problem.

Some of these spiritual leaders move on specially imported heavier vehicles that consume much more fuel than *fuel economy model cars* that are available in the local market. And when they speak out vehemently for minority institutions (as some of them have minority business men's investment in them) spectators of all backgrounds raise eyebrows.

And on whose money these heavy model vehicles run? Is it the believers' money or the business lobby finance them? And politicians from their community are needed to ensure safe passage of those 'holy vehicles ' at custom points and ensure clearances at various governmental level. Also, political representations are needed to clear up some of the serious violation of various income tax laws in those non-Church managed money making minority institution.

Fallout of this nexus between the trinity, spiritual leaders–business men –political leaders is that other communities, religious groups and caste organizations started adopting same model. And this pattern is now widespread. There is a huge competition between different groups to become the largest capitalist force within the State of Kerala. Interestingly, each and every community organizations have their micro credit arrangements.

Between the Trinity mentioned above, there are mutual give and take which may be broadly finance-related, business-related, vote-related and many more. This has nothing to do with Christianity or the Church. Helping a political leader or a political party is none of Church's business.

Late Bishop Paulose Mar Paulose, Late Abraham Marthoma and Bishop Yuhanon Marthoma all used to take strong political positions for different causes, for or against policies and decisions of the governments. Yuhanon Marthoma took a position against former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's emergency rule in the late 1970s.

But participating actively in politics, as behind the curtain strategy masters, religious leaders are poisoning Kerala's political space! It was indeed a 'slow poisoning', a process started with the formation of Kerala Congress! □□□