

## Getting Lost in Secular Menus

Political managers in the saffron camp don't make choices in a vacuum. They do it in the context of corporate relations they're enmeshed in and the options they have within those relations. Ever since the captains of industry billed Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as a Prime Ministerial material a couple of years back, a section of saffron brigade has been systematically projecting him as the point-one man of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In other words it is quite natural for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) opposition led by BJP, to accept Modi as their poster boy for the next parliamentary poll, just two years away. No, it didn't happen the way the BJP chalked it out as one of the major NDA partners—Janata Dal (U) of Sharad Yadav and Nitish Kumar rejected the idea outright because Modi lacks secular face. What matters to all these secularists or pseudo-secularists is the mask, not the reality. The Yadavs and Kumars know the art of selling secular image despite allying and sharing power with the communal BJP for so long. No contamination effect really! Faced with gloom economic prospects and mounting social unrest, all political parties are now banking on secular phobia to woo minority community voters and their approach sometimes borders on hysteria as it is the case with the new power centre of Bengal—Trinamul Congress.

In truth the difference between BJP and JD(U) surfaced over supporting the Presidential Candidature of Pranab Mukherjee—a Congress-led United Progressive Alliance nominee. Anything can happen in parliamentary politics. Foes become friends over-night. As NDA has no presidential aspirant of their own they have no option but to support the Congress candidate or the redoubtable Sangma who is now an independent runner. And in an extreme measure they could just abstain. JD(U)'s resolve to support Congress candidate is a minor affair which again illustrates among other things that the much publicised presidential election matters little to the broad masses of people in India.

Strange it may seem but secularism is now a byword even for diehard communalists. Not that the Gujarat carnage of 2002 under the stewardship of Modi was the first of its kind. Communal psyche is a hard reality since the pre-partition days. And nobody is interested in attacking the roots of communalism and religious bigotry. Anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 was no less horrific. And Congress, the covert instigator of that blood-bath continues to present itself as a crusader of secularism. Even after a decade of 2002 carnage, communal polarisation on religious grounds is a fact of life in Gujarat as the total dislocation of minorities seems to have created a permanent ghettoisation process. The sprinkling slum of Juhapura being the symbol of minority agony signifies how economic rebuilding and rehabilitation that follows every communal riot, becomes difficult in the post-riot situation. Economic attrition in the form of boycotting the minorities in trade and social space is simply horrendous as it is enough to cripple a community beyond recognition.

So long as Modi enjoys the blessings of the industry, he could survive all the attacks by the so-called secularists. Industrialists, otherwise finding it tough-going because of globalisation,

see Modi's Gujarat as a happy hunting ground for massive state subsidies while the media controlled by big business, never loses any opportunity to sing praises and modulate popular opinion in his favour, creating a larger than life-size image.

Strictly speaking, no political party, left or right, is above communalism. All of them indulge in secular chorus to win minority votes that matter in a number of states in making—or unmaking governments.

Communal virus is not confined to BJP-ruled Gujarat alone. It's everywhere, a single spark under a real or imagined threat, can start a fire anytime anywhere in the country. And here lies the strength of the communal forces. Secularists in this country in most cases pay lip service to the minority cause while refusing to carry on a sustained campaign in favour of a saner society.

Communal harmony sounds fine but it cannot be developed in isolation, it is part of greater mass mobilisation against a common enemy of the people. Surprisingly even the left is in no position to mobilise masses in their millions against a common target. Market in its present unregulated form is not their enemy and yet more and more people, irrespective of their religious beliefs and biases, are becoming destitutes because of the market tyranny. Only those areas are still relatively free from communal mindsets, that once witnessed massive popular upheavals against social and economic injustice. But mass-organising is not on the agenda of any political party—they are afraid of genuine mass movements. They just exhibit secular menu on the eve of the polls. If today Modi goes into oblivion, BJP or some other right-wing party may create another Modi in difficult times. Communalism is something that is extremely costly and poses great risks but it is again part of the options that parliamentary gamblers quite often resort to. And it cannot be otherwise in an atmosphere of growing social inequality and mistrust. □□□