

Gujarat Imbroglia

Mentioning Gujarat, once a refreshing experience, is now a shame. Reports that come in at regular intervals prove definitively that the state has become the main criminal. Even the grisly Godhra provocation is alleged to be the handiwork of the Hindu fundamentalist forces. Whatever that may be, the tragedy is that Gujarat has once again unleashed communal demons, difficult to contain.

The usual arguments of blaming it on the corrupt politicians, indifferent administration and the police force and so on do not convince. The erosion of values and the cultural dimension of the imbroglia, definitely valid, do not explain everything. What is needed at the moment is a more integrated and in-depth analysis of this complex issue that will haunt the Indian nation for a long time to come.

Historical perspectives are indeed very important. Why did majoritarian communalism grow so much in this country? Three factors seem to stand out. First, secular parties made frequent compromises with communal forces. Second, those secular parties, somewhere along the way, dropped a proactive agenda for inculcating and promoting secularism. Third, the very secular forces who, it was expected, would protect the nation, have fallen into the company of corrupt criminals and habitual violators of law.

It is also important to look at the constituency that the communal forces have conquered. As remarked by Rajmohan Gandhi, it is the youth on 'the margins of crime and unemployment who feel threatened but also tempted by modernity, a conflict revealed by the word American displayed across the maroon T-shirt' in the much printed picture of the violent youth in Gujarat. What one should not forget is that the Gujarat pogrom is the result of years of insistent and systematic planned vicious education (or mis-educational) process of blaming it all on the Muslims and Christians. The propagandist din has been loud and clear. People preferred to ignore it. And the nation has paid for it.

Social scientists and activists of various hues and colours have warned of Narendra Modi's Gujarat being a blueprint of the future, if the

Indian state comes fully under the control of the Sangh Parivar or similar fascist forces. The nation has seen it earlier too; since the partition days, the 1984 Delhi riots and the 1992 Mumbai riots. Unless the state and obviously the civil society proactively respond to the situation, the nation might as well slide into a catastrophe.

The challenge to the social scientists and activists is daunting. The primary task is to create and propagate an integral and comprehensive understanding of the situation. We need to create fora in which these issues are confronted and discussed and understood. The most important task is to build a genuine secular society. As Romila Thapar once pointed out, there are three dimensions to this secularising process. First, strengthening of the civil society by insisting on defending the rights of citizens. Second, the state has to activate the rights of the citizens. Third, religions and religious institutions have to review their role in civil society and the state. The secularising of Indian society, necessary for the betterment of those below poverty line and those victimised by majoritarian communalism requires the empowerment of civil society, based on the centrality of social ethics. Ultimately, it is an active civil society that can halt the state from being hijacked by anti-social elements.

Gujarat is a warning! One hopes that social scientists, activists and all citizens come together to pay heed to the same.

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