

A Defining Election Combating Hate and Inequality

By
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The people of India are passing through deeply troubled times. It is claimed that the forthcoming parliamentary elections will be fought primarily on a development plank. However, the facade of moderation carefully orchestrated by the BJP and a sympathetic media, crumbles as soon as you travel to far corners of the country. Instead you encounter a vastly different dangerous reality, of a cynically and recklessly engineered communal divide.

The elections in the summer of 2004 will decisively influence in many ways the destinies of our nation and its people. These elections will either return and further legitimise, or else reject the band of determined, highly motivated people and organizations that have mounted in recent decades an unprecedented assault and challenge to the very idea of India.

During the India's long struggle for freedom from British colonial rule, the mainstream of popular support lay with Gandhi, and shared his vision of a resolutely secular nation, with equal rights of citizenship for people of every faith, community, caste, colour and gender. There was also influential support for more radically egalitarian and democratic ideologies of the left and dalit movements. However, religious extremist leaders fought for and secured an independent Islamic nation carved out from Muslim majority segments of India. Extremist Hindu organisations, mortally opposed to Gandhi's humane and inclusive Hinduism and nationalism, assassinated him just months after India became free. The Constitution of India, drafted by one of India's most revered leaders from a people traditionally subjected to the most savage caste discrimination, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, established the secular, socialist and democratic foundations of the new nation.

Class oppression, inequality of wealth and land holdings, patriarchy, untouchability and communal hatred continued to traumatize and shame the land, but the aspirations of the Constitution of India still seemed unchallenged during the early decades of Independence, in the stated goals of public policy and social action.

A large majority of Indians continue to defend the idea of India, not consciously but mainly by the way they live their lives. However, for the greater part, they remain disorganised, divided, demotivated and in general disarray. An alternate fascist and iniquitous vision of India is therefore steadily gaining ground, amidst the growing global hegemony of international capital and the demonisation of Islam.

Pseudo-religious extremist organisations have challenge this vision of India, more aggressively since the 1980s. Their mobilisation is organised predominantly around the symbol of a medieval mosque, the Babri Masjid. In recent decades, this incendiary intensely sectarian dispute over a tiny patch of land in Ayodhya has come to dominate national public life in India, successfully hegemonising electoral politics, and displacing authentic people's democratic struggles for a more just, egalitarian and humane world.

The entire Muslim community has been systematically demonised, especially in the hearts and minds of large sections of the influential middle class, as implacably unpatriotic, regressive, unreliable and violent.

The manufacture of hatred has extended, especially in distant tribal regions of central India, to other minority groups like Christians. Textbooks have been re-written, and popular cultural forms like cinema distorted, to propagate a false, dangerously communal, undemocratic, patriarchal and inegalitarian vision of our history and cultural legacy.

This precipitous and turbulent period in our public life has coincided significantly also with the advent of global capital, policies of structural adjustment, the abandonment of socialist goals of public policy and the steady retreat of the state from its social responsibilities. Not only is the idea of India endangered because of the assaults on the constitutional rights of equal citizenship of all people, regardless of faith, caste, class, gender and language. It is imperiled also because the goals of justice, social and economic equity and a better life for impoverished and oppressed people have been jettisoned from public policy, state action and national politics.

In this moment of historic crisis, unprecedented in modern India, democratic institutions both of the state and the people stand eroded, corrupted, unsteady or weak. Fascist and anti-democratic politics have been legitimized by the opportunism - or communalisation - of segments of the media and much of the political establishment, except of the left. The resistance by progressive segments of civil society are greatly weakened by their divisiveness and passivity.

The brutal carnage in Gujarat and its aftermath has awakened sections of humane and secular public opinion in the country, to the over-riding imperative to reclaim and restore the pluralistic foundations of our society and polity. It has alerted us to the levels of communal poison that have been fostered in our society; the mobilisation of legions of young people by pseudo-religious fundamentalist organisations; and the failure of large sections of the state, the political class and even progressive civil society organisations to confront, resist and reverse sectarian mobilisation around ideologies of hatred and divide.

Secular political parties as well as civil society organisations need to recognise the deep significance of this moment in our political and social history. It is above all a battle for the hearts and minds of our people, and the future course our country will take.

The people of India are not willing to choose merely between soft and hard versions of pseudo-religious fundamentalism. Much more than the political class is willing to give them credit for, ordinary people of India see the choice clearly between the politics of hate, sectarian divide and insecurity and of that social harmony, unity and peace; and between the iniquitous economics of global capital and an alternative humane and egalitarian economics, constructed as if poor people matter. We live in times that do not allow soft and ambiguous options.