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An X-Ray of India's Compassion

By: Rajendran Narayanan

The politics of precarity and heightened socio-economic inequality erodes our compassion. The politics of prejudice and the treatment of minorities corrodes it.

Two recent incidents provide a rubric for us to evaluate our priorities and imaginations of India. The first is the extraordinary heroic effort in which 12 rat-hole miners rescued 41 daily wage workers who were trapped in the Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand for over 16 days. The second incident concerns a statement in the Parliament. On 21 September, Ramesh Bidhuri, a Member of Parliament (MP) of the BJP made derogatory communal slurs against Danish Ali of the BSP on the floor of the parliament. The comments received applause from some BJP MPs in the parliament.

The two incidents are seemingly unrelated. The thread that connects the two is the continued acceptance of precarity, indignity and discrimination faced by many in our society. The Silkyara tunnel is part of the union government's much publicised Char Dham project to build roads connecting the four Hindu pilgrimage sites of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri. While building roads are required, what needs interrogation is the rush to complete projects by ignoring environmental concerns and safeguards that puts socio-economically poor workers at the fulcrum of life and death. And, when a sitting MP gets away with derogatory speech on the floor of Parliament, it deifies resentment, legitimises prejudice and creates precedents for disharmony.

Together, these incidents demonstrate the need to pay attention to how the constitutional promises of dignity, equality and fraternity are playing out in practice.

India stands at the cusp of a historically tenuous time. Its economic structures have systematically fortified a class of people and rendered the poor to lead a fractured existence in the penumbra of our gated lives.

> Inadequate social safety nets and the daily grind have trapped the poor in a Sysiphian cycle of precarity. Intergenerational mobility towards economic prosperity has been sluggish.

The bottom half of India's population holds a mere 3% of the national wealth. When seen from this economic axis, it is the poor that constitute the numerical majority.

Splicing India along a religious axis creates a majoritarian idiom which is different from the absolute numerical majority comprising the poor.

This majority is just one economic or health shock away from slipping into utter destitution. Inadequate social safety nets and the daily grind have trapped the poor in a Sysiphian cycle of precarity. Intergenerational mobility towards economic prosperity has been sluggish pointing to a continuance of deprivation along caste lines. The economically poor are over-represented by socially marginalised communities such as Dalits and Adivasis.

In parallel to this economic disrepair, a continuous injection of resentment incites decentralised and splintered acts of discrimination and violence targeting Muslims. The tacit sanction from the government of such acts makes the force of law indistinguishable from the law of force (Hansen 2021).

The collateral damage of such politics of precarity and politics of prejudice is a steady erosion and corrosion of compassion. Erosion is a gradual, structurally mediated physical process while corrosion is akin to a biochemically induced process with lasting and even irreversible implications. The politics of precarity and heightened socio-economic inequality erodes our compassion; the politics of prejudice and the treatment of minorities corrodes it. These raise the question: what would an X-Ray of India's compassion reveal?

The eroding state

Over the last decade, we observe a steady reconfiguration of the citizen-state relationship. This is an inversion from the time between 2004 and 2013 when a set of rights-based legislations such as NREGA, NFSA, and the Forest Rights Act, were imagined as attempts to improve participatory democracy and the bargaining power of the marginalised.

Today, the state steadily abdicates its responsibility of enabling citizens' rights. It puts the onus on the citizen, as if it is the citizen's fault and not the state's responsibility to honour rights. For instance, not being able to get pensions owing to biometric or other technical failures is now framed as a citizen's fault instead of seeing it as a fault with the design and principles of governance. The patronising language of terming individuals as 'beneficiaries' instead of 'rights-holders' brands and repackages the government as a philanthropic institution doling out charity and further strips the citizen of her rights.

> A digitalwashing of rights raise serious apprehensions of whether we are entering a new age of digital feudalism.

Aided by digital technologies, the implementation of the rights-based legislations have become excessively centralised leading to a flattening of federalism and routine violations of rights (Buddha, Dhorajiwala and Narayanan, 2021), (Chaudhuri, B 2020), (Drèze, Jean, Reetika Khera, and Anmol Somanchi, 2021). Such a digitalwashing of rights raise serious apprehensions of whether we are entering a new age of digital feudalism.

These are all recipes for diluting government accountability and transfer duties - and blame - from the government to the individual. Such a model of policy and governance atomises the poor, who are left with little promise in making their rights count. They are pushed to the periphery to live a shadowed existence. Being in constant precarity means that the poor have little or no claim making in politics.

Counter-majoritarian constitutionalism

Moreover, among other things, essential services like transportation, healthcare and education are undergoing unprecedented levels of compartmentalising along class - and caste - lines. In such segregated sensual experiences of India, spaces for cross-class, cross-caste intermingling are shrinking. These in turn have further ossified the affluent and widened the blind spots towards deprivation. As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen write in their remarkable book, *India: An Uncertain Glory*, India is like 'pockets of California in sub-Saharan Africa.' Beyond the aphoristic quality of this phrase is the quotidian acceptance of this fact.

> When there is no meaningful interaction across class, caste and religion, the deprived sections become part of a physically proximate but emotionally distant landscape.

Rising economic inequality and segregation will naturally result in a 'social production of indifference' towards the poor (Gupta, 2012). When there is no meaningful interaction across class, caste and religion, the deprived sections become part of a physically proximate but emotionally distant landscape. A natural fallout of such a gradual process of emotional dissonance is a structural erosion of compassion.

Counterpoint to the structurally spawned apathy towards the poor is the regular mantras of prejudice towards religious minorities. (To be sure, historically marginalised communities such as Dalits and Adivasis are also targets of prejudice but in this article we focus on the communal dimension.)

The eminent scholar of jurisprudence Ronald Dworkin underscored the need to practise constitutionalism as a counter-majoritarian force for a healthy society. Reflecting on the American constitution in this regard he wrote in *Taking Rights Seriously* (133): "The constitution, and particularly the Bill of Rights, is designed to protect individual citizens and groups against certain decisions that a majority of citizens might want to make, even when the majority acts in what it takes to be the general or common interest. Such protection is rooted in the moral rights which individuals possess against the majority."

Socio-economic policies as per the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian constitution should foster a more level playing field across caste and class lines.

Yet, despite our progressive constitution with built-in counter-majoritarian principles - both in fundamental rights and in institutional responsibilities - there are serious concerns. In contrast to constitutional values, the majoritarian nationalism espoused by Hindutva ideologues rests on retaining the cruel caste hierarchy and treating Muslims as evil.

Discriminatory legalism

Majoritarianism represents a specific form of control and tyranny whose assertion in an electoral democracy is possible only when the elected government in power sets the tone and template for the everyday enactment of such tyranny. The success of such a project rests on a continuous injection of resentment maligning specific minority communities.

In his book *How Fascism Works*, Jason Stanely writes "At the core of fascism is loyalty to tribe, ethnic identity, religion, tradition, or in a word, *nation*. But, in stark contrast to a version of nationalism with equality as its goal, fascist nationalism is a repudiation of the liberal democratic ideal; it is nationalism in the service of domination, with the goal of preserving, maintaining, or gaining a position at the top of a hierarchy of power and status"(97).

For the Hindutva variant of fascism, even a catastrophe like the Covid-19 pandemic was not spared. Puzzled by the evident lack of anger towards the regime during the lockdowns, Mohammad Sajjad provocatively posits if communal hatred has superseded food and livelihood insecurity amongst us. Emboldened by prejudicial speech from the top, the author notes that some television anchors during lockdowns referred to stranded Muslim pilgrims as '*chhupey huey* (hiding)' while Hindus stuck in places like in the Vaishno Devi temple were termed as '*phansey huey* (stranded)' (Sajjad 2022).

> A targeted bulldozing of Muslim homes sends a strong message that the citizenship of Muslims weighs less than the citizenship of their caste Hindu neighbours.

More recently, a fact-finding report by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism on the violence that erupted in Nuh, Haryana, in August 2023 presents a chilling account of the ecosystem of hatred that has been created by Hindutva forces. In response to the violence, using bulldozers, the Haryana administration under the political patronage of the BJP demolished 750 properties in Nuh alone, all belonging to Muslims. A Muslim shopkeeper whose shops were demolished said 'Our shops were targeted because we are Muslims. There is nothing more to the demolitions.'

Such an abuse of power in the name of law and order is what the political philosopher Jan Werner Muller refers to as 'discriminatory legalism' which translates to 'for my friends everything, for others, the law.' Such a targeted bulldozing of Muslim homes sends a strong message that the citizenship of Muslims weighs less than the citizenship of their caste Hindu neighbours. It is hardly surprising then that a remorseless Hindu policeman, Chetan Singh, will shoot and kill 3 Muslim men from a point-blank range on a train just because they are Muslims.

While the active perpetrators of violence are perhaps operating on the principle of Schadenfreude (deriving pleasure from others' misery), it is hard to fathom the mindset of those on the fence, the bystanders. Surely, not everyone enjoys seeing destructive acts causing misery. Writing about the bystanders in Israel in the 1990s despite widespread awareness of the nature of crimes committed by Israel on Palestinian people, the criminologist and human rights activist Stanley Cohen referred to it as the sociology and culture of denial. He wrote 'Why, when faced by knowledge of others' suffering and pain - particularly the suffering and pain resulting from what are called "human rights violations" - does "reaction" so often take the form of denial, avoidance, passivity, indifference, rationalisation or collusion?'

Such a culture of denial continues in India and is a pathway to putrid perversion. Despite the Sangh Parivar's clear avowal of treating Muslims with derision, from the standpoint of humanity, when so many Hindus remain bystanders to communalism and discrimination, it points to how compassion in us has been corroded. When tragedy and humanitarian crises experienced by one community, as in the genocide in Palestine, get celebrated by Hindutva groups, it is not just Islamophobia. It symbolises perverted pleasure. Islamophobia seems too mild and an inaccurate term. Islamoperversion or treating Muslims with derision might be more appropriate to describe the extent of corrosion of compassion for political gains.

> If we continue with the politics of precarity and prejudice, we will be vaccinating our society against compassion.

In the backdrop of such continued denigration of Muslims, the government led frenzy and the loud celebration of many on the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya speaks neither about nonviolent devotion nor about the government's adherence to constitutional values. But instead, it shows how the corrosion of compassion has led to the removal of the veil of decency and respect.

Our moral core

In summary, an X-Ray of India's compassion looks damaged.

As we embark on the Lok Sabha elections in 2024, we need to think hard about our priorities and imaginations of India. If we continue with the politics of precarity and prejudice, we will be vaccinating our society against compassion. This will result in a generation where mistrust, anxiety and prejudice would be the currency of life.

The choice is ours. Do we want an India with humanity and empathy, or do we want an India where our moral core is hollowed out leaving behind a residue of soulless automatons? In this context, the celebrated saviours, the rat-hole miners, have some important advice for us. After rescuing the trapped workers, the rat-hole miners - most of whom are Muslims and Dalits - were asked what they want, their response captures what the country really needs: 'a pucca house for an elderly mother, village roads, love and human dignity that crosses religious and caste lines, life insurance and fair wages for all workers, and an assurance that such a collapse is not allowed to happen again.'

The views expressed are personal and do not reflect the views of the institutions I am part of.

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Rajendran Narayanan is a social scientist and is affiliated with LibTech India.

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