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Ayodhya and India's Descent to a Divided Democracy

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A statue of Mahatma Gandhi overlooks Indian parliament house in New Delhi. File photo: AP

The story of India's democracy since the Ayodhya demolition has been one of the withering away of foundational values. ***Sukumar Muralidharan, Associate Professor, O.P. Jindal Global University****, looks back on how certain perverse tendencies remained uncorrected, enabling an erosion of plurality, the alienation of several sections, and the hardening of the politics of exclusion.*

Democracy was the biggest investment India made at independence. The day three domes fell at Ayodhya may well have been when it all went sour. The retrieval project, begun faint-heartedly, has since floundered on an absence of political conviction. In that quarter century since mediaeval fury erupted at Ayodhya —over a third of India's seven decades as an independent nation — the infirmities hastily covered up in the euphoria of freedom, have sharpened to a point where the foundations of civility, freedom and democracy are threatened.

Words and images from ongoing political tussles signpost how mainstream political actors have proved inept in resisting the shift in the political agenda that Ayodhya set firm seal upon. Fighting to establish his political credentials, Rahul Gandhi, the inheritor of the Congress party, engaged recently in a conspicuous display of piety at the Somnath temple in Gujarat, the very temple whose inauguration his great-grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru had strenuously sought to stop the president of the republic from attending [1] . Smug in the stranglehold it has over Hindutva, the hard-line doctrine of political exclusion that has been its ticket to power, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) demanded proof of Rahul Gandhi's religious identity. Spokespersons of the Congress sprang to the defence of their leader by insisting that Hindutva admits of no hard or soft versions. In the darkness that has enveloped politics since Ayodhya, all cats are grey.

For all the ethical bankruptcy in evidence, India's claim to the loyalty of its citizens – as also its stature on the global stage -- comes from its posture as a country that glories in diversities. Even in circumstances of extreme material deprivation, it affords room to a polyglot people of multiple faiths to go about their lives without impediment. Gross iniquities persist, as do the daily denials of basic dignity. India's distinction has been in recognising, and from the moment of independence, setting a determined course towards correcting these social and economic disparities.

In 2004, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) chose "cultural freedom" as the theme of its annual report on human development. India was one among a handful of countries that earned lavish praise for its policies of social inclusion, represented among other things, in its well-established policies of affirmative action, multi-faith calendar of official holidays, pluralistic legal system and three-language policy in education [2] .

These policies have not changed substantively, but then comes the paradox, one among many that are rife in India. In one survey after another in recent years, the media research organisation, Pew, has identified India as a country where social hostilities based on religion

are among the most acute. In its most recent survey, involving the world's most populous countries, India ranked highest in terms of the "social hostilities index", though only in the "moderate" category in the measure of government restrictions on religion [3] .

File Photo: The heavily protected Ram temple in Ayodhya on December 14, 1992. The Hindu Archives

Here then is a sharp divergence between the stated ends of official policy, and the actual social outcome. Is this an accidental divergence or part of a deeper design? Are state and society working at cross-purposes? Or is the declared intent to right every iniquity of a deeply fractured society a shallow pretence, when the reality is one of state connivance in their perpetuation?

In some sense, this contrast between state intent and societal outcome recalls B.R. Ambedkar's famous words of 1949, as India's Constituent Assembly rose after the formal adoption of its republican constitution. India, he said, was about to embark upon a life of contradictions. "In politics", he said,

> we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? [4].

India's democracy story could be narrated as an effort at negotiating these contradictions without frontally addressing them. The universal adult franchise made politics a competitive exercise in recruiting mass loyalties, but also potentially an arena for an uncontrolled clash of group identities. This would have been a suicidal course for a nation born in the unreconciled clash of two religious identities, settled but not fully placated in a bitter partition. There was also the unappeased resentment of an excluded segment, the *dalits* and others consigned to a ritually inferior status under the religious tradition that after partition sought to impose its identity on the Indian nation.

The Constitution assured all citizens of equality before the law, opportunity and freedom from discrimination. Ironically, these exact same clauses became the basis on which the Supreme Court overturned early measures of affirmative action taken with the intent of achieving an egalitarian order. This led to the first amendment, which inscribed almost identical language into the articles on non-discrimination and equality of opportunity, enabling the state to introduce measures of special benefit for socially and educationally backward classes. In later judicial rulings, these enabling clauses were read as a contingent and transient exception to the equality stipulation. In the 1970s, when the Supreme Court acquired greater intellectual heft and a more radical hue, these clauses were reinterpreted not as an exception, but a stronger affirmation of the equality principle.

There was no such concession granted to people of the Muslim faith, rendered leaderless and rudderless by a partition forced upon them, yet also compelled to bear its stigma as a collective burden. As a salve to bruised sensitivities, the Muslim minority was given the assurance of identity, even if equality was not an immediate prospect. People of the Muslim faith were allowed to stay out of the proposal to reform personal laws in 1951, an effort led by Ambedkar that faltered over the opposition of Hindu orthodoxy.

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If equality also involves the right to lawful restitution, the Muslim faith in India has suffered a consistent record of denial. The trespass into the Babri Masjid in 1949 and the surreptitious introduction of idols of the Hindu faith, has been well documented [5] . Less well known is the fact that this was part of a generalised movement led by early votaries of Hindutva, to commandeer Muslim places of worship since the partition ostensibly rendered the faith alien to the sacred topography of India. As early as 1949, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was

writing to the Works and Housing Minister in his Cabinet, Mehr Chand Khanna, insisting that these illegal acts of expropriation be reversed: “It is obvious that this is a matter of great significance, even more important than having the other mosques vacated by the refugees. I hope you will also give this some priority” [6].

In a letter to Chief Ministers in March 1950, Nehru wrote about how the Hindu Mahasabha and other communal organisations were “fatal for India”, with their demand that Muslims prove their loyalty at every turn. “Loyalty”, he warned, “is not produced to order or by fear” and the constant “criticism and cavilling at minorities” did not help one bit in the process [7].

A few years later, in September 1953, Nehru drew attention to the deterioration in the “position relating to minority groups in India”. A constitution that provided for equality seemed unable to combat the subtle exercises of bias in everyday life. That was the occasion for Nehru to issue a wider warning about a narrow form of nationalism growing within the country. “The feeling of nationalism is an enlarging and widening experience for the individual or the nation”, he said:

> But, a stage arrives when it might well have a narrowing influence. Sometimes, as in Europe, it becomes aggressive and chauvinistic and wants to impose itself on other countries and other people. Every people suffer from the strange delusion that they are the elect and better than all others. When they become strong and powerful, they try to impose themselves and their ways on others. … a more insidious form of nationalism is the narrowness of mind that it develops within a country, when a majority thinks itself as the entire nation and in its attempt to absorb the minority actually separates them even more. We, in India, have to be particularly careful of this because of our tradition of caste and separatism [8].

In 1954, Nehru wrote upholding secularism as a vital value in public life. It was a word that did not acclimatise very well in the Indian political milieu but conveyed a profound meaning, little less indeed than “social and political equality”. A “caste-ridden society is not properly secular” said Nehru, and though he was averse to intervening in anybody’s personal beliefs, he was concerned that caste distinctions could become “petrified” and “affect the social structure of the state” [9].

That was the Nehruvian ideal speaking, though the political machine that grew into a formidable electoral force under his leadership, functioned by a quite autonomous set of rules, where pragmatism was a decisive consideration. In 1964, the political scientist Rajni Kothari

made an observation about the “secularisation of caste”, that was shaping political competition in India in a fashion quite distinct from the UK archetype of Westminster style democracy. Indian elections were different in not being a contest between parties representing different constituencies and offering competing visions of governance, but in pitting “parties of consensus” against “parties of pressure”, within a certain “margin of pressure”.

Within the margin were various factions of the party of consensus, and outside it were “several opposition groups and parties, dissident groups from the ruling party, and other interest groups and important individuals”. Groups working outside the margin did not “constitute alternatives to the ruling party; rather, their role was to

> constantly pressurise, criticise, censure and influence it …. and, above all, exert a latent threat that if the ruling group strays away too far from the balance of effective public opinion, and if the factional system within it is not mobilised to restore the balance, it will be displaced from power by the opposition groups.

The Congress as the party of consensus, functioned “through an elaborate network of factions which (provided) the chief competitive mechanism of the Indian system”. “Under the circumstances,

> political competition was internalised and carried on within the Congress. There developed an elaborate system of factions at every level of political and governmental activity, and a system of coordination between the various levels through vertical ‘faction chains’.

The “secular involvement of sectional groups”, Kothari said, would “help in the articulation of the Opposition” [10].

This requires of course, that there should be an agreed set of rules of negotiating between factions. When disagreements arise, there should be agreement on how these are expressed and resolved. This is the foundation of civil society, or civility: a recognition by all of the restraints every individual must acknowledge, in order that everybody may be free. As Immanuel Kant put it well over two centuries ago in a formulation that still retains its value, the civic state is attained when every individual autonomously subjects himself to standards of universal legislation.

In its purest form, reaching back to the European Enlightenment, civil society is organised around a notion of the privatisation of all identities, except that of loyalty to a civic existence. That perfectly agnostic civic identity triumphs when the duty of “civility” is accepted by all. In Edward Shils’s terms, “civility” is a sense of respect for another’s dignity. It subsists within the nation state and is ultimately buttressed by a system of coercive law.

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That state of civility is sustainable when the envelope of modernity is expanding, offering social and economic opportunities for all to seek the fulfilment of their aspirations. When that process stalls, or the envelope begins to shrink, consensus within civil society would come under pressure, and tendencies towards violence emerge. Such a sharp upsurge in violence was witnessed in the last months of Nehru’s life, enfolding showpiece towns of Nehruvian modernisation such as Rourkela and Jamshedpur in its lethal embrace. It was a constant menace through his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri’s, as well as the early years of Indira Gandhi’s tenures in office.

The Congress leadership was anything but firm and committed in responding to these first challenges to the Nehruvian formulation on secular democracy. Wavering commitments were evident in Home Minister Gulzari Lal Nanda’s connivance with a conglomerate of saffron clad sadhus espousing the cause of cow protection, as also in Bombay strongman S.K. Patil’s eagerness to adopt the cow as a mascot when he faced a tough electoral challenge from the Mangalore Christian, George Fernandes, in 1967.

As the expansion of the envelope of modernity stalled through the economic crisis of the mid-1960s, the Congress seemed eager to tread the pathway towards ideological regression. That was the occasion for an epochal split in the Congress and its return under Indira Gandhi to an older and more familiar, economic populism. The Congress platform was restored yet again, as an inclusive conglomerate of the poor and the aspirational, its legitimacy sustained by the promise of a better time for all.

Despite this restoration in its fortunes, the Congress still suffered some notable gaps in its leadership tiers. With a leadership drawn mostly from the upper and middle-strata, it depended

on the poor and the working class for its electoral sustenance. It pitched a universal message of development in its effort to gain broad allegiance, but was compelled to reserve its special favours and patronage for a narrower social group. When waves of economic crises began to strike from about 1974 on, the centre failed to hold. Rather than seek the democratic way out of a near calamitous state, Indira Gandhi opted for a harsh authoritarian course.

In her second avatar as Prime Minister, beginning 1980, Indira Gandhi was to prove much more mindful of the established centres of authority in her social milieu, cultivating even the most extreme forms of religious chauvinism as a prop for her own power. From then on, the Congress became to borrow another of Kothari's terms, the "transmission belt" importing the disorders of a grossly divided and unequal society into the apparatus of governance. The sectarian furies could not be defeated, but electoral advantage could potentially be drawn from appeasing them. The "margin of pressure" became in a sense, devoid of forces that would correct a shift towards extreme communalism, and the "effective balance of public opinion" shifted sharply towards denying the religious minority their token right to hang on to a distinct identity.

A degree of connivance at sectarian violence then came to be part of official strategy, especially when directed against people and communities of the Muslim faith. An element of systemic violence against this minority had been part of the foundational violence of the nation, in the manner that the expropriation of its cultural patrimony remained unrequited in several instances, as also in the violence – never acknowledged -- that accompanied the accession of certain States such as Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh [11].

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The Ayodhya issue, brought back to centrestage in Indira Gandhi's tenure and given fresh life under her son and political successor Rajiv Gandhi, afforded a platform for mobilising a majoritarian coalition without seeming risk to the Congress's claim to the loyalty of the minorities. But that was a strategy fraught with risk, since it stirred up ancient hatreds deeply corrosive of the foundations of civility and tolerance. Successive electoral contests since the 1990s have cast the minorities in varying political roles. In the days of Ayodhya, the main religious minority was stigmatised as legatee to the various indignities inflicted in the past on India's original, primordial cultural identity. Later, it was portrayed as an impediment to the

glittering promises of modernity that lay ahead for India as it sought its merited place in global councils. And “terrorism”, portrayed in the dominant political narrative as a virtual monopoly of fundamentalist Islam, was the weapon deployed to thwart India’s march towards global prestige.

It was not by any means an unbroken downward slide for the minorities after the demolition of Ayodhya. Even as the Congress forfeited all claims to their loyalty, they found other political vehicles capable of assuring them the security that was their irreducible demand. But the ramshackle coalitions that resulted proved unstable, incapable of meeting the demands of their diverse coalitions. Since the demolition at Ayodhya, the BJP has by no means had an easy pathway towards implementing its hard-line agenda, because of the compulsions it has faced to bring on board the diverse factions splintering off the Congress coalition. Partly because it offered a more congenial partnership, the Congress was able to remedy its own losses of vital social factions by aligning with smaller regional parties to keep the BJP at bay for an entire decade beginning 2004. But it proved unable to negotiate the turbulence unleashed by the global financial crisis of 2008. Hobbled by conflicting demands from its vast array of coalition partners and sticking to its please-all strategy, it succeeded in alienating even the social factions that had stayed with it through all adversities.

The BJP’s sweeping electoral triumph in the 2014 general election to parliament represented the long-delayed vindication of its Ayodhya strategy. And then with its resounding victory in the U.P. Legislative Assembly elections earlier this year, it proved to have found the formula towards harvesting rich political rewards by entirely disregarding minority sensitivities. Under-representation for the minorities was always a reality. The Ayodhya agenda in its fulfilment has made their complete eviction from the portals of power a reality. It remains to be seen how stable or secure, this manner of an “ethnodemocracy” can be.

Notes and References:

1. The disagreements between India’s first Prime Minister and President over the appropriate level of state involvement in the reconstruction and inauguration of the Somnath temple, are documented by Ramachandra Guha among others. See his *India After Gandhi*, HarperCollins India, 2007, p 131-3.

2. UNDP, 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World, Human Development Report 2004, United Nations Development Programme, New York, see especially pages 7 to 11.

3. ***Pew Research Centre*, 2017**. "Restrictions on religion among the 25 most populous countries, 2007-2015", April 12. [http://www.pewforum.org/interactives/restrictions-on-religion-among-the-25-most-populous-countries-2007-2015/]. If India was in the "very high" category in terms of the "social hostilities index" (SHI), it was on the border between "moderate" and "high" in the "government restrictions index" (GRI). In contrast, Pakistan was on the border between "moderate" and "high" in the SHI and on the border between "high" and "very high" in the GRI. Understanding these classifications would of course involve unravelling the methodology of the Pew Research Centre, which is not the purpose of this exercise. After an earlier round of survey, India was classified within the 33 countries out of 198 surveyed, where the SHI was very high. Indeed, between 2007 and 2012, in three rounds of survey, India featured consistently in this group, with an increase in the index between 2007 and 2012 that brought it to the third place in the global rankings, behind Afghanistan and Pakistan. India has since then caught up and surpassed these two countries. (See Pew Research Centre, 2014, "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High", January 14; extracted December 2017 at: http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/.) These findings could of course be questioned on methodological grounds as with any study that seeks to quantify complex social parameters. But they draw attention to certain realities that should engage any actor concerned with sustaining peace and harmony within a diverse society. For a well-informed critique of these and a comparison with other similar studies, **Jain, D. 2017.** "What does data say about intolerance in India?", *Mint*, April 26. [http://www.livemint.com/Politics/TS3jZUTVcCzkQHipNA9whK/What-does-data-say-about-intolerance-in-India.html].

4. These remarks were made in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949. They can be found in the relevant volume of the debates, published by the Indian parliament. They can also be found on the official website of the Indian parliament. [http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol11p11.htm].

5. **Jha, Krishna and Jha K Dhirendra. 2012**. "Ayodhya, The Dark Night", *HarperCollinsPublishersIndia*.

6. **Gopal, S. 1988**. " Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru", *Oxford University Press*, Second Series, Volume 7, p.16.

7. The letter was written on March 1, 1950, and can be accessed from the relevant volume of the Selected Works. It was extracted and published by the news website, The *Wire* on Nehru's last death anniversary, May 27, under the headline "My Dear Chief Minister …Three Letters Nehru Wrote That Indians Today Need to Read". [https://thewire.in/140836/three-letters-nehru-wrote-chief-ministers-indians-today-need-read/].

8. The letter was written on September 20, 1953 and can be accessed from the relevant volume of the Selected Works. It was extracted and published by the news website, at the following link. [https://thewire.in/140836/three-letters-nehru-wrote-chief-ministers-indians-today-need-read/].

9. Nehru to the presidents of state Congress party units. August 5, 1954. *Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund*, 2000."The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru", *Oxford University Press,* Volume 26, pp.200-1.

10. These ideas were developed in **Kothari, R. 1964.** "The Congress 'System' in India", *Asian Survey*, December, Vol. 4, No.12, pp 1161-1173.

11. In a prayer meeting on November 27, 1947, Mahatma Gandhi drew pointed attention to the violence in Jammu and Kashmir, and Junagadh. Referring to Jammu, he spoke of "considerable excesses by the Hindus there", which had "not been fully reported in the newspapers". There was also a hint that the Dogra Maharaja of the state and his top officials might have been culpable: "The Maharaja and his new premier (Mehrchand Mahajan) also went there. …. I don't know if what happened in Jammu was at the instance of the Maharaja or his new Premier. But these things happened and it is a matter of great shame for us". As for Junagadh, Gandhi was happy to note that Home Minister Patel had gone there: "When the Sardar (Patel) went to Junagadh I was happy to see that even the Muslims had welcomed him there. They said it was good he went there because they were in great trouble. When the Princes and the people of Kathiawar are all on one side, how long could Junagadh remain apart? Hence, I was happy that the whole problem was solved without any violence. They did not remain strictly non-violent, but whatever violence they used was after great thought and consideration. I was very happy to know that… But now I hear and even the (Karachi-based newspaper) Dawn expresses the view that the Muslims in Kathiawar cannot live in peace. I have received a telegram from a Muslim at the right moment. Kathiawar is a region where the Muslims used to live in peace and nobody ever disturbed them. ….Now, in that same Kathiawar such a situation has developed that they wonder if they can live there at all. …for me, this is unbearable because I was born in Kathiawar, and I know all the Princes and thousands of people there..". (From the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 97, pp 401-7). Aside from his reservations about an official embrace of religion, another of the reasons Nehru opposed government patronage to the reconstruction of the Somnath temple, located within the territory of Junagadh, was his fear that this would be seen as an unseemly act of triumphalism.

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