

INTOLERANCE THROUGH THE YEARS: 1934 to 1975 to 2015

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I

Day against Intolerance: 25 June 2015

The 25th and 26th of June mark not only the declaration of the internal Emergency at the behest of the Indira Gandhi regime in 1975. June 25th is also the day in 1934 when a lethal bomb was aimed at Mahatma Gandhi and his cavalcade by Hindu conservative and orthodox elements in Pune when he was on his anti-Untouchability tour.

For some years, especially from 1977 onwards, the anniversary has been observed as a day of protest against the Emergency of 1975-77. This is sometimes formulated as a constitutional transgression which it certainly was. Yet it was more than that. It reflected a tendency towards authoritarianism and political intolerance. When a former Deputy Prime Minister now asks the question whether an emergency could recur and registers his apprehensions regarding the possibility, he refers to the constitutional phenomenon. If he were to see the issue in its wider generic terms, he might see the connection between the emergency and such events as the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984, the Meerut-Maliana-Hashimpura massacre of 1987, the demolition of the Babari Masjid in 1992, the Gujarat massacres of 2002, the Muzaffarnagar events of 2014 and the Ballabgarh events of 2015.

Constitutional excesses, political intolerance and social fascism mutate seamlessly from one to the other. The connection between the bombs aimed at Gandhi during his anti-untouchability tour of 1934 and many of the phenomena listed above becomes clearer when we move from considering political intolerance to social intolerance, from the political fascist tendency to the social fascist tendency.

Some political parties are brazenly laying down the law for who may reside where, making nonsense of the Constitutional right to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India as we have known it over the years. Feeding into the support base of many of these political parties are rural cabals like khap panchayats and urban mafiosi on which the electoral machine of several political parties, both national and regional, now appears to run. The same cabals and mafiosi, emboldened by political patronage, then lay down the law for their rural and urban communities, intruding into the individual and social rights of the common people.

It is this persistent and growing tendency towards intolerance, of which the emergency was only a constitutionally crystallized form that needs to combat.

As against press censorship in the emergency of 1975-77, there is now the increasingly frequent targeted killing of journalists, especially in the smaller towns, to say nothing of the widespread harassment of those exercising their right of expression. Such killings are as sure an indicator of a creeping fascism as the advance notice of a coming plague that is given by the fauna that it devours. Such killings of members of the intelligentsia had become common in the Italy of the 1920s which witnessed the rise of classic fascism.

With intolerance directed at vulnerable groups in the country, it is of importance that the 25/26 June observance include both its political and social significance. It ought to be observed nation-wide as a Day against Intolerance. Indeed as a Day against Political and Social fascism.

II Role of Capital

The growth of Financial and Industrial Capital was ordinarily expected to have a modernizing role. It should have been expected to be in the forefront of the dissemination of liberal ideas, and the elimination of such endemic features as child labour. Post-independence Indian Capital, and more particularly Indian Capital after the rise of non-entrepreneurial capital from the 1980s, is a distinct animal. It has tended, in its short-sightedness, to support the growth of the forces that have bred intolerance. Non-entrepreneurial capital depends not on Research and Development but on State concessions, especially of natural resources, purchase of going concerns, including public sector assets, at nominal rates, and the appropriate bending of rules when desired.

In the early years when the public sector was being built up, the constant refrain of Indian Capital was that it wished to be free of state restraints such as licensing. It favoured the opening up of the economy. However, when this started happening from the 1980s onwards, it was non-entrepreneurial capital that took centre stage.

It had a peculiar concept of freedom. It claimed to stand for a free economy but was not prepared for an extension of this concept to land. Here it wanted the state to continue the Colonial system of the state acquiring land and handing it over to it at nominal rates. With some modifications, it wanted essentially the same colonial concessionaire system to continue in respect of mining leases, whether these be for coal, iron ore, zinc or any other precious natural resource. The idea that these resources belonged to the entire people, including the poor, was anathema to it.

Indian Capital developed a similar notion with respect to finance capital. It developed the belief that it had the first charge on more or less the entire financial resources of the country available in the banking system. It was loath to generate and plough back financial resources in its own enterprises, such as these were. When, therefore, a national level statutory rural employment generation scheme in the form of MGNREGA came up as a competing charge on financial resources, neither Indian Capital nor the media owned by it took kindly to it.

It had to wrest back control over India's land and finance and seek to reverse or dilute recent legal changes which it considered adverse to its interests. With this being its primary concern, it is myopic enough to believe that the growth of intolerance and social fascism is of little consequence to it.

Eighty one years separate 25 June 1934 and 25 June 2015. But social fascism has remained; though weakened in certain respects, it has tended to reappear and often assume new and virulent forms.

III Learning from Experience

There is yet another aspect of the June observance that requires attention. The internal emergency of 1975-77 was preceded by various significant events, including the Navnirman movement in Gujarat in 1973 and thereafter the JP-led movement against corruption. After that there have been two other movements which have focused on corruption in the polity, the VP Singh-led Jan Morcha in the late 1980s and the recent Anna Hazare movement in the years immediately preceding the General Elections of 2015.

It is important to go beyond the June observance and also try to derive some lessons from the JP and the later movements and the political cycles which the country has undergone as a result. Anti-corruption movements in India have suffered from an incomplete understanding of the meaning and implications of corruption.

In India the main internal issues that need to be grappled with are:

- a) The need to eradicate corruption;
- b) The prevention of religion-based and caste-based sectarianism, and
- c) The need to provide for the basic needs of the people, i.e. food security, health, education, and cultivable land for those progressively or arbitrarily deprived of it.

We have seen movements develop around Issue [a]; but when those who ran or controlled these movements came into power they did little about Issues [b] and [c]. Indeed, quite the contrary!! Those taking part in such movements should therefore be required also to make some commitments about Issues [b] and [c].

The Indian experience is that Issue [a] is used primarily as a basis to come to power. These movements, whether led by JP or by VP Singh, or as organized in more recent times, have been marked by a narrow understanding of corruption. Even though JP personally may well have had a wider understanding, he did not seek to build up an independent cadre of volunteers or pay adequate attention to their ideological training. He was not sufficiently cognizant of the dangers posed by the sectarian forces like the RSS which played a major role in his movement. In fact, he argued erroneously that these forces had changed character. That the matter was not a straightforward one of totalitarianism on the one hand versus “democratic” forces on the other subsequently became still clearer. For during the emergency, and particularly after the Turkman Gate firing in April 1976, the RSS and the then Prime Minister’s younger son even appeared to arrive at a rapprochement. The shortcomings that characterised JP’s movement were repeated in some or the other form by the later movements.

Corruption is simply a species of the wider issue of abuse of political and social power and authority. Recent Anti-Corruption movements have understood corruption primarily in financial and monetary terms. But corruption is not limited to bribery-related conduct. A studied and deliberate withdrawal on the part of state-authorities and of dominant political parties from a performance of their duty to protect the lives and property of citizens is also corruption. It is in fact a grave form of malfeasance that seems to cut across many political parties and regimes. In recent memory such malfeasance has been reflected, for example, in the state role in the face of violence against Sikhs in Delhi, Muslims in Ahmedabad, Christians in Orissa, non-Maharashtrians in Maharashtra and Dalits in Haryana. Anti-corruption movements that not only do not raise such issues but appear instead to offer good conduct certificates to certain delinquent forces and regimes cannot inspire as much confidence as they might otherwise do. The ideological stance here cannot be concealed: such movements would go after a police constable for, say, taking a traffic-challan-related bribe (indeed in the last round of the Lok Pal movement its major focus was on subordinate Government employees), but wink at a senior police official or a minister for organizing a pogrom or looking away while human beings are killed or beaten up as part of a concerted and in-built bias against a community or a section of the people. Thus the struggle against corruption and the struggle against intolerance cannot be separated.

Constitutional excesses, political and social intolerance, and corruption will be fought as part of national renewal and of a re-affirmation of the highest values of our struggle for freedom and of our Constitution. Though every movement may have its specific and particular focus, these issues cannot be dealt with by a method of pick and choose that leaves the worst traits in our politics and society untouched and in fact strengthened by opportunistic non-condemnation, direct certification or affirmation by association.

Appendix

MAHATMA GANDHI'S STATEMENT ON BOMB INCIDENT¹

POONA,

June 25, 1934

I have had so many narrow escapes in my life that this newest one does not surprise me. God be thanked that no one was fatally injured by the bomb, and I hope that those who were more or less seriously injured, will be soon discharged from hospital.²

I cannot believe that any sane sanatanist could ever encourage the insane act that was perpetrated this evening. But I would like sanatanist friends to control the language that is being used by speakers and writers claiming to speak on their behalf. The sorrowful incident has undoubtedly advanced the Harijan cause. It is easy to see that causes prosper by the martyrdom of those who stand for them. I am not aching for martyrdom, but if it comes in my way in the prosecution of what I consider to be the supreme duty in defence of the faith I hold in common with millions of Hindus, I shall have well-earned it, and it will be possible for the historian of the future to say that the vow I had taken before Harijans that I would, if need be, die in the attempt to remove untouchability was literally fulfilled.

Let those who grudge me what yet remains to me of this earthly existence know that it is the easiest thing to do away with my body. Why then put in jeopardy many innocent lives in order to take mine which they hold to be sinful? What would the world have said of us if the bomb had dropped on me and the party, which included my wife and three girls, who are as dear to me as daughters and are entrusted to me by their parents? I am sure that no harm to them could have been intended by the bomb-thrower.

I have nothing but deep pity for the unknown thrower of the bomb. If I had my way and if the bomb-thrower was known, I should certainly ask for his discharge, even as I did in South Africa in the case of those who successfully assaulted me.³

Let the reformers not be incensed against the bomb-thrower or those who may be behind him. What I should like them to do is to redouble their efforts to rid the country of the deadly evil of untouchability.
Harijan, 29-6-1934

¹ A bomb was thrown on what the assailant believed was the car carrying Gandhiji on his way to the Municipal Building. Gandhiji arrived at 7.30 p.m. little knowing what had occurred. When informed of the incident, he received the news calmly and agreed to the suggestion that the programme should be carried out.

Accordingly the address was presented and Gandhiji left the hall at 8.30 p.m. This appeared under the title "Providence Again". ² This paragraph has been reproduced from *The Hindu*, 26-6-1934.

³ *Vide* "My Reward".