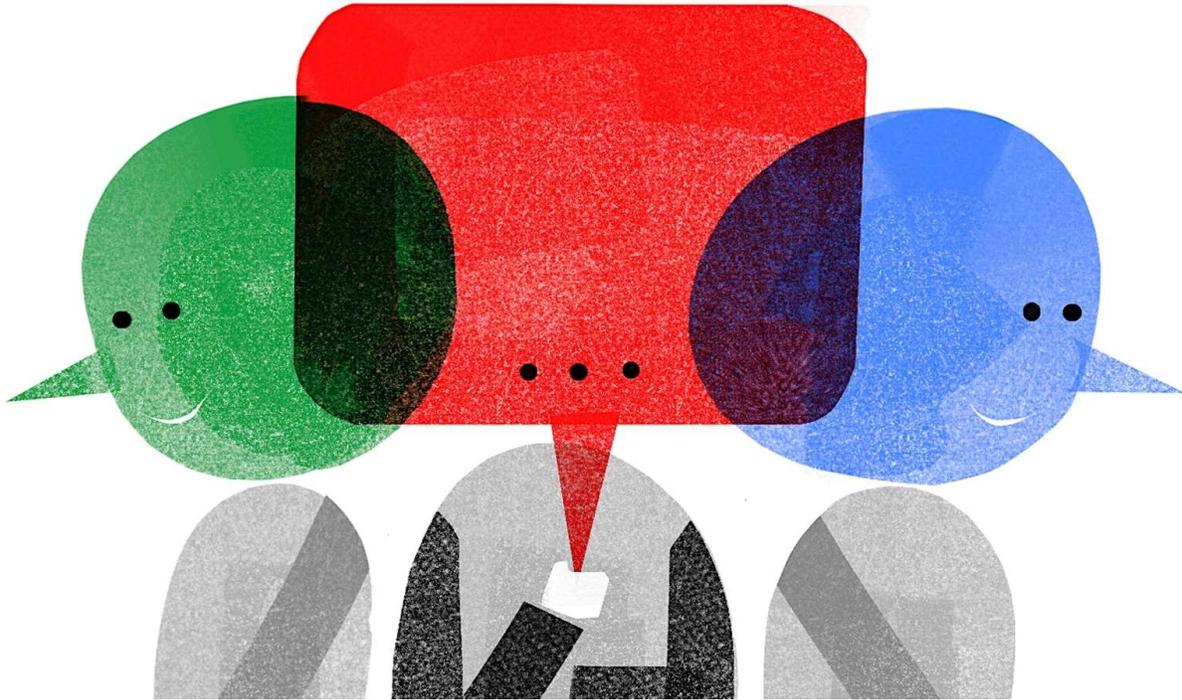


To reclaim the Indian republic, we need a shared language and humility

From Mahatma Gandhi's Sevagram Ashram, thoughts on "Hindu Nationalists", fraternity, and constitutional values

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Those who are out to dismantle the republic speak in a deceptively positive language. Sadly, those who seek to defend the idea of India speak a language of fear, shame and doom. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Question the world you must. Question its words if you must. But don't quarrel with the alphabet." Sitting at the feet of the Mahatma in Sevagram, I recalled this warning of my Marxist teacher to a group of young rebellious students. He was drawing our attention to a profound truth of communication: It is only by using a shared language, metaphors and symbols that we can hope to create new meanings and a new world.

I asked myself: Have we made the mistake that our teacher had warned us against? Are the liberal, progressive and secular Indians engaged in a futile quarrel with the alphabet of Indian society? We speak or think in English. We flinch at the mention of nationalism. Our alacrity in denouncing everything that our civilisation must be ashamed of is never matched by remembering things that we have reasons to be proud of. We are happy to name our adversary "Hindu nationalists". We participate in public spectacles to question the existence of God. We take pains to distance ourselves from anything religious, especially Hindu. And then we wonder why the people of this country do not listen to us.

Sitting in Sevagram Ashram, Gandhiji's home till the end, the message was unmistakable: Be the change you wish to see. If we want the state of affairs to change, we must begin by changing ourselves. We must radically change the way we think, communicate and act. This was my takeaway from a conversation among friends from diverse ideological traditions — Gandhian, Ambedkarite, socialist, Marxist, feminist and non-ideological — who gathered to reflect on how we can reclaim the republic in the face of the current onslaught.

The first lesson was surprisingly simple: Be positive. There is a stark difference between what people hear from the destroyers and from the defenders of the republic today. Those who are out to dismantle the republic speak in a deceptively positive language of new India, *aatmanirbharta*, integration, national unity and national resurgence. Sadly, those who seek to defend the idea of India speak a language of fear, shame, and doom. Our first challenge, thus, is to articulate and amplify the underlying hope in our vision of India.

There is so much to discover and celebrate in our civilisational heritage that we must not lose sight of in naming and shaming its rotten aspects. Civilisations are like rivers that bring stones, sand, and trash with fresh water. We filter it, but we do not refuse to drink its water. The same holds for our civilisation. Instead of focusing on all that is or has been wrong about our heritage, we must create new icons and be the carriers of historical memories and contemporary practices that infuse positivity.

The second lesson is that our constitutional values, the bedrock of the idea of India, need cultural anchors. We must enchant and re-enchant these values for each generation. This is something we have failed to do for the last 75 years. Reading the Preamble or waving the little red book becomes a sacred ritual only if we connect the constitutional ideals with the moral language of an ordinary citizen. Liberty must be infused with the fervour of *azadi*. Secularism must recall the idea of *maitri*. Socialism can draw its strength from the concept of *karuna* and *raham*. Democracy can be traced back to the *Vinaya Pitaka* and the idea of *adal* or *maslah*. And federalism can be grounded in the idea of *deshachar*, *urf* and the acceptance of customary laws. The *svadharma* of our republic is an umbrella concept that offers cultural anchors to our constitutional values.

The third lesson is about reclaiming Indian nationalism. We must not carry the vicarious guilt of German nationalism and its siblings in the creed of othering that passes for nationalism in Europe. We are heirs to a positive creed, an ideology of belonging. Those who copy European nationalism carry out hate-mongering against our neighbours and search for enemies within.

Our nationalism must involve strengthening the bonds of belonging, defusing internal tensions, especially in the border regions with a history of alienation. Our national unity is not uniformity; it is articulated in and through our deep cultural diversities. Our nationalism must be expressed by addressing the concerns of those who fear exclusion, the linguistic concerns of non-Hindi speakers, by anticipating the regional imbalance that may result from the forthcoming delimitation and by an honest conversation about national security concerns from across the borders. Communal bigotry is antithetical to Indian nationalism; it must not be glorified by calling it "Hindu nationalism".

The fourth lesson is not turning our back to the multiple religious traditions that continue to shape ethical ideas and practices for an overwhelming proportion of Indian citizens. Secularism does not require citizens to give up their faith or set their religious beliefs aside in thinking about public affairs. We are particularly fortunate that India is home to multiple religions, multiple streams within each religion and multiple syncretic traditions. This vast ocean of ideas and practices offers us more than adequate resources to take

on all the ills associated with organised religions, institutional hierarchies, unjust social practices and bigotry. Religion is like a language — you can use it for love, poetry, or for vile abuses. This is how we must approach our religious traditions, including Hinduism. The idea that hatred against non-Hindus or oppression of non-savarnas is sanctified by Hinduism must be contested. Such practices must not be given respect by calling them “Hindutva”.

These are not strategic lessons about communicative practices. These are ethical lessons in cognitive humility. Democracy is not just about respecting the voting choice of the people. It must also be about respecting their beliefs, their culture, their traditions. We can and are often called upon to disagree with their choices and opinions. But we must have the humility to speak to them in their language.

Was it the vicinity of Bapu Kutir that made this idea look self-evident?

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