

(On August 13, 2017, the Department of lifelong Learning & Extension in the *Savitribai Phule University Pune*, in association with the *Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal*, had organized a national symposium on "Various Shades of Social Integration". Mr. Amol Palekar as the chief guest at this event addressed the august gathering with his following words.)

Following the conventional norms, I should begin my speech by acknowledging the event chair, dignitaries on the dais and the learned audience, etc. However, it will be appropriate to remember and salute the Honourable President, Shri Kovind, considering his forthright statement in the context of today's theme. In 2010, while arguing against the 'Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission Recommendation' about scheduled caste converts, he stated, "...Including Muslims and Christians in the Scheduled Castes category will be unconstitutional. Islam and Christianity are alien to the nation."

Over the last two decades, human society has gone through and had to digest several tremulous events that created havoc through the world. The echoes of the 9/11 terror attacks on the US continue to resonate with scarcely diminished fury; its overt scars have been visible everywhere but the invisible repercussions continue to expose the venom through apparent community psyches.

Let me rewind a little to see how the world started leaning towards the right in last three decades.

The early 1990s triggered the end of Communism around the world. Simultaneous with the fall of the ideology and its governance, the emergence of a radicalized Islamist ideology, primarily from West Asia, was signaled. New nationalist, parochial identities began to erupt. Divisiveness was revealing fault lines in communities. Recognizing this as an exploitable opportunity, politicians and governmental formations around the world systematically developed strategies to catalyze the nascent hostility and to build constituencies around the emerging splinters.

In the process of infusing the laissez-faire environment, individuals were systematically parsed out which led to creation of individual centric society. Political strategists recognized that the scattered, fragmented mass was easier to rule over than attempting to control cohesive communities. These alienated individuals buried under the insecurities of market volatility, were appeased with alluring policies, schemes etc. which kept them in opioid daze. Fresh administrative rules, regulations and laws were framed in civic matters that though were superficially apolitical, were loaded with political agendas. These regulatory structures were designed to keep a tight leash on individual likes or dislikes, values and moral frameworks. While overtly agnostic, these structures represented powerful tools in the hands of political overlords. Realigning the equation that 'an individual is really the society', these structures sought to subjugate the dazed social fragments. Indeed the sedated souls succumbed to the allurements! Personal relationships and connections were recast; the very idea of rights and freedoms was being mutated; history itself was being rewritten to echo the dictates of the new power centers; an undefined fear of the *other* ensured that all would stay within the fold; spurious, self serving leaders got promoted as popular heroes; sensibilities were sacrificed at the altar of the fear factory; mass media was being used to systematically quell vulnerable minorities by constructing narratives of doubt and distrust against them. A divisive ideology that fed on suspicion and hate was disseminated far and wide.

All this eventually redefine the emerging social order and mass ideology. Social clusters assembled around this ideology learnt to keep their heads down, and thus their march towards decadence began!

Robert Brasillach, the French fascist best known for his work as the editor of '*Je suis partout*' developed the 'Mechanism of Neutralisation', best understood in his own words. "We grant ourselves permission to applaud Charlie Chaplin, a half Jew, at the movies; to admire Proust, a half Jew; to applaud Yehudi Menuhin, a Jew; ... We don't want to kill anyone, we don't want to organise

any pogrom. But we also think that the best way to hinder the always unpredictable actions of instinctual antisemitism is to organise a reasonable antisemitism." This is a way of voiding individuality from the individual. Just like caffeine-free coffee, nicotine-free cigarettes, sugarless sugar, zero-alcohol spirits or no-fat milk... this is bloodless killing, erasing persona while leaving the person alive. Spineless majorities are sought to be stacked in the contrived homogeneities of one religion, one language, one culture... In this process, the socio-political objective of demagogic control becomes easily attainable. Colin Powell developed the American doctrine of 'warfare without warfare', a credo that enabled America to remain at perpetual war without any American battlefield casualties. In an analogous manner, we now have the doctrine of "politics without politics", essentially using institutional mechanisms to suppress dissent in the majority.

In this manner, unconcealed 'murder' of individuality in broad daylight through the duly legislated means is being used as a new contemporary weapon in the saffronized India. We are not averse to secularism but then *they* (meaning the *other*) need to comply with our stipulations! And if *they* are unable to obey, *they* are most welcome to "go wherever they are comfortable." (The gratuitous advice offered to ex-Vice President Hamid Ansari by Mr. Indresh Kumar of the RSS is a prominent instance.) Never mind how difficult it is to sing 'Vande Mataram', students across the country, notwithstanding their medium of instruction or mother tongue, must sing it regularly. Of course, a girl must have freedom of choice but if she chooses to love and marry a Muslim boy, surely that marks him out as a warrior of 'love jihad'! Of course you are free to eat whatever you wish to, except that we will serve only vegetarian food to our economy class domestic passengers... one is familiar with Air India's recent decision! Yoga indeed is beneficial to health... nobody should have objections to it, right? Then why allege the Hindutva agenda there? Why should anyone object to the national mission of scientific validation of Panchagavya?

In this manner, our long-held belief in pluralism is being neutered and rendered impotent through an institutionally sanctioned process. Hired parrots ubiquitous on the social media amplify and accelerate this new legacy.

On this grim backdrop, are notions of social harmony and integration anything more than an illusion? Will we ever be able to embrace Victor Hugo's idea, articulated beautifully in *Les Miserables*, as "we are for religion; against religions"? It is reassuring that the Savitribai Phule Pune University can organize such a symposium today. But will it be able to continue doing so in future, I doubt very much!? The key issue is of our ability and willingness to create an insurmountable wall to confront the venomous assault of forced homogenization on us, our values and freedoms. Will we accept the challenge of raising a non-violent and fearless attack to save our syncretic culture?

Let's not bask in the falsehood and flimsy optimism.

We ought to remain restless, active and vigilant to illuminate our path.

Translation curtsey – Paritosh Joshi