

When the ‘secular camp’ came after me. Just goes to show the siege mentality in India

At a time when the politics of secularism desperately needs new friends, we start cultivating the art of making enemies.

-Yogendra Yadav

Recently, a first-hand experience of online onslaught taught me something about the politics of despair that surrounds us.

The attack was in reaction to the latest Sunday Satsang, my weekly live video on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube titled “Khalistan, Gazwa-e-Hind aur Hindu Rashtra: Bharat ke swadharm par akraman ke teen mukhaute [Khalistan, Gazwa-e-Hind and Hindu Rashtra: Three masks for an assault on the idea of India]”. My news peg was Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot’s statement that those who ask for Hindu Rashtra are responsible for emboldening the Khalistanis.

I used it to make a general point in the Sunday Satsang edition. While any expression of the idea of domination of a religious community, be it Khalistan, Ghazwa-e-Hind, or Hindu Rashtra, is at odds with the idea of India, there is a difference between these three. Ghazwa-e-Hind has simply no takers among Indian Muslims, and Khalistan is a fringe idea, rejected by an overwhelming majority of Sikhs. Yet, security agencies are out to dig up and punish their possible supporters. In contrast, the idea of Hindu Rashtra — no less anti-national — is openly espoused and widely patronised. This, I suggested, is the real threat to the idea of India and could be the reason for wanting to keep alive the ghost of Khalistan and Ghazwa-e-Hind.

Now, who do you think attacked me? The Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) IT cell? You are wrong. Hindu Rashtra enthusiasts did their routine abusing, but this time, the primary attack came from a small but very vocal section within the ‘secular camp’. I was accused of placing Ghazwa-e-Hind at par with Hindu Rashtra and tarnishing the already beleaguered Indian Muslim community. Never mind that the whole point of the video was to say that these three ideas must not be equated. In fact, I had emphasised that the Al-Qaeda and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have used the term Ghazwa-e-Hind and that no Muslim leader, party, or organisation — not even the Muslim communal organisations — espouse it. While some of the critics were graceful enough to say sorry once they watched the video, most were unwilling to engage with the content or even notice the word mukauta in the title.

A hurried reading of the title was enough for a summary trial and verbal execution for the crime of mentioning the word Ghazwa-e-Hind in the title. Coward, monkey balancer, libtard, hidden sanghi, Islamophobic were some of the printable abuses. I will spare you the rest. OpIndia noted with glee that I got a taste of my “bhaichara pontification”. Interestingly, this storm was confined only to Twitter and had no resonance on Facebook or YouTube, or real life as far as I can tell.

Politics of despair runs deeper

My point here is not to complain about the shoddy quality of public debates in our country. As they say, “We Indians are like this only”. And in the post-Arnab Goswami age, it is silly to expect evidence, facts, or civility. If you are in public life, you better learn to take a lot of nonsense.

My worry is about something much deeper. This little incident reveals a growing tendency in the anti-Modi camp that can only be described as politics of despair. Over the last nine years, with the Narendra Modi government tightening the noose over every nook and corner of public life, our public sphere has been poisoned. Those who hold on to the constitutional vision are beleaguered in their institutional and social spaces. Those who happen to be Muslim are at the receiving end of a relentless onslaught, both physical and symbolic. If they feel besieged, it is because there is a siege out there.

This has, understandably, given rise to some of the classic symptoms of siege mentality. As conversations with ‘the Other’ become more painful, we tend to avoid them. We tend to form small in-groups of like-minded people who reinforce our pre-existing convictions. Social media accentuates this natural tendency to form echo chambers even further. The closer we come to one another, the further we drift away from the possibility of a conversation with ‘the Other’ — in this case, a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and BJP sympathiser.

A mirror image of bigotry

A siege mentality encourages black-and-white thinking, leaving no space for any nuance. If you think that former BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma’s comments about Prophet Muhammed were obnoxious but do not feel enthused by the anti-BJP support that poured in from Islamic countries, then you must be Islamophobic. If someone takes a principled stand on a contentious issue — say, a ban on the Popular Front of India (PFI) — we accuse them of monkey balancing. As balance becomes a vice and we collectively lose a sense of balance, we look ridiculous in the eyes of outsiders.

This manner of thinking also leads to the surrender of the cultural resources necessary to take on the current ideological onslaught. Since the BJP-RSS dyad invokes nationalism and Indian tradition all the time, any attempt to draw upon powerful symbols of nationalism and rich resources from our traditions is frowned upon. We stand bewildered in the marketplace of ideas, having emptied our pockets of the most valuable currency.

This mentality leads to a premium on loyalty. Given the political games being played by the current dispensation, there is a deep sense of mistrust. Every new incident, every new controversy is a fresh test of loyalty. Do you stand on the right side of the divide, with firmness and without any ifs and buts? Gradually, standing for secularism and against hate-mongering slides into standing for the minority community and its spokespersons, no matter what. Unthinkingly, we start reproducing a mirror image of the politics of bigotry that we oppose. We also start looking for enemies within. We also give up on elementary protocols of truth and fairness. At a time when the politics of secularism desperately needs new friends, we start cultivating the art of making enemies.

This is a political catastrophe. Reclaiming our republic today requires deeper, meaningful, and difficult conversations with those sections of the public — mostly Hindus — who have been enlisted in the project to dismantle it. But the in-group mentality prevents us from having such a conversation. We make a virtue out of non-dialogue. Worse, we attack someone who wants to attempt this difficult conversation. This leads to self-defeating politics. As we fear what is coming, a call to prepare for the worst becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The new charter of obligations

How does one avoid a siege mentality, when the siege is out there? There are no easy answers to this question. One of Ram Manohar Lohia's famous essays was titled Nirasha ke Kartavya [Obligations of Despair]. In a similar vein, those who wish to defend the republic in these dark times need a new charter of obligations. The politics of secularism must not get entrapped in more and more intense and unhealthy conversations of the converts. Defence of our republic demands an obligation to open conversations with a vast section of the majority community who may have been temporarily swayed by hatred and bigotry. This requires renewing our existing cultural resources, revitalising the language of Indian nationalism, re-enchanting the vision of our Constitution, and reclaiming the ground of truth, reason, fairness, and balance. Above all, it requires us to remember that the siege is not as chinkless as it appears, and we are not as defenceless as we may appear.

Despair places an obligation upon us: Let us not allow the power plays of the current dispensation to distract us from the real challenge of our times.