

INDIA

Minorities cannot be at the mercy of RSS

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

RECENTLY RSS has advised minorities, especially Muslims that their safety depends on the goodwill of the majority community. Such statements by themselves do not create any goodwill among minorities. It almost amounts to veiled threat. All secularists and leaders of minority communities including Christians have rightly condemned this resolution passed at the Bangalore session of RSS.

In fact all the communities should have each other's goodwill. The safety and security of the country depends on harmony among all the communities. That is self evident. However, no community, whether in minority or majority can insist that its security depends on the goodwill of the other community. All communities and all individuals have equal rights according to the Indian Constitution. Every Muslim has as much rights as every Hindu. And according to the Constitutional theorists these rights do not accrue at the generosity of the constitution makers but they are inherent rights, inherent in individuals as human beings.

It is strange when world is recognising cultural and religious plurality the RSS is rejecting it and going backwards. The West had not known cultural and religious plurality until the first half of twentieth century but when migration began from ex-colonial countries of Africa and Asia to western countries, they (the western countries) began to recognise cultural and religious plurality. The western constitutional theorists not only recognised religio-cultural pluralism but also accorded them equal rights. Let the RSS theorist note that Indians in countries like U.K. or USA or

Canada do not live their at the mercy or goodwill of majority of those countries but live there as of their constitutional rights accorded them after they became citizens of those countries.

The rights accorded to Muslims and other minorities in Indian Constitution are no way conditional on goodwill of any community. These rights are absolute in every sense of the word. The Constitution makers like Nehru, Ambedkar, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel and others were well aware of the modern constitutional theory and the theory of inherent rights as individuals and hence they framed the Indian Constitution accordingly. The Constitution makers were not religious or cultural bigots as to make rights or security conditional on anyone's goodwill.

The RSS which talks of Indian culture, is not aware of the fact that India was always home to various religions and cultures. West accepted plurality, as pointed out above, only recently whereas India was plural in every sense of the word for centuries. India did not owe its plurality to only those who came from outside i.e. Jews, Christians and Muslims, as repeatedly asserted by the RSS but also from within India there has always been plurality, both cultural and religious. In fact there never was one religion or one culture in this country. India has never seen religious or cultural homogeneity in its known history.

It is also not a settled question as to who is Hindu and who constitutes majority community. The word Hindu was hardly used in religious sense in India until 18th century. It was British rulers who began to use word Hindu in religious and homogenous sense. In fact during the first census in 1872 the census commissioner divided Indian population

among Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis and others. The census commissioner has hard time defining 'Hindu' in religious sense. The census commissioner's report makes very interesting reading as far as the discussion on the concept of Hindu is concerned. He had very tough time defining it.

The word 'Hindu' in religious sense is a construct of the British rulers who wanted to divide India into religious communities to create animosity between them to make it easier to rule over them. Religious identities in India were never the principal identities of people. It is caste, linguistic and regional identities, which were principal identities, not the religious identities. Religious identities were far from being uniform. Each religion was divided into several sects and sub-sects and these were basis of autonomous communities.

Also, religion was never an important factor in medieval feudal politics. Land relations and class were far more important factors than religion in feudal politics. Religion was made an important factor only in colonial period, as religion was far more emotionally divisive than land relations or class. It was again during colonial period that the concept of religious majority and minority became important.

This divisive concept on the basis of religion was countered by our freedom fighters and Congress leaders by adopting secularism. Thus secularism was our only guarantee for unity and integrity. The RSS leaders on the one hand, and Muslim Leaguers, on the other hand, were not happy with the concept of secularism. Both rejected it. The RSS was never comfortable with the concept of secularism. It is not even today.

Time and again they have denounced it as 'western concept' not in keeping with the Indian cultural and religious ethos.

In fact the Sangh Parivar has always denounced secularism. The BJP began to call Nehruvian model of secularism as 'pseudo-secularism' and ridiculed it as amounting to 'appeasement of minorities'. Throughout eighties the BJP attacked Nehruvian secularism though while merging with the Janata Party in 1977 they had accepted secularism and 'Gandhian socialism' and had taken pledge at Gandhi's Samadhi to this effect. Since they wanted to come to power with the help of Janata party they accepted secularism without questioning it. But when they went out of power and separated from Janata Party they began attacking secularism. Is it not sheer opportunism. And the Sangh Parivar acts on advice from the RSS.

Since the RSS rejects Nehruvian model of secularism which is the Constitutional secularism also, it talks of 'Hindu majority' as hegemonic and minorities at the mercy of the hegemonic majority. In fact this concept is totally undemocratic. Religious majority and religious minority are a different category from political majority and political minority. We have firmly rejected the concept of separate electorate for the same reason. Religious minority has some safeguards in the Constitution only to the extent of preservation of its religion and religious identity. Politically it may be part of political majority or political minority. The Indian Muslims have always been voting for secular parties, which, constitute political majority either in the Centre or in the states. Though a religious minority they have always been part of political majority.

The Indian national Congress firmly rejected the concept of two nation and it was this notion which resulted in division of this country. The two-nation theory came into being because of this attitude on the part of Hindu Mahasabha and RSS that religious minorities should be at the mercy of religious majority. It is a well-known fact that Vir Savarkar had propounded two-nation theory before Jinnah did in the Ahmedabad session of Hindu Mahasabha in 1938.

We have entered a period of globalisation. Today no nation is mono-religious or mono-cultural. Due to economic migrations all nations are becoming pluralistic and hence pluralism is called a post-modern concept. All religious and cultural minorities are enjoying equal constitutional rights throughout the world. How can then RSS maintain that Muslims should earn goodwill of Hindus in order to secure their safety in India. It is totally against our Constitutional ethos and an insult to our Constitution makers and freedom fighters.

Such an attitude poses danger not only to Muslims but also to many others in India. Many dalit organisations maintain that they are not Hindus. Many followers of Ambedkar have renounced Hinduism and have embraced Buddhism. Will they not be on firing line after Muslims and Christians? And who will define who is Hindu? The RSS? It stands by only Brahmanical Hinduism and Brahmanical culture, Vedic religion and Vedic culture. Hinduism can be confined to any one scripture or any one cultural stream. Whenever you associate religion with politics religion tends to get more and more sectarian. The believers then cannot decide authenticity of their belief, it is politicians who will decide it. This is precisely what is happening in Pakistan and Jehadi Islam is becoming more and more 'authentic' Islam.

And goodwill, it must be noted, should be multilateral, not unilateral in a genuine democracy. If it tends to become unilateral intolerance will grow and you cannot build democratic culture on intolerance. Violence and intolerance will destroy democracy and democratic culture. Unfortunately violence and intolerance is growing in India today as never before. The genocide in Gujarat is not a sudden development. It is the result of years of hate propaganda against minorities. What the Sangh Parivar is doing will not be acceptable by any modern democratic country. It is systematically destroying India's age-old tolerance and pluralistic ethos. India had never witnessed such communal violence as it is witnessing in Gujarat.

India cannot become great nation by having nuclear weapons. It can become great only by ensuring implementation of Constitutional provisions. It cannot prosper by creating one controversy after the other against minorities. It can become great only by winning the hearts and minds of all, including minorities.

Asghar Ali Engineer is the Executive Director of Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai, India.

SRI LANKA

The rebel man cometh

Tamil Tiger supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, may have hopes to join the Sri Lankan mainstream politics, but his LTTE is nowhere near the ideals of IRA or PLO, writes Ekram Kabir

SRI LANKANS held their breath on Wednesday, as Tamil Tiger supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran stepped into the public eye for the first time in 15 years. The news conference was Prabhakaran's first since a 1987 Indian-brokered peace pact in Sri Lanka.

The press conference follows several carefully scripted changes to the image of a man who turned a band of barefoot soldiers into one of the world's toughest guerrilla armies - complete even with its own naval force.

With peace talks just weeks away, more than 300 Sri Lankan and international journalists reported to have streamed into the LTTE-held jungles of the northern Wanni region in Sri Lanka to focus a media spotlight on Prabhakaran, who at 47 has been in hiding for much of his adult life.

And for the island's Sinhalese majority, one question was paramount: "will Prabhakaran renounce his demand for a separate minority Tamil state?"

Well, he didn't. The rebel leader insisted the government must lift its four-year ban on his organisation before the talks in Thailand.

Actually, the call for a ceasefire in December last year and hopes negotiations emanated from the LTTE more than a year ago when the rebels realised that the noose was tightening against their fronts in the developed world also from which their insurgency movement drew sustenance. Then, the United National Front government, on its recent election victory, agreed to the unconditional ceasefire and went on to sign a ceasefire agreement which has also met with strong opposition and criticism from many quarters.

Then in last month, the United States joined the fray, threatening the LTTE with dire consequences, if they continue their terrorist activities. The Sri Lankans expected a difference, this time, on the entire episode.



The past

Prabhakaran's press conference is also seen as the his first attempt to join the mainstream politics in Sri Lanka, and to work out a possible mechanism to govern the country's north-east.

Now if he succeeds to become one, who would govern a part of the island, it would truly be difficult for a huge number of Sri Lankans to accept. In this situation, would it be possible for this man to be a regular politician, and for that matter LTTE a regular political party, ever on Sri Lankan soil? For, there are also those who think that he has gone too far in presiding over death and destruction.

For years, he and his group have killed people ruthlessly in the name of an "Eelam" for the Tamils. More than 200 suicide attacks have taken place in the past 15 years and high-profile victims have included the Sri Lankan president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and the former Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi.

Unlike other guerrilla groups, in the LTTE, loyalty to the leader is paramount. All LTTE cadres take an oath of personal loyalty to Prabhakaran, and go into battle. Prabhakaran alone can make or

break the peace in Sri Lanka, and still remains the greatest obstacle to peace in the island. Paranoid about even his own followers, Prabhakaran wields unchallenged power within the LTTE.

This is why the promises of Sri Lankan leaders to end the war sounded so hollow and ineffective. For, they faced a "fanatic" opponent who controls the organisation with an iron hand.

His first victim was the former Mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiyappah, a politician who preferred to follow the pragmatic tradition of living in peace with all communities. Duraiyappah was gunned down in 1975 in cold blood when he was on his way to a Hindu temple. This event, in effect, launched Prabhakaran's career as the LTTE chief. Since then, he turned himself into a Tamil/Hindu zealot, assuming so thoroughly the image of a ruthless functionary that the international community has branded him a "Tamil Tiger Terrorist." James Burn of *The New York Times* (June 25, 1995) went further and identified him as "the latest Pol Pot of Asia". He has also been called as the "Milocevic of Sri Lanka".

Up, with the mainstream?

The reason LTTE would fail to join the mainstream is because they are a vanguard army, totalitarian in character. They have little to do with the masses in Sri Lanka - even in the North-East.

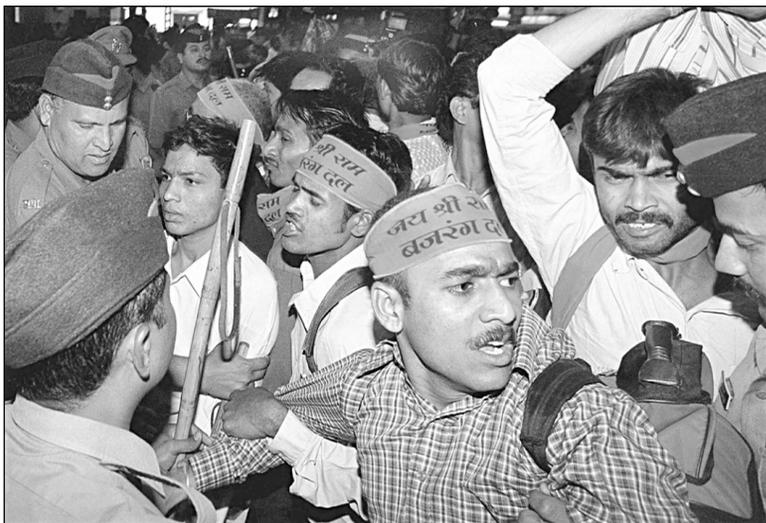
The IRA, the PLO, the FMLN, the URNG of Guatemala and all other outfits that eventually entered the democratic mainstream, were all politico-military organisations, not military-political ones like the LTTE. They all had serious internal political structures, processes and dynamics. Sinn Fein, for example, was a political entity which, back in the 1980s, entered the competitive electoral process. Moreover, Sinn Fein and the other guerrilla organisations in Latin America were linked to a network of semi-autonomous people's organisations which eventually transmitted social sentiments of war-weariness and began to exert pressure through negative feedback, on the armed movements.

Those movements were qualitatively more porous, and more dependent on the citizenry than the LTTE. Had the Tigers been similar, they would not have overridden mass sentiment for giving peaceful reform a real chance and successfully sustained that belligerent posture.

However, when in 1989-90 Prabhakaran belatedly launched a political wing, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers, he dissolved it in less than a year, despite, or precisely because of, its rapid growth among the Tamil masses of the North-East.

What must be understood here is that the Tigers are a different species from the IRA, FMLN and PLO. They may be able to achieve autonomy, as Prabhakaran hinted on Wednesday, in Sri Lanka but are not likely to be allowed in the mainstream.

Ekram Kabir is the Senior Newsroom Editor in Ekushey Television Limited.



Zealots on the move....

