

India should think beyond the Hindutva agenda



A CLOSER
LOOK

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OVER the last few years – under the BJP government – India's religious polarisation has increased in degree and intensity. Multiple factors have contributed to the ever-expanding divide among religious communities in India, from policy-related institutionalised approaches which are divisive in nature, to the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens in Assam, to the more administration-related decision – that is, new rules being imposed in various states that are biased against minority communities, and petty actions such as hijab bans in educational institutions, the right-wing rhetoric of majority of BJP leaders, and the attacks on Muslim and Christian places of worship. This polarisation has resulted in the sidelining of some of India's core precepts of pluralism, polyphony, heterodoxy, and communal harmony – ethos the nation has built upon since its independence in 1947.

The recent protests, although sparked by irresponsible, derogatory, and provocative comments by BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is the outcome of built-up sentiments among Muslims as a result of recent years of religious discrimination and "hate" messages they have had to endure in their own motherland.

This latest incident has not only disrupted India's internal stability, with communal unrest spreading in multiple states, but the nation has also had to face backlash from various countries, including its key trading partners in the Middle East. According to Al Jazeera, India's financial trading with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exceeded USD 150 billion in the fiscal year ending in March 2022. Its exports to the Gulf countries had been of around USD 44 billion, a 58 percent increase from the previous year. Indian imports

from the Gulf countries stood at around USD 111 billion, an increase of about 85 percent. And these strong trade ties have now been put at risk by the provocative comments of the BJP spokesperson.

What is worrying is that using this incident as a tool, vested quarters in both the Gulf countries and in India are propagating the boycotting of trade



relations. Social media is abuzz with hashtags such as #BoycottIndiaProducts and #BoycottQatarAirway. This is an alarming development, not just for India but for the overall state of global trade, as trade disruptions between India and its key trading partners in the Middle East would have a ripple effect on global trade.

These incidents should be an eye-opener for India, leading to a moment of realisation for the government that the majoritarian, right-wing policy that it is currently pursuing is highly destructive for the nation and its people.

India – the world's largest democracy, home to more than 200 million Muslims, a melting pot of diverse faiths and cultures – is also one of the fastest growing economies in the world. According to the IMF, India is projected to grow by 8.2 percent in 2022-23, compared to the 4.4 percent estimated growth for China. At this point, India cannot afford internal unrest that may

hamper its economic growth.

To realise its full economic potential, India must change its current course of action with regard to its treatment of minority religious communities. Suppression of minority communities, disrespecting their basic human rights, and their rights enshrined in the Indian constitution, discriminating against

hate-mongering elements, further such measures are immediately called for. Those who wish India well hope that it will understand that the only way forward for the nation is religious inclusion and communal harmony. According to Mahatma Gandhi, "True religion is not a narrow dogma. It is not external observance. It is faith in God and living in the presence of God. It means faith in a future life, in truth and Ahimsa." It is this same philosophy that the current Modi government needs to revisit and internalise, principles the nation's foundation is based on.

From Ashoka to Akbar to Gandhi, everyone advocated for a healthy practice of heterodoxy and dialogues, which has sustained India's vibrant secular character. And these are deeply rooted in how Indian thoughts have been shaped over centuries; one needs only to revisit the Vedas and the two great Indian epics, The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, that are so rich in discussions and deliberations encompassing a wide array of topics, including theology, philosophy, and politics. These values and characteristics have helped the Indian democracy thrive, enabled communities to live together in harmony, and it is these same attributes that need to be reintegrated into the nation's perception of its identity for it to overcome the challenges it is facing.

The present government needs to rebuild the burnt bridges by engaging in dialogue with the aggrieved communities and assuring them of their rights and security, which should be backed up by appropriate actions, including policy interventions, in order to demonstrate the commitment of the government towards religious inclusion.

Moreover, everyone should be aligned towards common national objectives of shared prosperity and economic growth.

The government, as distinct from the BJP, needs to think beyond the Hindutva agenda, and consider the bigger landscape of Indian historic legacy and global standing. It is the core values of the nation that need to be prioritised over the agenda of a particular section, regardless of it being the majority in terms of numbers. Nothing less is expected from the world's largest democracy, with such a rich history of religious co-existence and communal harmony.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

them, and cornering them in their own country will only aggravate the current internal tensions which may spiral out of control in the short- to mid-term. This would be a highly undesirable development, not only for India, but also its neighbours, including Bangladesh.

The way India has so far handled the current protests through coercive actions – state government in UP bulldozing Muslim homes; law enforcement agencies unleashing force to suppress the protests, leading to two deaths – shows that the government is still perhaps under the impression that its hardline policy against minorities is the right track to be on. But this only shows that minority sentiments are at a boiling point, which need to be cooled down at the earliest, for the greater interest of the nation and of the South Asian region.

Though we appreciate the few stern, albeit belated, measures the Indian government has taken against these

“Israel’s actions are that of an apartheid regime. The only difference is that we are all brown.”

Dr Amal Jadou, Palestine's Deputy Foreign Minister, talks to Porimol Palma of The Daily Star about the decades long Palestine-Israel conflict, and the recent escalation of violence against the Palestinians.

What is the situation now on the ground?

The situation has been very difficult for a very long time. It is getting more and more difficult now. The globally-accepted two-states solution to the conflict is escaping us mainly because of the Israeli policies of colonisation and settlement. It is a policy of displacing the Palestinians with Israeli settlers by moving Israeli civilians from Israel to the occupied territories in violation of the Geneva Convention. Today, we have more than 700,000 Israelis living in the occupied territories in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. When the Oslo agreement was signed in 1993, we had 100,000 Israeli settlers. But today, we have 700,000 settlers. Israel wants to increase it to one million by 2025.

The problem is the Israeli claim that this is a God-given land to them. We all believe that we are created by God, but God does not discriminate based on gender, race, colour or ethnicity, rather He accepts us all. It is very important that we don't mix religion with politics. This is a political conflict that requires political solutions.

Palestinian territory is dispersed – there is no continuity between them, they have become like dots on the map, like separated islands. Their ability to establish a contiguous Palestinian state based on the 1967 border with East Jerusalem as the capital is becoming more and more implausible. We have a minority of 700,000 Israeli settlers controlling the lives of 3.5 million Palestinians. There are two sets of laws that apply to the two territories – one in the occupied territory, and the other, for Israeli settlers. A different law applies for the Palestinian citizens. We have extrajudicial killings. We have roads for the settlers only and roads for Palestinians only. There is a bus system for the Palestinians and another for the Israelis. All of these are actions of an apartheid regime. The only difference is that we are not black and the Israelis are not white. We are all brown. If we were black and they were white, it would have been an explicit apartheid regime.

Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh was recently killed by the Israeli security forces. Are the Israeli authorities trying to send the message that they won't allow any fair media coverage?

She is not the first one. Of course, she is an icon of Palestine. We all love her and respect her. She was telling the truth about Palestine and the region. But there are killings of Palestinians on a daily basis. The coverage of those killings is not as prominent as that of Akleh. It is the immediate outcome of the policy that was adopted by Prime Minister Bennet of Israel, who basically ordered his soldiers to shoot to kill Akleh without any kind of restraint. This is really a very dangerous policy, and while moving from one city to another, I see the soldiers at the checkpoints with their hands on the trigger. They are ready to shoot and can shoot anyone. Basically, there is no sense of safety or security. Her murder is in line with the policy that they don't want the media to cover what really happens.

The Arab states – UAE and Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – established their diplomatic relationship with Israel in 2020. Earlier, it was Egypt and Jordan. What does this imply?

It means they have given up on their commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative, which clearly calls for ending the Israeli occupation of the Arab occupied territories in return for normalising relationship with the Arab and Muslim world. Unfortunately, they have done this based on self-interest. Despite this, the dialogue with these countries could continue within the Arab League. We know that the populations of these countries still believe in the just cause of Palestine. I hope that they also will abide by international law and respect the border resolution of 1967.

When all Palestinians need to unite, we see a division between Hamas and Fatah. Is it a roadblock to solving the crisis?

No, I don't think that it contributes to the lack of progress in the peace process. Currently, there is no peace, no process.



Dr Amal Jadou

But I can tell you that long before there was a division, the peace process was not moving anywhere. In fact, the party that negotiates for the Palestinians is the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – all political parties agree to this. Today, it is the Israeli government headed by PM Bennet says no to negotiations, no to the two-states solution, no to meeting with Palestinians, and yes to the expansion of settlements.

But yes, our unity is very important. I hope we can move in the direction of election as an exit-way for the Palestinians to choose their representatives, and we will respect the outcomes of the elections. I think every Palestinian is working towards an independent Palestinian state. I believe that Hamas is a political movement, a party that participated in

the participatory elections in 2006 and won, and then was given the chance to govern but the world boycotted it, and that basically is one of the reasons that we have division. I believe that there are dialogues that are taking place in different countries under the leadership of the Egyptians, Algerians and others who help the process of unity among the Palestinians. In fact, during the last year's aggression, we saw how Palestinians all over the world, in West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, and in Israel stood together and presented a unified position of support to an independent Palestine.

Militarily, Israel is far more powerful than Palestine. The US is also Israel's very close ally. Do you think there is real willingness in the international community to solve this crisis?

Here comes the issue of the universality of international law. When there are other conflicts in this region, the world comes together in order to find solutions and we have seen this in Europe just recently. So, international law needs to be applied universally. After all, international law is the culmination of many wars from the past. So far, the international preventive diplomacy has failed. We may have a chance to succeed by providing an opportunity for the international community to take a stand against the violation of international law and the regime of occupation and apartheid.

Do you have any new idea in mind that could be effective in realising your demand for an independent Palestinian state?

We are talking to everyone, engaging with everyone. It is important for us to explain the situation all over the world. We have friends all over the world. There are many countries that are trying to play a role. Our hope is that the UN will step up its efforts. A US delegation visited Palestine and Israel in order to push for a revival of the political process. We hope that their efforts are successful. I feel that the international community will play its role to find a just solution to this conflict.