

A shadow of fear over festivities

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As Durga Puja approaches and the country's Hindu communities prepare themselves to embrace their beloved goddess, it is very evident that they have been extremely cautious about the possibilities of facing sectarian attacks this year as well.

Amidst the preparation of the upcoming special occasion and related festivities, Hindus around the country are gripped with a perpetual fear of being the victims of communal violence and a feeling of helplessness. The bloodshed from last year's violence during Durga Puja is still fresh in the community's mind, and they have very little reason to believe that it is going to be any different this year.

From the very recent incident of the mayhem at Narail to the marginalisation and humiliation faced by them in social media platforms, it is easy to predict that such an incident is likely to be replicated this year too. Given that such incidents repeat themselves in a similar fashion every year, it could be said that most socially conscious individuals in the status quo are aware of the exact playbook which will be running when such an incident occurs in the future.

First, a post describing profanity against the faith of the majority group will be made on a public social media platform. Then, this will be made viral in various social media platforms resulting in the rise of inflammatory rhetoric from local "intellectuals", which will motivate crowds to go out there and commit acts of sectarian violence.

Lastly, you will have people in positions of power, the same people who have allowed such deep sectarian fault lines to prevail, shed tears and make empty promises once again, allowing this cycle of cycle of abuse to continue.

The fact that such incidents happen every time and there is no long term indication of change is troubling. One may question how I am so sure that the status quo is far from change. To this, I would like to point out the amount of malicious comments and hateful emails I received on another article about the Narail mayhem which criticised the majority group's silence when it came to condemning sectarian attacks.

From blatant whataboutism to complete denial, the mails and comments were a reminder of how divided our society is today. Someone even brought up how Muslims in India also receive similar treatment, if not worse, from the Hindu majority – as if very slyly trying to justify the entire incident. While the individuals attacking Muslims in India deserve our utmost criticism, it does not dissolve the sufferings of the religious minorities in our own country.

Therefore, if we really want to prevent such sectarian attacks from happening, we need to do more than just providing lip-service and rather make the necessary changes at policy level – one which involves a much more inclusive education system and preaches coexistence and diversity as a virtue and not a vice.

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What schools can do to support students' mental health

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Given the overall lack of importance given to mental health issues in schools, and the general stigma regarding mental health illnesses in our society, students often opt to suffer alone and not seek help.

A recent statistic by Aachol Foundation shows how serious the consequences can be. From January to August this year alone, 364 students took their own lives. A staggering 314 of them are students from schools, colleges or madrasas. The issues were most commonly found to stem from relationship trauma, family issues, and implications of false accusations.

This re-emphasises a dire need for change. It is high time our schools took a central role in supporting students going through emotional distress, instead of creating a foreboding atmosphere. Classrooms should exude a sense of positivity and inclusivity to support students.

Schools have a big role to play here. It is common for students to use mental health issues and conditions as insults or curse words, a common example of which would be "autistic", giving these words negative connotations. Support from teachers and regular campaigns to spread awareness regarding the matter would not only allow students to be educated regarding such sensitive matters, but would also allow schools to be aware of their students' mental and emotional wellbeing.

So, what can be done?

In light of a few incidents, the Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni announced that two lakh teachers would be trained in student counselling. While the efforts are commendable, this may not be the ultimate solution to our problems.

Hiring professional psychologists whose job it is to speak to people and understand

their patients' inner psyche may offer better results. Talking to them can be beneficial for struggling students, which may not be the case if they talked with teachers with only a few weeks of training under their belt.

Arranging seminars and mental health workshops is crucial. Distinguished clinical psychologists or cognitive professors may be invited to these sessions to talk about the issues, explaining the importance of promoting inclusivity while debunking myths and stigmas surrounding mental health.

For high school and college students, these workshops should be geared towards explaining the harmful effects of keeping their struggles secret. As well as debunking myths, they should also look to radiate a positive energy, giving students the support they may often need.

For younger students, these workshops should be done with parents present. Parents should be made to understand their role in helping children keep mentally fresh, by emphasising the need to be friendly with children, and the perils of authoritative parenting.

The tragic tales, the young lives cut short, and the dashed dreams serve as warning for everyone. It is high time authorities prioritise the emotional wellbeing of students before things take a turn for the worse.

References

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