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# A Nation-First Narrative

**Communalism will hurt India's prospects, but the exaggerated portrayal of it by the Opposition will hurt us more. Right now, we need the political discourse to single-mindedly focus on the economy**

**I**n the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, the then supreme leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), decided to focus exclusively on economic development. He realised that for the China dream to come true, the economy, shattered by Mao's decades of defective policies, must be reinvigorated.

The decade saw rapid economic growth and infrastructure development in the country. Foreign investors and technologies were invited into China. When his own colleagues in the party protested, accusing him of promoting capitalist policies, Deng shut them off with the retort that he didn't care about "the colour of the cat as long as it is catching the mice". This ruthless pragmatism, and the courage to set ideologies aside for the larger national good, has helped China reach where it is today.

The developing world is now debating these issues. As James Carville, the campaign strategist for Bill Clinton, quipped in 1992, "It's the economy, stupid." Countries are catching on to Carville's economic mantra, sidestepping ideological hamstrings. Whoever visited the Saudi Arabia pavilion at the recently concluded Expo 2020 Dubai will vouch for the progressive and ultramodern presentation of the mother-ship of orthodox Islam. Live images of surging race cars with Saudi women at the wheels left every visitor fascinated and flabbergasted. The same is the case with countries in Asia and Africa.

But, sadly, here we are, debating about communal polarisation. Leaders of the Opposition are writing op-eds as if in India, at every street corner, Hindus and Muslims have crossed swords. It may suit the political narrative for some, but it will certainly hurt the country's global narrative at a time when the leadership is steadfastly pursuing an agenda of growth and prosperity for every Indian. No other leadership appreciates this imperative better than the present one. The 2020s will be to India what the 1980s were to China. A decade of single-minded fo-

cus on the economy could unleash the country's latent potential and catapult it into the club of developed nations.

Pundits pointing fingers at the central government or some Hindu organisations for this perceived polarisation have a sinister agenda—they want to divert the national discourse by dragging the prime minister's name into it. But the actions of the government speak for its inclusive and development-for-all approach.

Communalism will hurt India's prospects, but the exaggerated portrayal of it will hurt us more. Is the 1.3 billion-strong Indian society really polarised? Should some fringe elements be elevated to the status of 'makers of the national narrative' for a vast country like ours? Isn't it tantamount to, say, calling the entire American society racist just because some truly reprehensible incidents of racial violence happened there?

India's communal problem is centuries old and it continues to erupt occasionally. This may be a kind of whataboutery, but isn't it hubristic on the part of some political leaders to pretentiously argue and take the moral high ground when their own



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

cupboards are filled with horrific skeletons from communal orgies?

This is not to undermine the potential threat that communal elements pose to India's national fabric. We paid a heavy price for it at the time of Independence, the Amrit Mahotsav of which is being celebrated now. These elements, be it Muslim or Hindu, do not and should not represent our respective mainstream communities. To merely shrug off responsibility for their actions also amounts to being communal apologists. There is a need to frame a civil society response to it.

Social media is partly to blame. It is democratic not only in nature and spirit but also in noise and chaos. Perceived injustices as portrayed on Twitter or Facebook impact sensible people too. But the problem is that different stories and images circulate among different recipient groups, making each believe that their religion is under attack from the other. While the image of an attack on a Hindu procession gets wider traction among Hindu user groups, similar provocative images of acts against a mosque or a Muslim group make their way to Muslim user groups. Hence the important lesson that the social media narrative needs to be viewed with greater equanimity and objectivity and that it allows the law and order establishment to take necessary action against the culprits.

## THE TALK OF POLARISATION MAY BE PREMATURE. INDIAN SOCIAL LEADERS NEED TO STAND UP TO THE FORCES OF HATRED AND VIOLENCE

These incidents are not all fictitious either. Every hate speech will have a fallout; every rape threat actually translates into a real incident. Hence the social leadership should immediately come forward, condemn and explicitly state that such words and acts have no place in a civilised discourse.

Post-Independence India witnessed the pampering of minority communal politics for vote bank considerations by the same parties that are preaching morals today. Communalism begets communalism. That brand of politics of appeasement has ended for good in the country, so the Opposition is calling the new order majoritarian politics. The minority leadership should reconcile to their new status and the end of such minority-majority distinctions. Learning to live in harmony with the rest of our mainstream national society should be viewed as an important obligation.

It is also important that the Muslim leadership come out of the Wahhabist hardline interpretations of Islam that seek to pit Muslim against non-Muslim and promote separatism and exclusivity. The return of debates like 'hijab' and 'niqab' is symptomatic of this as also the rise of violent, ultra-radical outfits like the Popular Front of India (PFI). A more inclusive and humanitarian Islam on the lines of the one promoted by organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama, a 90 million-strong Islamic organisation in Indonesia under the dynamic leadership of its chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf aka Pak Yahya, must be the way forward for them.

The reaction of sections of Hindus, including some wearing saffron robes, is also utterly un-Hindu. Violent language and talk of annihilation of an entire community smack of their attempt at semitisation of Hinduism. It is pertinent to note that mainstream Hindu organisations like the RSS have distanced themselves and disapproved of such rants.

Talk of polarisation may be premature but the Indian social leadership needs to stand up to the forces of hatred and violence by invoking peace, inclusivity and a nation-first narrative. India's narrative of the decade should be "it's the economy, stupid!" The onus lies on all of us. ■