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MAKING SENSE OF 'INTOLERANCE'

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ABSTRACT:

The recent discourse around intolerance had gained currency in the last two years when members of the civil society led by artists and intellectuals registered their protest by means of returning their coveted awards. The award wapsi against the alleged apathy of the Political regime towards growing intolerance in the country had once again opened up the space for debate on the issue of tolerance and specifically what entails political intolerance vis-à-vis the fundamental right to freedom of speech. This article traces the debate and tries to locate the very issue of intolerance in terms of the political intolerance in the ruling class and the decline in the credibility of the political representatives.

KEYWORDS: civil society, Political regime, fundamental right.

INTRODUCTION:

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. The opening lines of Charles Dickens, A Tale of two cities, seems apt to describe the multitude of narratives doing the rounds at present about the existing socio-political situation in India vis-à-vis tolerance/intolerance debate. This is the beauty of democracy that conflicting opinions find space simultaneously and each competes to have an edge over the other. Given the constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression (though with reasonable restrictions), sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish the genuine and fake concerns amongst the polyphonic voices. True to the six blind men and the Elephant metaphor, each side presents a totally different view. This reminds of a radio broadcast in the 1930's in the U.S. that revealed the power of media to create mass hysteria. A 1938 radio play based on H.G.Wells' War of the Worlds, enacting Martian invasion of Earth allegedly created a mass hysteria in the US as people thought that they were actually invaded by aliens.

Suddenly, intolerance has become the catchword of the day at a mammoth level and interestingly the political rhetoric of certain political parties and groups. The news media is full of statements by politicians, economists, industrialists, academicians, artists, writers, filmmakers, credit rating agencies and even masterminds of terror attacks about growing intolerance in India and the curtailment of freedom of speech. What an irony, where everyone is speaking her mind amidst the allegation of curtailment of freedom of speech in India. Some of them including those associated with the ruling party even went to the extent of saying that there is an emergency-like situation in India at present. Do they realize the fallacy of their own claim because had it been an emergency like situation, all those making anti-Government speeches and statements would have been behind bars and press would have been under censorship. This is just to count a few ills that had been expressed by those very people who were made to suffer during the emergency of 1975-1977 in India, only because they differed with

the existing regime. However, the intent of this paper is not to go back in history (though history is crucial) and indulge in blame game. The core idea is to interrogate the idea of tolerance, mainly political tolerance and what it entails.

During one of the debates on a popular English news media on Television, one of the speakers from a right-wing organization suggested that the term Tolerance was Eurocentric and had negative connotation, so we better use the term acceptance which has traditionally been used as a positive concept in India. Etymology aside, but what is it that the public discourse in India is worried about with regard to tolerance-intolerance debate? Political philosopher, Peter Jones in one of his papers had argued that in the orthodox sense, tolerance connotes dislike and we tolerate only that to which we object (Jones, 2007). He further gives another understanding of toleration, saying that we can tolerate only what we are able to prevent, i.e., toleration exists only when intolerance is an option. The latter understanding seems more close to contextualizing tolerance in the present democratic polity where despite an option to intolerance, ideally and constitutionally one opts not to do so. Going further, political toleration as Jones suggests is something which is secured through the apparatus of the state, such as religious and cultural toleration. Has the political regime in India stopped being tolerant and have incidents of intolerance grown? What statistics to use? Unfortunately, we cannot base our argument merely on certain statistics, nor do we intend to make a comparative analysis of how tolerant the previous regimes in India were. We need to understand that society does not become tolerant or intolerant overnight and mob-thinking and mob-violence cannot be curtailed cent-percent by any authority. If a man is lynched to death on the basis of a rumour and plethora of theories are built around it without addressing the root cause of the psyche of the masses and the apathy of the political class in general, it is a reflection of our superficial understanding of tolerance. The various episodes in the past with respect to Salman Rushdie, Tasleema Nasreen and M.F. Hussain too reflected intolerance on part of certain sections and fringe elements in society as well as the incapability or apathy of the ruling party to come to the rescue of free expression of these artists. But, did we brand the entire country or the political regime of the time as intolerant at such a level, as being done at present?

In the world of myriad opinions, ideology, interests and the conflicts arising out of it, tolerance towards the 'other' becomes very important at the global level. But, does this tolerance need to seek justification on any instrumentalist ground. In a recent newspaper article, an academician Kranti Saran invokes political philosopher T.M. Scanlon (The difficulty of Toleration) to argue that tolerance should be viewed as an end-in-itself and not as a means to pursue ends such as national security and economic development. In this very book, Scanlon talks about J.S. Mill's justification of freedom of expression and the associated 'harm principle'. It was Mill who had provided strong justification for every person's freedom of speech and expression and for protecting minority opinion from being marginalized by the majority in a democracy, as that single individual may have something significant to offer and even if his/her opinion is wrong, it helps reaffirm the opinion of the majority. J.S. Mill had also argued that every person has a liberty compatible with an equal liberty for others and my liberty to extend my arms end, where the other person's nose begins. Mill's maxim reminds us not only of the importance of reasonable restriction on freedom of speech and expression but also the significance of minority/ marginal opinion in a democracy. Thus, those making an outcry about growing intolerance in India and also those rebuking such claims, should be given an equal hearing, provided that each side while extending its arm does not hit at the other's nose. By this very logic, artists and authors have every right to return the Awards given to them citing shrinking space for freedom of expression in the present political regime in India. Similarly, members of the ruling party and parliamentarians as citizens of this country, too have every right to condemn 'Award-Wapsi' by writers, filmmakers, scientists and other members of the civil society, provided they do not use un-parliamentary language. However, as representatives of the people in a democracy, they have an added responsibility of restricting their speech to maintain harmony amongst groups and not use a language that degrades the quality of democratic debate. This is one of the concerns that should be addressed by every political party in power. There seems to be loss in the credibility of the political class in India in general in the last two-three decades and consequently in the democratic institutions they represent. It is perceived that the political representatives across parties have failed to meet the standards set by the constitution of India and themselves reflect the highest degree of intolerance and insensitivity. The degradation in the quality of debate in Parliament has been

documented by many academic writings and MPs are often found ill-informed about programs, policies and priorities of their own political party.

Political regimes at the helm of affairs have a tendency to filter free speech in democracy and to guard against any massive outburst of dissent against it. History has been witness to this fact as those in power, whether representing the left, right or the centre have been cautious of any assault on their authority. The biggest instance of suppression of dissent was the imposition of national emergency in India in the year 1975. However, in normal circumstances, a blatant misuse of free speech by political representatives sends a wrong message. It was the indecent, unparliamentary language of the legislators from the ruling party in India that created a sense of growing intolerance in the country. It is here that strong organizational structure, discipline and leadership in the political party is called for to ensure that a unified stand about the policies, programs and temperament of the ruling regime is conveyed to the Public at large. A weaning of democracy within a political party gives rise to dissent within it, leading to chaos and debasement. One of the reasons for the debacle of the Congress party had been the gradual slaughter of internal democracy in the party. The problem at present is not so much about curbing of the space for free speech and expression by the political regime but about the failure to acknowledge dissent within the political party and making no efforts to address it. A denial of space to voices of dissent within the party and its sympathizers creates space for others to intervene and hijack the platform for raising their grievances against those in power to the extent of creating a mass hysteria.

Furthermore, while the ruling BJP as well as the opposition mainly led by the Congress party tried to gain currency by rhetorizing the term "intolerance", it seems that rather than a regime getting intolerant it is more about intolerance amongst political parties. Whether in power or in opposition, political rivalry and consequent intolerance amongst political parties has curbed genuine debate and what is witnessed is mere mudslinging and blame game. The opposition party seems to hijack any issue that is raised by sections of media and civil society, for its own ends often turning the entire course of debate to its advantage. The ruling party in turn dismisses the voice of dissent from the opposition as an act of conspiracy by the latter. All political parties must remember that party system in India is the product of diversities that existed in the society. Diversities have given rise to varying ideologies and social composition of parties and hence political leaders should engage in constructive negotiation of diversities at institutional level and channelizing the same towards policies. Ideally, in a democracy the opposition party is expected to engage in constructive criticism of the party in power but this had rarely been witnessed in the recent history of Indian politics. Instead it has become rampant for political party in opposition to hijack the protest by any section of civil society, for its political mileage. The BJP and other parties outside UPA had done the same during the Anna Hazare anti-corruption, Lokpal movement and now the opposition led by the Congress party is doing the same over the intolerance issue. The Indian constitution to which our political class swears by (formally or literally), was a handiwork of a diverse lot and the thick volume comprising of 395 Articles was the product of ingenious process of churning of passionate debates in the Constituent Assembly. Diversity, dissent and differences are not new to India. True, some spate of untoward incident have been witnessed over the last few months but these need to be tackled by formulating institutional measures and the opposition parties should take an equal responsibility for the same.

India is after all a working democracy and intolerance even at the political level, should be addressed with genuine concern through democratic means and innovative institutional mechanism.

NOTES:

1.This argument from Scanlon's work, Difficulty of toleration had been drawn from Kranti Saran, The Indian Express, Tolerance for its own sake, Nov 4, 2015, pp 14.

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