

# **Symbols of singularity, alienation and exclusion: How to nourish roots of pluralism in Indian society<sup>1</sup>**

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The metaphors have very low entropy. They carry the messages, undistorted, undiluted and often without any blurring of the edges for long time and far and wide. The inclusiveness in society can only be understood by looking at pervasiveness of symbols of exclusion. More pervasive the symbols, less easy it will be to make society inclusive. Indian project on inclusiveness has not grappled adequately with these symbols. In this paper, I first describe some of the symbols, which define the constant attempt by society at large to reinforce exclusion leading to alienation and singularity of interpretations. I then discuss the roots of terrorism and violence, which to me are premised, on the foundation of systematic exclusion. No matter how hard the state tries to portray the violence in less economically developed regions as law and order problem, the dominant nature of the context cannot be dismissed. The price of exclusion cannot always be paid through ‘voice’<sup>3</sup>. It also expresses in ‘exit’, and sometimes in ‘aggression’ and ‘dissipation’. Finally, some lessons for reflection and action.

## **Part One**

### **Symbols of exclusion:**

The stories of Karna and Eklavya demonstrate how cultural singularity and exclusion are institutionalized in our country. I have asked about these stories and their interpretation for last several years in my first year class. Almost everybody has heard these stories and with almost identical interpretations. Eklavya is a symbol of reverence, persistence and obedience apart from excellence. Karna symbolizes sacrifice and commitment to his values. Why is it that the parents have not given alternative interpretation of these stories to the children? How come that children do not doubt for a minute, the ethics of Dronacharya? Would modern mind respect such a teacher who would deny a dalit student right to excel because of his commitment to a high caste student belonging to royal family? Has this value created dissonance in the minds of modern Indian? And if not, then should not we understand the roots of exclusion better?

When Assam agitation was going on, students used a slogan, which decried one bridge over Brahmaputra with seven flyovers in Delhi. It was a symbol of marginality, exclusion and alienation. The message was communicated with great clarity such that even a common person could understand the philosophical underpinning of complex history of alienation.

I recently happened to travel on highway No.39 in Manipur to Nagaland. Many Cabinet Ministers and even the previous Prime Minister have traveled by the same road. The

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<sup>3</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, 1970, “Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States”, Cambridge, Harvard University Press

condition of the highway is known to the people at the highest level. A distance of 60 kms., can take three hours. The road has potholes all over. The PWD Minister of Arunachal Pradesh said, in a chance meeting, that highway No.51A is no better. This is a situation when northeast is supposed to get a special treatment. Special it is, but in terms of indifference and callousness. Why should not people on the margin feel alienated? The town hall in Imphal is supposed to be the central building of the town. With stinking toilets and broken glass panes, every participant in every meeting gets reminded of the way centrality of a marginal place is viewed by the Central Government.

Having walked for about 4500 kms., during last ten years as part of Shodh Yatras, every summer, every winter, a great deal of grassroots reality has sunk in. One of the recent Shodh Yatras was in Anantnag district in Jammu and Kashmir. There were schools, which did not have a function for last 18 years. There was a hailstorm and we had to take shelter in a shop nearby. We asked for something made in Kashmir valley. The shopkeeper could not find even a candle. There was so much of warmth for us in every village we went to that the alienation apparent otherwise appears to be deliberately manufactured by acts of commission and omission. A Ph.D in Biotechnology was working as a teaching assistant in a village school at a paltry stipend. On a more promising note, I should also recall our walk to the thousand years old Sun temple. A local Muslim resident came running towards us. He thought we were Pundits who were coming back. He asked us to wait for a minute and said, "Ram, Ram, you are not going back this time". Several times during the walk, we heard this message.

The last Shodh Yatra was in Arku valley in Andhra Pradesh. The condition of the tirbals and extremely poor infrastructure explained, if an explanation was needed, as to why naxalites were so strong here. How else should people empower themselves when state can only neglect the margins?

In a recent paper, I wrote on ways of knowing, feeling and doing, I argued that we always claim to know a great deal. Only part of it is what evokes our feelings. And much smaller part of what we feel about, we actually act. It is not that the country does not know about the alienation of the youth and the rest of the people in marginal regions of the country. But, this alienation does not evoke feeling among most people. And those few who do have feelings seldom take much action. It is this gap between knowledge, feeling and doing or action that we need to bridge. It is for this reason that instruments of exclusion and inclusion have to be analysed not for just reflection but also action. It is in this context that I agree with Dr.Sudhir Kakar who argues for a longer term strategy and beginning at an early age. We need at least a 20 years strategy beginning with the children whose minds are getting shaped by exclusionary agenda. The elite not only on the right but even on the left is oblivious of the hard issues of partnership, stakeholding and ownership. Way back in 80's when agitation against Narmada dam was picking up, I had suggested that instead of opposing the dam, the activists should consider the distributed ownership of the dam and the canals by the oustees and other stakeholders. I had suggested that people should be allotted equity shares, bonds and opportunity of upgrading their skills so that they rise in their lives because of dislocation and do not become worse off. However, those ideas were not paid attention. Today, when large scale tensions are growing around SEZ (Special Economic Zones) and acquisition of lands for industrialisation, a question must be asked as to whether farmers cannot be equity holder in the enterprises apart from other kinds of compensations. There is no reason why industry should not partake part of the wealth with the provider of most precious resource, i.e., the land. Dr.A.P.J.Abdul Kalam, former President advocated distribution of equity

among farmers as a form of partnership in the context of Singur controversy. Let me take another example of systematic exclusion.

There are 250 million people who were given employment for 100 days under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. The nature of employment has not changed much for last 100 years. It is assumed that poor people have hands, legs, and mouths but no head. Philosophical discourse seems to take place only among people who do not work with hands. The philosophies of Rahim and Kabir are perhaps rustic and artisanal philosophies. Their comprehensibility by masses might exclude them from the category of deep thinkers or philosophers. When Honey Bee Network suggested that at least ten days of work should be mental, and not menial, the policy makers just blinked. When former President wrote to the Prime Minister, he could not consider the rationality of the suggestion. By using the mental faculties of the poor people, their knowledge richness could have become evident. They could have mapped not only the physical and natural resources but also the minds. India could have really moved forward to become a knowledge society. Even the leaders on the left of the political spectrum could not see the injustice and unfairness of the current design of employment programmes. There were other controversies more central to their agenda than recasting social engagement of the nation with 250 million people.

## Part Two Roots of Terrorism

The fact that right from Nepal, down to the east, south and upto Sri Lanka, most of the extremists indulging in violence are Hindus does not occur as something contrary to the popular pacifist image that some parties try to create. Violence by the extremist groups whether maoists or naxalites does not seem to dent the popular image of majority community. Such deep seated are the prejudices. There are Christian extremists in northeast just as there are Muslim extremists in rest of the country. Yet, the image of Islam and Christianity can be tainted in the popular mind but Hindus would often be seen as peace loving, law abiding people (disregarding the lawlessness in parts of Bihar, Orissa and other regions of the country). About 170 districts are believed to be affected by leftist violence. At least 70 districts of these are such where Govt. of India finds difficulty in enforcing its writ. What is the answer on which the ruling and the opposition party have a consensus; to treat it as a law and order problem.

Why economically backward regions suffer from dominance of the left extremists groups even in West Bengal (as we witnessed during the Shodh Yatra in Purulia) has not generated a consensus in favour of land reforms, rapid economic development in backward regions, better quality of health and educational infrastructure, etc. The alienation continues. Every time some leaders of the extremists group are captured, new ones take their place.

Recent serial blasts and the subsequent mails issued by the extremists group raise serious issues about the fairness in dealing with similar cases of violence by the left or the right, by Hindu extremists or by Muslim extremists. The fact that scars of 1984 took so long to heal has been forgotten. The extremism in Punjab, an otherwise prosperous place, began when higher quota of Sikhs in army was curtailed and made proportionate to population. Despite the fact share of Sikhs (including officers) was always higher than their weight in population among those who sacrificed their life for the nation, they were not allowed to die for the nation by reducing their quota. Around the same time, when the quota was reduced, a census took place in which several people who did not know reading or writing of Hindi, declared

their mother tongue as Hindi because of propaganda by some religious groups. That gave a threat to the Sikh identity. For the first time, falsehood was institutionalised for narrow sectarian and political ends. Rest is history. Playing with cultural identities is dangerous. Memories of injustice can be invoked even after hundreds of years. The crisis of former Yugoslavia and the birth of Kosovo and other parts based on three to four hundred years old memories of injustice should have served as a signal. One should play with memories that too dealing with cultural and social identities.

Dialogue with the minorities and particularly, those which may have suffered in the violence without adequate rehabilitation is necessary. Without dialogue, peace cannot follow. No matter how prejudiced the vote bank politics may have been, one kind of wrong cannot be corrected by another wrong. It was heartening to hear that some leaders of the opposition suggested that terrorists attacks should not become a matter of political *one-man-upship*. What are the roots of alienation which may lead to extremist violence. Apart from the fact that international forces with their own fissiparous agenda may like to precipitate the social crisis, the local support or lack of it is a vital factor which contributes to the severity of intensity. All perceived symbols of injustice and unfair trial will have to be opened up and brought to the table. Unless catharsis takes place, dialogue will not be meaningful. And without an authentic dialogue, the extremist cannot be isolated from the majority of disaffected and alienated people. Violence cannot be controlled by violence. South African transition should have taught us a lesson. By pushing people in corner, we do not achieve compliance and congruence.

### Part Three

#### Lessons for Reflection and Action

How does mind deal with exclusion? Sometimes, to safeguard one's self respect, one may try to learn to be helpless. Some may nurture deep prejudice and feeling of hurt leading to aggression. Some may become indifferent. And a few may submit to the circumstances and adjust, no matter with whatever sense of shame or guilt. The proportion of different kinds of people excluded from the mainstream may be different in different regions and at different times. There are certainly people among the majority community who feel victimized and have a sense of anger against the unwillingness of other communities to accept their way of life. One cannot rule out existence of prejudices. They will remain so long as the urge to simplify a complex problem remains as a necessary tool to maintain one's sanity.

I have tried to argue in this paper that much of the extremist violence in India is born out of history of sustained injustice and exclusion. No matter howsoever opposed we may be to a violent way of resolving disputes, some people will fall prey to such means. By excluding the extremist fringe from the arena of dialogue, we also cause violence, at least in the Gandhian terms. The philosophers cannot merely reflect on the continued absence of dialogue and engagement with the margins of society. They have to appreciate the creativity and innovative potential of the minds on the margin, which are not marginal minds. Despite enormous evidence of such creativity, we still treat disadvantaged, economically poor as also knowledge poor. Once knowledge is not treated as resource, we also call them resource poor. Having labeled them as such, our prescriptions can only be to engage such people at menial level. This is not acceptable to the disadvantaged people any more. It is not very surprising that the knowledge produced by the disadvantaged people in economically backward and ecologically fragile regions may actually be very precious in future (to deal with climate change or other contingencies). If we cannot engage with them to pursue a pluralistic

dialogue, can we engage with them in a utilitarian framework, to meet our own long term self interest? Ethics seldom triggers struggle for equity. But when it does, it does not let the society rest easily. We seem to be passing through a time of such struggle. Every icon of respect is being challenged and rightly so. Will the search for inclusion be guided by a tradition of accommodation, inclusion and not necessarily assimilation? Identities have to be respected so that negotiations for common ground of dialogue and development of common future can take place. The Eklavya is still willing to sacrifice his thumb. Are we willing to shame Dronocharya?