Editorial

Sectarianism on the Rise: Community the Casualty

During last thirty years religio-politico-economic handholding of extreme forms of individual-sectarian state actions converted even the 'only human' situation to 'only me and mine' situation where the triad (peace-education-development) has been questioned for its scope of application- *IJPED editorial, June 2020*

We have reached the third level of sectarianism. First level of sectarianism developed from antagonistic beliefs and praxis around religious philosophy and way of worship among followers of the same religion. It was a religious development. It happened in different time lines in different regions in known history.

Dominantly Religious First Level

Instances of catholic-protestant divide in Christianity, *Shia-Sunni* conflict in Islam, and Veerashaiva-Lingayata separation in Shaivism were only few such sectarian divides. And their conflict around the interpretation of the core and sphere of authority, not about the core gradually hardened ritualistic and social differences of minute yet demonstrable signs. The demonstration of differences turned into diversity around interpretation of core, antagonism of dominance and retreat on occasions, the yearn for return to the root from time to time, creation of ritual markers of distinction, relationship taboos. Sects persisted, and on common grounds of human conduct emerged each sect's religious-social leaders respected across the line. Visit to shrines of specific sects by others opened the channel of inter-sect and interfaith discourse and discovery of common orientation.

Though such sect developments did not leave rulers as members of denominations, mostly these were inherently questions of diverse human thinking about ways of worshiping and building up identities. Very few rulers could go beyond denominational identity and compromised.

The social churn was interesting. Often sects subsumed social categories, sometimes occupational, sometimes abstract or fictitious. This subsuming echoed the call for 'only human' identity through many paths; a barrier-dissolution effort. Yet it gave rise invariably to social groupings through practice of common occupation, dining prescription, mixing norms, relationship preferences and common settlements. It was endeared for comfort within known people, shared skills, shared thought process and ease of solution at every stage of life. In one expression: an existence of feeling secure through stages of own life and putting next generation into the feeling of same ease. The organic development of '*Samaj*' (community but not the society) in any settlement by dint of stay of people with same dialect, same response-mechanism for natural happenings including disasters and favourable situations, same homes and medications, common deity or belief despite sect-based and caste-based differences gave rise to dispute resolution mechanism within the community, ensuring peaceful-coexistence mostly. However, the deep seated hatred, violence and fear with lesser identity than being human or being a member of society or state erupted from time to time with slightest provocation. Peace is challenged again and again by agent provocateurs.

The flipside: To feel safe and secured, a sect keeps prepared for protective or aggressive action. This reasoning arises from taking side of the wrong doers within a sect if the wrong is against members of another sect. This fallacious reasoning is same with that of a parent who keeps blind eye to fault of the ward.

The sectarian identity is often an obstacle to higher identity in the form of politico-cultural homogenization. The feeling persists and expresses in sect-based approach in security of home and hearth, development, education and politics in contemporary democracies.

Sect offers a ready and sure space to experiment a cocktail of politics and religion in the age of democracy as political norm. *Statism* is the political religion of this age with core belief in authority of the political bosses. A manifest acknowledgement of the same is in religious leaders' formation of political outfits to exert authority. This is the breeding ground of competitive sectarian and religious conflicts.

Strong State and Second Level

The sustained existence of sects has been the tradition of the broad society throughout the time line. With emergence of strong state, much of the social mechanism of resolving conflict or rebellious conduct by members of any social or religious-social group has been systematically usurped by the state.

For example, the deeply embedded ethical tradition of mediation was very well developed in India for thousands of years.

> *Various forms of mediation were being practised as a method of dispute resolution. But the establishment of the British courts system in 1775 marked the erosion of community-based indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in India.*

> **— N.V. Ramanna, 2021**

The costly judiciary and distant police - both became matters of fright. This gave rise to helplessness of communities to reign their own rogue elements or rogues from other groups. As the free India adopted that model instead of community justice and control, especially when such communities are places of co-habitation of people with divergent sets of beliefs, praxis and politics, the chance of peace receded.

Some big states tried to break sects or forced dissolution towards a perceived higher identity of espoused principles. Crisis of void engulfed citizens in such states over time. Response of states to their own action to quell crisis led to two variants. Soviet Russia or China or France, epicenters of new political-economic actions of few centuries till today have evolved these two variants.

First variant happened when Russia was broken and church returned, and China brought back Confucius after putting the ideology to oblivion for long time of the revolution. In short: rise of *statism* in communist dispensations has to allow reinventing harking on tradition and heritage revolving around religious core.

Second variant is a curious development of how a country responds when a good number of people of an altogether different social-religious culture joins the existing population. The challenge to peace and security increases many fold when any group or sect is adamant to stick to such praxis which are offending to other sects of same religion, or other religious denominations. The example of France is pertinent here.

French dominant culture was well reflected in French secularism or Laicite which provisions for no intervention to any religious practice till that contradicts French spirit. The french response to religious extreme and accommodation of religious freedom offers a variant of formation responding to sectarianism. It has developed in last thirty years as France responded to few divergent praxis from emerging formations such as radical Islam, Scientism and Temple of the Solar.

The "equality, fraternity and liberty" aim of new politics brought to prominence by French Revolution was in many ways an anti-sect departure in world history. France, for a long time received people from her erstwhile colonies, and allowed them to practice their faith with liberty. The French people's phobia of a type of Islam practitioners who defy civil liberty, equality and fraternity by criticising others' belief but not tolerating others' criticism of their belief and praxis has increased. It is getting reflected in political democracy's increasing response to intolerant people. In a country with eighty percent nominal Christians (declared Catholics mostly, Protestants and non-affiliated) among whom middle class makes the most of the

Church goers, secularism is increasingly questioned as a practice which tolerated the minority to the extent of encouraging their intolerance to the French spirit.

Incidents of denying the laicite and conflict increased in France highly between 1998-2020. French ban on head scarves in schools (2004), ban on Burqa in public places (2010) and the bill titled "supporting respect for the principles of the Republic" to protect France from radical Islamists (2020-21) are enforced for Laicite in France. After the French colonies in Africa got liberation, huge number of people following Islam entered France for various reasons. Their insistence on own praxis was accepted on the principles of the Republic. However, their insistence on symbolisms in a country where no religious symbolism is allowed in public created unease to French dominant culture. France also took severe measures against people following Scientism and the Temple of the Solar.

Democratic politics often crosses limit by fanning religious and sectarian sentiments for grabbing power. Power is attained but the scar as social memory remains. The scar takes many forms. This is still giving rise to second level of sectarian development, a curious mix of secular with religious. Let us call it "religious-political sectarianism". While the first stage of development was essentially "sect development" on diversity of human realisations and practices, it is not.

Capitalism and the Third Level

The third level of sectarian development is demonstrated when the economic opportunity and religious praxis come together to give rise or support to a political practice based on the religion of capitalism. Capitalism is a religion with its core belief on profit in this life time - a protest to after-death beliefs of other religions. This may be termed 'economic-religious-political sectarianism'. It's not a completely new phenomenon.

Emergence of Protestantism in Christianity encouraged many favourable practices in adherents to become enterprise creators. Capital accumulation and risk-deescalation required favourable political dispensation. Many kings of England in sixteenth and seventeenth century were influenced by Protestantism. This situation gave rise to frequent violence between Protestants and Catholics, and Catholics were persecuted. In pre-revolution England the mindset of capitalists was shaped by Protestant ethics as a great influence. Emergence of Church of England hints at 'economic-religious-political sectarianism' through hand holding of three based on convenience and consensus.

The same violence and persecution of the people of other political and economic class identity happened in West Bengal villages from around 1990s. West Bengal, by that time had experienced loosening grip of casteism among Hindus. Though there were few Hindu sects such as Vaishnabas and Shaktas in Bengal, their conflicts was few and far between. By that time, educated Muslims also started taking concerted efforts to improve socio-economic situation of the poorer sections of the community.

By that time Bengal economy was already shattered due to violent trade unionism in industry and agriculture due to rise of left ideology since partition which could not give chance to the economy to revive from the effect of partition (1947). The effort of the Indian Congress under leadership of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy to industrialise rapidly was thwarted. This own creation, in turn compelled Left political parties in power from 1978 to fight for the government fund at Panchayate and Municipal levels. This was achieved through continuing murders, tortures and capture of properties of suspected opposition supporters in villages during the Left Front years (upto 2011). This was achieved through complicity of two wings of the Government, namely police and land reforms with Local Committees of party in power. Purpose of all these was to grab power to have control over the fund received from the centre and state.

Here we find dividing the community vertically between two political identities. It has been explained as the phenomenon of party-state formation. As the capture of fund for five years and sharing it among supporters and leaders of a particular political group was the priority, it gave rise to rivalry, violence, death and fleeing home on the part of the tortured. Here economy, politics and sectarian identities hold each others' hand

tightly. Religion remained as the veil which politicians could offer or remove as per convenience. The same reality persists in Bengal though another party, namely Trinamool Congress (TMC) is in driver's seat since 2011 and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerging as the defender of Hindu cause.

To wean away the minority Muslims, who are decisive to wrest power in around thirty five percent assembly seats, from the Left (whom they traditionally supported) TMC took up such measures which had repercussion in Hindus who never thought of voting en-block prior to it. Even Matuas, a sect of Hindus who came to India in large numbers being tortured in Erstwhile Pakistan and even after formation of Bangladesh due to increasing threat from extremist Islamists were recognised as a block which was tried to be made into a solid support base. The rise of BJP weaned away this sect to a great extent from TMC owing to their memory of torture on the other side of the border and the insecurity of not being given citizenship of India during long years of residence in India.

This curious turn gave rise to the communal variant of "economic-political-religious" type reflected in perception of common man about economic well being and political power has to travel through the patronisation of the religious sect. However a closer look finds that this development is essentially an economic one in once prosperous economically and culturally prosperous state of West Bengal where communities are pitted as rivals and intolerants, thus bringing political opposition from an election plank to a permanent rivalry among neighbours. This is breaking down the Samaj in the same state where Rabindranath Tagore emphasised that India needs to bring back the dynamism of her Samaj (community).

This third level of sectarian formations are threats to the society, community and individuals. It on occasions of election campaign and win unleashes torture on others. In many cases, this takes turn into incidences considered to be equal to religious persecution.

Third Level of Sectarianism Devastates to the Extreme

Society has mostly lost its capacity to bind together in a bigger identity due to weakening of social bonding in such situations in every state, whether in Asia or Africa or Europe. The feeling of inter-connect and inter dependency, and the act of sharing among members are getting replaced by the marketplace. Sectarian divisions are gradually hardened in this situation. This third level is the most complicated as it brings in segmental approach which weakens our vision to look from a holistic approach to life, living and people.

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