

The Unfolding Culture of Intolerance: A Tale of Two Festivals

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The recent decision of the Taliban authorities to destroy Buddha statues in Bamiyan has attracted international attention. In fact the Taliban troops have launched a big campaign against the historical statues using every weapon at their command starting from Tank to rocket launchers. The campaign to race all statues began in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Ghazni, and Bamiyan. The statues preserved in the Kabul Museum will not be spared, the Taliban information minister, Quadratullah Jamal said.

The statue at Bamiyan, which has attracted the world most, 53 metre tall- the tallest statue in the world – is the most ancient among these and had been standing there for almost 2800 years. The statement of Mullah Omar that he is merely trying to “implement the Islamic order”, has sparked off a huge debate on whether the co-terminality among culture, religion, territory and politics is justifiable and whether it nourishes a willful negation of historical process of the evolution of human culture.

In fact Taliban has, in many ways, set the agenda for the culture-police in many of the states in the neighbourhood. Even if the rightists in the neighbourhood have decried and vilified that Taliban, they have derived their conceptual basis as well as the operational instrumentalities from the Taliban. They demonstrate the very same emphasis on religious exclusivity and hatred of eclectic influences; the very same self-righteous dismissal of difference and diversity; move to territorialise cultural specificities; overpowering urge to coerce all dissent into submission and a suicidal love for ‘violence’. Taliban has in fact emerged as a model for the religious forces to emulate in this part of the world.

South Asia: Hotbed of Intolerance

A wave of intolerance is sweeping the region in recent times, many concerned observers of South Asian politics would say. The high priests of religion are having a field day. They are feeding on the insecurities of the people and assuring them tickets to heaven. The ‘other world’ has taken precedence over ‘this world’, in spite of the crass materialism that has held sway in the wake of the penetration of ‘global’ into the remotest of the ‘locales’. From Talibans, Jihadis to Shiv Sainiks the misdirected youth has become the fodder of the high-pitched political grind-mill. Protecting the culture has become the ruling theme and the faithfuls (or faith-fools?) have surrendered their capacity to ‘think’ to the ‘holier-than-thou’ holy-men in every religion. Intoxicated with a zeal to establish their separate transcendent conceptions – the Eeswar, the God, the Allah, the Wahe Guru – as ‘the God’, the diverse militant outfits have acted in uniform ways – the jihaidis, the sainiks and the like – have all sought to drive home the message of supremacy of their religion in violent ways. It is as if the spirit of the crusades of the Middle Ages is haunting South Asia these days.

Valentine Day in India: An Alien Festival

On February 14, the Valentine Day, in India, the self proclaimed guardians of religion and culture – the Shiv Sainiks (soldiers of Lord Shiva) and the workers of other right wing Hindu organizations like Hindu Jagaran Manch (HJM- the Organisation for Revival of Hinduism), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP- roughly translated as World Hindu Association), Bajrang Dal (the soldiers of the Monkey God), Sanskriti Raksha Manch (SRM – Association for Protection of Culture) etc - came out onto the streets and took several places of celebration by storm.

They went on a rampage in many parts of India, invading gift shops, burning V cards and disrupting festivities. In Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh as in the capital city of New Delhi these 'sainiks' shattered glass-windows of the shops and smashed cars. In the cities of Bhopal, Indore and Jabalpur, the protest against the celebration of the Valentine's day reached a fever pitch. In Jabalpur alone eighteen people (Six policemen and 12 workers of SRM) were injured when police tried to rein in about 200 SRM protesters, who went about ransacking shops and vandalizing the town armed with hockey sticks and lathis. Eight people were injured in the city of Bareilly, in Varanasi the BJP Student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Student's Association) chopped the hair of several youths celebrating Valentine's Day in the campus of the Varanasi Hindi University, and blackened their faces and in Kanpur, HJM activists burnt an effigy of Saint Valentine and forced closure of shops selling V cards and gifts.

Needless to mention, the Shiv Sena Supremo, the cartoonist-turned-fascist rabble rouser of Mumbai, Bal Thackeray, had denounced Valentine's Day as Christian festival alien to India's traditional cultural heritage. However, ironically, in hotels, where her daughter Smita and the Shiv Sena mayor of Mumbai, Harashwar Patil had shares, Valentine Day celebrations went on as usual without any disruption. The Chef in Dahisar run by Mr. Patil and the Green Village Hotel in Malad shared by Ms Smita Thackeray, printed beckoning invitations to customers in the wake of the Valentine Day. Mumbai celebrated Valentine Day in somber and peaceful way.

The legend of St. Valentine

It is useful here to give a short introduction to the festival that celebrates love and trace its origin. The Day of love (the Feast of Lupercalia), an equivalent of Valentine's Day, started in the time of the Roman Empire. In ancient Rome, February 14th was a holiday to honour Juno, the Queen of the Roman Gods and Goddesses. The Romans respected her as the Goddess of women and marriage. The following day, February 15th, began the Feast of Lupercalia. On these occasions, amidst a variety of pagan ceremonies, on the eve of the festival of Lupercalia the names of Roman girls were written on slips of paper and placed into jars. Each young man would draw a girl's name from the jar and would then be partners for the duration of the festival with the girl whom he chose. Sometimes the pairing of the children lasted an entire year, and often, they would fall in love and would later marry.

But there was an Emperor, Claudius II, who is also known in history as Claudius the Cruel, who was the enemy of love. He was a megalomaniac and wanted to raise a big army and conquer the world. During his time, Rome was involved in many bloody and unpopular campaigns and he

was having a difficult time persuading his subjects to join his army to conduct his ambitious military missions. He somehow believed that the main reason for the disinterestedness of his subject in his war efforts was reason was that the Roman men did not want to leave their loved ones or families. As a result, Claudius cancelled all marriages and engagements in Rome.

Saint Valentine was a priest at Rome during the days of Claudius, the Cruel. He secretly married couples, and for this kind deed Saint Valentine was apprehended and dragged before the Perfect of Rome, who condemned him to be beaten to death with clubs and to have his head chopped off. He suffered martyrdom on the 14th day of February, about the year 270AD, the day of the celebration of the Lupercalia.

The pastors of the early Christian Church in Rome endeavored to do away with the pagan element in these feasts by substituting the names of saints for those of maidens. And as the Lupercalia began about the middle of February, the pastors appear to have chosen Saint Valentine's Day for the celebration of this new feast. Since then the day of love has been celebrated all over the world and the spirit of love has even pushed the story of the Saint behind. As such it is anything but Christian religious festival and has a human appeal.

Basant in Pakistan

And now on to another controversial festival in the month of February in the sub-continent which is being celebrated over the years with even greater jest and enthusiasm – the festival of Basant. It is a festival to mark the onset of spring and usually celebrated in north India, in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. However, it is celebrated with fanfare and pomp in Lahore, in Pakistan, over the years.

There are many theories on the origin of Basant in the subcontinent. In the 13th century, according to some historical accounts, Basant was celebrated as a festival to welcome spring. As the yellow mustard flower bloom all around in the fields to mark the advent of spring, the colour yellow is taken as a symbol of the coming season. It is mentioned by many chroniclers that Amir Khustro, the famous poet and musician in Alluddin Khilji's court, used to participate in it wearing a yellow robe and dancing to please his spiritual mentor Khwaja Nizamuddin. There are also stories about the Mughal princes celebrating Basant in their royal palaces. According to another account, a Hindu boy named Haqiqat Rai from Lahore was sentenced to death for blasphemy during Aurangzeb's reign under orders from Moghul Governor Nawaz Zikriya Khan. On his burial some Hindus put on yellow turbans and clothes which gradually became an annual feat.

During the Sikh period, however, there are detailed and dependable accounts of official and regular celebration of the festival of Basant. The festival enjoyed royal patronage during the reign of Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja moved in a procession on the Basant day from the Fort to the Shalimar Gardens where the elite celebrated with dance and wine. The entire procession and a large number of Lahorites, lined up on both sides of the route, wore yellow to hail the coming of the spring. Since then, different religious communities began to celebrate Basant separately: Sikhs at Gurdawara Mangat, Hindus at the Samadhi of Haqiqat Rai and the Muslims, along with

some Hindus, at the shrine of Mado Lal Hussain. Even Ranjit Singh used to visit the shrine after starting the day with a reading of Guru Granth Sahib.

Many commentators in Pakistan do not dispute its pre-Islamic origin and say that “there is no denying the fact that Basant is a festival of the land that started with the Hindus. When the Muslims came to this part of the world they joined in, obviously, considering it a cultural rather than a religious activity... But Basant in Lahore has developed its own distinctive and glorious contours. Today the world knows Basant not as a Hindu or Sikh festival – or for that matter a Muslim festival – but as a Lahori festival. People from all over the world came to the city of Lahore to witness Basant.

An Un-Islamic Festival!

The Hindu aura of the Basant has been detested by many in Pakistan who consider Basant as a predominantly Hindu festival and the conservative elements have even dissuaded people from celebrating such a Hindu festival. In fact in the wake of this year’s celebration of Basant, and Advocate MD Tahir had appealed to the Lahore High Court to impose a judicial ban on Basant celebration declaring it un-Islamic. The appellant had described Basant as a Hinduistic festival and held it as a threat to public peace and life. He has also sought a complete ban on manufacturing and selling of kites and other related materials. The appellant had relied mainly on Article 2,2(a), 9,14,37 and 237 of the Pakistani Constitution read with provisions of Shariat Act of 1991. Pinpointing the adverse effects of Basant celebrations and kite flying, the appellant contended that it provided a joy to only one per cent at the cost of peace of 99 per cent population. However, a Division Bench of the Lahore High Court on February 16, disallowed the request to ban the Basant celebration which was supposed to be held the day after and referred the matter to Council for Islamic Ideology (CII) so that it could recommend steps after examining the Basant event from the Islamic point of view. The court observed the proper forum for the resolution of law is either the Federal Shariat Court under Article 203(d) of the Constitution or the CII. It is a settled mandate of the Constitution, observed the Court that it has allowed both these bodies, namely FSC and the CII, to operate in their respective spheres. The conclusion was that all such laws, which apply to Muslims in their capacity as Muslims, in their capacity as Muslims, whether they were statutory or otherwise, have been left to be dealt with by the CII, said the Court taking support from a Pak Supreme Court decision passed in 1981.

As the Judiciary left it to the legislature to debate over the issue in the coming days, this year, unlike the years before, Basant was celebrated with unprecedented enthusiasm and splendour in Lahore. As many commentators in Pakistan would say, “it has been celebrated with fervour over the past few years but the current season’s level and scale have become unprecedented because of governmental interest for the festival”. The Punjab Government declared it as Jashn-I-Baharan (Festival of Spring) and the official encouragement made the festival look even grander. Further, the element of commercialisation that crept into the festival with the MNCs like Coca Cola floating banners and buntings and lent it even a more lasting appeal.

Popular Enthusiasm

The 24-hour long Basant festival which began in Lahore with unprecedented enthusiasm on February 17 night concluded at sunset on February 18 with massive show of fireworks. The official patronage this year attracted guests from other cities and abroad who flew kites and enjoyed traditional local food. Arrangements by police and district administration and the arrest of the hooligans discouraged serial firing. Though there was curbs on flying kites with metal wire, a main source of disrupting power supply, people did not care. Four people died and over 300 injured in Basant celebrations in Lahore. Police arrested hundreds of people for violating ban on aerial firing and the use of metal string.

A predominantly Lahori festival, the festival many commentators said had now shifted venue to be observed by people in Karachi too. It was reported in Pak media that Karachi saw various basant galas being organized this year. However, the Karachi administration banned the celebration of Basant District South, and prohibited all major hotels and exclusive clubs from organizing any events to mark the advent of spring. The administrations in Pakistan behave in disparate ways. In Lahore Basant looks a 'National Carnival' and in Karachi it is an unwelcome 'alien' festival.

In this connection it is pertinent to mention here now many commentators have come out with their sharp and scathing attack on the conservative section who have branded Basant a Hindu festival. Many have gone to the extent of saying that the accidents that have occurred during the festival may not be an excuse to put a ban on the festival. Nasir Abbas Mirza writing in The nation on 23 February argued that "As long as there is life on this over-crowded planet of ours, there will be accidents. With all the money, technology and safety standards, the developed world is still unable to stop submarines from either sinking or crashing into friendly trawlers. Accidents at Christmas, football games and crime and killing associated with the Carnival at Rio or at the Notting Hill Parade, London, go on unabated every year these unfortunate accidents are considered a painful but inevitable part of activities in which people participate by the millions. Basant is no exception".

And many have reiterated the sub-continental face of Pakistan on this occasion. Thus says Kamran Safi in The News on February 26, "Might I say that Pakistan is part of the subcontinent. And that, therefore, the festivals of the subcontinent, specially those which had nothing to do with the religions of the subcontinent, were always celebrated by all of its people... Might I also say that no matter how hard anyone tries (as General Zia did) this country can never become a part of the Middle East, if only because its culture; its history; and yes, its geographical location precludes that. No matter how hard anyone tries, Pakistan will always be part and parcel of the subcontinent." And many commentators came out with their open criticism of the conservative elements and it was soon seen that those elements were either silences or co-opted into the all absorbing Basant gala.

Conclusion

If one compares and contrasts these two festivals one finds there is a tight-lipped intellectual silence on the rightist assertion on the occasion of Valentine Day celebrations in India. The saffron wave haunting India these days have many unwilling co-opters from the ranks of the intellectuals who have chosen to join the wave with their passive silence, if not with their public

approval. And in many cases their private dissent fails to go beyond the four walls of their drawing rooms. This is the difference between two societies in the neighbourhood. The voices of dissent in a near-theocratic, regimented society have been more strident and piercing than the voices of dissent in a so-called liberal democratic secular society. How long the saffron madness choke the voices of the liberal constituency in India remains to be seen. They have to act decisively, or else, India may be Talibanized ahead of Pakistan.

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