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The politics of hate in India—An extension of vote bank politics?

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By R.Upadhyay

Generally we avoid writing on the internal developments in India. The reason is that however much we may try to be objective, yet it is likely to be misconstrued as supporting one party or other. Mr. Upadhyay has consistently been writing on the dangers of “vote bank politics” that is being practised by almost all parties in India. To me, it appears that he is fighting a losing battle. So long as we have the “first past the post” system where the winner takes all, vote bank politics will continue to play havoc with our democracy. Demonising an individual as Hitler or an Asura will not help. Confront him with your own ideas on the political, economic and governance fronts.

Upadhyay’s opinion is his own and not that of South Asia Analysis Group. Director

The incessant and the longest running hate campaign against Narendra Modi launched by the secularists, caste-ists, communists, religious extremists and left-liberal NGOs, social activists, media and academics since the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 suggest that the political class which cannot think beyond the vote bank politics are scared of Modi-phobia as the latter seems to have posed a challenge to the prevailing political culture in the country. He is perhaps viewed as the anti-thesis of this politics.

The entire discourse of this individual-centric hate politics is first of its kind in the political history of post-British India. Ram Jethmalani in his article in on line Sunday Guardian observed, “No politician in independent India has been demonised in such a relentless, Goebbelsian manner as Narendra Modi, and no politician has withstood it with as much resilience and courage as him, notwithstanding the entire Central government, influential sections of the media machinery and civil society arraigned against him” (<http://www.sunday-guardian.com/analysis/the-rise-and-rise-of-tomorrows-p...>) [1]

Leaving apart the much deadly communal history of Muslim and British India, hundreds of riots have taken place all over India. But none of

them created the “individual centric hate politics” we witness today on the Gujarat riots.

Take for instance the 2012 communal riots in Assam. The Bodo-Muslim clash in August 2012 resulted in thousands of victims killed or uprooted from their houses. The Chief Minister of Assam is said to have delayed the deployment of Army, but no one launched any hate campaign against him.

The height of hate campaign was seen in Kerala in April last when Congress and Communist leaders refused to attend Sivagiri Mutt event for which Modi was invited. But the people thought it otherwise and a large number attended..

Though the hate journey against Modi though started in 2002, its upsurge was noticed at national level after his ascension as election campaign chief of the BJP followed by the break of the 17-year old Janata Dal (United) and the Bhartiya Janata Party alliance which ended the coalition government in Bihar.

Whether Narendra Modi will be the next Prime Minister or not is not the issue here. It is not my concern either. But what pains me is the systematic “hate” campaign being mounted when he is projecting himself as an efficient and pro development politician.

A divisive politics with a strong divisive hate campaign is not good for Indian democracy. It is a danger to India’s trusted faith in secularism. For these politicians the Gujarat riots alone matter and nothing else.

Vote bank is a political reality in secular India since Independence and has in fact become a part of the vocabulary of Indian politics. With the spread of regionalism, proliferation of political parties and unprincipled alliances, elections in India are hardly contested on the basis of political ideology.

Almost all the political parties have used this vote bank politics according to their political convenience. Although, its character varies from state to state on the basis of caste, ethnicity, language and regional factors, unfortunately only the Muslims are being targeted. May be that though they may not be in a position to win the seats by themselves but they are in a position to tilt the electoral balance in a number of constituencies. Hence the community is being wooed though one may wish that some senior leader of the community could get up and say “Leave us alone.”

Muslims constitute about 15 percent of country's population. With over 20 % of electorate in 95 Lok Sabha constituencies (Electoral Politics and General Elections in India 1952-98 by M. L.Ahuja, 1998, Page 277), they are said to have the potential to play a decisive role in the outcome. This is what makes them easy prey to vote bank politics of other parties.

Initially, the Congress inherited this divisive politics from the colonial rulers and maintained its monopoly over Muslim votes for many years and remained in power.

Subsequently, following the footsteps of the Congress most of the political parties also emerged as champions for the cause of protecting the religious identity. They raised issues like Muslim personal law, article 370, Urdu language, Ayodhya and now Narendra Modi but never offered any remedial solution for the modernised education for the Muslim masses. Instead, to allure the community they bribe some hand-picked Islamists with foreign ancestry by offering some share in political power. Understanding the weakness of the political parties, these Islamists consolidated the community into a reserve vote bank and became its self made directors.

The RJD in Bihar and SP in Uttar Pradesh, which could emerge as a political force on the basis of caste and vote bank politics of minorities took advantage of the situation and aggressively propagated against the danger of communalism from the majority community. The Muslims of these States found in them as the saviours of their religious identity

With the objective to break the Muslim- Yadav alliance of Lalu Yadav who ruled Bihar for fifteen years, the BJP having influence in upper castes joined hands with Janata Dal (U) under the leadership of Nitish Kumar who consolidated the none-Yadava backward castes and won over the Muslims with the same strategy of winning over the leaders of the Muslims belonging to the ajlaf (low born Muslims) who constitute a much larger percentage of the community in the country. Thus with the support of extremely backward castes, caste Hindus and the Ajlafs, the BJP and JD (U) alliance came to power in Bihar since 2005.

It is the allure of the vote bank politics that has influenced Nitish Kumar to breakaway from the NDA and go on his own hoping that the minority community would vote for him in the next general elections. It is too early now to predict how the minorities would vote for him or not in next Lok Sabha election, but he is taking a chance!

It is a pity that the political leadership in Independent India never took serious note to resolve the consistent bitter relation between the two major religious communities. On one hand the political parties continuously scared the community against the imaginary danger to their religious identity at the hands of the Hindu nationalists and on the other the leaders of the community never allowed them to integrate in Indian society. Modernisation of Muslims which is a key to development was never an issue of concern for either the political or community leadership of the country.

A section in the community might have full faith in democracy but their voice is so feeble and weak that they are unable to bring out their community from their religion-centric identity. In a wider context of Indian society, modernisation of Muslims is possible only with their modernised education. But assertive institutionalisation of the communal distinctiveness by their leaders obstructed them to think independently about their overall development as a part of Indian society as a whole.

Indian politics has changed over the past decades. New generations of political leaders have emerged, but the status of Muslims in India

remains virtually unchanged. The community has not seen any perceptible improvement as the largest minority in the country. Progress in the fields of sports, entertainment and, to some extent, in education is the result of individual talent, efforts, and support from private organizations. The government's contribution to these individual successes appears to be almost nil.

The level of education is consistently low in the Muslim community, especially among the female population for which they are themselves responsible. The Union minorities affairs minister K Rahman Khan during his interview with Saudi Gazette (January 5, 2013) honestly blamed Indian Muslims themselves for their educational backwardness. Citing the example of civil services examination taken by about 400,000 candidates every year he said that not even 4,000 Muslims sit this exam but secure about 40 out of 700-800 successful candidates.

The purpose of democratic system is to stimulate competition, increase prosperity and improve standards of living. Political parties playing vote bank politics generously dispense freebies to minorities for their votes, but, it is very important for the people to understand that every benefit has its cost. These donated benefits make them and their future generation barren, less motivated, uncompetitive and, eventually, permanently dependent on government handouts. In a democratic system, most people make their own choices and they flourish and prosper. However, there are people who don't mind being the victims of vote bank politics, and this is the second biggest pitfall of democratic system.

The pro-development politics of Modi is a new development and should not be dismissed off hand. If it could break the trend of the strong vote bank politics, it will be a great contribution to Indian democracy, no matter whether he wins or loses.

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