

India turns 60: Anti-conversion laws disgrace its birthday

India turned sixty on August 15, 2007 and as citizens of this great nation, we have many reasons to be legitimately proud of our achievements in all spheres of life. From a struggling economy up until the 1980s, we have now become a vibrant economy with 9% growth rate; and the world around no longer view India as an underdeveloped country with millions of famished people, plagued by drought and disease, malnutrition and illiteracy, caste wars and communal riots, and above all undependable in trade and commerce.

India has gained a new status and respect in the international market both for goods and services: India has over the last few years multiplied its global share of exports thus building up a more than comfortable level of foreign exchange reserve; produced hundreds of thousands of professionals who are sought after in many economically advanced countries. Cumulatively, they have made a huge difference in the global perspectives on India as a vibrant and strong nation that can no longer be taken for granted.

Our democratic institutions have survived and to some extent consolidated over the last six decades of independence. Our political elections, a massive exercise unparalleled in the world, have become more transparent and dependable - thanks to the people at the helm of the election commission affairs. There is much more public discourses on the very process of election, and people have become more discerning on their choices of political leaders and parties. It is quite a consoling matter to notice that the elections in the country are getting more development centric rather than on the basis of religious, ethnic and social stratification. Although our political class has been announcing from the rooftops about the need for social cohesions and religious harmony, we have not achieved much on this front largely due to the socially divisive policies we have been pursuing for whatever reason.

That our society is still far from being cohesive is best manifested in the political fragmentation based on social stratification. While on one hand, formation of political parties based on distinctive social base seems to be the natural outcome of the rising aspirations of people for development and progress, it also reinforces divisive tendencies that in the long run can only lead to alienation of people within the nation.

In addition to the social stratification serving as a reference point for many a political party to thrive and to catapult to the centers of power, religion has also been dragged into the vortex of political maneuvering with its disastrous consequences on the Indian polity. It is not that religion is simply an anathema in public spheres, it has its significant place in human society and its dynamics as Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, politics without religion can be blind pursuit of power and it does not go well with societal concerns. But to draw religion into the process of politicking is to mistake the wood for the trees.

An unimaginative alliance of religion and politics can be quite disastrous, to say the least. Human history has witnessed the consequences arising out of attempts to erase all differences of orientation of politics and religion. The French revolution was a case in point where the commoners wrested power from the religious leaders who also had appropriated the temporal powers. Similarly in many other parts of the world, people revolted against invoking religion for the sake of attaining political ascendancy.

In India, religion has always played a decisive role in social and political life. And it was perhaps accepted as normal that not many questioned it even when decadence set in at different periods of time in history. And for most part of Indian history it was monarchical rule, which left with hardly any space for commoners to make their voice heard; the King's word was the last word on his

territory. But things began to change in a free democratic India with its new Constitution that guarantees fundamental rights to its citizens which among others include the freedom to profess, practice and propagate one's religious belief. However, this Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious faith to citizens is flouted time and again by various States of India with apparent immunity.

State after State has been legislating against the right of citizens to change his/her religious persuasion; if at all they wish to do so, then it has to be scanned and approved by the civil administrative machinery. It seems to me that such appropriation of powers by the State over people's inner life guided mostly by religious persuasion is a clear case of trespassing territories proper to it. Just as religious leaders do not enter into civil administrative matters as they lie outside their proper territory of competence, the civil administration should also keep their hands off religious matters that are to be guided by those who are competent and designated by the community. What is of utmost importance here is to create and maintain proper decorum that gives decent space to each segment of society and its leadership to exercise their legitimate powers that determine the development and welfare of people.

Human being bereft of freedom is a less being. What characterizes human essence is his ability for volition, and the State is there to guarantee that fundamental nature of its citizens and not to curb it. Whenever and wherever there have been attempts to curb it, people have not taken it lying down; they resisted and often restored their birthright. Sardar Patel was right in saying *Swaraj mera janmasidh adhikar hai*, (Self rule is my birth right) and that by no stretch of imagination is limited to political freedom alone but preeminently in the personal realm of each citizen. Freedom of religious belief comes under this sacred and non-negotiable realm of an individual citizen and any interference of State here, except for reasons of public order, is totally uncalled for.

As India has completed 60 years of independence, we would have expected it to move forward in a manner that will ensure greater freedom in personal, professional and political realms while achieving better economic progress and development. But that is not exactly what we have been witnessing over the years particularly on the social front. What we need to realize with a sense of urgency is that no economy is sustainable when those behind its driving seat are a disunited lot; it requires a nationally committed and socially inclusive, culturally accommodative society. And that is what we need to strive for at this critical juncture of our nation's history.

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