

# RESTORE INDIA'S HERITAGE OF A SHARED PEOPLEHOOD

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

Debasing the nation's greatness | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The Gladstonian Liberal, John Morley (1838-1923), opposed imperialism and supported Irish Home Rule. But he had a dim view of India's aspirations for freedom. 'There is, I know,' wrote Morley, 'a school of thought who say that we might wisely walk out of India and that Indians can manage their own affairs better than we can. Anyone who pictures for himself the anarchy, the bloody chaos that would follow, might shrink from that sinister decision.' Disapproving of reformist enlargements to Indian franchise and representation, he rebuked the 'reformers' with searing words : 'When across the dark distances you hear the sullen roar and scream of carnage and confusion, your hearts will reproach you with what you have done.'

Quoting these two observations of Morley's in an essay on the man, Winston S. Churchill wrote (in his *Great Contemporaries*), ominously : 'Only time can show whether his fears were groundless.'

Today as we approach the 75th anniversary of India's freedom, we may ask if time has disproved those grim prognoses contained in Morley's keywords.

Is there 'anarchy' in India?

Absolutely not. Ours may be called by observers a turbulent democracy. True, some of our leaders often forget the laws, forget that there is such a thing as the Constitution of India. And many politicians speak with hatred in their minds and poison on their tongues with impunity. That does not make India a lawless desert.

Is there 'bloody chaos'?

Of course not. Yes, there are moments of mayhem, hours of bedlam, days of havoc. Our legislatures know pandemonium. Our government offices know disarray. But bloody chaos? No way! Our chaotic moments can be bad, they are not bloody.

Is there 'confusion'?

Yes, there is. It is something new. And it has been deliberately sown, assiduously nurtured. It is about what our national identity is, what we as a people are in our core beings. India has been, through the ages, about three 'C's — caste, creed and country. The first is a matter of kinship, the second about worship, the third about citizenship. The first two are about high sentiment, the third about a high ideal. Leaders of India's renaissance did not want the first two to engulf the third. They wanted the first to become irrelevant, the second to become a private matter, the third to engage us. Today, caste and, more to the point, religion, are engulfing the country. The Hindu-Muslim divide is at its sharpest ever since Independence.

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And do we hear the 'sullen roar and scream of carnage'?

One has to be where, in W.B. Yeats' words, 'the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and...the ceremony of innocence is drowned' to hear that roar and scream. If these two fearsome sounds had been heard for the first and last time when India was partitioned, one might have let the horrible trauma recede in our collective memories. But no, just as it had happened many times before India became independent, and happened at the hour of freedom, it has happened afterwards again and over again. When did it happen last? One can say 'yesterday'. One can say 'yesterday' every day, knowing that the 'yesterday' can spew into 'today', any day.

The Hindu-Muslim divide growing to a new and menacing proportion diminishes our country, debases its greatness, destroys its heritage of a shared Peoplehood.

Riots have invariably started over flimsy incidents, like fires generally are, but Hindu-Muslim riots have got quickly co-opted by other entities, with the help of mercenaries to serve sinister purposes. 'Entities' is a euphemism; we know who those are. They belong to both denominations.

Who started the disturbances on Ram Navami day? We are unlikely to ever know. Who gained, we will and already do know — nameless, faceless, soulless manipulators. Who lost, who suffered, is tragically known as well — Hindu and Muslim innocents. But more, beyond those innocents, who bleeds? Our country, its cohesion, its coherence, its conscience.

Social media spread the news of early incidents with the speed of light. District authorities in Madhya Pradesh, according to reports, had houses of some of those implicated in the rioting demolished. They acted surgically. Who came under the 'blade'? Destroyers of public property being made to pay for that destruction is sound, but is it sound to make the wives and children of the accused also pay by being rendered roofless?

In 1924, terrible Hindu-Muslim riots scarred the Muslim-majority district of Kohat, in the North-West Frontier Province. Gandhi went on a 21-day fast in Delhi by way of penance. Emerging from it, greatly weakened, he said in a feeble voice to those gathered around him: 'We ought to be able to live together. The Hindus must be able to offer their worship in perfect freedom in their temples, and so should Mussalmans be able to say their azan and prayer with equal freedom in their mosques. If we cannot ensure this elemental freedom of worship, then neither Hinduism nor Islam have any meaning.'

'There is no point citing Gandhi today; he is ancient history', I can hear the dejected reader say and my first instinct would be to say 'I know.' But there are many, many of them wielding great influence, who would demur. The stand on secularism taken by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M.K. Stalin, in recent policy pronouncements, [citing Gandhi and Bhagat Singh](#), has been exemplary. The statements of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in its just concluded conclaves in Kannur, have been salutary. These complement the traditionally strong positions on secularism taken by the Indian National Congress and many other political parties across the country. Very significant has been the statement of the former Chief Minister of Karnataka, B.S. Yediyurappa on the Ram Navami violence: 'It is our desire that both Hindus and Muslims should live like children of the same mother.'

It is time now for the courts of the land to take a stand, with the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Minorities as their thought-partners to uphold the Preamble and Article 25 of our Constitution. In [S.R. Bommai vs Union of India \(1994\)](#), the Supreme Court of India held that secularism is one of the basic features of the Constitution. To weaken the freedom of conscience is to weaken a fundamental freedom. The spewing of hatred by inflammatory words and any abetting of those by elements in power belittle the Constitution and betray the people of India. It cannot be permitted. Communalism inverts our citizenship,

perverts our humanity, subverts our Constitution.

Very recently, as many as 100 Muslim residents of Dalvana, a village in Gujarat's Vadgam taluka were invited to offer Maghrib Namaz and break their fast during the Ramzan month on the premises of its Vir Maharaj Mandir, a 1,200-year-old temple. 'When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy....' wrote Tagore.

In the prevailing aridity, Gujarat has shown that grace has not been lost.

We do not have to disprove Morley and Churchill. We have to prove ourselves to the conscience of our Republic.

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