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LIVING IN THE AGE OF MORAL DYSTOPIA

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Ethics in Private and Public relationships

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September 05, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 12:15 am IST

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A man stands near the debris of his shop in Nuh district, Haryana. | Photo Credit: PTI

We are living in the age of moral dystopia, a norm-less era where it is difficult for men and women to be human and convenient for the state to be less than neutral, just, and fair. Leaders not only fail to keep their pledges, but they are not even expected to keep them. The government wears its majoritarian colours with pride, unabashed and unedifying. In a tragic case of downward filtration, it all percolates down to everyday lived experience of the faceless multitudes. Monuments, offices, and houses all seem to be judged by the faith or political predilections of their builders and occupants. If you question the actions of the government or the actions of non-state actors taking out hate marches, you become the most vulnerable. Conformism is the norm today. Humanism, justice, and freedom have all been consigned to the deep freeze, to be retrieved at some indefinable point in future.

Take the case of activist-public speaker Yogita Bhayana, who helped rebuild the shop of an old Muslim man days after goons had set it on fire in Gurugram. The moment this news was shared on social media along with the video of the grateful man, many trolled Ms. Bhayana. Some advised her, rather sarcastically, to go and help another 50-60 men down the road who had suffered too. Others reminded her of the Hindu women in the neighbourhood. In a not-too-distant past, Ms. Bhayana would have been hailed for promoting communal harmony. But not today.

Now, the value system has changed, and shared living is no longer a cherished ideal for millions. It is to each their own, as Anis discovered in Nuh around the same time. He had given shelter to three Hindu men who faced a danger to their life from an approaching mob. The men were grateful to be alive. A day later, his house was damaged by a bulldozer, which went on an overdrive in the State. Finally, the Punjab and Haryana High Court stepped in, stating clearly, "Apparently, without any demolition orders and notices, the law-and-order problem is being used as a ruse to bring down buildings without following the procedure established by law. The issue also arises whether the buildings belonging to a particular community are being brought down under the guise of law-and-order problem and an exercise of ethnic cleansing is being conducted by the State."

Moral fibre was long since damaged, but this tattered? How else does one explain the sordid and public humiliation of women in Manipur and the whataboutery that followed in the top echelons of power? How does one even attempt to rationalise women handing over women to a mob? Or people marching in favour of the men accused of gang-rape of an eight-year-old girl in

Kathua?

Today, we wish to hold to account a king or an invader for the ignominy he probably visited some 400 or 1,000 years ago. But we find our lips glued together when it comes to seeking justice for victims in Manipur or Haryana. We talk of invaders and how they broke many a place of worship, some real and some imagined, and set about righting historical wrongs. And how do we do that? By attacking the place of worship of the faith of the monarch who died hundreds of years ago. And so, we have had repeated attacks on mosques in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and now Haryana. We have stayed quiet. After all, what is a mosque but a *dhancha* or structure, as senior BJP leader L.K. Advani once said with respect to the Babri Masjid? Now, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath says the same about Gyanvapi. There is no regret, no sense of shame. It is just history on rewind. And we just watch.

These are indeed times of moral foibles. Every nation has its moments of neuroses. In our case, it is collective short-term amnesia. We watch and we forget. We read and we move on. Be it a man being lynched, a shop being demolished, or a woman being brutalised, our memory seems to be like a sieve. We retain very little. Are we weary of the daily sordid spectacle? Probably. Are we too occupied with the daily goings-on to really care? Most likely. Either way, it emboldens intolerant, even violent non-state actors to do what they do. If it were about a mosque here or a shop there, the rot or the mob would have been controllable. It is not, and there lies the problem.

Today, the executioners of injustice don't need a mob with its tridents, hammers and pickaxes. Today, bulldozers get down to work. Even as a man's life's earning in the form of a tiny shop or a small concrete dwelling is razed to the ground, yesterday's mob member is today's selfie-seeker. Some make a video to upload on social media. We saw a cow vigilante pounce upon a weak man and record himself harassing and abusing him. We saw how a policeman on a train killed his supervising officer and three Muslim passengers and then made a video hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Adityanath even as one of the bleeding men took his last breath near his boots. People often make videos, but few attempt to save the life of innocent people. As for bulldozer victims, they are spectators to their own destruction, brick by brick, slab by slab. Sections of the media, meanwhile, hail the rising pile of debris as a proof of instant justice.

The ferocity of destruction through bulldozers, the bestiality of mob lynchings, the brutalisation of a large segment of our population — we have seen it all. Quietly, maybe even wearily. Anomie is a lived experience in 'New India'.

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PETULANT INTIMIDATION: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE FIR AGAINST EDITORS' GUILD MEMBERS

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Dimensions of ethics

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September 07, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 12:26 am IST

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The registration of [a police case against editors representing the Editors Guild of India \(EGI\)](#) and the belligerent remarks of the Manipur Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, constitute a petulant and intimidatory response to a report released by a fact-finding committee of the EGI. The report's focus was on media coverage of the [ethnic conflict that broke out early in May](#), and its main conclusion was that there was one-sided coverage by journalists during the conflict, but it also contained observations and conclusions indicating that the State leadership was partisan during the conflict. In a welcome move, the Supreme Court of India has given interim protection from arrest to those named in the first information report (FIR). Mr. Singh has sought to justify the filing of an FIR under sections relating to promoting enmity between two communities and wounding religious feelings by claiming that the three-member panel's report is one-sided and may provoke further violence. However, going beyond criticising the report, he said its authors were "anti-state, anti-national and anti-establishment" and claimed that he would not have permitted them to visit the State had he known their purpose. There is no justification for such intimidatory statements even if Mr. Singh is entitled to disagree with the report. And there can be no doubt that there is no need to prosecute anyone for seeking answers and ascertaining facts about a prolonged spell of violence and conflict.

The Guild sent a team to ascertain facts in response to complaints that the media was playing a partisan role. There was also a complaint from the Indian Army too that the media coverage was "arousing passion and not letting sustainable peace come in". Besides flagging one-sided coverage, the report also underscores that the Internet ban made matters worse and had a deleterious impact on journalism. It reveals a preference for self-censorship — so that the volatile situation was not inflamed further — and reliance on the State government for news. "This narrative under the N. Biren Singh dispensation became a narrow ethnic one playing up to the biases of the majority Meitei community," it says. One may question whether such direct imputation of blame on the government's leadership is needed in a report on media behaviour, but the conclusion also points to the possibility that in conflict situations, partisan or ineffective governance will be reflected in journalistic coverage too. On the wider political canvas, there appears to be no significant initiative to effect reconciliation between the two communities locked in conflict in Manipur and to bring about lasting peace. Meanwhile, it reflects poorly on the authorities if police cases are used to silence fact-finding initiatives of civil society.

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