

The Epidemic of Vigilantism*

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My wife and I retired seven years ago after teaching in Jawaharlal Nehru University for nearly four decades, and neither of us gets a pension. The interest on our joint lifetime savings largely sustains us. This entire amount had to be invested in my name because she was not allowed to do so, as her name on her PAN card was grossly misspelt owing to a clerical error by the concerned authority issuing the card, an error which has not been rectified by it despite decades of effort on our part (though interestingly her tax payments have never been refused for this reason). This arrangement has been going on for several years; but I recently got a letter signed by two executives of the private firm through which our investment is made (whose agents frequent the corridor outside the JNU finance branch in search of potential customers), asking me to explain the source of my investment which they considered to be “disproportionate to the known sources” of my income. They backed off after I replied that it was none of their business and brought the matter to the notice of others within that firm, but it was a clear case of unwarranted vigilantism.

Another, more sinister, instance was reported recently in the papers. Some students from JNU and St. Stephen’s College who had gone on a day-long picnic to a National Park near Delhi, were suddenly surrounded by a mob demanding to know why there was only one girl and four boys among them and how they were related to one another. Some in the mob even tried to molest the girl. The students fortunately were saved by the alertness of the taxi driver who had taken them there and who managed to make a quick getaway along with them.

Such instances can be multiplied. Quite evidently, a veritable epidemic of vigilantism has broken out in the country, where a much larger number of people than ever before now feel that they have the license to throw their weight around, to intimidate the innocent, to harass women, and to engage in lumpen behavior in the guise of enforcing a “moral code”.

The vigilantism of the Hindutva forces, whether as gaurakshaks in villages and small towns, or as “nationalists” in colleges and universities, has been palpable and pervasive. It has attracted wide attention and has been rightly condemned by those who still have the courage to speak out against such things. But this directly Hindutva-inspired vigilantism is also having a “multiplier” effect by way of stimulating a much wider scenario of vigilantism, where the perpetrators may have only a few openly Hindutva-avowing persons among them, in the sense of persons actually belonging to this or that Sanghparivar outfit, but where the vigilantism is carried out nonetheless in the name of defending “our culture”, that is supposedly the Hindu culture.

Such vigilantism, of prurient-minded mobs nosing into people’s private lives, or sundry individuals gleefully throwing their weight around to harass people in the self-righteous belief that they are serving the “nation”, is an equally sinister, but even more comprehensive, intrusion into people’s lives than that of the gaurakshaks and the “nationalists”. The sort of “action” that Hindutva outfits indulged in on specific occasions like Valentine’s Day until now is threatening to become a pervasive

phenomenon engaged in with impunity by lumpen mobs. Vigilantism in short is becoming more widespread, a veritable epidemic that is beyond anyone's direct control.

Each country's fascism has its own specific characteristics apart from certain general features. What we are witnessing here is fascism with Indian characteristics. Fascism elsewhere, say in Germany in the 1930s, was characterized by enormous centralization of power, together with a street "movement" which itself however was centrally directed (for example Ernst Rohm's SA before the "night of long knives"). Indian fascism too has the character of a street "movement", but one that is not necessarily exclusively centrally directed; it has a kind of "spontaneity" that no doubt derives sustenance from the centralization of political power in fascist hands, but is nonetheless distinct from it, even while complementing it. It is a kind of "fascism from below" which complements the "fascism from above" and is stimulated by it, but has a distinct identity of its own. This spectre of "fascism from below" is no less terrifying than "fascism from above"; together they threaten to crush all individual freedom, and negate secularism, democracy and the space for rational discourse.

Such "grassroots vigilantism" to be sure is not an innovation of Hindutva politics and the fascism (or communal-fascism) that such politics is spawning. It is a hallmark of our feudal society and long predates the Modi brand of corporate-backed communal-fascism which is clearly a "modern" phenomenon. But this "modern" fascism creates the conditions in which such "grassroots vigilantism" can thrive. Indeed the fact that fascism allows the thriving of such "grassroots vigilantism" is one of the reasons for the kind of popularity it enjoys in certain quarters.

It has suddenly removed the constraint imposed earlier by the need to be "politically correct", and allowed scope for the expression without impunity of one's lumpen-feudal instincts. This constraint had been there for the last one hundred years, ever since Mahatma Gandhi had called off the non-cooperation movement in response to the Chauri Chaura incident (though that incident of anti-colonial fury can by no means be compared to the mob lumpenism we are witnessing now). Even during the horrendous partition riots when the country witnessed an orgy of violence, there was nonetheless a constant and tireless effort at "rectification" on the part of the country's political leadership, to re-impose the constraint of "correctness". The BJP government however has removed this constraint. Instead of making an attempt to lift politics above the mundane empirical instinct of a mob, it has glorified this instinct itself as its politics, which accounts for the sort of popularity it enjoys in many quarters.

This liberation from the need to be "politically correct" enthuses not only "vigilante" mobs; it is also a source of relief for segments of the middle class who can now give freer expression to their anti-Muslim, anti-dalit and anti-women sentiments. If the mobs smother the notion of individual privacy, then these segments of the middle class now feel free to reject the notion of equality, to which they have been unwillingly paying lip service till now. And the BJP which has created an ambience where such rejection becomes possible is naturally a favourite with them too.

Notions of individual freedom, democracy, equality and reason are the hallmark of true "modernity". It is not the growth rate of the Gross Domestic Product but the degree to which these notions are realized that defines a country's march towards true "modernity". The "modern" phenomenon of fascism ironically, by effectively pook-

poohing these notions, most explicitly through its opposition to secularism, is rolling back India's march to true "modernity". (It is another matter that while doing so it is also overseeing a deceleration in the rate of GDP growth as well). It is noteworthy that one of the arguments of the central government in its submission before the Supreme Court on the question of whether "privacy" constituted a fundamental right, was that privacy had never enjoyed the privileged position in India that it did elsewhere. This actually amounted to explicitly apotheosizing India's pre-modernity, and, hence necessarily by implication, the monstrous inequalities that were associated with it.

The Supreme Court judgement upholding privacy as a fundamental right has been seen by commentators as entailing a restriction on the encroachment by the State on the domain of individual lives, as facilitating same-sex relationships, and so on. All these it certainly does. But it also throws some sand on the mechanism of vigilantism. It may not of course stop the current outburst of vigilantism altogether, but the fact that it has made a pronouncement of principle against it by upholding the right to privacy, is no mean an achievement.

In a situation where the secular political leadership has lost a good deal of its credibility with the people and its attempt to uphold "political correctness" does not cut as much ice now as it did earlier, and where the secular intelligentsia too is looked upon with greater suspicion than before, since it has been a beneficiary and generally an upholder of globalization which has simultaneously affected a large number of ordinary people adversely, the judiciary continues to remain a credible instrument for the reassertion of the values that the Constitution associated with a "modern" India. In the current struggle between "modernity" and fascism, the Supreme Court verdict on the right to privacy must be seen as a beachhead gained.

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