



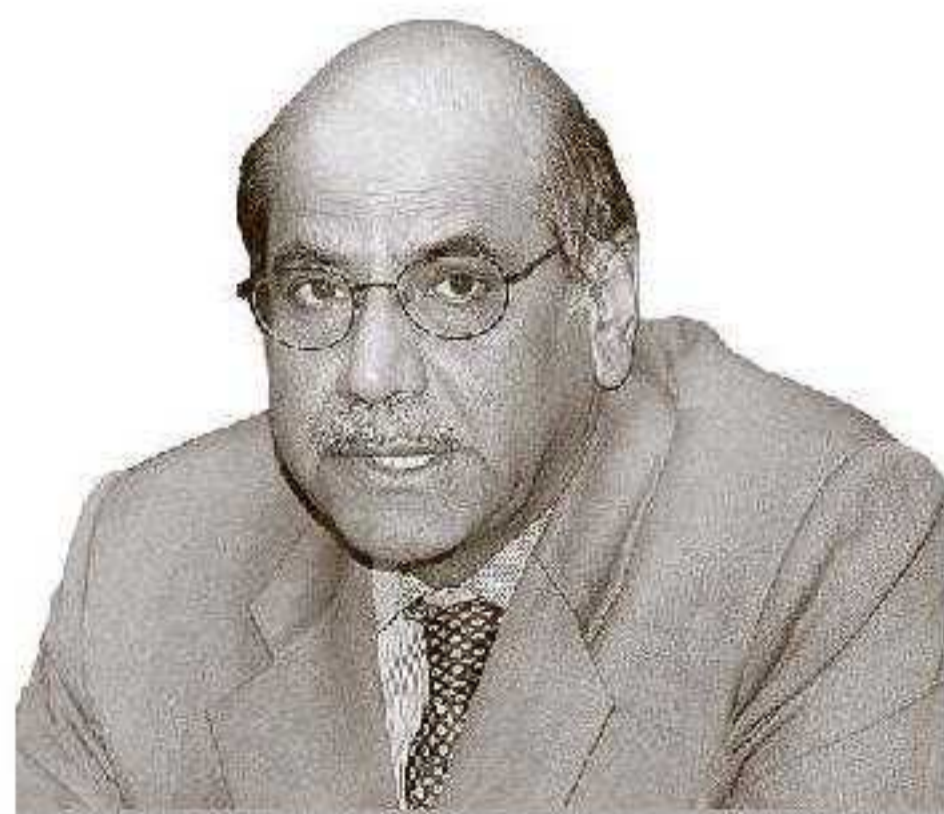
Babri recall: A million mutinies

Unless we put the Constitution at the centre of our political discourse, we are likely to reap a bitter harvest

On December 6, 1992, when the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was being demolished in a paroxysm of hate and anger, my family and I were in Mumbai, en route to my assignment as India's high commissioner to Mauritius. We were unable to stir out of our hotel as, in the aftermath of the horrific incident, Mumbai, too, descended into chaos, with violent and bloody communal clashes in several neighbourhoods. We spent the day watching TV channels broadcasting images of this most shameful of episodes in independent India's history. What was strikingly apparent was the well-planned, indeed well-rehearsed nature of the assault, with hordes of security personnel standing mute witness while the law of the land was being torn into shreds and a motley brand of political leaders were cheer-leading from the sidelines. It reminded me of another similar and shameful episode in 1984 when the Sikhs of India were targeted by violent mobs in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi by one of her Sikh bodyguards. An individual act of murder was made the crime of an entire community. In the Babri case, too, revenge was sought on an entire community for an alleged wrong committed by a co-religionist, long dead and gone. These were grievous body blows on the very notion of India as a citizen-centric, modern, and plural democracy, with equal rights for every Indian, irrespective of caste, creed or faith.

When I arrived in Mauritius the next day, there was

no escape from persistent questions about what the Babri demolition would mean for the future of India. I tried to convince my interlocutors that this was indeed unfortunate but an aberration, which would pass and cherished Indian values of tolerance, of celebrating diversity, and respecting all faiths, would reassert themselves. But it was clear that something had changed in our country. The anti-Sikh riots and now this equally communally-charged incident had the potential of putting the country on a path very different from the vision of India which drove the fathers of the Indian Constitution.



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The Constitution of India begins with the words, "We the people of India." This reflects the conviction that there is only one community in India — that of its equal citizens. All the rights and obligations enshrined in the Constitution are individual and citizen-centric. The framers of the Constitution recognised that due to historical reasons and deeply ingrained social attitudes, some citizens may need, in addition, temporary entitlements based on community to overcome inherent disabilities. Some may wish to adhere to their community norms but that would be an individual choice not dictated by the community. Thus Indian law would recognise an inter-faith marriage as legitimate even if rejected by the communities involved and register it under the Civil Marriages Act. Individual right may not be overridden by community entitlement.

In this notion of citizenship, there is no room for using perceived historical grievances as a basis for making distinctions among citizens however keenly felt those perceptions may be. Once legitimacy is accorded to one such set of grievances there is no way another set of grievances may be rejected. These may be grievances, real or imagined, based on notions of faith, caste, region, language, role of historical or mythological characters or indeed any arbitrary benchmark a group or sub-group may wish to assert. Once community-based entitlements are given precedence over individual-based rights the very idea of a modern and plural democracy is put at risk. Instead of the "We" in our Constitution we begin to define ourselves as the We versus "Them" — a country of competing and contending and increasingly self-entitled communities. The inevitable outcome is the breakup of society into more and more narrow interest groups, each claiming a veto over what any other community can say or do if it involves even its most parochial or obscurantist sentiments. No overarching sense of nationalism can be constructed on such weak and narrow foundations. In the ongoing election campaign for Gujarat, constant appeal is being made by the ruling party to perceived attacks on Gujarati pride or on a "son of Gujarat". As if this makes all other issues in the campaign irrelevant. The prime minister has conveyed that as a Gujarati PM he is able to offer rich benefits to the people of his state. Then how does he intend to be the PM for the whole country?

This is a dilemma not only for him as a political leader but for everyone in the fray. The manner in which the Congress reacted to questions being raised about Rahul Gandhi's Hindu identity is instructive. Instead of being defensive on this score, he could have proudly projected himself as the quintessential Indian — a pedigree boasting of a Kashmiri Brahmin, a nationalist Parsi, a Roman Catholic Italian, and that too just in four generations. But thanks to the rising communal and sectarian drivers of political contestation in the country, that claim may have been considered toxic by his political managers.

In retrospect, one can see clearly that the temptation of using communal sentiments and prejudices for short-term political gain has repeatedly trumped the harder task of constructing a truly citizen-centric democracy in India. What may have been tactical manoeuvres to gain political power have, over time, become the mainstream political narrative. When the demolition of Babri happened, the Bharatiya Janata Party leadership condemned the action of the karsevaks. Former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's anguish was not contrived. The Congress had, in the immediate aftermath, pledged the reconstruction of the masjid on the same spot. Today, there is hardly any voice condemning the incident or its perpetrators. The deafening chorus insisting on building a Ram Mandir on the site is mostly met by an equally deafening silence on this assault on the very idea of India.

We have unleashed a million mutinies and may reap a bitter harvest unless we put our Constitution front and centre of our political discourse.

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