



How the world sees India

The world hears those who shout the loudest and sees those who act with violence. No wonder, India's reputation is getting tarnished

Recent events in India have damaged the country's image as a vibrant, plural and successful democracy. This is a setback not only for India but also for embattled democracies across the world. It is time to reflect on this since, with general election in less than a year, the polarisation and communalisation of our political and social discourse appear to be growing. What is more, social media amplifies these pathologies in an unprecedented manner by enabling their "going viral".

We pride ourselves in being the most tolerant of people, celebrating our diversity of faith, culture and tradition, ways of life and language. Diversity thrives on sharing; it becomes poison when it becomes an instrument for separating "us" from "them". One cannot construct an over-arching Hindu identity on the basis of creating a binary Hindu-Muslim divide. Once the process of division is legitimised in one case, it will inevitably spiral into divisions across the board based on subjective interpretations of faith, of history of various communities and of economic and social grievances finding expression in injured identities. Democracy is based on a constant negotiation of differences, a culture of give and take, and this is only possible when black and white are blended into the greys where compromise and reconciliation are made possible. Polarisation weakens democracy. Communalisation makes it impossible.



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One often hears even educated, middle-class Indians saying that Muslims, Christians and presumably other non-Hindus, are free to live in India but "on our terms", that is, they must be ready to accept a second-class citizenship bestowed generously by a majority community, which is itself an imagined construct. But this means that we must jettison the very notion of democracy and equal rights of every citizen of India. It is only an autocratic and repressive regime that could attempt to impose a discriminatory dispensation on millions of Indians.

This also goes against the very notion of rule of law, which is based on the equality of rights of every citizen of India. How do you bestow superior status on the members of one community if the law treats members of all communities equally? In doing so the notion of equal rights has to be abandoned and that is what we witness when Union ministers feel compelled to demonstrate sympathy and support for those elements who have acted on the basis of a presumed differentiation between themselves and their innocent victims. They were dispensing "justice" to those guilty of not knowing their place in society; not different from White American lynch mobs that murdered Blacks, also delivering their own form of justice.

Every nation nurtures pride in its historical achievements and its contemporary accomplishments. These describe who we are and what it means

to be an Indian. Our history is not devoid of multiple contestations and violent conflicts but re-enacting them day after day can hardly contribute to building a strong and confident nation. We are in danger of communalising our history, pitting one community against another, each with its own preferred history and heroic figures. There is much to be proud of India's civilisational achievements but these must be placed in their proper historical context. They have undoubtedly contributed to the advance of human knowledge but that hardly justifies claims of superior contemporary wisdom. Worse, the obscurantism that is openly on display among those who are in leading and influential positions strikes at the very root of India's reputation as one of the leaders in science and technology. This is not the basis on which a modern digital future of India can be built.

The advance of political democracy is integrally linked to the embrace of rational thought and logic. In fact, this is one of the most precious components of Indian civilisational heritage that lies obscured in literal interpretations of myths and legends. What has distinguished India through the ages is the culture of curiosity and deep reflection, the spirit of questioning and dissent and these are precisely the values we need to make India a modern and flourishing democracy. Yes, we have inherited many negative and regressive social attitudes from the past yet our future lies not in indulging them but in confronting and eliminating them. Political parties and political leaders have chosen to appeal to these prejudices to gain political advantage rather than wean people away from them. A wave of regressive tendencies is evident in our country and Nehru's advocacy of instilling a "scientific temper" among the people of India sounds oddly out of place in this environment.

These trends have been there for some time but never before have they acquired social and political legitimacy as they have begun to today. Communal and caste prejudice have been prevalent in sections of Indian society but their open expression was constrained in public discourse. There have always been people who subscribed to their own version of imagined history but they rarely got a respectable hearing. There were contrary and reasoned voices, which provided a rational counterpoint to such discourse. But these are being muted by the violent and threatening response from cultural and religious vigilantes.

The work of our diplomats has been enhanced by India's reputation as a country that has successfully managed immense diversity, which has delivered economic progress even while maintaining the precious individual freedoms of its people, a country where powerful institutions enable the day to day practice of democracy, a country whose people are not only the inheritors of a rich civilisational history but also pioneers in the cutting edge of scientific advance. That reputation lies somewhat tarnished by the conduct of what I still believe are elements who do not represent mainstream opinion in this country. But the world hears those who shout the loudest and sees those who act with violence. We must assert the values and principles that lie embedded in our Constitution and resume our journey towards the India that its enlightened framers envisioned. Only then will the world see in us the qualities of a *Vishvaguru*.