

Dalits, Muslims and the holy cow

Aijaz Zaka Syed

Since the change of guard in India two years ago, it has been one hell of a ride for the great republic. Extraordinary events and developments have been unfolding at such a breathless pace that one has lost the capacity to react to them.

When Mohammed Akhlaq, a 52-year old farmer and father of an Indian Air Force engineer, was beaten to death by his lifelong neighbors in Dadri, a sleepy village in Uttar Pradesh less than 30 km from the power center of Delhi, over “beef eating” rumors a year ago, the news sent shockwaves across India and around the world.

The usual suspects have been administered many such beatings and even lynched since but they have barely created ripples. Call it indifference on the part of media and administration or helplessness of victims that such ‘incidents’ do not raise eyebrows anymore, let alone invite action against the guilty.

In the new and ‘Modi-fied’ India, stray animals loitering on the streets are more secure and protected than humans.

No wonder the guardians of holy cow get bolder and more blasé by the day. And why wouldn’t they? They are given to believe that they enjoy the political patronage at the highest level in the land and can get away with murder. And they do.

But targeting Muslims, who have all but lost all self-respect, sensitivity and capacity to respond to such attacks and abuse is one thing and taking on the assertive Dalits, the low caste communities, is quite another.

Given their increasing powerlessness and political dispossession, India’s Muslims are forced to lie low and offer little resistance even when faced with attacks like Dadri. No wonder the Dadri killing was soon followed up by the lynching and hanging of two Muslim cattle hands from Jharkhand, one of them barely 15 and many other such episodes.

Even as I write this there are reports of two Muslim women being beaten black and blue by a mob in the presence of cops in the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh on the rumors of “possessing beef.” Someone even filmed the obscenity and posted it online. The wretched women were beaten up for nearly 30 minutes until one of them collapsed. And, yes, the duo has been charged with “illegally selling meat” after police “recovered” 30 kgs of buffalo meat from them!

Are these the 'good times' the voters were endlessly promised in 2014? Where is India headed? Are we still living in the 21st century?

Try doing the same to Dalits and you will get the taste of your own medicine, as the BJP in Gujarat and at the center is discovering.

In response to the brutal public flogging that a Dalit family received at the hands of the cow protectors in Gujarat last week, Dalits shut down the entire state and other parts of India. Some of them came up with novel protests like unloading truckloads of dead cattle and rotting meat in front of government offices.

The Dalit reaction has been so swift and overwhelming that the prime minister and the top BJP leadership that is yet to own up Gujarat and apologize for Dadri had to quickly swing into action tendering unconditional apology. This even as turning the Indian Penal Code on its head, Akhlaq's family was charge-sheeted for 'cow killing' in UP!

But then that is the power of Dalits. Unlike the weightless and rudderless Muslims, Dalit voices can shatter the glass ceiling in Delhi, wrecking governments and many a political career. In view of the looming polls in UP, Gujarat and elsewhere, the BJP can take no chances with this influential section of the electorate. The Gujarat incident has also shattered the carefully constructed Hindutva myth, portraying Dalits as the "foot soldiers and protectors" of Hindu society, and not as the oppressed lot stuck at the lowest rung of the inhuman social order perpetuated over centuries.

Since the BJP came into being in the late '70s and especially since VP Singh implemented the Mandal Commission recommendations, shaking up the entire political and power structure, the Parivar has been aggressively trying to expand its support base among Dalits and other backwards.

On the one hand, it has been busy appropriating Dalit icons like Ambedkar who despised the communal hierarchy that Hindutva represents. On the other hand, it has been using Dalits and other groups as cannon fodder in the campaign against Muslims and other minorities. It is hardly a secret that Dalits had been successfully used during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and other communal conflagrations.

Despite the fact that for centuries Dalits have been treated as lowest of the low, their 'Hinduness' is discovered during times of communal strife.

From the worst form of social and communal apartheid to rape, murder and casual violence, Dalits have for centuries suffered every indignity and crime imaginable.

Of late though to neutralize the politically conscious and economically empowered

Dalits, the RSS has been making a conscious attempt to “accommodate” the community by discovering Dalit icons like Suhaldev in UP, painting him as the ‘savior of Hindus’ against ‘Muslim invaders’.

Incredible as it may sound, 800 years of Muslim rule is now being blamed for the oppression and persecution of Dalits.

This is a clever, double whammy that seeks to drive Dalits away from Muslims whose egalitarian society and beliefs have always attracted the oppressed lot. Since the mass conversion of Dalits to Islam in 1980s in Tamil Nadu, disingenuous ways have been found to keep the “flock” together.

But you can’t fool all the people all the time. The politically savvy and informed Dalits have begun to see through the game.

The Rajkot flogging should come as a wake-up call to Dalits and all dispossessed communities. If they thought only Muslims needed to worry about the new wave of Hindutva militancy and vigilantism in the name of cow, they were clearly mistaken.

As the history of Hitler’s Germany would attest, the vicious run of fascism never ends with one community or group. They will come for everyone, until there is no one left.

There is a desperate need for Dalits, Muslims and all right thinking people who believe in the idea of an inclusive India to join forces against the growing threat of fascism.

Unfortunately, for all the feel-good talk of Dalit-Muslim unity and the realization that the two communities have for long been at the receiving end from the same forces, little has been done to build bridges and alliances between the two groups. This talk of unity has at best remained at the level of Dalit and Muslim intellectuals and activists. The unity has remained elusive even during the rule of Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party, which depends crucially on the support of Dalits and Muslims in UP. Perhaps both Muslims and Dalits are to blame for this. Be that as it may, the two communities need to wake up at least now to the shared threats. Better late than never.

The Muslims in particular must get out of their comfort zone to reach out to Dalits and other marginalized groups and communities. They cannot tackle the coming threat on their own. The very future of India as a secular and pluralist democracy is at stake. We need to stand together to fight the darkness that is fast closing in. We are in this together.

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