

PRESS NOTE

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A Fractured Polity: The Relevance of Gandhi Today

A Conclave organised by former Civil Servants and Armed Forces Veterans

10 October 2017, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi

A group of 65 former civil servants from the All India Services and Central Services wrote an Open Letter on 10 June 2017 expressing their concern at the growing religious intolerance, vigilantism, hyper-nationalism, authoritarianism and majoritarianism that are threatening India's Constitution and secular values. Condemning the vigilante attacks against Muslims and Dalits, the crack-down on student groups and academics who voice dissent, the witch-hunt against NGOs that are opposing State policies, and the vicious trolling of all those who disagree with the majoritarian ideology, the petition urged all public authorities and Constitutional bodies to defend the spirit of the Constitution of India.

In the same vein, on 30 July 2017 a group of 114 Veterans of the Indian Armed Forces addressed a letter to the Prime Minister of India and others on a similar set of issues. The letter pointed out that differences in religion, language, caste or culture have never mattered to the cohesion of the Armed Forces. The letter condemned the targeting of Muslims and Dalits, the clampdown on free speech and attacks on civil society groups, universities, journalists and scholars. Making it clear that they did not hold any affiliation with any particular political party, the veterans urged the authorities to urgently act to uphold the letter and spirit of the Constitution.

Some members of the two groups have been discussing ways and means of working together

for the reinstatement of a public culture of dialogue and reasoned debate, anchored in the guiding principles of the Constitution. Gandhiji's political philosophy, with respect for dissent and diversity and rejection of all forms of violence at its core, provided inspiration all along. It was decided to start with a Conclave on the relevance of his ideas in the fractured polity that is contemporary India. It is hoped that the Conclave held at the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi on 10 October 2017 will be the first of a series of joint actions.

The Conclave was attended by members of civil society organisations, activists and representatives of the media as well as a number of former civil servants and armed forces veterans. The speakers were Justice A P Shah (former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court and Chairman, Law Commission); journalist and author Ms Mrinal Pande (former Chairperson of Prasar Bharati); and historian Ramachandra Guha. Their speeches have been recorded and will soon be available on YouTube.

In his wide-ranging reflections on the threats to our democratic rights and freedoms that we are facing today, Justice A P Shah pointed out that these are rights that the people of India have bestowed on themselves through the Constitution – they are not favours granted by the government. Gandhiji himself, with his passionate commitment to the right to free speech, “even if what is spoken is hurtful”, would have applauded the Bombay High Court for striking down the ban imposed on the play “Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy” on the grounds that it glorified Godse and insulted the Father of the Nation. In stark contrast to Gandhi's vision, cultural conformism is today being systematically imposed in the guise of nationalism. Pointing out that the SC order on the national anthem could convert patriotism from a value into a performance, Justice Shah underlined that there was a systematic attack on institutions including the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the media resulting in a dangerous polarisation

and the growth of a violent, narrow, majoritarian vision of nationalism. He called for strong resistance to the move to “stifle dissent by stifling dissenters” and wrongful accusations of an outdated notion of “sedition”. In response to a question from the audience on the shrinking space for protest especially by the poor, he said that he was willing to join a legal challenge to the recent order banning protestors from gathering in Jantar Mantar.

Mrinal Pande pointed to the failure of progressive movements to reach out to people at the grassroots, using the language and idiom that is familiar to them. She decried the growing tendency to forcibly impose Hindi and said that Hindi is not the Rashtrabhasha. Commenting on the saffronisation of education, she pointed out that homes and families are the primary arenas for building the “republic of divisive thought”. Discrimination and sexism are promoted and normalised within families. Sexism lies at the root of the racism, communalism and militarism, the building blocks of the republic of divisive thought that is looming over us today. She urged the group to reach out to young people and to reclaim the local and traditional space for democratic discourse and debate.

Striking an optimistic note, Ramchandra Guha shared his views on Gandhiji’s “four pillars of Swaraj” - non-violence, abolition of untouchability, economic self-reliance and Hindu-Muslim harmony - in the 70 years of India’s life as a free country. He felt that India had made much progress in strengthening the electoral process by holding regular, free and fair elections. In other areas, too there is progress, albeit slow and patchy. For instance, as envisioned by Ambedkar, urbanisation and the expansion of economic opportunities are weakening caste by delinking it from traditional occupations. Women are increasingly able to resist pressures from families and are claiming their rights to determine their own lives and relationships. He felt that the greatest threat to democracy was the systematic promotion of hatred and violence

against the minorities, especially Muslims. Describing this as “the most anti-intellectual government in our history” he felt that attacks against historians, scholars and, scientists were part of the attempt refashion India as a Hindu nation.

Harsh Mander, whose Karvan-e-Mohabbat has been visiting places where Muslims and Dalits have been lynched in the last few years, spoke of the deep roots that communal hatred have struck in rural areas. Sharing some of his conversations with the families of Md Akhlakh, Pehlu Khan and Junaid, he described how the state is colluding with those who perpetrate violence and is criminalising the victims. In all these cases, the attackers and their communities justify their actions as legitimate, and show no signs of remorse. Aruna Roy expressed serious concern at the blatant distortions introduced in school history textbooks in Rajasthan, for instance making no mention of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The growing army of unemployed youth was fodder for fomenting social and communal unrest.

In the discussion following the presentations, participants also raised serious concerns about the possibility of communal polarisation in the police and armed forces as a result of what is happening in society at large affecting these institutions.

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