



Think GREY but talk in
BLACK or WHITE

AN important reason we have a poor track record of solving problems in post-independence India is that we have acquired the unfortunate tendency to polarize debate on every issue into a simplistic 'for or against' position.

In addition, we often find that small interested groups are able to clutter public attention through skilful manipulation of the media with poorly conceptualized, low priority issues that waste a great deal of time and energy while distracting attention away from far more significant issues.

This unfortunate situation is exemplified in the unresolved controversies over economic reforms, uniform civil code and gender based reservations in legislatures, and contesting claims over certain religious spaces such as those in Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura. We have allowed too many people to acquire a vested interest in inflaming passions by keeping these conflicts alive and simmering.

A good example of a deadly stalemate is the Sardar Sarovar Project which has been embroiled in a fiery controversy for more than a decade. Opinion is sharply divided. The pro-Dam lobby projects it as a big boon whereas the anti-Dam group has dubbed it as a monumental

Polarized Debates Our Poor Track Record in Problems Solving

○ Madhu Kishwar

disaster. Those who have tried to take more balanced or nuanced positions based on the extensive information now available have been effectively marginalized.

Even the Supreme Court has failed to resolve the stalemate because the Court can at best grant temporary stay orders but is not in a position to terminate construction of the dam. Numerous international agencies have got involved in the anti-Dam Campaign, leading to still greater confusion and polarization. The two sides have hurled endless accusations through the press but have seldom been brought together to work out a plausible solution except through bureaucratic committees where each side reiterates its position and charges. The stalemate however continues.

Despite extensive media coverage of the issue, even highly educated, technically qualified people have been unable to figure out whose claims are more genuine—the environmental concerns, or whether the relief and rehabilitation packages being offered are adequate or unjust. In fact, even journalists are divided along pro-dam and anti-dam lines. Therefore, the coverage has been equally polarized. Articles in the media can be neatly divided into pro-NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) and pro-SSP (Sardar Sarovar Project) positions.

Another sad example is the ongoing controversy between historians of the Left and Sangh

Parivar over the misuse of academic institutions like the ICSSR (Indian Council for Social Science Research) and ICHR (Indian Council for Historical Research) for partisan purposes. Each side is flinging charges and allegations at each other through the press, as well as, via the rumour network. There is no one who can play the role of a referee and sift the false charges from the valid ones. A certain number of people take sides by believing in one or the other group, depending on their ideological inclination rather than a careful examination of facts.

In the eye of the public, on each of these, and many other issues, small but prominent cliques on each of these, and many other issues monopolize the terms of the discussion, presenting highly biased polemics in favour of their pre-determined positions, often with scant regard for citizens' rights to accurate information. As a result, most people are unable to discern the difference between fact and fiction, information and partisan propaganda.

Public debate in India tends to be intellectually stunted and over simplistic because of the mess we have made with our education system:

(a) The vast majority of people are illiterate and are therefore, denied access to basic information on most subjects. Therefore, they lack the confidence to engage in any public discussion with those who are highly

educated. The voices of the uneducated are not even considered worth hearing.

(b) Unfortunately, even those with degrees are hopelessly mal-educated. Most of the required information on varied issues is available only in the English language. People who have studied through the regional languages, are denied access to the world of knowledge, information and ideas. This makes them dependent on whatever trickles down courtesy *Angrezi wallahs*. Thanks to the poor quality of our education, even among those who have passed BAs, MAs and even Ph.Ds in the English medium, only a microscopic number of them are skilled enough to seek out and evaluate relevant information on diverse issues.

Consequently, the real debate is among a handful of people—no more than a few dozen—in a country of one billion. The rest are unable to challenge the power of this information elite even when the latter are indulging in gross misinformation in the service of one or the other special interest. A good example is the caricature of a debate on patents and intellectual property rights. Those against India becoming a signatory to these global treaties have been able to whip up hysteria and get away with blatant lies. Here is a sample: If the patents regime comes into operation, multinational corporations (MNCs) will come to own all our flora and fauna. Indians will have to pay a fee to MNCs every time they break a *neem* branch for use as *datun* or buy turmeric for cooking. Farmers will have lost the right to produce their own seed; they will have to pay MNCs every time their calf drinks its mother's milk.

Another good example is the continuing stalemate over the Women's Reservation Bill. A

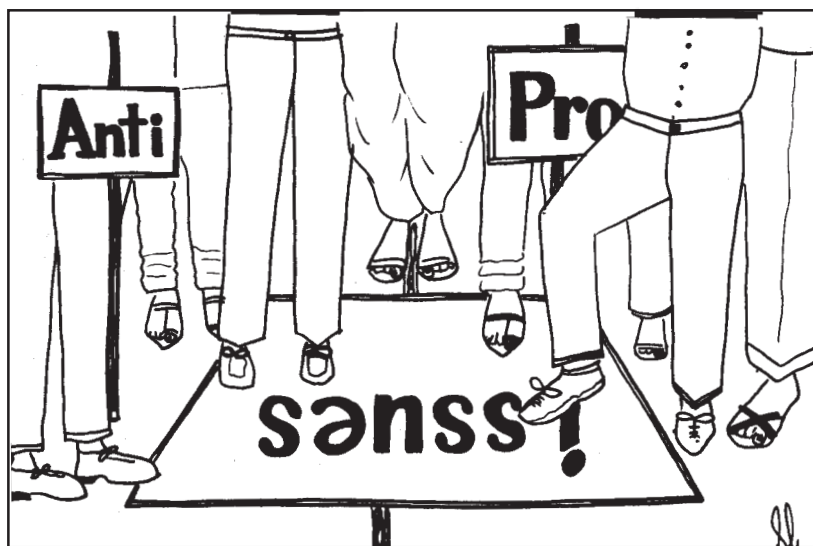
shoddily drafted legislation which is likely to cause a lot of damage to women's long term interests in politics, as well as, to our democracy, came to be the rallying point of a highly emotive campaign all over the country—based on near total ignorance regarding the contents of the Bill. I have been repeatedly appalled to find that very few, if any, of the supporters of the Reservation Bill, had actually read its contents or understood even the most basic implications of that scheme. Yet, they take a do or die stance on it. The vocal opposition to the Bill has been equally phoney with OBC (Other Backward Caste) leaders alleging that the Bill was a deliberate measure to strengthen the diminishing hegemony of the highest caste groups because *parkati* women from upper castes would corner the entire quota. Nobody cared to explain how upper caste women could win from OBC dominated constituencies, when upper caste men were finding it impossible to hold their own against OBC men. Given the fact that the electoral arithmetic in a majority of areas is in favour of various castes designated as "backward", OBC women would have the same

advantage vis-a-vis upper caste women that their men have. In this polarized scenario, if you try to break the stalemate by a more nuanced discussion you are dubbed as "anti" women by those in favour of the Reservation Bill. On the other side, the OBC leaders dub you as an agent of the upper castes if you do not unconditionally support their spurious demand for caste based quotas within the women's quota.

Since very few people take an informed stand on issues of public importance, those who take more appropriate and nuanced positions tend to get browbeaten into silence for fear of being misunderstood and pushed into one or the other warring camps.

One result is that conflicts are allowed to drag on endlessly. Or else populist decisions are taken as knee jerk responses in trying to placate some or the other vote bank. Thus, for the sake of narrow short-term gains, our political establishment sets into motion processes which have long-term harmful consequences for the entire society.

Our plight is aggravated by the fact that while all our traditional



institutions for conflict resolution have decayed or have been marginalized or destroyed, no new institutions have been created for this purpose. Since the government machinery in our country lends itself easily to a combination of mutual co-option and manipulation for the benefit of the *babu-neta* nexus no matter which political party is in power, it hasn't developed the capacity to mediate conflicts and evolve consensually acceptable solutions. If anything, the tendency is to let all the conflicts fester in order to serve partisan political purposes. In the process, disgruntled groups, who may have started with making reasonable and legitimate demands, get increasingly impatient and desperate.

Often their desperation leads them to take recourse to more and more emotive issues, add shriller demands to their list in the hope of mobilizing mass frenzy as a means of giving impetus to their cause. Very often, extremist elements are deliberately planted within such groups by the ruling party itself in order to destroy the credibility of movements that started off by making fair and reasonable demands. The Khalistani movement in Punjab, the ongoing secessionist movement in Kashmir, and the ULFA*-led insurgency in Assam, are some examples of this process at work.

Given the absence of effective mechanisms for conflict resolution among contending groups, and between the government and the people, we are witnessing an increasing tendency to use a variety of extra-constitutional methods to seek redressal of grievances.

Recently the Supreme Court (as also the High Courts) have become popular means of dispute

resolution. However, this practice has a tendency to lead to the over-extension of judicial jurisdiction. Thus the Supreme Court is left isolated and expected to take sole responsibility to decide on an incredible range of issues abandoned by the political decision making apparatus such as dam safety, river pollution, bus fare hikes, and telecom policy. The adversarial system of adjudication followed by our law courts inevitably means that legal debate is in the form of charges and counter-charges with often spurious legal and constitutional trappings, with both sides veering towards the ridiculous in their distorted need to resolve political issues judicially using procedural points that have little or no relevance to the dispute to win cases, and committing other misuses of the judicial process to shore up a rotting political decision making process. Thus pseudo formalistic and legalistic debate fills the media while actual decision making remains confined to a small undemocratic clique, while the rest of the citizenry are altogether alienated from the process.

Another dangerous method of keeping the rotting state afloat is the accretion of illegal and unconstitutional powers in the hands of ad hoc coterie of decision makers that cohere around the office of the prime minister and the key cabinet

offices and stave off total chaos with last minute decisions that sometimes are implemented, sometimes rescinded, and always are looked at sceptically as temporary decisions on the basis of which legitimate longer range policy development cannot take place. The country now operates in a primitive way, somewhat similar to the way major empires once functioned.

The absence of an effective conflict resolution machinery has paralyzed the decision making capacity of the country to the extent that whatever makeshift arrangements are currently in place acquire an aura of inevitability about them. The frequently commented upon fatalism and passivity of India derives from the people having little alternative but to accept the clear short-term advantages that the ruling nexus derives from their ability to thwart meaningful solutions for short-term advantages.

This is leading to all-pervasive cynicism and erosion of self-confidence throughout Indian society. Many have come to feel India's problems defy solution and the term "Indian" has come to be synonymous with filth, squalor, inefficiency, corruption, shoddiness, disorganization, and civil strife. On each issue rival political groups pull in the direction of their immediate self-interest, making our society appear as though it is experiencing a continuous series of mini civil wars. All this is disastrous for the health of our democracy, as also for our civil society.

In fact, today most of those who have the power to intervene tend to exacerbate the conflict. Take the example of the ongoing conflict between sections of the Sangh Parivar and the Christian community over the issue of conversions. Virtually the entire

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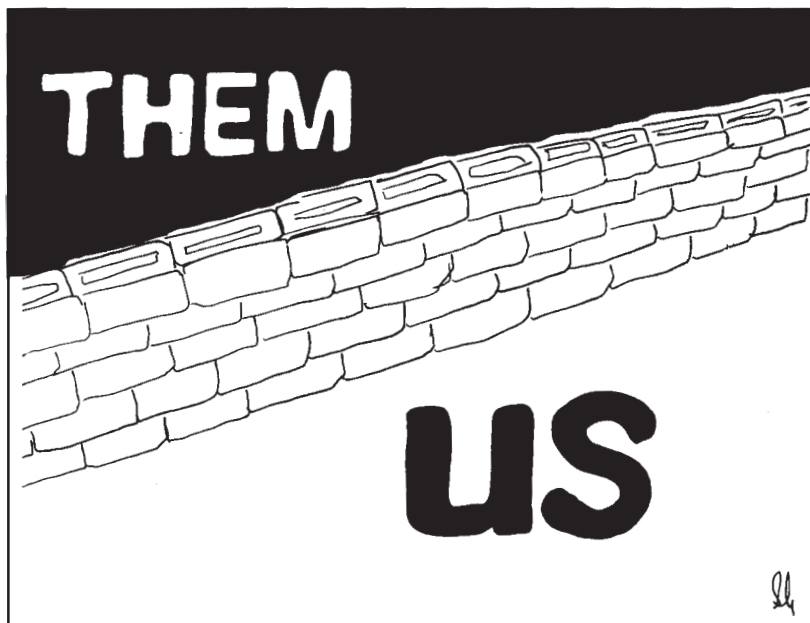
* United Liberation Front of Assam

spectrum of people who define themselves as “secular” are wrongly or rightly perceived as being anti-Hindu, or at least anti Sangh Parivar.

The secular lobby does not even condescend to dialogue with those they dub as Hindu communalists. The only mode of communication they choose is name-calling through the press. Their mode of operation in this regard is not very different from that of left parties who are content with simply demonizing the “Hindu communalists” in the hope of consolidating the “secular” and the minority votes.

Since the sections of Hindus influenced by the Sangh Parivar see the “secular” lobby as totally hostile to them and blindly partisan to others, they ascribe little worth to the criticism and attacks levelled against them. It merely gives them a sense of being wronged. Consequently, they become even more unreasonable and unrelenting. Even though they might beat a temporary tactical retreat, their estrangement from the Christian community does not lessen. It just keeps festering like an untreated sore. In the process, the conflict gets sharpened, not resolved.

It is ironical that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in our country tend to take even more polarized positions than do most political parties. This is because, mainstream politicians have to constantly engage with each other, no matter how opposed their views. However, NGOs feel no such compulsion and, therefore, tend to form clusters of like-minded individuals and organizations with very little actual interaction with those whose politics or actions they oppose. For example, those who define themselves as being opposed to economic reforms are seldom seen to engage with proreformers. Each insulates itself



from the other and then they yell at each other through the media rather than engage in a live dialogue with a view to getting their concerns understood by the other.

Any well-functioning society needs to create spaces where the most significant problems get considered in depth, where viable options for their solution are prepared and disseminated effectively, so that the issues get properly framed, so that they can be resolved in some rational and timely manner, so that feasible and appropriate reforms get implemented in a way that take the many complex dimensions of a problem, as well as, diverse conflicting interests into account.

The responsibility for providing such conflict resolution mechanisms ought not to be confined to institutions within the state, or left to politicians. All those citizens who wish to promote genuinely participatory democracy have an equal responsibility for creating such spaces and institutions that include individuals known for their integrity, credibility and expertise on specific/ varied issues.

In recent years, a whole range of Centres for Peace and Conflict Resolution have cropped up in various cities and universities. The real test of their worth will be their effectiveness in applying their academic wisdom in concretely solving both the latent and blatant conflicts in their respective regions.

Those who wish to be counted among the problem solvers of India need to:

- Keep an open mind, especially with regard to facts, no matter how convinced one is about the correctness of one’s own position. One must guard against the tendency to simply trash and reject outright the views of those who are taking an opposing position.
- Avoid the temptation to stick to or seek out only like minded people for debate and discussion.
- Be willing to concede the legitimate grievances of even those they consider political opponents. It is only when one displays the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate grievances and has the political courage to accede to the legitimate demands of even the most

unreasonable groups, that one earns the moral right to take a firm, unyielding stance against their unreasonable demands.

➤ Have a realistic appreciation of what solutions can actually be carried through while bridging the gap between conflicting groups.

➤ Be in the forefront of the efforts to get a Right to Accurate Information Act passed by our Parliament. It is curious that the movement demanding the Right to Information has emerged out of the struggles of the rural poor wanting accountability in governance. The educated elite—journalists, intellectuals, academics—have not lent their might to this effort. That is why the government has been able to get away with drafting a mealy mouthed legislation in this regard. We need a far more liberal legislation which goes beyond paying lip service to the citizen's right to information to actually emphasizing the *duty* of

sarkari officials to provide *accurate* information to all citizens as their constitutional obligation. Easy access to reliable information is the first prerequisite for an informed debate and decision making on important issues.

➤ Push for the rapid spread of internet connections in the country because that is by far the fastest, the cheapest and the most effective way of bridging the gap between the information rich and the information poor among the educated.

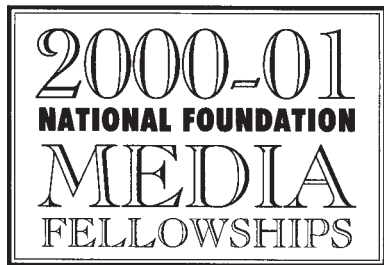
➤ Build pressure for the spread of quality school education upto secondary level for every child in the country.

➤ Create effective media monitors which build a moral and legal pressure on newspapers and television to do proper homework and invest resources into providing accurate information on various issues of public concern. Unless the media is made to move beyond its penchant for sensationalism

and becomes a serious, trustworthy tool for information dissemination, it will continue to generate more conflicts rather than help resolve them.

A well-functioning democracy is one in which each group is confident that its legitimate aspirations will be recognized and conceded to expeditiously, where peaceful, democratic assertion of demands gets quick and fair hearing and where individuals or groups do not need to resort to political blackmail or violence in order to get due notice. It is only when effective institutional mechanisms exist for sifting just demands from illegitimate ones, genuine fears from phobic fantasies, for working out consensually acceptable solutions rather than yield concessions only to powerful groups with electoral or financial clout, that the entire society can evolve common goals and progress as a cohesive entity. □

Giving voice to the unheard



FOR CONCERNED YOUNG

JOURNALISTS AND PHOTO-JOURNALISTS

The National Foundation for India has a programme for young (upto 40 years), mid-career (5-7 years experience) and sensitive journalists to enable them to take time off from their routine occupation, to research and publish articles/photo essays on issues of importance to ordinary Indians, their battle for a better life and covering diverse aspects of development-related issues. That includes the working conditions of people, environment-linked matters and other major social problems. National

Foundation for India encourages proposals with focus on **Gender Equity & Justice**.

The Foundation offers five fellowships of Rs.1,00,000/- each. Journalists, especially women journalists from small newspapers with demonstrated capacity to publish well-research articles/photo essays are encouraged to apply. One of the Fellowships will be awarded to a photo-journalist. It would be desirable for the successful applicants to take leave of about six months from their employers to work on the chosen theme.

The last date for receipt of application is **25th August, 2000**. The results will be announced in November 2000.

For details, contact:



Programme Officer - Media Fellowships Programme

NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INDIA

India Habitat Centre

Zone IV A, Upper Ground Floor

Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003

Phone: (011) 464 1864/65, 464 8490/92

Fax: (011) 464 1867, E-mail: kala@nfi.ren.nic.in