

I come from a small town – Kaithal Kapisthal, which is the epicentre of Kurukshetra. I also come from the pious land of 'Baba Ladana' in Kaithal, Haryana, which houses 'Matth' of 'Maharaj Totapuri', Guru of Swami Ramakrishana Paramahansa.

I am a 5th generation farmer. As I stand before you today to simply state that, "Tolerance can never be the new intolerance"; let me, bereft of the finesse or artful colour of language, begin by recalling a simple incident from life of Swami Ramakrishana Paramahansa.

Once Swamiji was taking a walk on the banks of a river, when he saw a scorpion floating on the surface. He entered the water and lifted the scorpion. Scorpion stung him. Swamiji shook his hand in pain and dropped the scorpion. It fell into the river. Swamiji lifted it again. Scorpion stung him a second time. Swamiji shook his hand and scorpion fell again into the water. Next, Swami Ramakrishana found a twig and carefully moved the scorpion to the edge of the water. One of the disciples, who was watching all this, asked his Guru, "**Why did you lift it a second time, even after it stung you causing so much pain?**" Swamiji replied, "**It is the nature of the scorpion. It will sting. It is my nature to help it. Should I give up my nature just because it stung me?**"

Friends, shall we give up compassion because another is cruel?

Shall we give up love and affection because another spreads hatred?

Shall we give up humility because another is arrogant?

Shall we give up tolerance just because another is intolerant?

Answer is plain and simple – 'NO'.

While I say this, I am aware that in recent times, if you are tolerant, inclusive or compassionate, the intolerant fringe immediately and stridently starts isolating, trolling and hounding you.

Does it mean that the fringe has become the mainstream?

Does it mean that if you disagree with the ruling establishment, you are the enemy?

Does it mean that dissent is anti-national?

Does it mean that we need to carry a certificate of 'patriotism'?

Again, answer is plain and simple – 'NO'.

While I say this, I am painfully aware that '**fault lines**' of '**identity**', '**religion**', '**region**', '**caste**' and many others have become extremely pronounced and disdainfully prominent in India.

Last 22 months of Modi government have witnessed brutal divisions, ugly hatred and blood thirsty violence. On account of this repeated, mindless and often heartless attack on our 5000 year old composite culture of compassion and tolerance, it often appears as if this is the mainstream discourse. Its intensity and noise is so strong and so loud that all sanity appears to have been lost in the din. So naturally, it looks as if 'intolerance is the new tolerance'.

What has happened needs to be examined and understood by the events that have transpired. Let me recollect a few –

- 1) Modi government's honeymoon had not even ended when its Minister, Gen V.K. Singh called the Army Chief as a 'dacoit'. This was unprecedented in India's history.
- 2) Successive misogynist and regressive comments are repeatedly made for India's women reflective of a mindset.

- * The then Defence and Finance Minister, Shri **Arun Jaitley** called 'Nirbhaya Rape Case' as a 'One Small Incident of Rape'.
- * Not to be outdone, Haryana CM, Shri **Manohar Lal Khattar** said, "If women want freedom, why don't they roam around naked".
- * RSS Chief, Shri **Mohan Bhagwat** had earlier said that, "Rapes hardly take place in 'Bharat' but occur frequently in 'India'".
- * Former BJP CM & Madhya Pradesh Home Minister, **Babulal Gaur** went a step further and said, "Rape is sometime right, sometimes wrong".
- * BJP Goa CM, **Lakshmikant Parsekar** tells nurses to not protest under the sun as it will, "Make you dark and ruin your marital prospects".

- 3) Religious dogma and hatred has become most pronounced with a continuing hate agenda against minorities run by ruling dispensation.

- * Union Minister, **Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti** calls Delhi elections as a fight between 'Ramzaadas vs Haramzaadas'.
- * Union Minister, **Ram Shankar Katheria** calls muslims as "Demons and descendants of Ravana" and calls for their beheading. Union Home Minister, Rajnath Singh justifies the speech.
- * BJP MP & its Central Committee Member, **Sakshi Maharaj** states that, "Education of terrorism is being given in madarasas. They are making them terrorists and jihadis".

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- * Union Minister, Shri **Mukhtiar Abas Naqvi** states that, "Those who are dying without eating beef can go to Pakistan".
- * Union Minister, Shri **Mahesh Sharma** states that, "Despite being a Muslim, APJ Abdul Kalam was a nationalist".
- * BJP MP, **Yogi Aditya Nath**, while speaking about Missionaries of Charity, says, "What people associated with Mother Teresa do is sauda not service".
- * **RSS** runs a campaign in entire Hindi belt called 'Love Jihad'.
- * BJP attempts to polarize Bihar elections through divisive and objectionable advertisements with BJP President, Shri **Amit Shah** going to the extent of announcing that, "If BJP loses Bihar elections, fire crackers will be burst in Pakistan".
- * **Mohammad Akhlaq** is lynched in Dadri, UP by accusing him of eating beef while Union Minister, Shri **Mahesh Sharma** dismisses it as a mere "accident".
- * All this happens as worst communal violence post-Independence takes place in Muzzafar Nagar, UP and other parts of the country.

4) Suppression of voice of dalits and students appears to have become the norm for ruling establishment.

- * Union Minister, **Gen V.K. Singh** compared a dalit child burnt alive in Faridabad to a dog.
- * **Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle** is banned in IIT, Madras for criticizing the policies of Modi government.
- * Dalit Ph.D. scholar, **Rohith Vemula** is forced to commit suicide in Hyderabad Central University after successive letters are written by Union Minister, Shri **Bandaru Dattatreya** and HRD Ministry.
- * BJP National General Secretary, **Shri P. Murlidhar Rao** calls Ambedkar Student Association including Rohith Vemula as 'anti-national'. Union Minister, **Smt. Sushma Swaraj** goes to the extent of questioning the 'scheduled caste status of Rohith Vemula'.
- * **FTII Pune** students protesting against an incompetent Head are punished.
- * **JNU, Delhi** is called 'a den of anti-nationals' with OSD to Haryana CM comparing JNU girls to 'prostitutes', while another BJP Legislator from Rajasthan counts the number of 'contraceptives and abortion syringes'.

Finally, JNU President, **Kanhaiya Kumar** is booked in a case of 'sedition'. Some of the videos forming the basis of sedition charge are found to be 'doctored' and emanating from twitter handle of a close aide of HRD Minister, Smt. Smriti Irani.

- * BJP Lawyers and sympathizers beat up journalists, teachers and students inside courts complex in Delhi.

5. Suppression of free speech and targeting of writers, thinkers, rationalists, journalists and opponents appears to be the norm for ruling government.

- * Hundreds of **writers, artists, thinkers** and others have returned their '**awards**' in protest against all round intolerance. Union Minister, **Shri Arun Jaitley** contemptuously calls it a 'manufactured dissent'.
- * Former Union Minister, **Shri Arun Shourie** complained of 'severe abuse' by BJP supporters including targeting of 'his son suffering from cerebral palsy' after he criticized Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi.
- * Appointment of noted lawyer, **Shri Gopal Subramaniam** as a **Supreme Court judge** was stalled despite being cleared by Supreme Court collegium only because he had appeared in the past against BJP President, **Shri Amit Shah.**
- * Rationalists, **M.M. Kalburgi, Govind Pansare** and **Narendra Dabholkar** are murdered with evidence suggesting that same weapon was used in all three crimes. As a fringe outfit '**Sanatan Sena**' is being investigated in Dabholkar's case, A Minister in Maharashtra government gives it a clean chit.
- * Political opponents are persecuted. Senior most Chief Minister of India, Shri **Virbhadra Singh's** official residence is raided by CBI as his daughter is getting married.
- * Not to be outdone, **journalists and publications** are repeatedly targeted. From **Hartosh Bal to Nikhil Wagle**, from **Sagarika Ghose to Vidya Subramanian**, from **Siddharth Varadarajan to Rajdeep Saradesai** and many others are hackled, hounded and trolled for criticizing the government.

Can they succeed? Obviously, they can't. Reason is simple. **India's DNA is about 'compassion', 'co-existence' and 'co-habitation'.**

We are a nation that enabled birth of different religions, peacefully accepted even foreign religions and yet thrived. **We are a people who calibrated Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaaktism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, Ahmadiyas, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism etc.**

We co-opted **Bhakti, Nirgun, Valmiki, Kabir, Meera, Tulsi, Rahim, Raskhan, Chisti, Auliya and Mata Mariyam** in our hearts without duress. **Any coercion, be it that of bigots of religion or thought, fell on the way side in shaping our National Identity.** We co-existed and celebrated with all - every one who was us - us Indians! **And I'm confident that no government or organization can take away our DNA of compassion, co-existence, co-habitation and tolerance.**

Let me end by quoting Shri Rabindranath Tagore

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

Randeep Singh Surjewala