

Controlling Thought and Food Habits

Ram Puniyani

The intolerance does not grow in one field of social life in isolation. In different arena of our life it tends to run in a parallel manner. In Maharashtra, with the BJP majority Government in seat of power, we had a ban on the storing, selling and eating of beef few months ago. This ban increased the problems of a large section of society, the workers in abettor, those consuming beef and those selling beef. The workers of Devnar abettor, located in Mumbai, the biggest one in the area, rendered jobless due to this decision of the Government are writhing in the pain of unemployment. Then came the Government order that any criticism of Government servants will be treated as sedition. This is an attempt to put a total cap on the basic democratic rights, on freedom of expression and on the right to dissent. During this period the state witnessed the murder of two of its foremost rationalist thinkers and leaders, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar and Comrade Govind Pansare (who was also a political worker) for taking on the forces of blind faith and for promoting scientific temper. In the neighboring Karnataka the ex-Vice Chancellor of Kannada University, Hamphi, the tall scholar of Kannada and rational intellectual was done to death.

On the heels of this comes the decision of Mira Bhaynder Municipal Corporation to ban the non vegetarian food, except fished and eggs, during *Paryushan*, a Jain festival, for eight days. This ban has been put for four days in Mumbai area under Mumbai Corporation. BJP is in lead in taking decisions in this direction. As such over a period of time the number of days for which this ban has been there is proportionally going up with the rise of sectarian politics in the nation and in the state. As such earlier during Paryushan the ban was there for one day in 1960s, two day in 1990s, now it is four days in Mumbai and eight days in Mira Road-Bhayander area. Interestingly fishes and eggs which Jains don't consume have been spared from the wrath of the zealots who think imposing your sentiments is part of one's religion. Will there be such a demand for prohibiting garlic and root vegetable, which are also prohibited by Jain practices, next?

Country as a whole has been the victim of this *food fundamentalism* of the dominant forces. There are housing societies in Mumbai where the non-vegetarians are not allowed to stay. In Ahmadabad, Gujarat I came across an interesting incident. I was staying with a friend, who was living in a rented accommodation. Suddenly one morning when we were sipping our morning tea, the landlord barged in and headed straight to the kitchen. And then after few minutes he made his exit. I was puzzled. My friend explained that it is "Kitchen Check" to examine whether any non vegetarian food is being cooked or consumed! It was very baffling moment for me. One knows that there is a sort of 'food curfew' during the day time during Ramzan month in many Gulf countries, where Sheikhs are ruling with iron hand, in the name of Islam. Which community and whose sentiments will prevail in a diverse society is a complex question.

How does one handle the food habits in a diverse society like ours? As such earlier also many a kings have respected the sentiments of the minorities. Akbar when approached by the Jain delegation did impose restriction on Non vegetarian food for some time. Babar in his will to his son Humayun instructs that cow slaughter should not be permitted as deference to Hindu sentiments. As

such the basic aspect of teachings of religion is to respect the feelings of other people in the society. What is taught is that the followers of that religion implement these in their lives. The question of imposing one's sentiments on the others is the sign of one's social dominance in the society. Communal parties for the sake of vote bank and for their political social agenda are feeling they can have their way and impose such practices on the society. There are others who feel grateful enough if they can practice their own things in their own family and social space without imposing it upon others.

As such what should happen in a democratic society? It's very complex question at one level. Point should be to respect each other's feelings and accommodate for that. Ideal is that the 'other' calls for such a self imposition out of volition and respect. That's what Mahatma Gandhi teaches us time and over again. Be it the matter of religious practices or food habits, his path was clear, lets follow our path without imposing it upon others. As such, imposing one's sentiments on 'others', is the highest form of violence. One of Gandhi's writing on the issue of beef eating- cow slaughter is very illuminating, he writes "I maintain that Muslims should have full freedom to slaughter cows, if they wish, subject of course to hygienic restrictions and in a manner not to wound the susceptibilities of their Hindu neighbors. Fullest recognition of freedom to the Muslims to slaughter cows is indispensable of communal harmony, and is the only way of saving cow." (http://www.mkgandhi.org/g_communal/chap14.htm)?

Our country has diverse food habits, from Arunchal Pradesh to Kerala to Punjab and Gujarat, we inherit the rich diversity. With the rise of the sectarianism and politics in the name of Hindu religion, *Hindutva*, such intolerant things are being brought in with bigger aggression. The section of Jain leadership, which getting this done, is close to the BJP. BJP in turn has an agenda in all aspects of our socio-cultural life. Ban on Beef eating is a deliberate ploy to sharpen the divisive politics, the politics which is polarising the communities. One recalls the 1946 V. Shantaram Classic film *Padosi*, where the two neighbors, Hindu and Muslim, love and respect each other's sentiments and feelings. There are legions of stories in times past where such camaraderie amongst these communities was a matter of celebrating each other's practices not just tolerating them. It is this intermixing at all the levels which gave us the diverse plural heritage, the culture of joy and celebration of diversity in our country.

Such issues related to bans have become an integral part of identity politics, Islamism in Gulf countries and *Hindutva* in India. This is painfully gripping our democratic society by the neck and imposing suspicion and dislike for the 'other'. The economic aspects of banning beef, and banning selective non vegetarian food during the *Paryushan* is of no concern to the political leaders who keep deepening their hold on the section of community not by harping on issues of dignity and rights of the people but by the intolerant attitude for the 'other'.

From over last one year, this stifling attitude is a retrograde step, putting chains on our democratic freedoms. This is a regressive march inching towards the pattern of countries where democratic freedoms have been put under the carpet in the name of religion.