

Fratricidal Communal Competitiveness In Politics

■ **Dr. M.N. Buch**

For some time now there has been relative communal peace at the macro level in India. Obviously organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), could not be very happy at such a development, especially in the light of forthcoming assembly elections in States such as Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and the general elections in 2014. Suddenly out of the blue VHP decided to revive the Ayodhya controversy and said that it would organise a huge rally for the 84 kos yatra in Ayodhya. In many pilgrimage centres circumambulatory yatras are a normal feature. These are completely religious functions where there is peace and harmony because spiritual rejuvenation rather than communal polarisation is the objective. By itself the 84 kos yatra is an unremarkable event and would have been so in 2014 but for the unprecedented mobilisation by VHP with an obviously political and communal angle. The U.P. Government, at present under the leadership of the Samajwadi Party, promptly banned the yatra, a prohibition upheld by the Allahabad High Court. Thereafter the Government vigorously enforced the ban, affected a large number of preventive arrests and ensured that the VHP agenda was fully aborted. As an exercise in maintaining law and order and preventing a disruption of the public peace this was a copy book exercise.

Unfortunately this is not the way U.P. Government's action has been interpreted by some political parties and by a section of the media. For some time speculations had been rife that VHP and Mulayam Singh Yadav had entered into some sort of an unwritten secret agreement whereby VHP would create trouble in Ayodhya, government would take preventative action, the Muslims would thereafter be persuaded to believe that their true friend is the Samajwadi Party and, therefore, they should vote en bloc for the Samajwadi Party, whilst at the same time upper class Hindus would give their united support to BJP. The loser would be the Congress which would have hardly any vote bank left in U.P. Unfortunately it has been reported that Digvijaya Singhji has made precisely this allegation, which has exacerbated the situation. The effort to polarise the Muslim votes was evident in the last U.P. election in which the Congress Party tried to project Rahul Gandhi as the true saviour of the Muslims and for this purpose when he put in an appearance in Muslim dominated area such as Azamgarh he sported a beard. In fact the Muslims proved that they have come a very long way from 1947, they are totally rooted in India and are an integral part of our social fabric and they did not vote Congress. They want security, education, health care, employment and a share in development. The communal considerations of the past no longer dominate our politics. This is equally true of the Hindus who may have been swayed by the idea of Ayodhya in the mid-eighties and early nineties of the last century, but to whom the Ram Temple is now neither central to their thinking nor the main objective of their action.

In a way the polarisation of minority votes would be useful to BJP if it led to a counter polarisation of Hindu votes. The first two elections were fought in Gujarat by Narendra Modi on the basis of Hindu votes, but in the last election he did make an effort to garner some Muslim votes and he claims that about twenty per cent of Muslims of Gujarat voted for the BJP. Whether this is true or not the very fact that BJP is making this claim means that it realises that the minority vote also counts and should not be shunned.

Supposing what has been alleged by the Congress is correct and that in U.P. a deliberate attempt had been made to polarise votes on religious grounds. Who benefits? When communal passions are aroused the overall atmosphere becomes polluted as different religious groups view each other with hostility. A surcharged atmosphere is an invitation to violence and any flash point can cause an explosion. A recent incident in Indore proves this. Fortunately in Madhya Pradesh the administration has been given a free hand in dealing with potential communal problems and in Indore police action was swift, though there was some initial delay. However, the administration regained control within twenty-four hours and, therefore, there was only one fatal casualty and the number of other casualties was limited. Would the BJP government have benefitted if many more people had died? Certainly not.

In Gujarat in the initial three year after 2002 the government was nationally reviled for what was seen as a highly communal stance in which the Muslim community was targeted. The Sohrabuddin case and the Ishrat Jehan case are cited as examples of communal bias. However, the Gujarat Government learnt a lesson and in the matter of law and order in the last eleven years Gujarat has seen almost complete peace. Modi has never apologised for what happened in 2002, but today as a proportion of the total Muslim population Gujarat has the highest Muslim representation in the police in the whole of India, with an average of ten Muslim policemen in every police station. Because there is peace and because there is all round development the Muslims have also benefitted. The advantage that the BJP has derived from this is that in the last local bodies elections a large number of Muslims were elected on the BJP ticket. Regardless of his own Hindu credentials Narendra Modi has benefitted by relative communal peace in Gujarat.

A blatantly communal programme to polarise Hindu votes will boomerang on BJP, whose best bet for 2014 is to publicly state that it accepts the basic secularism of India, views every Indian as precisely that and not through the prism of religion, with every citizen being entitled to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity as enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution. The BJP has to state that it will not single out any community for special favour, but it would deny no community the rights enshrined in the Constitution, including a fair share in the development pie. This is the best way of mobilising moderate Hindu votes and convincing the minorities that BJP Government would not be inimical to them.

If RSS really is nationalist as it claims, then it must rein in VHP which is a member of the Sangh Parivar. VHP must return to its original role when Dr. Karan Singh was its Chairman, which is to spread the message of tolerance and universal brotherhood which is the core of the Sanatan Dharma and whose motto is “Vasudhev Kutumbakam”, or that the whole universe is one big family. The present day VHP is a menace, most of all to Hinduism, whose strength lies in its inclusiveness and whose greatest weakness would be bigotry.
