

A Tale of Two Countries*

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On May 25 in Minneapolis, an African-American arrestee George Floyd was choked to death by a white police officer pressing his knee against Floyd's neck. The entire America erupted in protests, which targeted not just contemporary racism but even historical icons like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who had been either slave-owners or open racists. The statues of Confederate leaders during the civil war, Jefferson Davis and Robert Lee, were brought down. The protests even spread to Britain where the statues of some slave traders were brought down and those of Cecil Rhodes and Winston Churchill had to be protected against a similar fate.

The protesters spearheading this veritable upsurge for social equality were neither charged with sedition, nor held captive under any UAPA-equivalent law. In fact, Donald Trump's suggestion for using troops against protesters was opposed by the current Pentagon chief Mark Esper and his predecessor James Mattis; and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, who had accompanied Trump for a photo-op at St. John's Church, just across from the White House, after the intervening space had been cleared of protesters, apologized for doing so, pleading lack of prior knowledge that he was being politically used. When right-wing groups wanted to organize counter-protests, they were in general kept completely separate from the protesters to prevent any clashes.

Contrast this with the situation in our own country where a similar movement for social equality, the anti-CAA anti-NRC protest against patently discriminatory laws targeting Muslims, which took every conceivable precaution to eschew violence, is being targeted with a vengeance, with several of its participants being booked under the UAPA, and that too after the movement was withdrawn because of the pandemic. Amazingly, virtually every institution of the State, including even those charged with defending citizens' rights, are conniving with this repression. In fact, it is a sad comment on the pusillanimous complicity of virtually every institution of the Indian State in the executive's repressiveness, that thirteen human rights experts attached to various U.N. bodies felt the need to write a joint letter to the government of India to release those arrested for the anti-CAA agitation; they accused it of sending a "chilling message" to India's "vibrant civil society" that criticism of government action will not be tolerated.

But let us leave aside the current repression against anti-CAA protesters. When the protests had begun, the Delhi police had entered the Jamia Millia Islamia campus on December 15, and used tear gas and lathis against students, including even those who were studying in the library. The police are not supposed to enter any university campus without taking the permission of the Vice-Chancellor; no such niceties were observed on this occasion, so that the university authorities even lodged an FIR against the Delhi police. The police claimed that some miscreants, who had damaged public property nearby, had entered the campus to avoid capture, and their own actions were only meant to nab them.

Let us momentarily accept this. There can still be no doubt that the brutal and indiscriminate police action inside Jamia led to several innocent students being badly injured. Let alone launching prosecutions against the erring police officers for their high-handedness, the central government under whom the Delhi police falls, has not even offered any compensation to the injured students. In India where, rightly, the government compensates even those affected by natural calamities, the refusal to compensate victims of wanton and wilful excesses perpetrated by its own forces, is an act of blatant discrimination. The National Human Rights Commission which has just produced a report on Jamia violence does recommend compensation for injured students; but it wants the Delhi government to make the payment, which is a non-starter. Oddly, it blames students for the police violence and wants the “real actors and motives” behind the protests “uncovered” (The Wire, June 26), as if students are mere manipulable marionettes.

How do we explain such contrasting responses of the U.S. and India to similar movements for social equality? Some would argue that “communalism” and racism are quite dissimilar, the latter being a legacy of centuries of inhuman imperialist oppression, by metropolitan powers, of people of the “outlying regions”. But while it is true that the histories of the two phenomena are different, the fact remains that the majority of Muslims in India today are among the poorest people in the world. Their victimization is no less odious than that of the blacks in the U.S.; a movement against an obvious instance of such victimization, the CAA, is as deserving of support as the anti-racist movement sweeping America. How then do we explain the difference in attitudes of the two societies?

To say that the U.S. administration is more “liberal” than the Indian one would not do. Cornel West, the philosopher of African-American origin at Columbia, has called Trump a “neo-fascist gangster” in an interview; the fact that he has not been hounded for this remark is not because he is wrong and Trump is indeed more “liberal”, but because the U.S. system imposes stricter limits to what Trump can do, compared to what the Indian system does on a comparable Indian administration. This only changes our question: why this difference?

One may be tempted to say that while the “educated” in India would fight as hard for social equality as in the U.S, the “people” here are less “enlightened”. This alas is untrue, for the capitulation of all the institution of the State, which are manned by the “educated”, before a communal agenda, would be otherwise inexplicable. The problem lies with the “educated” themselves.

John Maynard Keynes, the economist and “liberal” thinker, had set great store by what he called the “educated bourgeoisie” for the defence of liberal values and for a reformed capitalism that he thought was essential for upholding them. At the other end of the political spectrum, Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* had talked of socialist consciousness, as distinct from trade union consciousness, being brought to the working class by bourgeois intellectuals who had de-classed themselves and seen the “historical process as a whole”. The role of the “educated bourgeoisie” in short is crucial in any contemporary society; the difference between the U.S. and India with regard to their respective movements for social equality lies above all in the fact that the “educated bourgeoisie” in the U.S. has been more punctilious in playing a democratic role than its counterpart in India, which in turn has to do with the difference in the two education systems.

There is much breast-beating in India about our educational institutions not figuring among the top 200 or so according to some orderings. This is a totally false criterion of excellence; far more crucial is whether our education system imparts to students, not by rote or ritual, the fundamental value of social equality that underlies our Constitution.

Meanwhile, before we accept as the new “normal” a situation where the police enters campuses and beats up innocent students with impunity, where socially-conscious students fighting for equality are put into jails under the UAPA, we must remember that we pride ourselves on being the largest democracy in the world.

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