

Prem Sharma: A Time To Speak

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The events of the last six months in Gujarat have shocked us all. Not only because of the terrible cruelty and violence, nor only because of the cover-up attempts by some in authority. It is also because of the attitudes of many people, both in Gujarat and across India and the Diaspora. 'These things happen,' some have been saying. 'The minority community started it. What can you expect...?'

It is time for the silent majority to speak up and address these issues that are shaking the foundations of our democracy. We need to acknowledge freely that what has happened, and is continuing to happen, is not right. The killing of Hindus, followed by the killing of Muslims and the displacement of thousands of people; the destruction of property and assets; the wrecking of trust and community relationships – this can never be justified. It should never have been allowed to happen, but when it did happen it should have been stopped. It should have been openly rejected by all those who are committed to peace and justice, truth and equality and the principles of our secular State, which gladly acknowledges the rights of all communities and seeks to build harmonious relationships between them.

When I was a boy in India we had school and college friends from all communities. We didn't ask each other what religion we belonged to. We were one undivided society. Have those days gone for ever, I wonder? There seems now to be a gulf of suspicion and misunderstanding between certain sectors. Some Hindus, apparently, cannot accept minority communities as equals. A small section of Muslims act in ways that raise questions about their loyalty. All of us must reaffirm our commitment, as members of one country and one society, to which all of us can contribute.

The British Asian media have raised some objections to the approach I have just outlined. Let me answer them.

1. Is not this approach a sign of weakness on the part of Hindus, who have always been too soft and tolerant?

On the contrary, it is a sign of strength. To acknowledge that the actions of some of our community members have been wrong does not imply weakness. It demonstrates our commitment to something

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higher than narrow community interests; our commitment to truth and justice, which ultimately will triumph. The motto of the Indian republic is satyameva jayate. Let us believe and practise it!!

2. Are we by this approach condoning the wrongs done by the minority community?

Not at all. Ashutosh Varshney has expressed this well in his interview in *The Times of India* (11 March 2002):

The commentary in the English media has consistently underplayed minority communalism and overplayed majority communalism. Both forms of communalism need to be equally harshly condemned ... That Godhra happened because 'The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had it coming' is both a bad argument and a politically self-defeating position. Judgements of this kind only enrage the majority community and aggravate the problem, not solve it. Such commentary is similar to statements that the attack on the World Trade Center was the United States' fault. One can't distinguish injury and pain in this way. It should be possible to accept that just as there is majority communalism, there is also the phenomenon of minority communalism. Acknowledging this fact is not the same as saying that all Muslims are communal. The media needs to disaggregate the community, and accurately portray that just as there are innocent and noble Muslim citizens, so there are Muslim gangs and criminals.

Our aim is not to polarise but to acknowledge communalism, from whichever side it comes. We condemn all forms of communalism, and all those who use violence as a means of expression.

Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee of India put it sharply and most eloquently when he said that the violence had greatly diminished everyone and was a damaging blot on India's global image. 'I do not know with what face I will go abroad after all that has happened here.' He showed leadership with that statement. He demonstrated wisdom, too, when on the same occasion he spoke the following words of solidarity to 8,000 Muslim riot victims at the Shah Alam relief camp: 'You are not alone. We are with you.' That is the spirit of leadership and wisdom – the ability to speak truth and to express solidarity with all who suffer.

What then should be our response? What should the silent majority be demanding from our leaders?

1. We call for transparency and openness

The government of India must allow full access to all who are seeking to establish the truth, especially the Human Rights agencies. We have nothing to hide. If wrong has been done by anybody, the perpetrators must face justice. The government must allow access for Indian citizens, NRIs and others concerned, to approach the United Nations and seek their resources of information and people with valuable experience.

2. We encourage local groups to meet and discuss these issues, both in India and the Diaspora

The media need to stimulate genuine discussion (we appreciate the example of Asian Voice, with its predominantly Gujarati constituency). More than that, local groups from different communities must be helped to meet for discussion and dialogue. This will not be easy. The issues are grave and the pain is real. There are no easy answers. Anger and fear will not disappear just because we wish it to. But at least we must begin the process of healing through honest admission and direct discussion. This is as important in our Diaspora communities as it is in India. Perhaps we can help to set an example in this.

I recently attended a UN conference in New York, where religious leaders of all backgrounds affirmed their religion's commitment to tolerance and peace. I asked them who they were addressing. It was not enough for them to speak to each other, formulating principles which all could easily agree on. We need to take the message out to the field, to where people are, in their local communities, to help them deal with the issues there.

3. We re-affirm the right of all to follow their conscience in matters of political and religious belief and practice

This means, of course, that we also recognise the limits of that freedom: we cannot impose our will on others, or use force or violence to pressurise them. This applies to people of all communities, however large or small. The government, and all community leaders, should take steps to control those who use violence.

A practical proposal

How can we take this forward practically?

I propose that the organisers of this Conference plan a further conference of NGOs in New Delhi, to be addressed by leaders from the different religious communities and from the Government. This conference should be at the highest level – we should seek sponsorship from the United Nations. Then the NGOs should take the message out to local communities, in cities, towns and villages. They should call together up to 200 local community and religious leaders, from all backgrounds, and arrange for speakers from different religious communities to address them.

This will be the beginning of a process of healing and reconciliation, of grappling seriously with the issues. I believe that it is what the vast majority in India and the Diaspora want. Like this conference, we seek peace and justice, truth and reconciliation. That will only come about when we are willing to speak out with honesty and courage.

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