

THE AGE OF AMNESIA

Excerpts from SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA's presentation at the Conclave

The elections are over and a man has been installed as the Prime Minister of our country who represents a mindset that I ideologically oppose and find it deeply disturbing. Nevertheless, despite my personal assessment, he was democratically elected by the people of our country and has swept into power with such a force that any semblance of a credible opposition has completely vanished.

The people who did not vote for him are in shell-shock. Political parties that opposed him are in absolute disarray. Other political parties that sat on the fence hoping to negotiate a future if things went another way are now genuflecting before him in obeisance. In a strange way, our democracy has elected an emperor.

And yet, why am I not surprised?

I will take a small break here from my argument and tell you a little about myself.

I would like to inform you that I am an academic. I am a film-maker, writer, traveller and hopefully, a thinker. The views I am going to present today are not the observations of a trained sociologist or analyst but rather that of a concerned Indian who has, through his work and through travelling across the length and breadth of our country, spent his life dealing with the affairs of people.

Having said this let me move on to my paper. Let me also inform you that I have written it to open up a debate, because I firmly believe that it is the need of the hour, if we have to understand the nature of our country and where it is heading.

Now, back to my paper:

Why was I not surprised? To understand what I am getting at, I have to go a little further back in our country's history. We have to go back to the time when India became a Republic with a written Constitution. It was the time when our leaders defined the nation to the people of India and to the world. We were sovereign, secular and democratic. Here was a country that was primarily feudal, caste-ridden, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious, that was born out of incredible communal slaughter and the largest mass migration of people in history, and yet had the courage to look into the future with a sense of purpose and, most importantly, a sense of poetry. And, backing this dream was a large section of the educated and professional middle and upper middle class. They were the ones who mobilised the masses in the struggle against imperial rule. That is how our country was born: a multi-religious, pluralistic and inclusive nation.

Left behind in the shadows were forces, also from the middle-class, though smaller in number yet potent in influence, that were vehemently opposed to this ideal. They had a different agenda and a far simpler notion of what our country was all about: Hindu India had a glorious past before the coming of invaders and the country could create a glorious future by re-affirming its Hindu identity. These were the two main opposing ideologies and I as a young man was witness to the slow dismantling of one of them and the growth of the other.

The journey of dismantling began with the role of Congress party from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. What amazed me was the number of caste and Communal riots that had occurred in state after state under its watch, in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. If one checks the records they were in hundreds.

Very rarely did these events make front page news. More often than not they seemed casual, yet gruesome, reminders tucked away in the back pages. I could only guess at the reasons and forces behind these atrocities and yet I did realise something very clearly: The Idea of India that was defined in the Constitution was being relentlessly confronted by another reality on the ground. If nothing was to address these issues the consequences for the future could be disastrous.

The second aspect was the Congress party's over-indulgence of the Muslim clergy. I understand that good governance means recognising the needs, aspirations and fears of minorities but when did clerics become the sole spokespeople of these fears and aspirations? Though in the decades after Independence, the condition of the minorities, specifically in the north, west and east of India, sharply deteriorated and today it is abysmal, this molly-coddling of the Muslim clergy gave right-wing fundamentalists enough ammunition to scream 'minority appeasement' and 'vote-bank' politics. These charges found immense resonance with large sections of the middle class in the 1980s and would also have enormous consequences in the future.

There was one movement however that really set me thinking. It was the beginning of a political formation that started out in the city of Mumbai. It was The birth of the Shiv Sena. Backed by the muscle power of sympathetic street gangs, it would begin to attack south Indians, move on to threaten and squeeze Gujarati business, then take up the sons-of-the-soil slogan and attack north Indians and then, by the early 1990s, to finally settle down on a Hindutva platform through a series of riots. Mumbai, the nation's most cosmopolitan city and its financial, industrial and entertainment capital had now come under the influence of an organisation that dealt with issues by turning the streets of the city into battleground. By and large, in this violent journey of theirs the political parties in power and the law enforcing agencies looked the other way. What really set me thinking was that the Sena had the support of a large section of an affirmative, angry and educated Marathi-speaking middle-class that felt left out and marginalised in the growing employment opportunities of this burgeoning city. The Sena was their deliverer from real or imagined injustices.

These were the early signs and stages when the idea of India as envisioned by our early leaders began to be dismantled. What would follow, from the 1980s onwards, would be an onslaught.

At one level we saw the Naxalite movement grow in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, southern Bihar and Jharkhand to which the poor and marginalised had rallied because they had nowhere else to turn. In the North-East of the country we saw insurrections in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. A large-scale and violent farmers' agitation began in western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan demanding subsidies and economic relief. Farmers in Maharashtra began an agitation, too. Assam was in turmoil with a movement against 'outsiders' that manifested its anger in one of the most savage acts of brutality in which more than fifteen-hundred old men, women and children were bludgeoned to death outside a village called Nellie. In Punjab a violent militant movement began that demanded a separate state for Sikhs. The agitation and militancy was brought under control with the army storming the Golden Temple where hundreds of people died. The final act of this militancy unfortunately ended with the murder of the Prime Minister and then slaughter of more than three-thousand innocent Sikhs in gruesome acts of revenge in Delhi and other parts of the country. Thanks to a botched and rigged election, militants in Kashmir, aided by Pakistan, launched a protracted armed revolt. As the slogans of the militants got shriller and more communal, mass migration of Hindus from the Kashmir valley occurred. In the north, after the Mandal Commission report backward castes began organising themselves in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. There was a violent backlash from upper castes.

What did all these movements reveal? That a political and economical structure was not delivering and the tone and tenor of politicians' discourse was turning more brutal and violent.

We are all aware of what the Jan Sangh in its new avatar as the Bharatiya Janata Party did next. What is however important to note is that the Ramjanmabhoomi movement struck a chord, specifically with large sections of middle and upper middle classes in north and western India, because the idea was perceived as the launching pad for a proud and resurgent India. The movement culminated in the

horrendous communal riots of 1993 in Mumbai, where more than a thousand five hundred people died, hundreds of homes and livelihoods were destroyed and on to a series of horrific bomb blasts in which hundreds of innocent people died and hundreds more were injured. In a strange and macabre way, these two events faithfully served a purpose: they shocked the nation and polarised it.

And, as for the BJP, it went on from a party of almost nothing to a party of plenty. And also from party on the fringes of mainstream politics to the centre stage. The Writing was on the wall.

From the 1990s, along with the political and social upheavals other dramatic changes were also happening in our country. We were rapidly moving towards economic liberalisation and reforms and a whole new breed of 'entrepreneurs' was about to move in - land sharks, developers, wheelers-dealers, money launders, venture capitalists and, most importantly, corporate think-tanks.

In urban centres the most visible manifestation of the great euphoria of being finally free from 'licence raj' were magnificent malls, shopping arcades, lounge bars, multiplexes, nightclubs, boutiques and theme parks. They started springing up all over the country. And, backing this hedonistic lifestyle was a blitzkrieg of film, press and television commercials that celebrated the nation's 'coming of age'. Editorials in leading newspaper heralded India's leap into modernity. Beauty contests became front page news. A wedding party thrown by one tycoon where the cost was \$ 5 million, a mansion built by another that cost ten times more also became news. Mainstream cinema was not far behind in eulogising this new state of affairs. India was the happening place. The streets of Mumbai or Delhi were supposedly just a heartbeat away from those of Paris, London and New York.

What did large sections of the stoic middle and upper middle-class do in all of this? It got seduced. It got seduced by all the goodies on display: foods, clothes, cars, electronic gadgets, toiletries, beverages, shoes, and everything else that was on display in those incredible inviting store windows and shelves. It began to party. It was almost as if after years and years of abstinence this solid block of sobriety had gone on a binge. What nobody realised was that the centre of the nation had caved in. There was nothing to temper the onslaught of excess. All this was happening in a country where over seventy percent of citizens lived on less than \$ 2 a day.

Does all of this history link to political choices? I believe it does. Because the way people think determines their attitude to their families, their communities, their cities, their country and then the world. And, the elections of 2014 came at a time when the so-called economic miracle had turned into a nightmare.

As corruption reached every nook and corner of our existence, as the stock market distanced itself from ground realities and created wealth only for manipulators, as the IT industry reached its saturation point, as small and medium manufacturing industries began to collapse, as horrific acts of violence against women became everyday event and 'item' songs in films proliferated, as bomb blasts ripped through cities, buses, trains and market places taking many innocent lives and quite a few innocents were arrested, as MBAs and engineering students found it more difficult to find jobs, as agriculture could not sustain itself and millions left the land and headed towards urban centres, as other terror attacks occurred in Parliament and Mumbai where hundreds of people died, as thousand of debt-ridden small farmers committed suicide while film stars upped their fees by crores, as sting operations revealed economic scams everywhere, as service industries shrank, as police brutality got revealed and extra-judicial murders were highlighted, as the Meenas opposed the Gujjars in Rajasthan and the Kannadigas opposed the Tamils in Karnataka, as crony capitalists and their lobbyists stalked the corridors of power in state capital and in Delhi, as fundamentalists attacked books, art exhibitions, writers and painters, as higher education was no longer a pathway to economic salvation, as judges were found to be corrupt, as politicians and bureaucrats amassed enormous wealth, as healthcare costs rose astronomically, as inflation and the cost of living soared, as relatives of the rich and powerful

brandished their weapons in night clubs, as real estate prices reached absurd levels, far beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, a strange desperation set in.

It was in these desperate times that the middle and upper middle classes, specifically in north and western India, chose Mr. Narendra Modi as the messiah that the country needed to deliver itself from the economic, social and political mess it was in. Through the recent elections and the results that followed seemed to be a debate between 'good governance' and 'bad', we need to ask a question: was it really?

I believe there was a sub-text to the entire election campaign that was far more important.

I say this because of the choice the Bharatiya Janata Party made of its prime ministerial candidate before the election campaign. Here was a man vilified within the country and around the world for presiding over the mass slaughter of innocents within his state of Gujarat. He was a man attacked by the intelligentsia as a fascist and demagogue. He was known as a man who was uncompromising on the RSS's ideology and firmly grounded on its perceptions of the history. He was even attacked as a leader who favoured rich industrialists in his state at the cost of the poor, the farmers and the marginalised. And yet all of this did not matter as he was selected the party's candidate.

Did the party know something that those opposing him did not? I believe so. It did not matter to the party's hard-core support base which had expanded considerably since the demolition of the Babri Masjid. They had waited too long for this day to arrive. I think the party also knew that it did not matter to the majority of the big industrialists. It did not matter to the vast majority of traders because they were the party's traditional vote bank. There was also another group of small but influential supporters to whom it did not matter. It was a group that I would call the forgive-and-forget kind. They felt Modi was needed in this hour of crises: he was seen as the silver bullet to solve all the problems the country was facing. And, most importantly it did not matter to the very large sections of the middle and upper-middle class because they had either been sufficiently polarised over the years or been sucked into a world of consumerism and self-preservation. As for the majority of the youth from the middle and upper-middle class it also did not matter because to them history did not matter and besides, they were the sons and daughters of the same class of people I mentioned earlier. To all of them it just did not matter.

The journey is now over and we have elected Mr. Modi. Whether this is right or wrong for me is immaterial now. The journey also tells us what most of the middle and upper-middle classes have become and the vital question to ask is where will they go from here?