

# “DIVERSITY FOR POLITICAL HINDUTVA IS DISTURBING AND UNWELCOME”

**Excerpts from K. SATCHIDANANDAN’s presentation at the Conclave**

The concept of plurality is central to any genuine idea of India as a nation. We have had conflicts whenever any agency has tried to impose forms of religious, ethnic, cultural or linguistic hegemony in the name of unity while we have lived happily for centuries with the idea of plurality which to our people has been the very organic nature of their environment, natural and enriching like bio-diversity itself. This plurality is also part of the very essence of our democratic polity.

Let me digress a bit to explain what I mean by democracy: First condition for understanding democracy is to detach it from the instruments of the State and see it as people’s power which is the only true form of power since it is not they who are resisting the power of the State but the State that is resisting, constraining, containing and suppressing the power of the people through its institutions of law and order. While true democrats always speak of expanding the base of democracy, overcoming its constraints through popular action aimed at social justice and going beyond its present limitations and curtailments of rights, the enemies of democracy fear even the exercise by the common people of already existing freedoms and want to put further curbs on them and confine their availabilities to the upper layers of the society.

Jacques Rancière, the radical French thinker, in his treatise, *Hatred of Democracy* (Verso, 2006) remarks how the ‘government of anybody and everybody’ is bound to attract the hatred of all those who are bound to govern men by their birth, wealth, or science. “Today it is bound to attract this hatred more radically than ever since the social power of wealth no longer tolerates any restrictions on its limitless growth, and each day its mechanisms become more closely articulated to those of State action... State power and the power of wealth tendentially unite in a sole expert management of monetary and population flows. Together they combine their efforts to reduce the spaces of politics. But reducing these spaces, effacing the intolerable and indispensable foundation of the political, means opening up another battle field — it means witnessing the resurgence of a new radicalised figure of the power of birth and kinship. No longer the power of former monarchies and aristocrats, but that of “the peoples of God.”

Rancière takes the examples of the radical Islam and the American evangelists fighting democracy in different way, and in our context it can well be the apologists of ‘Hindutva’. Democracy destroyed in the name of a holy book or religion and the bellicose expansion of democracy using the power of weapons into other countries are two sides of the same coin. Democracy is neither a form of government that enables oligarchies to rule in the name of the people, nor is it a form of society that governs the power of commodities. It is the action that constantly wrests the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments, and the omnipotence over lives from the power of wealth. No institutional form can guarantee democracy unless it is constantly active and can wrench its power from its alienated forms.

This is where politics too begins: when it converts what was just noise into language, when those men and women who do not have the time to do anything other than their work take the time out they do not have to prove that they are indeed speaking beings, participating in a shared world and not furious or suffering animals. Thus, the inaudible is rendered audible, the invisible becomes visible, what was animal noise becomes human speech: thus, political activity reconfigures the distribution of the

perceptible. It resists 'policing' of every kind, challenges the watching eye, the one we find in Bantham Jeremy's concept of 'panopticon' that Foucault uses as a paradigm for the master's omnipresent eye (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*).

The challenge to Indian democracy now comes precisely from those sections who hate democracy as an idea. One needs to clearly distinguish hatred from critique, because critique is essential to expand the base of democracy and to redeem it from the hollowness caused by the constant depletion of its meaning turning it into just a formal structure with no democratic content that is continually happening to our democracy. But hatred comes from a deep contempt for the people with their plural natures and aspirations.

The hatred of democracy manifests itself in India chiefly in four ways:

One, intolerance towards India's religious, ethnic, linguistic, philosophical and cultural plurality;

Two, suppression of difference, silencing of popular and intellectual opposition and the consequent thwarting of the freedom of expression;

Three, the enfeeblement of the federal polity and increasing centralisation of power; and

Four, contempt towards those sections of population whose welfare constitutes the very goal and measure of democracy, viz, women, peasants, workers, dalits, adivasis, religious, ethnic and sexual minorities.

While speaking of plurality one needs to take note of contending notions of plurality. One of them is the market idea of plurality propounded by the globalisers and the champions of the neo-liberal economy where it means no more than the diversity of consumer products. Ethnicity in their jargon is but a trademark, regions are just product-labels and tourist destinations, people are all producers for a centralised market completely alienated from their products once the products enter the market-chain, globalising what was local so far. The languages are meant only to reach the diverse clientele, the 'copy' translated in different tongues.

The second is the 'statist' idea of plurality where it is looked at from the point of view of governance. The attempt here is to make it 'governable'. To some extent it is a colonial legacy as the British had found India's diversity an obstacle to governance that at times they also utilised to divide the people making control easier. In the 'statist' idea, plurality is acknowledged, but formatted as manageable: While we have several hundreds of mother tongues, only 22 find place in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, Hindi being given a prime place as the 'official' language (English being the associate official language) and we have linguistic states in each of which there are anything from 20 to 60 languages according to the recently concluded 'People's Linguistic Survey of India'. The State whatever its intentions, ends up creating hierarchies among languages as well as regions leading to identity wars. A forced unity inevitably leads to balkanisation. The great principle of federalism enshrined in the Constitution is seldom reflected in the actual practices of governance. Regions like the Northeast seldom appear in our picture of India, especially when it comes to the cultural discourse. Arts and literature are cleanly divided into classical, folk and modern, a division legitimated through the cultural institutions, whereas in practice they have all given to and taken from one another proving the clean and rigid division to be unreal and arbitrary. Certain aspects of our diversity get overlooked in the creation of the 'imagined communities' of the nation (to borrow Benedict Anderson's famous term) assisted by symbols. Plurality often becomes a colourful mask worn during spectacles like the Republic Day parade, a reductive, governable idea worthy of exhibition along with the nation's military strength, the 'theyyam' dancing behind a tank.

Political Hindutva however does not even recognise this diversity except as an unwelcome and disturbing presence. It is built over the tomb of India's pluralist ethos that believes in dialogue, exchange and debate. Anyone who has tried to argue with its proponents must have seen how it is like talking to a wall that only hurls stones at one instead of counter arguments. We see it on social media everyday: every criticism, even those made in the most rational and decent language, is countered by the worst forms of abuse by the self-appointed rowdy guardians of the Hindutva ideology.

Political Hindutva, let us not forget, despite its claims to patriotism, is a colonial construct borrowing elements from Western Orientalism, the Judaic idea of religion and the fascist ideas of cultural nationalism as manifested at various times in Germany, Spain and Italy, whose murderous intent has been expressed many a time in recent history from Gandhi's assassination to the Gujarat genocide.

It is timely to remember what Umberto Eco in his *Five Moral Pieces* calls 'ur-fascism', a kind of universal, omnipresent fascist trend with the following features: the cult of tradition that considers the truth as already revealed or known that goes against the grain of scientific thinking, rejection of modernism, action for action's sake done without reflection, suspicion of culture and of intellectuals, seeing any dissent as betrayal, fear of difference and the consequent rejection of pluralist ethos, appeal to the frustrated middle classes who feel the pressure from below, the negative and exclusivist way of defining the nation that leads to xenophobia, the creation of an 'other' blamed for all that is wrong with the society and an obsession with conspiracies, seeing pacifism as collusion with the enemy that comes from a vision of life as permanent battle that will finally lead to the lost golden age, a form of popular elitism that results in scorn for the weak, machismo that condemns all non-conformist sexual habits and a contempt for women and sexual deviants, the cult of death ('Viva la muerte' was the slogan of the Falangists of Spain) that prefers death to life, this readiness to die also justifying the readiness to kill, qualitative populism that treats people as a monolith and identifies the voice of one small group with the voice of the whole people believing in some abstract 'common will' and hence opposing all parliamentary governments, and the 'new speak' (a term George Orwell uses in his novel *1984*) that sees everything in black and white, abhors all complex thinking and would like to limit the tools available for critical thinking.

It is not difficult to see almost all these symptoms, at times in transformed, veiled or diluted forms, in the Hindu rightwing in India. The Hindu cultural nationalism is nationalism shorn of the respect for regional identities and cultural differences on the one hand, and of the internationalist dimension on the other. In its atavism, faith in racial and religious superiority, opposition to egalitarianism, its rootedness in the middle classes and its collaboration with capitalism, it is no different from Nazism. Outfits like the Bajrang Dal and the Hindu Rashtra Sena are like the Nazi storm troopers, and their use of symbols like the lotus, the *ganga-jal* and semi-mythological figures like Rama remind one of the Nazi deployment of Nordic symbols. Again what the Jew was to the Nazi is the Muslim (and minorities generally) to the BJP-RSS-VHP-Bajrang Dal combine: the Muslim (could well be Christian, Parsi, Buddhist or Jain) is the first 'other' held responsible for all the ills of the society and the suffering of the majority.

Add to this, their vain racist faith in their Aryan origins and you have all the making of classical fascism modeled on Nazism. Also, add to it the recent revelations about its terrorist activities under the cover of 'Abhinav Bharat' with its proved involvement in the Malegaon blasts (2008), Mecca Masjid blasts (2007), Samjhauta Express Bombing (2007) and the Ajmer Sharif Dargah blasts (2007) -that made even the Prime Minister of India say that the saffron terror was even a worse threat to India than the Lashkar-e-Tayiba and you have a perfect combination of fascism with terrorism.

We very well know that the Hindu religion spoken of today is an overarching concept constructed from a plurality of cults and belief-systems on the model of Judaic religions as a response to the spread of Christianity in India: its proponents equated the upanishadic concept of the indefinable Brahma with God in the Western sense, turned Gita that legitimates the *varna* system and eclectically brings together many different systems of earlier philosophy (said to have been appended to the Mahabharata much later according to D. D. Kosambi) into a revealed book like the Bible or the Koran, gave the legendary Krishna the mantle of a prophet like Jesus or Mohammed, began to consider the Vedas as holy scriptures and the epic Ramayana as a sacred book, treated concepts like *jeevatma*, *paramatma*, *karma*, *dharma*, *sansara* and *moksha* as the basic principles of a standardised 'Indian' philosophy, that had many theistic and atheistic strains, universalised Brahminism as Hinduism and even initiated forms of group worship and missionary work to make it look like a religion in the Western sense.

Originally the Hindu had just been a general name for the natives of India that the foreigners found here when they came and has its origins in the Greek Indos, the name for Indus, the Sindhu river. The Muslims and Christians who first came here needed a term to qualify all the others in the country they had come to, and later the Colonialists and the Orientalist historians and philosophers constructed a 'Hindu' religion based on certain texts and practices, mostly Brahminical, to the exclusion of a variety of streams of thought and practice that complemented or contradicted these.

Philosophical systems many of which even rejected the concept of the divine like the Sankhya and Charvaka, Sramanic religions like Buddhism and Jainism, hundreds of tribal religions and diverse cults were excluded in order to construct a monolithic Hindu religion, and in the process also invisibilised the cultural contributions of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Jewish religion to the making of the complexly plural Indian civilization. Alternative historians of the Hindu practices like Wendy Doniger (*The Hindus: An Alternative History*) and many subaltern historians have interrogated the assumptions about a monolithic Hindu religion projected by conventional historians and Orientalists, and tried to look at the immense diversity of its many streams outside the so-called mainstream as defined by certain Sanskrit texts and Brahminical theologians.

The idea of Hindutva was first politically formulated by the Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha established in 1914 at the initiative of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lala Lajpat Rai and made more militant under the leadership of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s. It criticised the Indian National Congress especially for going out for Muslim support which it thought was a compromise. In 1925, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh which opposed Gandhi's *Quit India* move and supported the British efforts in the Second World War, a fact it would now like to conceal. Then came Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's Bharatiya Jana Sangh that became the chief rallying point for militant Hinduists between 1951 and 1980, the year that saw the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party as a political outfit. In between the Vishwa Hindu Parishad had come up to spread the Hindu dharma, reconvert the delinquent Muslims and Christians into Hinduism and to fight for banning cow slaughter. Their website clearly declares Hindutva as their ideology and the establishment of a Hindu nation as the cherished goal. The website opens with the slogan: "Rajniti ka Hindookaran, Hindustan ka Saineeakaran" (The Hinduisation of Politics, the Militarisation of the Hindu Nation) BJP from the beginning has stood for a Hindu nation and championed the revival of Sanskrit – by which they meant of course only the Brahminical Sanskrit texts, the idea of Hindi (as against the Hindustani closer to Urdu suggested by Gandhi) as a national language, as recently re-emphasised by the new Prime Minister, and the opposition to everything western.

They also look at socialism, communism and secularism as 'foreign' ideas and consider Islam and Christianity too as alien religions. Despite its anti-caste rhetoric and even the accommodation of a few Muslims to project a secular image, its ideology remains steeped in Brahminical principles and texts like Manu Smriti. Those who voted the party taking the Prime Ministerial candidate to be a member of the OBC, that was used as a vote-catching slogan in UP and many interior parts of India with OBC vote banks, are in for disappointment as the party is steeped in Brahminical ideology and has been an upholder of the Varna system. Only for the time being his being empirically an OBC has got him a big chunk of votes from the OBCs who feel, ironically) that the Dalits have won a lot of privileges while they have been neglected at the national level.

All the arguments for justifying the existence of such a heavily communal outfit under a constitutionally secular democracy have been false. The first of them was that the Hindus had suffered persecution under the Muslim rule that destroyed their temples and imposed religious taxes. But, if Mahmood Ghazni had robbed temples of their wealth, so had the Hindu king Harshavardhan too according to Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. This had the sanction of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* that permitted the rulers to take temple wealth in times of scarcity or war. The second argument is based on conversions from Hinduism. But all the studies of conversion show that the converts were mostly from the backward castes who had suffered grievously under the Hindu *varna-jati* system and had been looking for an escape from the hierarchy; the rest had economic motives and a few were the result of religious conviction.

It will be worth recalling here the bloody battles the Hindus had fought against the Buddhists and also the feuds between different cults like those between Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Religious tolerance was hardly ever a Hindu virtue. One also needs to remember that many Muslim kings like Akbar, Aurangzeb, Safdarjung and Wajid Ali Shah had either built temples or had heavily contributed to them. The students of history know very well that the arguments around Ramjanmabhoomi that even brought the BJP to power too are completely baseless as Ayodhya had no links with Rama in the records from 5th to 8th centuries AD. During the time of Huen Tsang it was a Buddhist centre, and later sacred to Jain pilgrims. Its moral prudery-manifested in its outcry against erotic paintings or homoerotic literature and youth celebrations like the Valentine's Day, etc is entirely non-Hindu and Victorian British going by the Indian texts like *Kamasutra*, *Kumarasambhava*, *Saundaryalahari*, *Deveebhagavatapurana*, *Kalika Purana* and *Gitagovinda* all of which are uninhibitedly erotic, not to speak of the sculptures of Konark or Khajuraho or the Tantric art and rituals.

The growth of Hindutva had other catalysts too: First, India did not have an agrarian revolution and our bourgeois revolution was incomplete thus permitting many feudal structures and ideas to continue to hold sway. Secondly, our nationalist movement was seldom a secular movement and employed several religious ideas and symbols in its promulgation: Gandhi used the concept of Ramrajya, Aurobindo used Kali worship and Tilak used Ganesh Chaturthi for example. Thirdly, our agrarian movements often had a religious character as in Kerala, West Bengal and the Deccan. Fourthly, our nationalist historians often divided Indian history into three phases based on religion: the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the British/Christian period. Fifthly, the British had consciously created and deepened the Hindu-Muslim divide. Sixthly, the Indian National Congress, both before and after Independence did little to lessen its intensity and even used the Hindu plank quite often after Nehru's time, promoting *babas* and dubious gurus like Chandraswami, to take one example. Many of our cultural leaders, including Rabindranath Tagore did not take into account the Muslim contribution to Indian culture.

The growth of the BJP from zero seat in the Indian Parliament to 182 seats in 1999 and 282 in 2014 was but the consequence of an unprecedented mobilisation of Hindu votes based on a combined Goebbelsian propaganda by a combination of communal outfits, made possible in 1999 by the passion generated by the televised *Ramayana* serial — so well studied by Romila Thapar — and the unpopularity of the Congress-led government at the Centre, besides unprincipled political alliances. In 2014, the corruption and the degeneration of the Congress and their consequent estrangement from the people on the one hand and the corporate's disenchantment with them on the other besides the OBC factor as stated above, the role of huge money — said to be 1500 crores of dollars — contributed chiefly by the corporates and by the NRIs-combined with the disunity and failure of the opposition parties made their huge victory possible.

The BJP in its last term had left no stone unturned in its monstrous attempt to appropriate culture for political use: during its regime almost all the public cultural institutions of India, like the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the Indian Congress for Historical Research (ICHR), the Indian Congress for Philosophical Research (ICPR), the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla (IIAS), Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal were politicised and shamelessly used as institutions for insular propaganda. The attacks by the Hindutva outfits on films like Deepa Mehta's *Water* and *Fire*, Amir Khan's *Fanaa* and *Rang De Basanti*, Nandita Das's *Firaaq*, on the paintings of M.F. Hussain, the plays of Habib Tanvir, on Darpana, Mallika Sarabhai's dance school, on Medha Patkar and Anand Patwardhan, the destruction of the tomb of the poet Wali Dakhani, the attack on the Bhandarkar Institute just because James Lane had referred to some books there to write his objectively researched book on Shivaji have not been forgotten by the right-conscious sections of the public and the intellectuals. The case against Wendy Doniger's books on Hindu religion and mythology, the recent appointment of Y. S. Rao, a legitimiser of the caste system with a strong RSS background as the Chairperson of ICHR, the lawyer's notice against B. Rajeevan's statement that Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindutvavadi with an RSS background, the threats and abuses being hurled at people who use social media, including

intellectuals like Priyamvada Gopal for critiquing the Modi government, the misuse of Section 66 A of the Indian Penal Code as well as the Sedition Law, the new surveillance regime intended to suppress criticism on the social media leading to the murder of Sheikh Mohsin Sadiq by the Hindu Rashtra Sena, the insult meted out to U.R. Ananthamurthy, the highly regarded Kannada writer for criticising Modi, the actions against two campus magazines in Kerala, the threat to Shubha Mudgal, the famous Hindustani musician at the Sannivale temple in the US by a NRI Hindutvavadi, the attacks on the members of the Ram-Rahim Mitramandal, the high-handed intervention in judicial appointments, the vindictive acts against human rights and eco-activists including the raising the height of the Narmada dam, are all more recent examples of onslaughts on democratic freedom of action and expression. New outfits like Hindu Rashtra Sena, Sree Ram Sena and Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti are making their own contribution to the imposition of the neo-Hindutva world view on everything from pubs to publishing houses.

Suffice it to say that the hegemony of the Hindutva ideology poses a great threat to the plurality that defines the nature of India's civilization and history and is the basis of its cultural richness. If the hegemony of a monolithic Brahminical Hindu religion challenges our religious plurality, the belief in the 'Aryan' origins of Indians (against Romila Thapar's contention in her book *Aryans* that 'Aryan' is no more than the name of a group of languages and such a race never existed) threatens our ethnic plurality. The silencing of dissent on the environmental front in the name of the 'foreign funding' of NGOs and the mega-idea of 'development' that helps only the richer sections of the society (all recent studies prove wrong the 'trickle-down theory' of its proponents), goes against the idea of ecological diversity while on the intellectual and cultural front, various forms of surveillance and suppression and the taking over of cultural institutions, are meant to silence the plurality of ideas and ideological debates. On the political front, one sees what Professor Anthony King calls 'the theatre of celebrity' where all the ministers and bureaucrats are made to listen to the commands of one man who is supposed to have won the votes for the new regime. Linguistic plurality is already under threat with the wrong characterising of Hindi as the 'National' language and the proposed teaching of Sanskrit at the school level. Opposition from labour is also sought to be silenced through the new anti-labour laws now being tested out in Rajasthan.

Lord Acton once said, "It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority, for there is a reserve of latent power in the masses, which, if it is called into play, the minority can seldom resist". Read this with Rosa Luxemburg's famous statement in her arguments with Lenin that freedom means the freedom to oppose. Today opposition is becoming more and more difficult and therefore, more and more necessary, for without dissent democracy dies. When they speak of the 31 percent who voted them let us speak of and speak for the 69 percent that did not vote them for various reasons. When political parties seem to be abdicating their responsibility towards the people, it is for the people to play the role of the opposition and re-educate the parties in the art of dissent.