

Impossible Lessons

• Ravi Sinha

Far away from Peshawar five men and a woman sat in a physician's waiting room in Lucknow. The television screen that ordinarily shows some Bollywood film or a cricket match had a news channel on. It was day after the slaughter of children. The assistant who maintains the waiting list of patients and collects the doctor's fee said something very predictable, even if heart-felt, expressing his horror and revulsion. The matter would have passed as unremarkably as most things do most of the times, except for what an elderly gentleman waiting to see the doctor had to say in response.

In a feeble yet firm voice whose conviction and sincerity was unmistakable, he said – *dhaarmikata ko badhaava doge to kattarta badhegi; kattarta badhegi to aatank upajega, haivaaniyat saamne aayegi.* (If you will promote religiosity, fundamentalism will grow, and from that will emerge terror and barbarism.) After a pause he added – *hamaare desh mein bhee yahee ho rahaa hai, haalaan ki abhee hum pehle daur mein hain, dhaarmikata badhaane ke daur mein.* (Same thing is happening in our country too, although we are in the first phase so far – that of promoting religiosity.)

It was stunningly simple a statement with clear enunciation of a causal chain. No one spoke after that. Uncharacteristically, for Indians, no discussion followed and no rebuttals were made. The statement was surprising for a number of reasons. First of all it did not come from an atheist leftist. There are too few of them left in any case in this city of Majaz, Rashid Jahan and Sajjad Zaheer, and it would have been too much of a coincidence if both the patients waiting to see the doctor in that lean hour of the day belonged to this rare breed. (Others were either family members of the patients or the doctor's assistants.)

The statement was surprising also because, despite widely held views to the contrary, it did not blame one particular religion for being more disposed than others to harbour and incite terrorism. Nor did it sing the usual song about true religiosity being antithetical to brutality and violence. If one were willing to honestly count all killings across millennia of human history, I have little doubt that religion will show up as the single biggest killer. There are those who deploy enormous erudition and scholarship in proving that it kills only when it becomes modern. There are others who would not tire of repeating that it kills only as a handmaiden of imperialism. Veracity of examples likely to be cited in support of such theses cannot be denied. And yet, the theses themselves are grievously mistaken. Religion kills for its own sake too. If others hire it frequently, they do so because it is extraordinarily effective at the job. Nobel winning physicist Steven Weinberg once said – ... *you have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But, for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.*

It does not take a great deal of erudition to know that the Thirty Year War in seventeenth century Europe had seen the biggest blood-bath before the world wars of the twentieth century broke that record. That can hardly be attributed to modernity or to imperialism. Nor did religion begin to kill children only in the modern times. The oldest of religious myths

recount massacre of children. If one were to consider that the slaughter of all male children of Hebrew families at Egyptian Pharaoh's orders is a story intended to portray the adversary in bad light, how does one interpret the same side reporting gleefully the extermination of all Egyptian firstborns in the last of the ten plagues unleashed by the Hebrew God on the Egyptians?

A mistaken view that seems to be widely held in this country considers Hinduism comparatively non-violent. The *Hindutva brigade* laments this. They would like to turn Hindus into ferocious warriors against other faiths. This sordid episode is currently in full bloom in the Indian society and polity. I do not fully agree with the gentleman in the clinic when he says that we are in the first phase of promoting religiosity that is yet to attain full-scale brutality and violence. Can one draw any such comfort after witnessing, for example, what happened during the Gujarat carnage of 2002?

If religion can kill even while preaching peace, compassion, brotherhood and spirituality, one can imagine the added ferocity when it openly preaches the virtues of violence. The current foreign minister of India has called upon the world to accept *Gita* as the global holy book. Honesty would demand that this appeal be accompanied with a disclaimer – this book is basically a call to arms and an incitement to violence. Lord Krishna went to great philosophical lengths to rid Arjun of the scruples the latter had about participating in the impending blood-bath of *Mahabharat* that would include killing his own cousins and relatives.

Speaking against religion is not a wise thing to do. It carries all kinds of dangers – exclusion and ridicule being among the more benign ones. It is not easy, therefore, to draw truthful lessons from histories and practices of religion. Nearly all of humanity that has lived so far has been religious and, by and large, it continues to be so. How does one criticize or evaluate the mode of living of the entire human race? How does one bring its core beliefs under dispassionate and fearless scrutiny? It is not surprising that thinkers and theorists have had to plumb great philosophical depths and weave intricate theories around this issue. Obvious observations and simple truths would simply not do.

Undoubtedly there are things in the world about which precious little can be done. There are problems about which the best one can do is to go around them. And yet one learns about them not only because one is curious but also because one is always trying to cope with the world and make it better. One cannot do anything to gravity, and yet one keeps learning about it. In the process one does find newer ways to cope with it. Religion, unfortunately, is much like gravity. Lessons drawn from its history may invariably be impossible lessons, but even impossible lessons have their uses.

The poetically inspired moment in which Marx coined the phrase – *opium of the people* – has been the bane of every Marxist's life. They have been mercilessly beaten up with this phrase and endlessly ridiculed for being juvenile. Hardly anyone reads the passage in the *Introduction* to Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* from which the phrase gets plucked. It almost reads like an ode to religion when he says – *Religious suffering is, at one*

and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. One wonders what Marx would say about religion after the slaughter of children in Peshawar. Would he say that it did the killing at the behest of imperialism? Would he say that seeds of a ferocious religious culture were sown in the Swat valley and elsewhere so that harvest of slaughters would feed the powers that rule over the planet, control its oil and own its wealth?

Anger and ridicule should be directed not towards what someone might say about religion. They should be directed towards what religion actually does. Its deeds are so grim and stark that even its sympathetic theorists are forced to raise questions about its conduct. Take for example the communitarian-idealist philosopher Charles Taylor who is famous for deploying exceptional intellect and erudition in making sense of the likes of Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and later Wittgenstein. In 2007 he came out with a 900-pages long book on the role of religion in history and civilization. The approach of this book, which he called *The Secular Age*, is too nuanced and its conclusions are too complex to be summarized here. While wrestling with the riddles of human thought and deeds in the dark alleys of history, myth and psyche with little light from the lamps of science and certainty reaching those alleys, Taylor emerges occasionally as if to catch a breath on the surface of manageable questions and simpler conclusions. I am tempted to quote from him, despite the risk of doing injustice to him and of exposing my own pretentiousness, in the hope that rational scrutiny of religion can be seen as a worthy enterprise.

Sources of primal frenzy, wild sexuality and plain slaughter have been debated within religious discourses themselves. More modern and humanist interpretations of religion have often castigated the primordial and naturalist versions for holding a view as if “all religion is ultimately Moloch drinking blood from the skulls of the slain” (*The Secular Age*, p. 648). I wonder if there have been similar debates within Hinduism where *Kali* and *Shiva* are reprimanded for such conduct. In any case, through an anthropocentric cleansing of ancient religions, at least in the west, it was hoped that religion would be rid of evil and frenzy, sex and slaughter,

“... in this anthropocentric climate, where we keep any idea of the spiritual, it must be totally constructive, positive. It can’t accommodate Kali, and is less and less able to allow for a God who punishes. The wrath of God disappears, leaving only His love...On the older view, wrath had to be part of the package...some people fry in Hell; and the others are only saved because Christ offered “satisfaction” for them. This was the heart of the juridical-penal understanding of the atonement. But in the anthropocentric climate, this no longer makes sense, and indeed, appears monstrous.” (*The Secular Age*, p. 649)

The question, however, remains. Why then, despite modernity, religion remains a prime instigator of bestiality and slaughter? Taylor discusses the question at various levels – biological, meta-biological, metaphysical, psycho-social, political and historical. Given his theoretical and ideological dispositions, he is inclined towards metaphysical explanations. Wading through complex arguments he arrives at a conclusion that puts part of the blame at

modernity's door. Modernity turns out in this account to be as self-righteous as religion. Citing examples of modern and non-religious violence, from the French Revolution to the War on Terror and Abu Ghraib, he accords equivalent status to Robespierre, Hitler, Stalin and George Bush.

I have put Taylor on display as an illustrative example. The point is to recognize the intrinsic relationship between religion and violence. If we have to understand our own specific predicament, we may have to step away from Taylor and go beyond his conclusions. After all, Peshawar and Gujarat happen here and not in Canada or Sweden. There must be some reason if religious slaughters and other barbarities of the present age tend to cluster in some parts of the world and not others.

The Economist this week quotes a former army officer from Pakistan, "I am not sure if Pakistan was created in the name of religion, but it is surely being destroyed in the name of religion" (*From the Graveyard*, Selections from *The Economist*, The Indian Express, 22nd December, 2014). There have been condemnations around the world of the slaughter of children, and also declarations that this is going to be the much-awaited turning point as far as Pakistan is concerned. But wishes cannot be horses. The soil often gets soaked with blood because political and civilizational histories – and above all religion – have poured poison into its deeper layers. The courageous Pakistani intellectual and physics professor, Pervez Hoodbhoy, is on spot when he points out with his characteristic forthrightness why this is not going to be "the final atrocity" in Pakistan,

"All tragedies provoke emotional exhortations. But nothing changed after Lakki Marwat when 105 spectators of a volleyball match were killed by a suicide bomber in a pickup truck. Or, when 96 Hazaras in a snooker club died in a double suicide attack. The 127 dead in the All Saints Church bombing in Peshawar, or the 90 Ahmadis killed while in prayer, are now dry statistics. In 2012, men in military uniforms stopped four buses bound from Rawalpindi to Gilgit, demanding that all 117 persons alight and show their national identification cards. Those with typical Shia names, like Abbas and Jafri, were separated. Minutes later corpses lay on the ground.

If Pakistan had a collective conscience, just one single fact could have woken it up: the murder of nearly 60 polio workers — women and men who work to save children from a crippling disease — at the hands of the fanatics."

(The Dawn, December 20th, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151930>)

One could raise a few questions about the Indian collective conscience too. Did it wake up after *Gujarat 2002*? Did it punish the perpetrators of the horrific crimes? Did it punish those who presided over the carnage? Did India hang its head in shame when thousands of women were raped, scores of children slaughtered, even fetuses were torn out of wombs? The answer is well-known. The person who presided over *Gujarat 2002*, justified the barbarism by invoking Newton's third law (*the action at Godhra is bound to have a reaction across Gujarat*), organized the post-riot "procession of pride" (*Gaurav Yatra*) just ahead of the coming elections, and offensively humiliated an entire community with his *ame paanch, amaaraa pachees* speeches ("we five, ours twenty-five" – an ugly caricature of the family-planning slogan, "we two and ours two"), has been rewarded election after election culminating in the final reward of the Prime Minister's chair. Nearly entire country is lying

prostrate before this newly minted “statesman” who is supposed to have moved on and become the messiah of development. It is touching to watch fierce journalists and erudite commentators worrying endlessly about the damage that might be done by the minions of the *Hindutva brigade* to their own commander’s project. Why should they raise the spectre of *love jihad*, speak obscenely about *ramzade-haramzade*, generate tension through *ghar-wapsi* (home-coming by reconversion to Hinduism), and go on fomenting riots in different parts of the country? Why should they do what their commander-in-chief did before he became the commander-in-chief?

Prevailing standards of political debate in this country would prompt many to retort – why keep harping on Gujarat? What about the massacre of Sikhs in 1984? Wasn’t Rajiv Gandhi rewarded with the largest majority in the history of the Lok Sabha? Yes, that too! Although in that case victory may have come despite the massacre and not because of it. In any case, one could count many more cases of engineered riots and pandemic brutalities that brought political dividends. That precisely is the point. Why is it expedient for politics in our kind of societies – including in its democratic avatar – to hire religion for mass killings if that is what is needed to attain political goals?

This is a question that is often sidestepped and the entire blame is put on politics. There is no doubt that politics is to be blamed for much and there are politicians who have committed crimes against history and against humanity. How can one ignore the poisoning of an entire civilization by contemporary politics, especially since the days of the *Rath Yatra* and the demolition of the Babri Mosque? And yet, most of the country appears to have little trouble breathing in this poisoned atmosphere. Should this not bring one back to the question that one was trying to sidestep in the first place? Should one not look into the make-up of a civilization that finds it natural to breathe poisonous air?

It might appear as if we are back to the affair of impossible lessons. Are we going to elect a new people, as Brecht is supposed to have said somewhere? Are we going to conjure up a new way of life and rewire the social brain so as to give rise to a new civilization? If the haystack is ever ready to catch fire, what can we do other than making sure that no one throws a matchstick into it? Any lesson about religion or about the make-up of a civilization is not likely to be of any real use.

But, one may be rushing too fast. In real life useful measures are routinely squeezed out of seemingly impossible lessons. Consider, for example, some of the processes at the interface of a modern system and a yet-to-be-modern society. What prevents the religious fanatics and the politico-religious brigades from throwing the society into a perpetual inferno? Why are pogroms and carnages used selectively and, perverse as it may sound, in limited ways? Why is it that in spite of the frequent bouts of barbarism we escape plunging into outright religious wars of the ancient and medieval types? The answer lies primarily in the existence of a modern system and in the peculiar historical fact that modernity has become remarkably, if unevenly, entrenched in this yet-to-be modern society. Contrary to what the regular leftists and the esoteric post-leftists would have one believe, the *Hindutva brigade* in India is prevented from going completely berserk not because people will disapprove. It is primarily

because of the restraints imposed by modernity. Faced with the religious-fascist onslaught even those who have more fundamental reasons to oppose the system are forced to take shelter behind the Constitution and the formal structure of a modern state. The plight of those living in the countries without a modern state and a constitutional rule – in the subcontinent and elsewhere – is far worse.

The regular leftist would be alarmed by what would appear to him an explicit endorsement of the modern state. The post-leftist, on the other hand, would be aghast at what would appear to her as succumbing to the deceptive charms of modernity. Both would be mistaken in their respectively expected ways. I can rehearse what I have written elsewhere about how the modern state exists to serve the interests of the capital and why do capitalists hire the brutes, including the religious kind, to manage the polity (“Of Money-in-the-Blood and Blood-Money”, <http://kafila.org/2014/09/13/of-money-in-the-blood-and-blood-money-ravi-sinha/>). I can also rehearse and hopefully improve upon my take on modernity which is one of critical appreciation. But that would take us away from the issue at stake here.

Religion is not the sole repository of impossible lessons. There are other seemingly impossible lessons to be learnt from capital, labour and history. But that is another story and will have to be told another time.

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