

Hate Speech: Contexts and Consequences

Mazher Hussain

Suddenly a speech delivered by Akberuddin Owaisi is in sharp public focus. This is not the first hate speech delivered in India nor will it be the last. What define this speech are the obnoxious levels of rhetoric against a community coupled with its propagation through the social and electronic media.

Leaders from different religious, caste, regional, linguistic and ethnic communities in India are known for their hate speeches. But most got away with whatever vitriol they spewed before the era of electronic and social media due to lack of clinching evidence. Even if some speech was made, it would reach people more as a report and not directly and hence did not evoke strong responses as compared to present times where it could be viewed, reposted and reviewed by hundreds of thousands with outmost ease as it goes viral. Because of this direct access to content by potentially limitless viewers, its ability to hurt (and to be manipulated by vested interests), becomes manifold. Further, the audio visual format makes the content undeniable and exposes any subsequent statements of misreporting or misquote as false.

Impacts All Communities

Though a hate speech is generally taken to hurt the sentiments of one particular community / group, it also impacts the other community in multiple ways. First, the right thinking people of the other community- and most people in any community so far are fortunately right thinking- are also dismayed and feel the hurt to varying degrees. Second, it gives a bad image to the community. Individuals also feel tainted for no fault of their but can do little except feel defensive and find themselves exposed to counter profiling, taunts and even physical violence. Fourth, with each hate speech, more and more “neutrals’ and “liberals” of the other community tend to become partisan leading to greater polarization. But this is precisely the aim of communal politicians- maximum polarization for electoral gains.

Finally, in the case of the speech of Akber Owaisi, it also goes against the very basic precepts of Islam that exhorts its followers not to say anything against any other religion. In the Quran it is clearly written “Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite Revile Allah in their ignorance” (Quran: 6-108) and an entire Sura (Chapter) devoted to the theme that is as follows “ I worship not that which you worship, Nor will you worship that which I worship, to you be your way and to me mine” (Quran: 109- 2,3 & 6)

Tolerating Hate Politics: Reasons and Consequences

The prime reason for continuation of hate speeches, communal conflicts and riots is lack of political will of the government of the day to take appropriate action. This could be due to fear of a backlash or political expediency as the government may be dependent on or in coalition with the communal forces or in most cases afraid of losing the vote of the community against

whose member(s) some action is warranted. Most actions in India against communal elements have been on the directions of courts and not because of the initiatives of the governments. In fact, despite court directions, the investigation and prosecution (that is under the control of governments) is diluted to enable the accused to go free. Hence the rate of convictions in communal offences is abysmally low and emboldens communal forces to continue their nefarious activities brazenly for electoral gains. People have even become Chief Ministers through hate speeches and riots adding to the attraction of communal politics.

But every act of hate speech or conflict that goes unpunished further divides society and encourages violence and promotes politics of hate where development issues take a back seat and leaders get elected not because of their service to people but manipulation of community sentiments. The youth on both sides are the worst affected as they get swayed and engage in violence that affects both their character and careers.

Strong but Impartial Action Accepted by People

Past experiences show that there are negligible protests from a few fringe elements whenever governments have taken firm action. Examples are of the arrest of Pravin Togadia by the Rajasthan Government; disfranchisement of Bal Thackeray by the Bombay High Court that was upheld by the Supreme Court of India; and most significant, the arrest of L.K. Advani by Lalu Prasad Yadav during the Rath Yatra of mid 80s that made Lalu Prasad a hero and propelled him on to the National scene.

Communities do react negatively but only when they perceive inaction or discrimination or selective persecution. Minority and marginalised communities are particularly sensitive in these matters. When no action is taken when it is warranted or when action is taken against one person or group and not others or equal action is not taken, the community protests the discrimination even when it may disapprove of the acts of its own members against whom action is being taken. In fact, inaction or selective action or discriminatory action on the part of government antagonises even the normal or indifferent people and communalises them to eventually add to the numbers of fanatics.

So if governments fail to take appropriate action to nip in the bud hate speeches and riots that lead to polarisation, it will communalise more and more people to eventually start giving electoral dividends. With the prospects of electoral dividends, hate speeches and riots will increase to strengthen communal politics. But communal politics just play on sentiments of people and have little to offer in terms of development and empowerment and so when politics becomes communal, common people of all communities, majority or minority, come to suffer in multiple ways.

Sentiments Vs Human Life

Sentiments are very important but far more important are human lives- each and every human life. Whenever hate speeches are delivered, there is public outcry and demand for severe action. But when people die in communal violence, most of them become statistic and there is hardly any feeling of personal hurt, public revulsion or sustained demand for punishment of the guilty. Are sentiments more important and precious than human lives? Or is it because most people who die in riots are either the poor or minorities or marginalised?

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