

February 13, 2019

Fraternity: The Missing Link of India's Democracy

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Fraternity—bandhuta—is the most radical and important idea of our times, the necessary foundation to fight all the world's injustices, hate and inequalities.

The people of India, and indeed much of the world, are living through deeply troubled times, marked by rising hate and inequality. A new leadership is gaining strength and electoral support in country after country around the world. These are leaders who are authoritarian, divisive and polarising, who reflect, amplify, legitimise and indeed valorise bigotry and prejudice, targeting minorities of many kinds.

There is simultaneously a precipitous decline in the civility of our public discourse, in which hectoring and blighting one's adversaries are seen as markers of high oratory and political muscularity. These together constitute in India a grave threat to our constitutional values, and most of all to fraternity.

While submitting the Draft Constitution to the President of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad, on 21 February 1948, B R Ambedkar wrote that the drafting committee had added a clause on “fraternity” in the Preamble (even though it was not part of the Objective Resolution) because “the need for fraternal concord and goodwill in India was never greater than now.”

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India arguably today stands more divided than it ever was since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi amidst the bloodbath of Partition. Once again today, I am convinced that we must again echo Ambedkar: that the imperative for fraternity was never greater, since the birth of India's constitution.

Yet fraternity remains the least understood, least discussed, and doubtlessly the least practiced of the four pillars of constitutional morality spelt out in the preamble of India's Constitution: justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. It is forgotten not just by those chosen to uphold our Constitution, it is lost even in our public and social life, in which the aggressive use of oppositional identities remains, for most political parties, the most reliable instrument to harvest votes with. And prejudice and inequality are produced and reproduced in our hearts and homes.

Fraternity for Us

The word fraternity is derived from French to mean brotherhood, friendship, community and cooperation (Asthana 1992: 118). It is in all these senses that, while drafting India's Constitution, Ambedkar laid great stress on fraternity. “Fraternity,” he said, “means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians—if Indians are seen as being one people.¹ It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life.” He was convinced that “without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than a coat of paint.” He explained, “Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them.”

Ambedkar dreamed of an India in which divisions of caste and religion would gradually fade away in the spirit of fraternity. He recognised, though, that fraternity “is a difficult thing to achieve.”

Feminists often have rightly criticised the idea of fraternity as “brotherhood,” as the word—both in language and, according to some, in imagination—excludes any “sisterhood.” Mary Louise Pratt (1994) argues that the nation was imagined as a deep, horizontal comradeship of men as brothers. Women inhabitants of nations, according to her, were neither imagined as nor invited to imagine themselves as part of this horizontal brotherhood. Women were citizens of a nation only in their instrumental capacity as the producers of citizens. So, women inhabitants of modern nations were not imagined as having intrinsically the rights of citizens; rather, their value was specifically attached to (and implicitly conditional on) their reproductive roles.

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Even Ambedkar used the language of brotherhood in explaining his understanding of fraternity. But the Hindi-language Constitution uses the word *bandhuta*, which is free from these implicit gendered exclusions. Bandhuta is a beautiful, iridescent word derived from Sanskrit, reflecting the idea that we are all bound to and with each other. It can also be understood as an ideology of friendship. Bhiku Parekh (2008) traces rich traditions of friendship in Indian classical texts, bonds between individuals that are voluntary, reciprocal, of intrinsic rather than instrumental value, and often a source of kindness.

Many Forms

The Constitution views fraternity significantly as a source of affirming “the dignity of the individual” and the “unity” of the nation. The former is accomplished by recognising the moral equality of individuals, upheld through mutual respect, despite all our differences, of religious belief, caste, language, culture, ethnicity, class and gender.

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The idea of the unity of the nation being derived from fraternity is even more significant. The nation is today imagined by the Hindutva right as built on a hierarchical homogenisation of the nation, the idea that those who aspire to belong to the Indian nation must subordinate and subsume their beliefs and ways of life to the “majority” upper-caste Hindu belief systems. It is only in this homogenised (upper-caste and masculinist) Hindu-ness that the unity of India can be assured. By contrast, both Ambedkar and the Constitution derive the unity of the nation from fraternity. Not from forcing minorities to adhere to majoritarian principles, but instead a sense of mutual belonging and respect that transcends all other differences between the people.

Fraternity is both a way of feeling, and a political principle (Asthana 1992: 120). The idea of fraternity is closely linked to that of social solidarity, which is impossible to accomplish without public empathy; the daily, lived realisation that human beings who look different, wear different clothes, worship different gods, speak different languages, have different political persuasions, actually have exactly the same intrinsic human dignity, and experience the same emotions—dreams, hopes, despair, pain, happiness, anger, love, triumphs and defeats—that we all do.

There are several sibling ideas to the notion of fraternity. There is *bandhuta*, the idea of being bound to and with each other, and the idea of friendship. There are bonds not just of brotherhood but also sisterhood which tie us together. There is solidarity, the idea of standing together, *feeling* we are together. There is the idea of caring, of compassion, of empathy and of love, indeed of radical love. Each of these are sibling ideas, but not identical twins of fraternity.

In the space of this short essay, I will not try to elaborate each of these sibling ideas and ideals of fraternity in detail. But I will briefly illustrate some—empathy, solidarity, caring, and radical love—to explain why fraternity is perhaps the missing key for the deepening of our democracy.

Understanding How Others Feel

Empathy requires both a leap of imagination—to imagine how the other feels—and solidarities of feeling; to feel the suffering and humiliation of the other as though they were one’s own. In other words, empathy has both a cognitive and affective element: it engages both the mind and the heart. Empathy tends to flow more naturally when the suffering person is someone I can relate to and understand, someone whom I feel is similar to me in some essential, relatable way, because I can then better imagine what the other person is feeling.

Empathy breaks down when I can persuade myself that the “other” is, in some ways, not like me, not fully human in the way I and the people of my family, my community, my caste, my gender, my race and, indeed, my sexual preferences are. I can do so when I refuse to see or acknowledge that people who are of a different gender, caste, class, religion, sexuality or culture from me are essentially human in the same way as I am, when I am in the sway of normative frameworks and politics which cultivate difference and foster indifference.

Some scientists and philosophers believe that empathy is a uniquely *human* trait, inborn in human beings but also one which can be taught and nurtured. Equally, as we can learn empathy, we find that barriers can be constructed against the natural surge of empathy which would otherwise have arisen had it not been actively blocked.

Hierarchies and the politics of difference are two of the most significant walls which can block out empathy from our minds and hearts. I often worry about the way we are raising our children: teaching them by our actions if not our words to be disrespectful of people who are different and less advantaged, and being uncaring about their suffering and deprivation.

Standing Up Together

To a much larger project of striving for a just and humane society, the first contribution which the cultivation and nurturing of empathy can make is by helping build social solidarities. Battles for justice must be fought by people who live with that injustice. To remind us of this, the slogan of many disabled peoples' organisations is salutary: "Nothing about us without us."

And yet, I would think that a society would be much poorer if it left sufferers of injustice to deal with their problems alone. In a society built around social solidarities, when women are battered, men fight also in the forefront for equality with women; when violence decimates the minorities, people from the majority speak out and fight for justice; upper-caste men and women protest and resist caste discrimination; heterosexual men and women join battle against the criminalisation of consensual same-sex relations, and so on.

In the aftermath of the Gujarat carnage, I spoke in many gatherings of Muslim people in Gujarat and other parts of India who were devastated by the brutality, of the complicit role of the state and, above all, the fact that Dalits and Adivasis were the foot soldiers in much of the violence that was unleashed on them. 'We have lived in peace with our Dalits and Adivasi neighbours for generations,' they would recall to me in great sadness. "How then did they turn against us?"

I would say to them, "I understand your anguish. But I too have a question for you. When Dalits and Adivasis were being oppressed for generations, when did you speak out in their support?" For instance, across Gujarat, Dalits are prohibited from drawing water from the common village well. I asked, "Is there any village in Gujarat where the Muslims invited their deprived Dalit neighbours to share the well which was used by the Muslim community instead?" And I would explain, "If the Muslims never reached out in solidarity when Dalits and Adivasis were being persecuted, how did you expect that they would stand in your defence when you were under attack?" They could never find a village in which Muslims shared their water sources with Dalits and each time, this set off a great deal of collective introspection.

My conversation with them would continue. I would ask: why do Muslims tend to get agitated mainly when Muslims are attacked? It is exactly the same with Sikhs, Hindus, Christians and people of various identities. Why do we not feel equally aggrieved when people of any faith are forced to endure violence, hunger, homelessness, disease and persecution?

I therefore speak of the need for all people who live with injustice and suffering, and all people who share their suffering, to build a new bond between themselves: *dard ka rishta*, a bond of shared pain, born from empathy, solidarity and fraternity. It is this bond which will drive us in the direction of greater justice and caring in our world.

Collective Caring

The persistence in India today of enormous levels of entirely preventable suffering is for me daily evidence of a profound failure of fraternity in our social and political life. Akhil Gupta (2011) asked how many people die in India every year of entirely preventable causes, and he concluded that even most conservatively, the numbers are two million annually. This means in simple language that at least two million people continue to die each year because of hunger, lack of clean water, healthcare and a home. To put this figure in perspective, the numbers of people who died in the last great famine that India has seen, the Bengal Famine of 1943, was three million. The implication is that something like the Great Bengal Famine is happening in our midst each year, and we barely notice.

Despite the passage of significant rights-based laws for food, education and work, and major programmes for healthcare and social protection, why does India not make the necessary public investments to ensure a minimally decent life for all persons, with food, clean water, free and accessible healthcare, decent education, housing for all, maternity benefits, childcare services and pensions for the aged?

In India 1% of the population owns 73% of the wealth. In the year 2017, just the increase in the wealth of this top 1% was higher than the union budget of India.² It is therefore not the case that resources and food for ensuring a minimally decent life for all persons are not with us today. We do not summon and deploy these resources because ultimately the lives of the poor do not matter to people of privilege. Or to put it differently, it is because people of privilege have no bonds of fraternity with their less advantaged brothers and sisters in this land that preventable want and injustice continue. It is in the end the same failure of fraternity which allows us to treat our own children so differently from a child worker or the child of our domestic helpers within the walls of our own homes.

How then do we build the case for universal social protection? Noam Chomsky remarked that the idea of social protection is basically the idea, simply, that we should take care of each other.

For many today, this idea of social protection—or the duty of social caring—is indeed a dangerous philosophy which must be crushed at all costs.

There can be no better encapsulation of the idea of the good state, a state which must be founded on the idea of fraternity, on the continuous mindfulness of the obligation of the state to care for every person, weak and strong. But Chomsky goes on to say that we live in times when this is considered a profoundly “subversive” idea.

For many today, this idea of social protection—or the duty of social caring—is indeed a dangerous philosophy which must be crushed at all costs. Those opposed to this idea are either people who believe that markets by themselves are both necessary and sufficient to end poverty, hunger and want, or those who restrict their idea of solidarity to narrow notions of identity, whether of race, ethnicity, community or caste, or any other. These two ideas often converge, as in India’s political arena today, which renders the opposition to agendas of social protection and the caring state even more adamant and powerful; and for some, so much more charismatic.

We are easily persuaded when the State tells us that it simply does not have the money to ensure that every child gets nutritious food and good schooling; that old people do not have to sleep hungry; that homeless people do not have to sleep out in the cold; and that children do not have to die only because they cannot afford healthcare. These are people for whom markets can never work. They enter the already crowded zone of our collective amnesia and we are unconcerned that neither markets, nor the State, nor even in most cases non-state public action, are reaching them. We are being convinced that the markets will get to them one day, someday, maybe decades later, and until then, they can do nothing better than wait, and suffer patiently, without complaint, and without resistance.

I am driven to question the assumption that the pursuit of the highest possible pace of economic growth should, in itself, be the highest goal of society. Although the question of how much of (priced) goods and services we produce is important (because this creates wealth and sometimes—but often not—jobs), there are other, much more important questions that must be asked in a good society while evaluating state economic policy.

These alternate, and in my opinion far higher-order questions are, firstly, *by what means* are these goods and services produced? Are they based on the displacement or the oppression of labour, on the large-scale uprooting of people from their lands, habitats and natural resources, on polluting our rivers and poisoning the air, and on depleting natural resources faster than they can be replenished? Secondly, *what* is being produced: are we spending on weapons and luxury goods when people lack nutritious food, clean water, healthcare and decent homes? And, lastly, *for whom* are these goods and services being produced or, in other words, what is the distribution of income, wealth and consumption?

As society pursues the goal—or mirage—of galloping economic growth, even with all of these caveats, it must care for everyone left out of this growth story. I believe that in a good society, people of every social class and identity should be involved in a huge public debate about what is the floor of human dignity, socially, below which no human being should be allowed to fall.

Based on the outcomes of this debate, we should build a new social contract founded on fraternity in new and rapidly growing India. Our contract should be that we will together build a country—and world—in which no child will sleep hungry, no child will sleep under the open sky, no child will be sent to work instead of a school which is as good a school as for any other child her age, no person will be subjected to discrimination or violence because of her identity, no person will be denied free, good-quality healthcare, and no old person will have to work or beg to live with dignity.

For this to be possible, we first need to reclaim the idea which Chomsky spoke of, that we owe it to each other as human beings that we all take care of each other. It requires the kindling of the ideas of solidarity and social caring, of *bandhuta*.

An Inability to Love

Fraternity fails us equally when we stay silent as hate crimes targeting Muslims, Christians and Dalits mount in recent years in India. The “Karwan e Mohabbat” or Caravan of Love was imagined as a series of journeys to of solidarity and conscience, in which we resolved to visit every family in which people had been felled by hate crimes. At the time of writing, we had completed 25 journeys to 13 states of the country. We were profoundly shaken in each journey by the brutality of the hate violence, often against strangers, the capturing of videos of most such hate crimes by the perpetrators, and the hostility of the police to the victims. But most of all, what troubled each of us was the failures of local compassion, of any kind of fraternity of local people from the majority Hindu community with the victims of hate violence and lynching. Everywhere, people just stood by as the hate attacks and lynching transpired, sometimes capturing videos, but never intervening to stop the mobs or to save the victims. Even later, we never found instances of local people reaching out to offer solace and help to these people. Hate seems to have frozen our capacities to care.

I was then starkly reminded about what fraternity could look like by two hate crimes which occurred within the span of one month in the summer of 2017 in two opposite corners of the planet. In two commuter trains, in these two different countries, men acted out their hate against young teenaged children. In both compartments, knives flashed, blood flowed, and people died, only because of the fury of prejudice.

Yet both stories are as different as light is from darkness.

“The stories are as different as day and a moonless night. In Portland, white co-passengers heroically came to the rescue of the children, and paid for this with their lives. In India, not one passenger helped the boys”

It was an ordinary Friday evening, on 26 May 2017, in Portland in the United States, when two young teenaged friends were travelling by train. One was black, the other visibly Muslim as she wore a hijab. Suddenly a white man in his thirties with shoulder length hair racially harangued the two girls. He shouted they did not belong to the country, did not pay taxes, and should go back to Saudi Arabia.

Three men separately approached the enraged man, forming a protective ring between him and the terrified girls. “You can’t disrespect these young ladies like that,” they said to him. As they argued, the man got even more infuriated and threatened them.

Just as the girls were trying to get off the train, to their horror they found the man suddenly attack their protectors with a knife. He slit the throats of two of the men, and savagely sliced into the thigh of the third.

One mortally wounded man, 23-year-old college student Taliesin Namkai-Mece fell on the floor of the compartment. A few passengers tried desperately to stem his bleeding. “I am going to die,” he said. As they picked him up, his last words were, “Tell everyone on the train that I love them.”

The second man whose throat was slit was 53-year-old Rick Best, an air force veteran and father of four. He too died on the platform. It was only the third young man, a poet, 21-year-old Micah Fletcher, who survived his injuries in hospital.

There was an outpouring of grief and gratitude from all over the country for these heroes. One of the girls said to KPTV,

“They didn’t even know me. They lost their life because of me and my friend and the way we looked and I just want to say thank you to them and their family and I appreciate them because without them we probably would be dead right now.”

Less than a month later, on 24 June 2017, again on a commuter train, again a Muslim teenager, became the target of hate assaults, this time in India. The boy Junaid Khan, with his brothers Hashim and Shaqir, was returning to his village in Haryana by a local train, after his Eid shopping in the walled city of Delhi. The boys found seats to sit, and began to play Ludo on their phone. At the Okhla station, a large crowd got it. Junaid got up and gave his seat to an old man. A group of men demanded that the other brothers also vacate their seats. When they held on, the men abused them racially, asked them to go to Pakistan, and taunted them for being circumcised. They pulled off their skullcaps, tugged their beards, and thrashed them. They did not let them get off at their station. Instead, as the train sped ahead, they took out knives, and stabbed the three brothers, and threw them off at the next station.

It is remarkable that both these hate attacks at two ends of the planet, in the world’s two largest democracies, in similar ways targeted Muslim teenagers, by men frenzied by majoritarian prejudice. In both, train compartments were sites of violence, and in both knives

were used to kill.

Sadly, the similarity ends there. The stories are as different as day and a moonless night. In Portland, white co-passengers heroically came to the rescue of the children, and paid for this with their lives. In India, not one passenger helped the boys, and even the old man who Junaid gave his seat joined other passengers in further goading the killers. In the station, no railway staff or shopkeeper came to help the boys even as the youngest one bled to death.

American people were moved by the heroism of the three men, and raised donations of \$1.2 million. But Fletcher, the lone young survivor, said that the country should really be most worried not about him but the two girls who endured the hate attack. “It is they who need counselling and support to be able to face life with courage,” he reminded his countrymen and women.

And when he was invited to a programme to honour him, he said, do not make us heroes. All we were trying to do was saving *our* children.

What finer articulation could there be of the idea of *bandhuta*?

Bandhuta

I feel convinced therefore that fraternity – *bandhuta* – is the most radical and important idea of our times, the necessary foundation to fight all the world’s injustices, hate and inequalities. A fine example of what *bandhuta* can accomplish in times of hate was offered in the last months of Mahatma Gandhi’s life, which were surely his finest hour. In these months, he cemented powerfully the foundations of India as a humane, inclusive, secular country. He showed us the possibilities of fraternity to imagine - and live – a different India.

Think of it. One million people had died in Hindu- Muslim riots, fourteen million people had been uprooted from their homelands, and a new country had been created amidst rivers of blood on the basis of religion. And yet he was willing to stand even alone, to affirm that India would be a country which belonged equally to all its people, regardless of their religious faith.

In the wake of the bloody communal killings in Noakhali, facing angry murderous mobs. He walked from home to home, reaching out to families who had lost their loved ones, offering them solace and kindness, and restoring peace. He was in Calcutta stemming the fires of communal hatred with his epic 40 day fast, far from the celebrations of India’s independence. Mountbatten went on record to say that what his 55,000 armed-soldiers could not accomplish in Punjab to restore peace, this one man realised with just the weapon of his frail body.

When he reached Delhi, he found it engulfed with the same fires of hatred. Muslims were being driven out of their homes by angry refugees from Pakistan, and mosques and dargahs converted into Hindu temples. His last fast was for the homes to be returned to their Muslim owners, and the mosques and dargahs to be restored to the community. On the fifth day of his fast, a lakh people came out on the streets in his support. Two weeks later, a man reared in ideologies of hate, took his life.

The Mahatma in these last months of his life, showed us the power of radical, fearless love. He also lit our way to a secular, just and kind India of the future, an India founded on iridescent bonds of fraternity.

[In this essay, I have drawn in part from my book *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India* (Speaking Tiger, 2016), and an article in *Hindustan Times* “[Don’t look away from stories of oppression and exclusion around us.](#)” Grateful for research support from Paaritosh Nath, Nidhi Sen, Vidit Verma and Sahana Kaul.]

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