

FROM THE EDITOR

THE PATHWAY TO GOD AND THE PATHWAY TO POWER

When we skip a fact or hide a necessary truth to avoid unpleasantness, it only results in more unpleasantness and falsehood in the long run. If we believe that truth will ultimately triumph — *Satyameva Jayate* — the sooner we face it the better.

In December an unexpected violence disfigured the charming face of Bangalore. It even spread to Mysore and some other places of Karnataka and had its echo in faraway Kashmir. What inspired it is a short story published in the Sunday literary page of the *Deccan Herald!* No short story in the world's literature had ever been credited or discredited with such an aftermath to its publication.

I read a number of editorials in different newspapers, some passing value-judgments on the short story in question as "poorly written", unworthy of making a furore, and at least one national newspaper sermonising on the responsibilities that go with the freedom of the press, taking the unfortunate *Deccan Herald* to task for negligence in discharging that duty, as if the publication of that short story reflected a serious editorial policy! The simple fact that such a 'slip' can creep into any newspaper, through the lack of alertness on the part of a single sub-editor, was surprisingly forgotten by this powerful compatriot.

Yes, it had happened through lack of alertness, not through any lack of literary taste. I have at last read the story — to my great anguish — for it is indeed a good story. It is about a Muslim boy, who is physically and mentally deficient and who with his innocence amuses all in the village where Muslims and Hindus live in the usual rural harmony and where Muslims even contribute to the construction of the Hindu temple. He is the popular village idiot.

The story is a portrayal of an unfortunate lad. For sake of realism, he had to belong to one of the religious communities and he is shown to be a Muslim. It would have hardly altered the situation if he would have been placed in a Hindu or a Christian family. It is a human story and no reader can miss the empathy with which the character is drawn. The only 'blunder' the writer made was to christen the character by a holy name and only once, at the end of the story, to refer to him by the appellation by which the founder of Islam is known. (We do not know what the original Malayalam version of the word was.) In any case, no sensible reader can find any motive in it except a comment, on the ways of the world. If irony was meant, then the parallel irony was there also in the name of the prostitute, Sita, one of the holiest of holy Hindu names, the personification of chastity!

The original version of the story must have been relatively well-known in Malayalam for it had won an award. It did not arouse any murmur in Kerala where 70% people are literates and Muslims form a considerable part of the population. But it did inflame violence in Bangalore, when, years later, it was published in English. A case which warranted, if at all, a few letters to the editor, took a heavy toll in terms of life, property and money — and left in its trail a memory of hatred and distrust.

Why? On the occasion of its publication in Malayalam, people took the story as a story. On the second occasion some people attributed to it a sense that was not there. In other words, it is not the story, but the minds of a few readers which was at the foot of the violence. It is doubtful if even one per cent of those who protested against the publication had read or understood the story. This is the state of affairs in our society. A few exploit the religious, linguistic and regional sentiments of many. Religion, of course, comes most handy.

At the time of going to press, yet another development is brewing. A leader has given a call to his community to boycott the Republic Day because their sentiment has been wounded as the court order in regard to the Babri mosque at Ayodhya has gone in favour of the Hindus. Has the leader

thought whose interest he is harming? Has he understood the far-reaching consequence of colouring his community as one that has no sentimental attachment to the national day?

Enough of claims and counter-claims with the show of muscle. Should we not leave certain issues to the court of law or to the process of compromise?

But the silver lines on the cloud too are distinct. A number of leading Muslims have condemned the aforesaid call.

Both Hindus and Muslims have to live together. Even an experiment like the formation of Pakistan at the terrible cost of massacres, murders and much more has not altered this fact! Both Hindus and Muslims will do well to rise above the mere forms of their religions and to respect the essence of religion which is man's aspiration for Truth. Let religion be the pathway to God, not the pathway to power or leadership.

Both Hindus and Muslims have so much to be proud of the creative heritage of India. No Muslim of today is responsible for what Babar or Aurangzeb had done any more than any Hindu is responsible for what Jai Chand had done. The Hindus must remember that if they claim to be the heirs to the tradition built by the Rishis of the Vedas and the Upanishads, they must be as secular and as Catholic as the sires were, for the ancients not only allowed totally divergent philosophies to thrive, but also accepted atheists like Charvaka and Javala as Rishis!

In fact anyone who looks upon India as his motherland, be he a Christian or a Muslim, is an heir to the tradition built by the Vedas, the Upanishads and the epics, for such works project the consciousness of India; they were formed long before the present concept of Hinduism came into being. The Hindus of today, simply because they are born in Hindu families, cannot claim a monopoly of this heritage.

Both Hindus and Muslims must fight the obscurantist rituals and practices in their folds and not tamper them. Both must look forward to a greater future. If not for truth, we all should at least strive for happiness. And that is not possible without a harmonious living. For a harmonious living, demagogues who cash in on cheap sentimentalism, who thrive on keeping alive hatred and suspicion, must be confronted by the intelligentsia — in all the religious communities.

I do not remember the author of a significant short story (Is it K.A. Abbas?) in which an ass is asked whether it was a Hindu or a Muslim. The ass replies that a Hindu could be an ass, as much as a Muslim can be an ass, but an ass can be neither a Hindu nor a Muslim!

Should we not justify the ass's assertion?