

Communalism: A slow poison killing the soul of India

Mahatma Gandhi once famously said "Hindu-Muslim unity is not a thing to be achieved by empty professions. It has to be an affair of the heart. The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions." There is a distinct fragrance that defines the Indian subcontinent. It is not just the scent of wet earth after the first monsoon rain, nor is it merely the aroma of spices wafting through crowded bazaars.

It is the fragrance of a shared existence. It is the sound of temple bells harmonizing seamlessly with the morning *Azaan*. It is the sight of a Sikh family serving langar outside a mosque, a Muslim artisan weaving the threads of a Hindu deity's ceremonial robes, and a Christian nurse holding the hands of a dying patient whose faith is known only to God.

This is the soul of India. It is a soul woven from a thousand threads of different colors, textures, and origins, creating a tapestry of unparalleled beauty and complexity. For millennia, this land has been a sponge, absorbing cultures, philosophies, and faiths, making them its own.

Yet, today, this magnificent tapestry is fraying. A slow, insidious poison is seeping into its fibers. We call it communalism.

Communalism is not an explosive force that shatters a nation overnight; it is a slow poison. It does not announce its arrival with the deafening roar of cannons. Instead, it enters quietly through drawing-room conversations, through forwarded messages on our phones, and through the subtle, unsaid prejudices we pass down to our children. It is killing the soul of India, not by destroying its borders, but by hollowly rotting it from the inside.

The Anatomy of the Venom

To understand how this poison works, we must first look at its nature. Unlike a physical ailment, communalism is a disease of the mind and the heart. It operates by altering our perception of reality, blinding us to the humanity of our neighbors and replacing it with the cold, hard walls of religious identity.

The poison thrives on a very simple, yet devastating binary: **"Us" versus "Them."**

- **"Us"** represents safety, purity, righteousness, and victimhood.
- **"Them"** represents danger, impurity, malice, and aggression.

Once this binary is established, the slow drip of the poison begins. It starts by erasing the individual. When you look at the person running the local grocery store, the tailor who stitches your clothes, or the child playing in the park, the poison forces you to no longer see an individual with dreams, flaws, and a family. Instead, you see a representative of a "community." You see a label.

This dehumanization is the crucial first step. When a tragedy occurs, the poisoned mind does not ask, "How many human beings died?" It asks, "How many of *ours* died? How many of *theirs*?" Grief, which should be the great unifier of the human experience, is compartmentalized. Empathy is rationed out strictly along religious lines.

And the tragedy is that this venom is being fed to us daily. It is manufactured in the factories of political opportunism, packaged by irresponsible media channels, and distributed through the intricate networks of social media algorithms that profit from our outrage. We are taught to fear the other, to believe that our survival depends on their subjugation. We are taught to search the annals of ancient history for grievances to avenge, forgetting that the people living today are not the ghosts of the past.

A Mirror to Our Madness

To truly comprehend the absurdity and the heartbreak of communalism, one need look no further than the poignant lesson encapsulated in the name **Mohammad Deepak**.

Imagine, if you will, a story born from the ashes of a communal riot a tale that has echoed in various forms across the riot-torn streets of our nation's history. In the aftermath of mindless violence, where neighbourhoods are reduced to cinders and blood stains the pavements, a baby boy is found abandoned in the rubble. He belongs to no one, and yet, he belongs to everyone.

He is rescued by two men who have lost everything in the fires of hate: an elderly Muslim tailor and a Hindu schoolteacher. Bound by their shared trauma, they decide to raise the child together. When the time comes to name him, they do not fight over his religious identity. The Muslim man gives him the name *Mohammad*, in reference to the Prophet of peace. The Hindu man names him *Deepak*, for he is the light that has pierced through the darkest night of their lives.

The child grows up as Mohammad Deepak.

In this boy, the artificial walls of communalism collapse entirely. When he goes to school, does he sit with the Hindus or the Muslims? When he bleeds from a scraped knee, does Hindu blood spill, or Muslim blood? When he cries for his mothers, in what religion do his tears fall?

Mohammad Deepak is not just a character in a parable; he is the embodiment of the Indian ethos. He is the living, breathing reality of a syncretic culture. When you eat a biryani cooked with spices indigenous to the Western Ghats, you are tasting the essence of Mohammad Deepak. When you listen to a Sufi Qawwali sung in the vernaculars of the heartland, you are hearing his voice. The architecture of our monuments, the vocabulary of our languages (like Hindi and Urdu, born from the same soil), and the genetic makeup of our people are all a testament to this inescapable blending.

The lesson of Mohammad Deepak forces us to confront a terrifying question:

When the mobs take to the streets with swords and slogans, demanding that blood be spilled to avenge the Gods, which half of Mohammad Deepak do they intend to kill? How do you separate the salt from the ocean? How do you sever the light from the flame?

You cannot. And that is why communalism is inherently suicidal. When a nation attacks its own diversity, it is not destroying "the other." It is mutilating itself. Every time a mosque is vandalized, every time a temple is desecrated, every time a man is lynched for what he eats or how he prays, a piece of Mohammad Deepak dies. A piece of India dies.

The True Cost of Hate

The poison of communalism exacts a toll far heavier than we dare to calculate. We often measure the cost of communal riots in terms of lives lost, properties

destroyed, and curfews imposed. But the true cost is the invisible, intergenerational trauma inflicted upon the national psyche.

India is a country striving to lift hundreds of millions out of poverty. We dream of becoming a global superpower, an economic juggernaut, and a leader in technology and innovation. But hate is an incredibly expensive enterprise. It diverts our national energy, our resources, and our intellect away from schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, channelling them into policing, riot control, and rebuilding what we have broken. Investors flee from instability. How can a nation build a shining future when its citizens are busy digging up the graves of the past?

Perhaps the most visible symptom of this slow poison is the ghettoization of our cities. Neighbourhoods that were once vibrant melting pots of communities are now being segregated. "Safe zones" are created. We look for housing societies that cater exclusively to our own kind. Children grow up without ever playing with someone from another faith, learning about them only through the distorted lens of prejudices shared at the dinner table. When communities stop talking to one another, paranoia takes root. The "other" becomes a monster under the bed, capable of unimaginable evils, simply because they are unknown.

The deepest wound, however, is emotional. It is the pervasive climate of fear and suspicion. It is the Muslim professional who changes his name on a resume to get a job interview. It is the Hindu family living in a minority area who sleeps with their doors double-locked when political tensions run high. It is the friend who stops calling after a bitter argument over a political WhatsApp forward. The warmth that characterized Indian society the instinct to trust the stranger is being replaced by a cold, calculating mistrust.

If communalism is a slow poison, it cannot be cured overnight with a single dose of medicine. It requires a sustained, deliberate, and courageous detox.

The antidote to hate is not a grand political manifesto; it is radical empathy. It is the refusal to surrender our critical thinking to the architects of division.

We must recognize that the Gods we worship are not so weak that they require mortals to defend them with swords and fire. The true desecration of religion happens not when a brick falls from a place of worship, but when a human

being the ultimate creation of the divine is slaughtered in the name of that religion.

We must embrace the lesson of Mohammad Deepak. We must teach our children that India is not a melting pot that erases identities, but a magnificent mosaic where every piece, no matter its shape or colour, is essential to the picture. We must actively seek out the "other," sit across from them, share a meal, and realize that their struggles to pay rent, educate their children, and find happiness are exactly the same as ours.

We must also have the tendency to hold our leaders and our media accountable. We must reject the narratives that seek to divide us for electoral gains. We must stand up in our drawing rooms and challenge the casual bigotry of our friends and family members, even when it is uncomfortable. For silence, in the face of this spreading poison, is complicity.

India stands today at a critical crossroads. The poison is in our bloodstream, but the heart is still beating. The soul of India the soul that birthed Buddha and Mahavira, the soul that sheltered the Parsis and the Jews, the soul that was sung into eternity by Kabir, Nanak, and Amir Khusro is fighting to survive.

We are not just a nation of borders and laws; we are a civilizational idea. We are the greatest experiment in human diversity ever attempted in the history of the world. If we fail, it is not just the failure of a political state; it is a tragedy for the human race. It will prove to the world that people of different faiths and cultures cannot live together in peace. We cannot afford to let that happen.

We must remember the tears of every mother who has lost a son to communal frenzy. Their tears have no religion; they taste exactly the same. We must look into the eyes of the Mohammad Deepak's of this nation the children of our shared destiny and promise them a future where their names are a badge of honor, not a death sentence.

As we look toward the horizon of our nation's future, as the echoes of divisive rhetoric ring loudly in our ears and the slow poison threatens to numb our collective conscience, we must look into the mirror and ask ourselves the most defining question of our time:

When the ashes settle and the history of this era is finally written, will we be remembered as the generation that built a bridge to the future, or the generation

that allowed the beautiful soul of India to slowly bleed to death in the name of God?

