**Avoid Modi`s nationalist turf**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2021-10-19

GANDHIJI was a pacifist. Hindu nationalists killed him for that, for not letting go of his fabled humanism even amid the fratricidal madness that came in the wake of 1947. Many South Asians, who would be wary of Gandhiji`s many antediluvian social and political ideas, have stood with his quest for peace and harmony between Hindus and Muslims and between India and Pakistan.

In recent days, the torch has passed to a newer generation of Pakistanis from the hands of Fahmida Riaz, Asma Jahangir, I.A. Rehman and Mubashir Hassan among the stalwarts from Pakistan who lauded Gandhi`s secular ideals, which he interpreted as religious harmony, vital for both countries. Sardar Jafri, Inder Gujral, Nirmala Deshpande, Kuldip Nayar, Dinesh Mohan and Kamla Bhasin are no more with us, but they too have left their imprint as strong Indian advocates of democracy and amity between the two countries.

Are there any takers though for Gandhi`s pacifist idealism, a potent foil to narrow nationalism, among the current crop of political leaders in both countries? It`s not an easy question to answer, made more difficult with the rise of religious polarisation stalking both countries as it does much of the world. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is of a piece with this disturbing fact. Lest we forget, the worrying reality of Afghanistan today would probably not be there without the advent of Gen Zia in Pakistan. And Zia clearly appears to have inspired the turn of events in today`s India.

His use of religion to subvert democracy has much in common with the sectarian doctrine of Hindutva.

How can we change the picture, to begin with, in India? There are important states with strong-willed people in every corner of the country that have rejected Hindutva as a creed in electoral terms.

Seven key states will hold polls next year. Are they also prepared to resist the damaging cultural ideas that India`s ruling Hindutva establishment spawns, an establishment that counts among its supporters, devotees and worshippers of Gandhi`s assassins? A big difference can be made for the resistance by the Congress, which is undergoing a deep churning currently. Despite its recent poor performancesat the hustings, it remains the only party with a presence in every state, which makes it best equipped to effect the required radical change.

It was important for the fight ahead that Sonia Gandhi, the current Congress president, shepherded the party at a weekend meeting of senior members to its older and surer winning position of keeping to the left of the political spectrum.

Reports say she sent out a clear signal to her regressive critics within and outside the party, asserting that she was very much in charge of the Congress and would be so until September next year when a new president is to be chosen, possibly her son.

There`s a problem here, however. The Congresscannot fight Hindutva on Modi`s nationalist turf.

This is something it needs to think deeply about.

It so happens that Indira Gandhi`s war with Pakistan in 1971 served to unleash a nationalist genie in India and within her party. Nehru would see it as a self-defeating ogre that had to be kept mostly locked up. Nehru displayed his internationalism instead by engaging with the wider world, particularly Third World leaders who he courted as partners in a globally liberating project. Since it was neither a Gandhian nor Nehruvian trait to dwell on narrow nationalism as an asset it didn`t come naturally to Indira Gandhi either. And who can deny that Rajiv Gandhi`s summit with Benazir Bhutto sparked great hopes for Indo-Pakistan rapprochement? His long handshake with Deng Xiaoping too in 1988 ushered in an era of measured civility in ties with China for decades.

It was, therefore, somewhat out of line for the usually level-headed Rahul Gandhi to stray ontothe nationalist turf although that was some years ago. `My grandmother broke Pakistan into two, he had boasted during an election campaign in Uttar Pradesh. Had the claim won him two extra votes it would have been worth the effort. Luckily for his party, fascism and not nationalism has emerged as the issue to contend with.

There are good grounds to bring the Congress back to its leftist orientation, and these are mostly rooted in its historical evolution as a socialist party.

The late historian Prof Bipan Chandra recalls a lovely vignette from the relationship between Nehru and communist stalwart P.C. Joshi. The latter would borrow books on Marxism from Nehru as these were banned during British rule. Joshi was evicted as party general secretary in 1948 for advocating close ties with the Congress.

Bipan Chandra`s summary of Joshi`s fulminations on Nehru and Gandhi would be useful for the young leaders being inducted into the Congress under Sonia Gandhi`s watch.

In opposition to the B.T. Ranadive line, the hardline leader who got him expelled from the party, Joshi applauded Nehru`s foreign policy as anti-imperialist in slant. He saw Nehru`s domestic policy as one of independent economic development. Possibly the most relevant observation by Joshi for today`s purposes was that Nehru`s agrarian policy had moved towards `a definite curbing of feudalism`.

The Congress was not blameless, however.

`There were of course negative features, such as the government following anti-people economic policies.` Joshi was particularly critical of Nehru`s alleged softness towards the rightists in his party, Chandra noted in a tribute to Joshi in the Mainstream in 2007. `He warned against a rightist takeover of the country because of Nehru`s absence. The remedy was to initiate popular movements against these elements and to forge a united front with Nehruite Congressmen in order to build a strong and progressive nation-state.` What this also implied was that strong and progressive nation-states regarded the use of narrow nationalism as a political tool with deep suspicion.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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