

Intolerance

Nilanjan Chatterjee

November, 2017

Intolerance is a hybrid word. It comes from a combination of the Latin 'in'- meaning "not" and 'tolerantem' meaning "to bear, endure". Commonly it refers to a state of mind that reacts against order or belief that one is not in sync with. Commonly used in the context of religion intolerance spreads its tentacles on other areas of life as well.

Psychologists say that intolerance is a mental condition that is a product of various problems which the conscious and the sub-conscious mind bears. It is seen that a person without any cultural or psychological problem is seldom intolerant. Only those who have to carry a mental burden are intolerant.

Another important reason of intolerance is the inability to accept the life, philosophy and thought of either an individual or a community and the desire to effect an eradication and / or rectification of the same. The belief or faith of an individual or a community is increasingly coming under scrutiny through the hostile attacks by the believers of some other creed in almost every country of the world.

Yet this should not have happened. We understand that progress of civilisation entails an acceptance of heterogeneity and multiculturalism. In fact the progress of civilisation depends upon an understanding that one man can be different from another, just as his habits, beliefs, language can be different from another. Still there is an opportunity for sharing space with the different.

But these nice words are trapped within the pages of books on morality and good behaviour. Everywhere we find instances of, what Wilfred Owen said, nations trekking from progress. Intolerance has become the way of life and is found in both micro and macro social contexts.

In micro context we peep into any public transport for an instant example. In almost every train compartment or bus we find some man / woman or other at war with another for the procurement or retrieval of microscopically small advantages. People fight to get in or to get out of a public transport. They quarrel with gusto over small matters like a little jostling or a window seat one had been aiming for some time. Often we get the impression that there are people who are sick and tired of their fellow passengers and want to get rid of them by force or fraud. Intolerance in this case stems from having to fight for small benefits with one's fellow men.

The macro context is created by, for example, the optimism that our creed is the best and most suitable for the country. An important part of ethnic and ideological cleansing lies in the false impression that my belief or ideology comes under attack simply because it is different from that of yours. The large scale massacres of the Buddhists in medieval India to exterminate the religion, the partition of what was once Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia, the oppression of the whites over the blacks in the Apartheid South Africa, the rise of the Neo-Nazis in Germany – are all examples of the feeling of pseudo-superiority that lies behind intolerance,

It is a misnomer that with an advancement of knowledge intolerance is challenged. In fact history is witness to the fact that the most intolerant are the leaned men. Most of them have no respect for various or divergent opinions. Galileo's experiments with the moons of Jupiter were forcibly rejected by the Church though the church personnel were all educated. His Law of Falling Bodies did not find enthusiastic responses from other learned sections of other parts of Europe. History is also replete with examples of other visionaries who had preached to change old and outmoded beliefs and were greeted with derision and hate not only by the rabble but also by the intelligentsia of the time. The life of Jesus Christ remains a shining example in this case.

Hate is an interesting response to new and divergent ideas. It is the key factor responsible for intolerance. During the Partition of India in 1947 almost ten million people lost their lives and many

more rendered homeless because of hate. Those who were against the Partition were treated like Toba Tek Singh, the protagonist of Sadat Hasan Manto's story. During those months India and the newly created Pakistan displayed intolerance of unmatched intensity. Loving neighbours became bitter enemies overnight. Horrible incidents of massacre took place on both sides of the border. Trainloads of innocent refugees were gunned down. Kafilas' were looted and thousands of women were abducted. Noakhali, Amritsar, Lahore, Faisalabad – became places in the map dotted with human blood and tears of the massacred.

In fact, from then on Indian society became regular victims of intolerance produced by hatred. Numerous riots – big and small – have remained like a scar on our psychology. Seen through the spectacles of intolerance our identity is mapped through our religious faith. Kazi Nazrul Islam's advice: “কান্ডারী বল ডুবিলে মানুষ” [kandari bolo dubicche manush; O Captain please assert that it is man who is drowning and not a Hindu or a Muslim] is thrown to the winds as one hate-speech after another tears the thin fabric of tolerance preached by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Today things have reached to such a limit that even Mahatma Gandhi's killer, Nathuram Godse is revered and statues of his are built at certain places of India.

But intolerance which is a product of hate does not only aim at liquidation of all those who oppose the will of the hater. Often this intolerance turns the barrel of the gun inwards and aims at his own brothers. It is then that intolerance becomes fratricidal. In November 2017 at a place called Sinai in Egypt the Islamic State terrorists bombed and then gunned a mosque on a particular Friday killing around 250 people who had gathered there to pray. Similar incidents also took place in certain parts of Pakistan. A few years earlier an Islamic terrorist group in Nigeria calling themselves Boko Haram abducted all the girls of a school. Most of these girls were Muslims. They never returned home.

Actually the bomb of a terrorist when it explodes does not only kill the people he hates; it also kills his sympathiser if he happens to be in the vicinity. Intolerance is therefore a self-defeating weapon of a coward who spews venom and hatred because he knows that his belief is so fragile that it would not stand the test of intellectual and logical scrutiny. The intolerant who uses force to make his point and force people to obey it are themselves sceptical about their own creed. This contention proves that those people who kill men to prove that cows are sacred are themselves doubtful about the sacredness of cows and know that they cannot defend their faith. The same is true about those people who kill the bloggers in Bangladesh. They claim that they are on a Holy Crusade against the detractors of religion. But by murdering the dissenting voices they prove that the dissent they voiced was stronger than the faith the killers claim to uphold. In Stockholm, Paris, Manchester, Barcelona and London Bridge, the attack against Mallala Yusufzai in Pakistan because she disregarded the 'fatwa' of the fundamentalists and went to school – the terror attacks proved that the terrorist had nothing to prove and no single point to make. His intolerance may have brought him out to kill a few people but the issue against which he had a grudge is still very much alive and vibrant. His hate could have killed a dozen men but it is too weak against the idea he set out to destroy.

To come back to India after a global tour, the controversy against the filming of Sanjay Leela Banshali's "Padmavati" and demonstrations against it in various states; the violent demonstrations against the ace Pakistani singer Ghulam Ali when he came to attend a concert in Delhi; the massive rallies against Taslima Nasrin, a feminist writer of Bangladesh in Kolkata, are all examples of intolerance along with the naked and shameless use of political power to compel the object of dislike to bow and submit. The use of such power has taken intolerance in India to a new high. Certainly the intolerant has scores to settle with the object he is not in sympathy. He uses his coercive powers if he can manipulate that. He wants to crush the deviant with force. But it is often seen that he himself gets crushed by his own lack of logic in the process.

Thus intolerance proves nothing and achieves nothing. It only shows that the intolerant has miles to go before he can mature into a real human being. He is a person sans ideology, sans logic and often, sans humanity.

