

Getting the right ideas

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By Sidharth Mishra



For the proponents of a certain ideology, it's not easy to mull over the idea that they lack the requisite scholarship to stand up to adverse propaganda. For an ideological school, it's not even easy to discuss that everything may not be right with their traditional thought process. If an ideological seminary decides to hear out people not so ideologically inclined towards them, it's a welcome idea and the first step towards inclusiveness. Rising above the immediate challenge faced by Narendra Modi government to the counter adverse political environment created by an electoral setback, your reporter was witness to a three-day India Ideas Conclave of entrepreneurs, researchers, writers, academicians, lawyers, and activists sympathetic to the right in Goa, earlier this week. Interestingly, they decided to indulge themselves in a more than liberal debate, even going by the standard definitions of liberalism.

Getting somebody like Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed to converse with the redoubtable former commander of 15 Corp in Srinagar Lt Gen Ata Hasnain, was probably the high tide point of the conclave organised by BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav's India Foundation. Mufti's condemnation of terrorism in no uncertain terms and claims that his life's mission was to rehabilitate the Pandits in the Valley were music to your not so "right" reporter. Mufti's presence at the conclave, which could not escape the tag of being that of the Rashtriya Swatamsewak Sangh (RSS), could indeed be seen as a sign of ideological and political inclusiveness.

Having separate sessions on -- cultures in conflict, the rise of radicalism and Semitic ideas, having lead participation of Christian and Muslim intellectuals, presented ideas about achieving inclusion in Indian society under a centre-right political leadership. Though the likes of Canadian commentator Tarek Fateh, in their enthusiasm to play to the gallery, went overboard in criticism of Jihad and Pakistan, a more sensible intervention came from Sultan Shahin, founder and editor of New Age Islam.

His suggestion that India could adopt some of Pakistan's matrimony laws may be seen as a step towards the uniform civil code. His enunciation that such a move would not be opposed by the Indian Muslim clergy and the more extreme Islamists held merit. However, will some of the more cantankerous elements within the Hindu right wing accept such an idea? This is something to be followed in times to come.

Talking of the conclave's liberal character, it must have been reassuring for British historian Patrick French to get away with criticising the right wing for not defending rationalist writer MM Kalburgi and deriding those writers who decided to return their awards in protest against Kalburgi's murder. Although his line on the lack of scholarship in the right wing to meet the challenge of the giants on the Left was initially met with vociferous protests, it ended up rubbing

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off on the audience. There was a certain feeling among some in the audience on the need to promote scholars amidst them and that a Deenanath Batra was no answer for the likes of Romila Thapar.

If Mufti's presence was the high tide moment of the conclave, the summit point of the deliberations was the address by the Prime Minister of Bhutan Tshering Tobgay, who in your reporter's perception, rose higher than spiritual Guru Jaggi Vasudev, in pushing ahead with the agenda of inclusion. Suffice to say, the concept of inclusion is something which the Indian right is charged with not possessing today. Tobgay's line was that the Indus Valley Civilisation was superior to other civilisations, as it had possessed the ability to allow diverse laws to live in harmony.

"I will give you my reasons: the Indus valley Civilisation is the birthplace of many major religions in the world, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism," Tobgay said. The Bhutanese Prime Minister went on to add that these religions coexisted in harmony, borrowing, lending and complementing one another. Such values, according to Tobgay, were of greater value. He would have done better to add that the challenge was even to coexist with religions that were not born in the Indus Valley.

And the pop-star of the meet was Dalit entrepreneur Milind Kamble. Talking on the issue of identities, the founder of Dalit Chamber of Commerce and Industries came up with the premise that Dalit liberalisation was possible only through economic reforms. Kamble's call to turn his community's image from being job seekers to job givers maybe was a better and more palatable interpretation of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's desire to review the reservation system.

A conclave of the right in India cannot be complete without the views of the RSS being heard. If his exposition that the idea of a Hindu Rashtra was that of a cultural India could not cut ice with those who heard him with suspicion, RSS joint general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale went a step further, saying religion could not be the sole unifying factor for a nation.

The question, which comes to one's mind after attending such conclave, is where does the right go from here? India Ideas was seen as a conclave of the social and economic elite, who may not necessarily be practitioners of hard-boiled politics. Will they have any influence on the politics of the right wing in this country? It's a difficult question to answer. The conclave, however, showed that right of the centre in India is not all about the likes of Sakshi Maharaj and Sadhvi Prachi. There are enough sane voices too, which need to be heard.

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