

The perils of stereotyping Brahmins and Muslims

DH deccanherald.com/opinion/main-article/the-perils-of-stereotyping-brahmins-and-muslims-1181046.html

January 14, 2023



Credit: DH Illustration

Recently, there was a furore over graffiti on some walls of JNU using violent language against Brahmins and Baniyas. The social media is full of similar remarks about Muslims as well. It is common to see abusive and threatening language about many social groups, like the Kannadigas, Tamils, Hindus, Christians, Brahmins, Dalits, women, non-binary genders, and many others, too.

Those on the receiving side, who are abused because of their social identity, may feel bewildered or hurt and may want to hit back in some way. Some may just ignore it. Or may think it safer to keep quiet, while still feeling bad about their silence.

There are many reasons behind such attacks on community identities. A common one is that the attacker sees real or imagined threats from the attacked community. For instance, some Tamilians may think – incorrectly – that all Kannadigas hold them in contempt and deny their right to the water of the Cauvery. Or there may be a Dalit community in Uttar Pradesh which, in reality, feels humiliated and denied their due by

certain middle caste groups in whose land many of them work. Or some Hindus – again, incorrectly -- may think that all Muslims have the agenda of humiliating their culture and converting them to Islam.

Behind such attacks, there lie certain evolutionary processes, which also run the danger of becoming self-destructive. Fear and aggression have evolutionary advantages. We tend to feel agitated when someone threatens us (or so we think) or denies us what we believe is our due. We may want to hit out at them, at least verbally, if not physically. Fear and aggression can help to motivate us and give us the energy and focus we need to resist injustice. Harsh language can help by warning wrongdoers of repercussions if they do not stop their wrong acts. However, there can also be too much of this and we may be needlessly making enemies out of possible allies and friends.

We have evolved a capacity for stereotyping people and situations as well. We generalise about an entire group from a few visible signs. “If it is long and moves on the ground, it is a snake, kill it!” Thinking in terms of stereotypes simplifies our thinking process and helps to quickly identify friends and foes. It helped in the past to keep us safe, and to carry forward our genes. But when stereotypical thinking gets combined with fear and hatred, it can cause several problems. Two are:

1. Unfairness: For example, a number of Brahmins may indeed justify casteism. They may even be dominant castes at certain places and may directly be exploiting and oppressing other groups. But there are also a number of people who consider themselves Brahmins and yet have no part in humiliating or oppressing others. They may actually be opposed to casteism and deeply sorrowful of how it worked in the past or works today. Attacking and abusing Brahmins as a whole is unfair to these Brahmins and hurts those who did nothing to deserve being hurt.

Similarly, some Muslims may indeed think that all Hindus are morally corrupt. Centuries ago, many of their ancestors may have used Islam to justify the rule of the Mughals and other dynasties. But today, there are not many Muslims in India who are trying to return to those times when Muslims ruled over Hindus. The overwhelming number of Muslims are quite content to live side by side in peace with their Hindu neighbours. When they are abused and insulted, this too seems to be unfair and hurts those who did not do anything to deserve being hurt.

2. Blocking solutions: Yes, it is important to convey one’s opposition and one’s unhappiness at being wronged. Doing too much of it, however, can deepen a dislike of each other and actually solidify enmity. This can become a problem if practical solutions eventually need the two parties involved to shake hands and collaborate with each other. That is usually the case in most social conflicts. Two communities which live in the same neighbourhood and have to cooperate on civic and economic issues cannot afford to have a deep dislike of each other. Even if they live in different parts of the country, several of them will still need to work together in companies and in the government. Fear, distrust and hatred increase the difficulties and obstacles to that.

Often the tension between two social groups is because of real injustices like, for instance, economic exploitation of one by the other. They too will still need each other. The exploited group will want to get support and strength to change the terms of work and stop the exploitation. They will need friends from within the exploiting community since someone after all has to agree to the solution proposed.

It is much better to focus on specific acts that trouble one's community rather than to tar all members of the other community with the same brush. It is much better to say that some individuals are brutish and ignorant when they make fun of one's culture, than to say that their entire community is brutish and ignorant. It is better to say that intolerance, casteism and patriarchy are evil because they deny us our humanity and dignity, than to say that all Muslims, Brahmins and men are evil. This permits us to focus exactly on the roots of the problem. It avoids making unnecessary enemies, and instead creates allies who will join us in overcoming that evil. Aggression and stereotypical thinking are easy and simple. But they often do more harm than good.

Along with the capacity to hate, we have the capacity to love as well. Many anthropologists believe that human survival over thousands of years has been helped by our bonding with each other and our desire to take care of others. Without this, we would never be able to live in groups and overcome the challenges of our environment. Our capacity to love people we do not personally know is what permits us to identify with nations and with humanity as a whole. To become part of a larger nation and a larger humanity, we need to move from the ability to hate to the ability to love.

(The writer teaches at Azim Premji University.)