

OUR INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATIONS

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There is a story about an young artist and the famous French artist and engraver, Gustave Dore. The young artist brought his painting to Gustave Dore for his opinion. He had drawn a picture of Jesus Christ.

Dore was reluctant to give his opinion at the beginning. But the young artist pressed Dore to give his personal opinion. So Dore gave his frank view in one sentence: “You don’t love Christ, or you would paint him better.”

What has this story to do with our independence day celebrations on August 15, 2004? I think that the story has a very important challenge to each and every Indian to examine his or her conscience asking just one question on Independence Day: Do I really love my country so that I do better than what I have been doing?

I presume that every Indian will answer the question in the affirmative: “Yes, I do love my country and I want to do my best for my country.”

Some people who are not satisfied with this simple affirmative answer will want to show their love in much more elaborative ways: “ I do love my beloved country and I am proud of my India. She is the most beautiful country in the world.”

But in the last analysis, these are only words and nothing but words. They do not reveal if you really love India or not. Then, what is the proof that you really love your country, India? I ask this question to myself.

Love for me is a commitment expressed concretely in action. As a commitment my love does not depend on my feelings which may vary from time to time, from people to people.

Loving India means loving the people of India without any distinction or discrimination against anyone in the name of culture, religion, language, region, race and caste. Loving India means behaving with all citizens as your equals. Loving India means treating all people with justice and care. Loving India means being concerned about the people who suffer, like the poor, the dalit, the tribals, the migrants, the displaced and the like.

While widespread social inequalities and crimes in India proclaim to us that a good number of Indians do not love India but they love only themselves; there are also an equal or a greater number of people whose words and action bear witness to their unflinching love for India.

Hundreds of children and old people have died in India in the last few years due to malnutrition and hunger while India was shining with overflowing go-downs of grain and cereal! The rats got fatter and fatter and the exporters made big money. But the government authorities and the

official executing and distributing machinery did not have any love for India to see that the poor and the marginalized got the minimum food supply to survive! Unbelievable? Well, in the land of plenty to export, malnutrition and death by hunger are sad realities of my India!

If loving India means doing one's duty faithfully and caring for one's neighbour, then we are forced to conclude that a lot of the citizens of this land do not love their motherland but only loot and exploit her for their own personal gains!

Still it is heartening to see in the sea of corruption and crimes that there are people who deeply love India. We see their love in their actions of caring for their neighbours without any distinction of caste or creed.

I am happy to note that in recent times more and more magazines, newspapers and other periodicals are reporting and highlighting those people whose lives and actions proclaim their love for India. They are loving their neighbours through their services to people, especially the marginalized and the neglected people like the dalits and Adivasis.

Let us also be aware that the genuine love of most people for their fellowmen and their country goes unnoticed and unsung. So it was heartening to read about the love and courage of some people who saved the lives of many in the genocide in Gujarat in 2002. The magazine 'COMMUNALISM COMBAT' in its June 2004 issue carried a cover story entitled Good News from Gujarat.

Paying tribute to the extraordinary deeds of 'ordinary' people the magazine articles highlighted a number of individuals and families who went out of their way to save the lives of their fellow men and women at great risk to their own lives while the Gujarat genocide saw more than 2000 Muslims dead and lakhs of people in refugee camps in Gujarat in 2002.

As reported in the June 2004 issue of COMMUNALISM COMBAT, Fariduddin Khan of Sureli village in Umreth Taluka, Anand District saved more than 600 Muslims of Odh village while the entire Muslim neighbourhood was burning. He was prevented from further rescue operation as the local Hindu fanatics blocked the approach road with tree trunks and stones. Consequently on the next day 27 Muslims were burnt alive in Odh village.

Then, there is a typical case of a police officer of Umreth, Kader Khan Pathan who disobeyed the unofficial 'orders' of the local leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), who told him not to interfere. But Mr Pathan did interfere and stopped within three hours all "the looting and arson in different parts of Umreth city under the alleged supervision of local BJP chief Lal Singh Bhadodia."

Mr Pathan's 'meritorious' service was 'fittingly' rewarded with a transfer order out of the Umreth police station the same day! This is the present day reality of Gujarat of five crore people

There were also cases in which the Hindus came to the rescue of their Muslim neighbours and protected them against attacking Hindu fanatics and arsonists. As related in the June 2004 issue of COMMUNALISM COMBAT, two Hindu business men and their friend in Kiasanwadi,

Vadodara sheltered about 500 Muslims in their houses on the frightful night of February 28, 2002 and then they were removed to safety.

‘Were it not for the Muslims’ timely removal from Kisanwadi, the murderous mob may well have burnt them alive,” says COMMUNALISM COMBAT acknowledging the humanitarian services of Ramdas and Lamiben Pillai, business persons, Ramdas’ brother and a friend Kanubhai, as well as a tractor owner, Mohanbhai Savalia.

There are many Hindus and Muslims who came to the rescue of the people of other faiths often risking their life and facing stiff opposition from their co-religionists. But they stand tall as people who genuinely love their Mother India and all her children irrespective of their caste and creed. I can only say, may their tribes increase.

Some time ago the then Prime Minister Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee said that he was ashamed of the Godhara and post Godhra massacres in Gujarat. I hope that Mr Vajpayee, like most people in India, can now feel proud of these people of outstanding humanitarian services.

On this Independence day I feel proud of honest and hard working people everywhere in India. They may be eking out a living by building roads or working in the fields as agricultural labourers. They may be clerks in government offices or officers in a multinational company. But being honest and earning their bread with sincere hard work they contribute to making India a better and prosperous place to live in.

On this Independence Day I feel proud and salute all Indians who love and care for their neighbours, especially those who care for the Dalits, tribals, Adivasis and all the have-nots. The new government at the centre gives hope that they will redeem all the people who were marginalized in India during the past. I dream of an India of liberty, fraternity and freedom for all its citizens.