Deep sociability: sharing sacred spaces

Why humanitarian ethics is alive and kicking among ordinary Indians despite the violence and hate-mongering reported every day

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

We live in dark times, perhaps among the darkest in living memory. Not a single day goes without news of rape or lynching, not to speak of treacherous lies, vitriolic rumour, venemous threats, fearmongering, hatred and violence. And then, apart from these human misdemeanours, there is the devastation caused by nature's fury. But amidst this gloom and destruction, one also has to witness acts of exemplary courage, care and compassion. Particularly heartening are some stories from Kerala. Two groups of fasting Muslims reportedly spent the second day of the Haj pilgrimage removing post-flood slush and silt from temples in Wayanad and Malappuram. In Mannarkad, the Sunni Students' Federation washed clean the Ayyappa temple premises. Last year, when the ground in Tiruchchirappalli’s Jaffna’s vines was submerged under rainwater, the local Sikhs offered their gurdwara to Muslims for Eid prayers. And last year, religious organisations funded the Sikh-run Khalsa Aid to hold langars on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border for Rohingya refugees.

The springboard for generosity

What is the deeper motivation behind such acts of kindness? Remember this: these acts are happening in a domain of human life filled with severe restrictions and where sectarianism is rampant. After all, Hindus have all kinds of conventional taboos in relation to Muslims. Despite this, why do they welcome them into our own sacred spaces? Muslims believe in one transcendent god. Why, then, by helping believers in multiple gods do they do what is doctrinally forbidden? Have people transcended their religion to feel part of one larger community, say, Kerala or India? Is the motivation stemming from a more catholic interpretation of their own religions? Or is human suffering so intense that people are moved to act kindly despite disgrace or past hostility? For, these are not instances of religious tolerance or religious acceptance; they are symptomatic of a deep respect for humanity. Sometimes, in moments of unspeakable tragedy, we get a glimpse of our own humanity, or, perhaps, our own divinity is revealed to us. Hence my question: what is the springboard for such acts of generosity? What qualities help us shield prejudice, hostility, indifference, selfishness, the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Boundaries collapse and we begin to feel each other’s pain and joy as our own. Empathy is a fundamental human attribute and only someone who has gone through psychopathic training or sociopathic misfortune is left without any trace of it.

The magic of empathy

Deep sociability

Apart from the emotive, experiential empathy, another trait, more foundational, exists in human beings. I allude here to the philosopher David Wong’s suggestive idea that desiring a constructive relationship with others, including with those whom we don’t fully comprehend or with whom we disagree, is one of the abiding, though not always dominant, motive in the psychological makeup-of humans. This trait, what I call ‘deep sociability’, is a good in itself. People value good relationships with others not only for instrumental reasons, but also for intrinsic ones. People do not merely wish to cooperate with others for mutual benefit. They wish to be with others, to do things together because they find it enjoyable, fulfilling, uplifting. This is why they also wish to be recognised and accepted by others. If so, disagreement on some issues, even some important ones, motivates people to look for agreement in other domains. People have a capacity for unconditional sociability that compels them to set aside disagreement or minimise the significance of radical difference. Put generally, because we are born radically incomplete, we achieve completion only with and by others. So, other humans or the achievement by other humans or the motor driving us towards fulfilment.

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