

AN APOLOGY TO MOHAMMED AKHLAQ

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I feel personally responsible for Mohammed Akhlaq's death. In his death are the embers of my deeply cherished values, my faith in the power of reason and the power of resistance, and I see the defeat of my ability to question and demand an answer for profound wrongs. Some months ago, when I wrote about free speech in the context of the right of an intellectual to question religion, I was accused by a fairly erudite liberal (or so I thought) scholar of being a "secular fundamentalist." I was troubled, not so much by the accusation as by what it signalled about the scholar making the accusation. I panicked about how dangerously close the liberal intelligentsia was sliding to a position that is not only irretrievable, but also a position that draws legitimacy from the blood of its victims. These victims are not intellectuals alone. While writing is expression, it is culture that is expression par excellence -- food is at the heart of culture, as is worship. Critique by a rationalist, the suspicion of beef in a Muslim home, temple entry by dalits invite death, no less. The thirst for the blood of the victim, a moving target, is insatiable.

A 2015 report of PEN International opens with the following lines: "In India today it is surprisingly easy to silence people with whom you disagree. An overlapping network of vague, overbroad laws and a corrupt and inefficient justice system have given rise to an environment in which speech can be quickly censored...This is a shameful state of affairs for the world's largest democracy." Indeed it is. Independent India saw the imprisonment of poets and writers in the 1970s. But there was resistance. However, majoritarian, dominant caste hate-speech, the hallmark of three decades since the 1990s is ascendant now as never before and there is a snuffing out of dissent as never before. Technologies of cyber communication are harnessed in unprecedented ways, sealed through a cosy and growing homosociality between political and corporate musclemen. The camera is witness.

There is murder on the streets -- of free-thinking intellectuals, and ordinary citizens who just go about their business from day to day -- eating what they have always eaten and what they like to eat; wearing what they like to wear; sometimes daring to marry out of choice; at other times daring to espouse a political viewpoint. There is fear in the hearts of many who write -- a very real, palpable fear of the murderous mob on the rampage -- a mob with people from our city, our town, our village, our caste, our families, our state, our country, governments we have elected, sometimes in uniform at other times not, and they are out for the kill. Those that are not crippled by fear have chosen silence as resistance -- What is left to say? Who is listening? Does it matter any more that the basic right to life of citizens of this democratic country has been trafficked to faceless mobs by those who are under oath entrusted with the security of the people of the country?

In the era of the constitution we are asked to be thankful when our daughters are not assaulted; murder is not any more a question of crime, targetted murder is not aggravated atrocity -- the protest over a gruesome, unpardonable murder is just a blemish on the India's platinum shine, a mere embarrassment to our messiahs out to win the world. Hate is the way of life in shining India. And impunity is a method of government.

My mind wanders back (what can the mind do but wander in this frightening time) to the discussions around the Rowlatt satyagraha in 1919, and recalls one exchange especially:

Raizada Bhagat Ram: "To my mind [the meetings during the Rowlatt satyagraha had been peaceful] due to the soul force of Mr. Gandhi."

O'Dwyer [raising his fist]: "Raizada Sahib, remember, there is another force greater than Gandhi's Soul-force" (Punjab Disturbances, volume 1).

Independent India has seen an acceptance and exploration of Gandhi's "soul force" as well as trenchant critiques of it, notably in the Ambedkarite traditions. There are other critiques as well. Yet, central to the entire range of writings by conscientious resisters of different hues was the firm belief in justice and peace.

But our times have changed. O'Dwyer's fist pales into empty gesture. Our tongues ripped out, we watch the painful incineration of our most dearly held beliefs and freedoms. At a time when the air is thick with the cinematic smog of a golden age, a hoary Indian past, history fades into mythology; the arrow grows heads, morphing into a trident; science drowns in the treacherous waters of miracle; divine birth tales, far from being an immaculate matter of blind faith, are proof that science has no history, that it is immutable, and the figure of Karna signals an ascendent genetic science in a mythic era, just as the figure of Ganesha removes constitutive obstacles in the way of modern medicine. This funereal smog chokes off the last remnant of the argumentative Indian; it chokes off the voices of those that asserted over centuries that their right to faith included the right to question; it decimates those that dare to speak truth to power.

So today, starvation takes on new meaning and a new life. It is not only those that cannot afford food that will starve. It is also the rest who will not eat lest they pay with their lives. I remember my good father saying long ago that there was no bigger travesty of justice than imprisoning a writer, thus denying her the opportunity to practice her craft. Thankfully, he is not alive to witness a time when the freedom to practice a craft or trade is way beyond the horizon – this is the time when people are killed for eating.

And while citizens die at the hands of murderous mobs that direct governments, and scholarship acquires an ochre monotone, the cameras click away, eager to capture the millionth image of carefully manicured, coiffured power – the bloodstained image of Brand India.

Make not in India. Not till we have yanked ourselves back onto the road to freedom.

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