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Introducing "Karnataka Vignettes"

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IN the preface to a book on natural farming, the writer, Devanoora Mahadeva, recalls walking past a large group of farmers, who had gathered close to his house in Mysore in search of work, and finding it difficult to meet their eyes. The forces shaping Karnataka today would not understand his conscience.

Developmentalism, religious fundamentalism and Kannada chauvinism are the unholy forces knocking about the state. The last twenty years have seen a consolidation of a new vocabulary of development which aligns the well-being of the public with that of the corporate sector. The expansion of capitalist commerce is welcomed as a good package deal for society as a whole. The age-old ties between business and the state have acquired new performative dimensions. Corporate leaders openly offer advice to the state and the state, in turn, is eager to consult with them on issues of urban infrastructure and governance. Nothing seems amiss in this cosy relationship propped up by phrases like public-private partnership, corporate social responsibility, and stakeholder citizenship. Though by no means triumphant across the entire state, this language, nevertheless, has increasingly come to guide the imagination of the influential urban elite and middle classes.

Invoking ‘development’ can justify the unjustifiable acts of the state and business and sweep aside opposition, its value seen as self-evident. The silence of the majority towards the state’s violent land grab for building a Special Economic Zone in Mangalore illustrates this sad phenomenon. Is this mere absence of sympathy or sign of a deeper malaise? Open declarations of wanting to remake Bangalore in the image of Singapore, are less heard these days, but their underlying chilling fantasies still lurk large. Substitute fantasies that keep in view the utter destitution surrounding us are sorely needed.

If developmentalism fetishizes a consumerist utopia without social obligations, religious fundamentalism, especially of the Hindutva forces, threatens to render religious prejudice commonplace. Although communal propaganda work has been active for more than two decades, and its origins in the state stretch back to the early twentieth century, it has reached a feverish pitch ever since the BJP government was formed in 2008. The right-wing news media work overtime to pervert any critical discussion of public issues. The large world of private entertainment channels almost never makes space for the social lives of Muslims or Christians. The state government has also aided the polarizing of communities into Hindu and non-Hindu. Its brazen disbursal of state funds to mathas run by various castes for ‘development work,’ and its active abetment of attacks on minorities are examples.

Third, the movement led by Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV), ostensibly to protect and promote Kannada in the state, is nurturing deep resentment against non-Kannada speakers. Its activist attempts represent the most powerful move in recent times at redefining the Kannada identity as an identity under siege and in need of violent defence. Its membership base has grown frighteningly large. KRV claims to have 20,000 units across the state with 60 lakh members. It mobilizes support on issues of discrimination in employment, river water sharing, anti-Hindi resistance, border areas, demanding Kannada as the language of administration, protecting the Kannada film industry and, so on. KRV can mobilize more people on the streets today than any other activist organization in the state. Key leaders from the three major poli-
tical parties, swamis from the most influential mathas, and the biggest stars in the Kannada film industry were all present at the repeatedly televised tenth anniversary celebrations of the KRV a few months ago.

These three forces come together in deadly ways. The KRV, for instance, rarely supports Kannada language instruction in schools, not wanting to alienate those Kannadigas who wish an English education for their children. Here, developmentalism and linguistic chauvinism are not in conflict. Collectively, they pose a clear threat to Karnataka’s rich cultural plurality and humanistic traditions on grounds of efficiency, cultural and linguistic purity. The near-collapse of democratic social movements in the state, like the dalit and farmers’ movements from the 1970s and 1980s, has only made their work easier. The exact nature of their combined assault is not clear, but they are reshaping the conscience of communities.

How do we analyze such contemporary forms of violence? What forms of activism must we undertake to render them illegitimate? What must be our languages of political critique? How do we discharge our intellectual obligation towards the living worlds of the vulnerable lower castes, dalits and tribals, and their ethical horizons and normative enchantments?

All the three forces have polarized political choices: pro-development or anti-development, religious or secular, pro-Kannada or anti-Kannada. The hard intellectual-political task is to fight against this destructive polarization and work the middle ground, or third space, or whatever we may wish to call it, and open up fresh spaces for democratic activism that go beyond the paralyzing polarities.

How do we talk about developing our society in ways that take social suffering seriously, that do not lose sight of elementary kindness? How do we talk about the importance of regional languages without being seen as linguistic chauvinists? In grappling with these questions, we are obliged to develop conceptual frameworks that are reflective of and sensitive to diverse life-worlds and expose, in that very process, the illegitimacy of the fundamentalist forces.

Of course, this is not to rest all hope on intellectual work. Massive corruption (the illegal iron ore mining in Karnataka over the last decade ‘reportedly’ totalled 60,000 crore rupees), a weak state administration (its pathetic relief operations following the worst floods seen in the state in the last five decades is an example), an irresponsible electorate (the less than 50% voter turnout and high voter corruption during the last assembly and city corporation elections are illustrative), the largely profit-driven and socially indifferent media, among others, pose formidable difficulties for anyone wishing to intervene politically. But, to the extent that criticism — academic, artistic and literary — can shift things, there is work to be done.

Do Kannada-speakers have duties towards non-Kannada speakers who choose to make Bangalore their home or place of work? Do non-Kannada speakers have a duty towards the capital city of an officially Kannada state? Public discussions on such ethical questions are absent. Mere appeals for inculcating liberal, cosmopolitan attitudes to manage linguistic tensions do not address the sources of insecurity prevailing among both Kannadigas and non-Kannadigas. How do we address such insecurities? Is confining our appeal to only an ethics of living together and not to historical memory adequate for this task? These questions are likely to assume increasing significance in the coming years.

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