Columns
Social Justice



People stand at an interfaith peace gathering in New Delhi in this undated photo. (CNS/Anto Akkara)



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> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
> Where knowledge is free
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
> By narrow domestic walls …
>
> Where words come out from the depth of truth
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection
>
> Into that Heaven of Freedom, my father, let my country Awake …

This prayer of Rabindranath Tagore remains profoundly relevant today, resonating with the yearnings and longings of every Indian heart. As we reflect on the past decade, we have witnessed an erosion of the ethos of our country, where diversity had been upheld and love and fraternity prevailed among our people. Unfortunately, there seems to be a change in the manner in which we relate to each other. We have been viewing each other through the lens of fear, suspicion and mistrust, which feels alien to many of us born into this country between the 1950s and 1990s. So much has changed. When we were children in school, we related to one another as classmates and enjoyed our little pranks. As classmates, we visited each other's houses, participated in their celebrations, and we were happy-go-lucky children. Today, it's different. Children now identify more strongly with one religion and often do not mix with other children belonging to a different religion. Where have we lost all this? How is it that we have drifted away from all this? This shift makes me stop and ask myself: Is this the country where I was born?

Today, many of the independent institutions we once proudly revered — such as the media, judiciary, banks — stand on the brink of collapse, undermined by forces that threaten to cripple the country. We used to uphold our rights and duties as citizens of this great democracy. However, it is becoming more and more evident that the ability to instill fear, through the use of independent bodies like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED), has overtaken the consciences of our people. As a result, dissent is no longer tolerated in today's scenario.

When a nation loses its ability to perceive the truth without bias, it is on a downward journey. From a glorious past of being the world's biggest empire, we have regressed on every index of human development. Despite rich human resources and talent, we have failed to channel these potentials for constructive contributions to the economy. The misdirection of this potential is a matter of great concern.

The lack of opportunities and the high rate of unemployment are creating frustrated young citizens, which has become a matter of concern. Such frustration is taking a toll as suicide rates are on the rise. Qualified young people, after years of hard study, find themselves unemployed and without a sense of purpose in life. Although the future seems bleak, there is a glimmer of hope. It is imperative to motivate young people to keep the light of hope burning to persevere in the struggle.



Demonstrators in Delhi, India, protest a new citizenship law Dec. 27, 2019. The law amended citizenship eligibility to persecuted minorities, but does not include Muslim refugees. (CNS/Reuters/Anushree Fadnavis)

As India goes to the polls, many of her citizens are raising relevant questions. How can there be free and fair elections when the playing field is anything but level? Even before the match begins, elected members and sitting chief ministers are behind bars as they are accused of some criminal activity. When there is no equal playing field, how can we even talk about democracy? Slowly, we are experiencing the erosion of the structures that have kept our democracy alive.

There are many such violations of the very basis of our democracy and the model code of conduct clearly notifies how one should conduct oneself. Yet the sitting party has left no stone unturned to clip the wings of the opposition party The elected chief ministers of two states — Delhi and Jharkhand — have been sent to jail on what many consider false and misconceived cases. The accounts of two major opposition parties have been frozen.

The right to vote is something that we, as citizens of this great country, have enjoyed over the years. The elections have been completed in four phases. At some booths, members of the minority Muslim community have been prevented from casting their votes and exercising their democratic rights.

Today, there is a great threat to the very nature of India and to living in a free country where democratic values are upheld. We have come to a crossroads, where we find that it's a clarion call to do or die. There's no other way but to stand together to maintain our diversity, a legacy we have treasured with pride over the years.

Yet today, we find that many of our so-called leaders, instead of bringing people together and treasuring these values so that plurality and diversity are upheld, have become divisive factors. They are diverting people's attention with hate speeches spread by the ruling party, which is contesting elections, claiming that the opposition party will give prominence to Muslims if they come to power. Though the word "Muslim" does not appear in the manifesto of the Congress party, which is the leading opposition party, this rhetoric distracts from the real issues affecting people, their struggles, and their livelihood.

The controversy surrounding electoral bonds exploded like a bomb, revealing a system that has become prepaid, post-paid, and raid-paid. Electoral bonds are a controversial method of political funding introduced in India. They allow individuals

and corporations to donate money anonymously to political parties. Never before in global history has there been such a legalized form of corruption. The ruling party has been implicated in what is arguably the greatest scam, which many consider unconstitutional.

The common man is now awakened and refuses to believe in false promises or be taken for a ride. Today, we witness the spirit of India as citizens grapple with high unemployment, inflation and insecurity for women. Even the women wrestlers who brought laurels to the country have reported sexual assault and harassment, yet their statements have not led to justice. Instead, the perpetrators have been awarded positions as members of Parliament.

Farmers who protested for 13 months in 2021 in response to harsh agricultural law that left them vulnerable to large corporations were prevented from entering the capital. Public sector units, including railways, telecommunications and banks, have been sold to a few corporate entities — the Adanis and Ambanis. This privatization benefits only a few individuals and their cronies, while many farmers have been mishandled and lost their lives.

This is the sad state of our beloved country, where we once held our heads high in pride of our rich diversity and unity. Thank God, there are many awakened individuals in this great country who have taken it upon themselves to organize and spread the truth about the past decade. Fearlessly, women, children and men are shooting videos and circulating them on social media and challenging the policies of the present regime. These fearless Indians give us hope. Though we may be a small number, we are stirring the conscience of our people. We are not taking any chances and we are determined to speak the truth, to uncover what was concealed and bring it to the light for our people.

In the spirit of Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The charge of the Light Brigade":

> "Forward, the Light Brigade!"
> Was there a man dismayed?
> Not though the soldiers knew
> Someone had blundered
> Theirs not to make reply
> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs but to do and die,

Into the valley of Death,
Rode the six hundred.