

Blaming the “Other”

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There is a widespread perception that the BJP’s Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi is essentially a divisive figure, particularly with respect to different religious communities. There is of course his past history of presiding over communal carnage in his home state of Gujarat. But even the more peaceful times that followed have been problematic in the creeping communalisation of society that has been both tolerated and encouraged. This has made it much harder for people of minority communities to find secure and regular employment, run small businesses, live in “mixed” neighbourhoods rather than ghettos of single communities, freely intermingle with and perhaps even marry people of other communities.

Yet during this election the perception has changed, largely because of a systematic media campaign to present a rather different persona. Much of the past and present concerns about discriminatory policies and politics were swept under the covers, as Mr Modi and his party attempted to provide a different and more nationally acceptable face to the electorate. The focus of the election campaign was more on the defects of the current UPA government and the supposed material progress of Gujarat under Modi, however illusory such progress may have been for most of its citizens. The attempt has been to show him not as divisive but as decisive, a quality the country is said to be greatly in need of.

However, as the prolonged election campaign has worn on, the tone has changed. Indeed, by the early days of May it was evident that the gloves were off and a more explicitly communal or majoritarian approach was once again up for display. Thus, in an election speech at a rally in Bankura, West Bengal, Mr. Modi was more explicit than he has been through most of his national campaign, in identifying and attacking a specific target. He is [reported to have said](#) that “infiltrators” from Bangladesh must go back. And the reason is economic: “Those who are taking away jobs here have to leave. The priority is jobs for the youth of this country. That is our first responsibility.”

He was [even more explicit](#) about who such infiltrators are, defining them essentially in terms of their religion. Those “who observe Durgashtami” (i.e. Hindus) are apparently “Mother India’s children”. So they are welcome in India and will get the same respect as any Indian. Those who do not observe this Hindu festival, on the other hand, have apparently “been allowed into the country because of vote bank politics” and so must be made to leave.

Such a different response determined by religion is probably (and unfortunately) not new in some other parts of the country (though very different from the practice of the earlier Left Front government in West Bengal) – but such a striking and unabashed statement of it still strikes a chill in the bones. It is hard to see how any Muslims (who comprise around a quarter of the population of West Bengal) can feel comfortable living in the state when this is the supposed criteria for acceptance as citizens with rights and security.

So why is Mr. Modi choosing to sing this particular tune now? What is it about the regions that will experience the last two phases of voting that allows masks to be

removed and encourages leaders like him to be more openly communal and target minorities in the hope of attracting majority votes? These areas are parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, all areas in which youth unemployment and poor quality of available jobs have emerged as major public concerns.

One important feature of Mr. Modi's Bankura speech deserves to be noted in this context. It is the link that is sought to be made between economic problems, specifically inadequate job opportunities for people especially the youth, and the presence of immigrants, whether legal or illegal. Migrants are blamed for the fact that "local" people do not get jobs – and easy target, and of course the wrong one, since joblessness reflects more systemic and policy-driven issues that will scarcely be affected by the enforced departure of a few thousand or even a lakh of such people.

In making this argument, Mr. Modi is following on well-trodden footsteps, not only in India, but more recently in developed countries in Europe, where immigrants have become the fall guys for the economic ills imposed by wrong-headed and unjust austerity policies.

The resurgence of racist and xenophobic attitudes was already something of a problem in Europe in the past decade when rightwing political forces demanded major restrictions on immigration and sporadic episodes of violence broke out against migrant and Roma groups. As the economic crisis bites deeper and as the "austerity measures" enforced by governments cause more unemployment and more failure of small family-run businesses, bitterness and anger among the population have inevitably grown. Tragically, the anger is directed not at powerful financial interests or even against governments that seem to bend like willows to every dictate of the market, but against more vulnerable targets that can be more easily attacked. The most obvious targets, of course, are the migrants, who often stand out also because of their perceived racial differences.

So rightwing and anti-immigration political parties – the Northern League in Italy, the National Front in France, the British National Party in the UK, the Movimento Social Espanol in Spain, the National Renewal Party in Portugal, the Flemish Blok in Belgium, the Danish People's Party in Denmark, and so on – have grown in importance across Europe in the recent past. They are now expected to do very well in the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament. And they all campaign on very similar lines, accusing immigrants of taking over jobs meant for "locals" and demanding stricter border laws as well as repatriation.

It so happens that in Europe these attitudes are not just unfair and undemocratic, they are also economically counterproductive. Europe's economic boom was fuelled by and supported by cheap labour, which not only helped generate higher profits for employers but also increased the consumption of goods and services by the local population through cheaper sourcing. The economic booms of the 1990s and from 2002 until 2007, combined with the demographic pressures of an ageing population, created demand for all kinds of workers: on farms, in manufacturing, in construction, and in services. As a result, men and women workers have come from less developed countries in Asia and Africa, as well as from the former socialist countries of east and central Europe. They came legally and illegally, often tolerating very low wages, poor living and working conditions, and constant insecurity, in the hope of somehow

raising their own living standards and remitting something to households back home. The productive role of these migrants is pervasive, in a very wide range of seen and unseen activities.

This had many positive economic consequences for the local population, which are not adequately recognised. With the collapse of the boom in Europe, local perceptions about migrants are undergoing rapid changes even among those who are not driven by explicitly racist ideologies. In fact it is not the case that such migrant labour is now expendable, as they continue to be critical for many activities. But they are increasingly seen as threats, not only to local culture and so on, but also to the employability of local workers. They are accused of driving down wages, of creating unsanitary conditions, of making public spaces insecure, and of much else.

The similarity of these arguments with the BJP's aggressive stance on migrants from Bangladesh, which can then be easily transferred into an attack on Muslims more generally, is obvious. And just as in Europe, it is economically stupid. Economic and social strategies that are based on and seek to exploit such aggressively divisive attitudes will boomerang on all Indians. More than anyone else, Mr. Modi should know this: Gujarat's diamond industry and many other economic activities rely heavily on migrant labour from eastern India.

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