

Persecution in the face of the 'Other' – A Hindu-Muslim Young Couple in Today's India

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This paper would attempt to reflect on the individual's intra-psychic negotiation with violence and the fear of annihilation haunting modern existence when faced with socio-political unrest and religious intolerance in the Indian context. The contention is to explore the quality of resilience being played on human psychological formations, with both internal and external agencies, when faced with such atrocities.

A clinical vignette:

Sabina, 24, was brought for therapy by her husband Rahul, 30, as prescribed by the psychiatrist they consulted. Sabina was serene by nature. Initially she hardly spoke; her husband explained the situation.

It was a love marriage with two years of courtship. Their marriage was a difficult mediation between the two families as Sabina was Muslim and Rahul was Hindu. There was much resistance from both families; however, they finally succumbed to the couple's decision. In the initial six months Sabina stayed with her in-laws, after which they moved to a rented space hoping for less familial or religious interference in their day-to-day living. This was, sadly, not taken in the right spirit by Rahul's family.

When brought for therapy, Rahul reported that Sabina started to have all kinds of complaints against Rahul almost from the time they moved into their new flat in a "good middle-class" locality. She was sure that eventually Rahul was just like the rest of his family members – he did not like her at all, let aside love her. That is why he travelled so often. And all because she was a Muslim! She went to the extent of thinking that Rahul strategically got her to stay alone in their new flat because he actually wanted to "slow-poison" her (this did not necessarily imply that Rahul would 'poison' her, but that by torturing her mentally she would eventually naturally die sooner or later; or indirectly be compelled to commit suicide). So, she was sure that one day Rahul would kill her. No amount of assurance of love or repeated reasoning from Rahul convinced Sabina that this was not true. He tried to reason with her – what would he gain by doing something like this to someone whom he loved so dearly, for whom he had gone against his own family? Rahul explained that his travelling had truly gone up because his present job profile was of a higher designation with more assignments as well as a higher package. Sometimes Sabina would be temporarily convinced of Rahul's love and commitment but it would not last long. This gradually led to regular fights between the two of them and unrest within the relationship.

After a few sessions with Sabina it was possible to unravel that ever since Sabina shifted to their new flat, she was "teased" by young boys of the building, most of whom were 13-14 years old. Although they were quite young Sabina found it difficult to deal with them. She did not feel comfortable living in that building. They would call her by a colloquial derogatory word for Muslims. She tried to avoid them but they played all kinds of pranks on her. Sabina thought it was nothing really serious so she never mentioned it to Rahul. Besides, she found it somewhat embarrassing to complain about a few young boys, and that too over some verbal "teasing" involving her being a Muslim, while on the other hand, complaining to the boys' mothers was equally unnecessary to Sabina because that would unduly draw attention to the fact that she was a Muslim. She felt she had to always underplay being a

Muslim there. All of this internally disturbed her, though she expressed nothing to anyone. Initially it was just the few boys of the building; soon other neighbourhood boys – 20-24 years old – joined in. Gradually their pranks took further dimensions: one afternoon they slipped a postcard under her front door with abusive words against Muslims written on it. She kept it all to herself, even tore the postcard so that Rahul would never see it. On another occasion they burned the tip of her hanging sari left to dry in the balcony; often they would sing sleazy Indian movie songs; at other times, whenever she passed the boys they would sing together words rhyming with her name which meant 'Sabina-don't-eat, don't-go' indicating that she was someone in whose house one will not go, not eat (because she was a Muslim). While simultaneously establishing an indirect internal prohibition in Sabina, who herself acted as the executor of the prohibition, refraining from any community participation by not mixing or eating with people in her neighbourhood.

Sabina found it below her dignity to tell Rahul about such 'trivialities'. Her being a Muslim had never been any issue with Rahul nor had it ever come up between them, till lately. As a matter of fact, she herself was very surprised to see her own accusations against Rahul revolving around Hindu-Muslim issues. In some deeper introspective moments in her sessions she wondered as to why she was behaving this way with Rahul; why she kept accusing him of things that he had never inflicted on her, although she internally wished that Rahul had understood her isolation in that neighbourhood, that building.

After speaking to Rahul it was clear that, contrary to what he thought was a "good middle-class locality" where Sabina would be safe, the neighbourhood itself turned out to be the stimulating agent for Sabina's emotional turmoil. It never occurred to Rahul that it was primarily a 'Hindu' middle-class locality. Rahul had never faced the need to see Hindus and Muslims in such overt boundaries, his growing awareness to deal with this division started after his relationship/marriage with Sabina.

After a few months of regular sessions with Sabina, an open discussion with both Sabina and Rahul helped Rahul to understand certain things that Sabina used to accuse him of. She often complained saying that she could not dry her clothes out in the balcony because everybody watched her and then they would burn her clothes, and eventually burn her alive. Or, when she actually managed to tell Rahul the truth about the kids teasing her saying "Sabina-don't eat, don't go", Rahul thought it was her own unreasonable imagination that made no sense, and if the boys said such things then she must not take them too seriously as they were only kids; they would soon forget about her the moment they found some other game that would take up their interest. This remark of Rahul particularly disturbed Sabina as she was shocked to hear him so casually indicate that she was merely the kids' object of entertainment for the time being.

Over time, when things became clearer to Rahul, he felt deeply disturbed and found himself acutely guilty of his lackadaisical attitude towards Sabina and also of being a Hindu. To him Sabina was most important, so he immediately decided to move to a more cosmopolitan area. He even considered a primarily Muslim area if that would make Sabina more comfortable. It was quite surprising to discover how one was talking of exclusion determined by one's religion, whether Hindu or Muslim, reflecting our own 'ghettos' in our minds.

Sabina continued her therapy after shifting to their new flat, which was more cosmopolitan, comprising working couples' families. She responded better to therapy and felt happier having worked out her own persecutory fantasies and counter aggression, while in realistic terms more at peace with her new neighbourhood. She began to realise her own participation in her illusions about Rahul that had torn her apart internally as well as the relationship for the past year. Needless to say, this led to

deeper pockets of persecution that she had grown up with within her family.

Sabina 'stood out' as a singular representative in a major Hindu locality carrying the burden of a post-partition historical reference incorporated within her Muslim identity (i.e. the 1947 reference of the Partition of India, when Hindus and Muslims were politically divided into India and Pakistan, where Pakistan was declared to be primarily a Muslim country, while India continued to be a secular country but predominantly with a Hindu majority). Sabina was constructed to become the 'other', or the object who was all 'bad', one to be isolated, persecuted by the majority. In defence of the self the paranoid-schizoid self claimed to retain all the 'good', leading to anxieties revolving around persecutory retaliation. As Stephen Mitchell reformulated, aggression may become a reaction to the threat to psychological selfhood, which, through projective processes is experienced as coming from the 'other'.

In the case exemplified above there is a combined impact of 'historical-reality' and 'psychic-reality' on Sabina. It is disturbing to note how the quality of attack against Sabina emulated all the colours of violence blurring all boundaries – religious, communal, sexual. With therapy Sabina gradually managed to find a closer affiliation developing between her ego/her evolving self and the depressive position that would further help her to build her container for resilience to such ostracisation. The therapeutic emphasis was more on Sabina's psychic-reality while the couple negotiated the immediate environmental reality by choosing to move into a more cosmopolitan locality.

The growing alarm that one experiences in the cited instance is in the comprehension of the youngsters of the locality, whose paranoid-schizoid split happily created their daily playing-object out of fragile human beings dwelling in marginalized spaces, personifying the 'other' in their psychic location, to which society maintains its passive compliant position. That violence, which stays hidden behind innocent games of children, immersed in devotional religious sacrifices, ensnared in community/family honour is perhaps the most dangerous and most utterly opaque object to penetrate, to resolve. And there lies the challenge of psychoanalysis in today's changing times in India. Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* suggested how society created its favourable opportunities for the death instinct in the individual, expressed in the form of a collective union, through its many wars. It further got released in combination with Eros under the pretext of idealism and patriotism for one's country. That way it found a justification and a glorified status to implement its destructive impulses.

With that perspective, one wonders what recourse can psychoanalysis offer when faced with a situation where there is a fear of annihilation of the self, a stripping off of all dignity by another community or individual, an absolute loss of the self. Exploring this aspect, in the paper, 'Fundamentalism, Father and Son, and Vertical Desire', Ruth Stein very rightly pointed out that the fundamentalist state of mind originates from a deep-seated experience of fear that overwhelms the ego to utter helplessness. Stein said, "fundamentalism is not just strictness, rigidity, and literal adherence, but is suffused with a libidinal dimension of desire". In the case above we see the seeds of this critical state of libido being churned through so-called harmless, pleasurable, innocent games of children and lewd songs of youthful men.

Today's India continues to negotiate a dialogue that attempts to find harmonious co-existence between Hindus and Muslims. The effort to resist notions of the 'other' defining boundaries of romance and human compassion needs to build perhaps a much firmer nest in the community space as well as in the clinical space.

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