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OPINION

Was Godse more patriotic than Gandhi?

Or why it is the wrong question to ask – and why biography is no substitute for political thought.

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A few days ago, Bharatiya Janata Party member of Parliament Tarun Vijay tweeted an **appreciation** of Indira Gandhi on her birth anniversary, calling her a “symbol of strength”. The appreciation of this kind of “strength” was puzzling because it seemed incompatible with Vijay's praise in the past for **Mahatma** Gandhi, and for his criticism of the **Emergency**. But such inconsistencies apply at the other end of the political spectrum as well: perhaps there is something equally puzzling about a joint admiration for figures like MK Gandhi, JL Nehru, and BR Ambedkar, who disagreed with each other over so much.

These patterns of inconsistent admiration reveal a side of our political discourse which, I think, borders on the pathological: the conduct of substantive political debate second-hand, by association with some historical figure. To be pro- or anti-Nehru is then to stand for or against a certain kind of secularism, just as to be pro- or anti- Syama Prasad Mookerjee is to stand for or against a certain kind of Hindu nationalism, and so forth. An interesting, substantive question about what kind of secularism or nationalism we should be for or against, is then turned into a

historical question concerning the figures in question, and whether we should be for or against *them*. That history is in turn invoked selectively, based on the substantive political views we wish to defend.

Four problems

There are at least four problems with this kind of argument-by-association. First, the figures concerned had long careers spanning tremendous social and political change. The Nehru who founded the Indian Civil Liberties Union in 1936 was not the Nehru who banned the RSS in 1948. The Syama Prasad Mookerjee who joined the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937 was not the Syama Prasad Mookerjee who resigned from it in 1948 (on the grounds, rejected by the Mahasabha, that Independent India did not need a separate political organisation for Hindus alone). If one is “pro-” Nehru or Syama Prasad, which Nehru or Syama Prasad is one being “pro-” towards? One cannot solve this problem either by searching for the “real” Nehru or Mookerjee, or by rejecting such a search on the grounds that there is no such personage. The problem cannot be solved by doing history better: it is political, not historical.

Second, arguments-by-association short-circuit the complex institutional structures within which these figures operated. Why attribute the ban on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to Nehru rather than Vallabhbhai Patel (deputy prime minister as well as home minister) or Ambedkar (law minister), or for that matter Syama Prasad (minister for industries and supplies)? Strictly speaking none of these attributions is correct – they are what philosophers call “category-mistakes”, since the decision to ban the RSS was not the decision of a single individual, but of a Cabinet whose members well understood the principle of collective responsibility (Ambedkar and Syama Prasad were both to resign in later years because of disagreements with overall government policy). There is a tendency to attribute decisions one doesn't like to political figures whom one doesn't like, and to attribute decisions one likes to political figures one likes – this is why a certain narrative of the right assigns to Nehru responsibility for the RSS ban, and to Patel responsibility for Indian unification. But when these are collective decisions, both sorts of attributions are problematic. It is crucial to see that this is true regardless of one's ideological position with respect to the merits of the decision itself. Someone who was in favour of the RSS ban and against the forced accession of many Princely States would be making the same mistake.

Third, arguments-by-association leave very little room for nuance: one has to either accept the historical figure's view *in toto*, or risk being seen as hypocritical or inconsistent (this was, after all, my initial reaction to Vijay's tweet). Surely the

solution is simply to disentangle the person from the view, or from other views that person held. Then one might admire Gandhi for his views on non-violence while deploring his views on *brahmacharya*, or admire the Hindu Mahasabha leader NC Chatterjee (father of former Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader and Lok Sabha speaker Somnath Chatterjee) for his views on civil liberties, without buying into his Hindu nationalism. The *admiration* in these cases is secondary: one might admire a person because one agrees with their views, but admiration cannot by itself give us reasons to agree with them. Those reasons must stand on their own.

Fourth, arguments-by-association displace substantive political debates into a potted biographical narrative of virtue and vice. The vice in question has usually to do with the nationalist credentials of the person involved: on the right one mocks a Nehru for being Anglicised, or **questions an Ambedkar** for not having played an active role in the Independence movement. On the left one mocks the right for failing to see the imprint of Western ideas about nationhood on Golwalkar or Savarkar, or questions the RSS on *its* nationalist credentials. But lost in this mutual mockery is a discussion of the substantive political disagreements which divided these figures to begin with.

Past and present

Associated with the appeal to nationalism is the use of the presumed virtue of some historical personage to lend legitimacy to their views – the virtue in question is often associated with some kind of suffering or self-sacrifice. The most extreme manifestation of this is the recent attempts to celebrate Godse's anniversary as “**Balidan Diwas**” because “Godse was much more patriotic than Gandhi”.

The proper response is not to argue about Gandhi and Godse on the patriotism scales, but to point out that if patriotism is a virtue, it is a purely secondary one – it all depends upon the kind of nation one wants to be patriotic about. (This is why slogans such as “India First” are so slippery and for that reason dangerous – how can one know whether to put India's interests first without a clearer sense of what those interests are, and which idea of India is being invoked in the first place?) Just because a person went to jail for their views does not make those views worth listening to: that is true whether the person is Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, or indeed Gandhi or Nehru.

The lesson in all of this is that attempts to draw present-day political mileage from arguments by association with historical figures should be treated with suspicion:

political decisions about the present must be assessed on their merits, not on the basis of such historical associations. Even when it is done well, biography is simply no substitute for political thought.

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