

# Balm of “Public Apology” in Societal Conflict

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Arjun Singh, a former HRD minister, in his resignation letter to P.V. Narasimha Rao, reiterated his demand that Congress tender an apology to Muslims for the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

The DAC (Disciplinary Action Committee) of the Congress party didn't take kindly to the suggestion. “Your aim was clearly to exploit a long-standing and highly emotive issue in the context of a heinous crime, only to blame your government, while being fully aware of the attendant circumstances and the constitutional and other constraints and implications.”

A few other ministers pitched in. Pranab Mukherjee, presumably speaking for government, made out, “There is nothing to be apologetic about... What we have done we have done correctly... The proponents of the “apology” theory should take to task the ‘vandals’ who brought down the disputed structure in Ayodhya.”

Rajesh Pilot, the state minister for Home, expressed a contrary view. “We must accept that we failed in some respects... The BJP was mainly responsible for the demolition of the masjid, but we also failed to protect it... There was nothing wrong in accepting a mistake.”

And what about an apology to Sikhs for the massacre of thousands of their brethren in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's murder. The bulk of these brutalities took place in Delhi territory ruled by the Centre, there weren't any constitutional niceties to hinder quick and effective action.

The role of “public apology” to right a past wrong is assuming particular importance these days. Such an apology at national or international level was almost unheard of in earlier eras. What had been done was done, and that was the end of it. The wronged ones could forget it, or continue to fight against it, but the perpetrators of the crime or their successors rarely apologized for it.

Now the world is evidently experiencing a ground swell of humanitarian sentiments. Human rights have come to the fore as never before. And the world is fast shrinking to a global village. What happens in one place becomes the concern of others, be it an act of terrorism or an ecological disaster. Communications, the media and travel are drawing us closer.

In this context, a public apology is increasingly being viewed as a vital instrument in resolving conflicts, or at least in defusing tension. The balm of “public apology” is being applied oftener to societal conflicts.

Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor apologized to the Poles for the atrocities committed on them by the Nazis. And Yelstin now repents the shooting of 15,000 captured Polish army officers under Stalin's orders.

The former Japanese Prime Minister Hosakawa apologized for his country's aggression in the Second World War. And an apology is forthcoming from the Japanese government for the Imperial army forcing Korean and Chinese women into a network of brothels.

F.W. de Klerk apologized to all South Africans for his party's imposition of Apartheid. “It was not our intention to deprive people of their rights and to cause misery, but Apartheid led to just that. Insofar as that occurred, we deeply regret it. “And Klerk continued. “Deep regret goes further than just saying you are sorry. Deep regret says that if I could turn the clock back, and if I could do anything about it, I would have liked to have avoided it.”

Even Nelson Mandela has apologized for atrocities committed by the African National Congress in fighting against Apartheid. ‘

The present Pope on his visit to America apologized “for abuses committed by Christian colonizers against Indian peoples.”

The list goes on. And more apologies could be in the offing; apologies from people in power

who, themselves or their predecessors, victimized - or failed in their duty to protect - innocents, even decades or centuries into the past.

Only on February 28, 1995 Lee Teng-hui, the President of Taiwan, with tears in his eyes, offered an apology for the massacre of an estimated 18,000 Taiwanese in 1947. The incidents took place when the Nationalists retreating from mainland to the island crushed rioting by native Taiwanese.

“As the head of state, bearing the burden of mistakes made by the government and expressing the most sincere apology, I believe that with your forgiving hearts, we are able to transform the sadness into harmony and peace,” he said while addressing the victims’ relatives.

One person hearing it, burst out, “President’s speech is the most precious present to all relatives of the victims.” Incidentally, the Taiwanese government is also awarding a compensation, of US\$ 1,90,000 each, to relatives of victims.

An apology, tendered in the right spirit and at the right time, has a significant social value. It can help in healing psychic scars. The more an apology finds acceptance with the aggrieved, the more beneficial it proves.

But then an apology to be successful has to have some essential ingredients.

It must clearly specify the wrong done, the way de Klerk does for Apartheid. Glossing over in generalities is not enough. The US Senator Packwood, accused of sexually harassing over a dozen women employees and clients, had this to say, “I’m apologizing for the conduct it was alleged that I did.” Now, that’s no apology.

A true apology must spell out a credible explanation as to why the wrong occurred in the first place. Indeed, an effective explanation makes the point that it was not the normal behaviour but an aberration arising out of certain circumstances. That way, it extends an assurance that the same thing will not happen again. An effective apology over the Sikh massacre will have to incorporate such an assurance.

And possibly the most important point of all: the person or the party apologizing must feel a sense of guilt and shame, a keen disappointment with oneself over the moral lapse. An element of self-suffering is always there in a soul-searching regret.

Timing is crucial to the success of an apology. Undue delay can almost nullify its good effects, even make matters worse. On the other hand, some apologies to be successful have to await the emergence of an appropriate environment. A public apology may have to be put off for years till the public sentiment is prepared for it.

For, everyday social lapses like jostling another pedestrian through clumsiness, or accidentally spilling a drink over a friend’s clothes, or using a rude word in heated conversation, the regret has to be expressed right away. Spontaneity is the essence of such apologies.

Poor manners, or bad behaviour, like not turning up at a friend’s dinner despite acceptance, causing financial loss to a trustful acquaintance, or otherwise hurting someone’s self-respect demand an appropriate apology. But this can sometimes wait for a few days or weeks, depending upon the specific circumstances.

Personal apologies are offered to restore a relationship, or simply to relieve oneself of a sense of guilt. Some others apologize to escape punishment or retaliation. At times, a gift is given along with the apology.

But when an offence had a calamitous impact on peoples or nations, a public apology may take years to materialize. The time has to be ripe for an apology to be tendered and accepted. That implies a change of heart on both sides, some softening up as evidenced by their actions, particularly the actions of the party which had done the wrong.

Some day an apology will be forthcoming for the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Perhaps also an apology from Muslims for the past destruction of temples and desecration of idols. The only difficulty is that a public apology best comes from someone in power. Still it will help if Muslim heads express their sincere regret over it, the way Pope did over Christian colonizers mistreating American natives.

And, so some day, an apology for the barbarities inflicted on Sikhs in November 1984, or even the army's storming of the Golden Temple earlier in June. But whether the time has come for any of these is a matter for debate. A forced apology is no apology; it can even trivialize the damage incurred by the wrongdoing - in which case, the apology itself seems offensive. A genuine apology has to spring from within the heart.

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\* Public apology has since been rendered by the Sikh P.M. of India in the Upper House of Parliament in the month of August, 2005 on behalf of his government and indeed on behalf of the nation.