

Minds That Are Influenced

An intolerant BJP and its followers target a college principal for sharing his views on electoral choices.

The comment that took the cake and ate it too came from Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesperson Nirmala Sitharaman in Delhi. “If he is trying to influence the minds of students who have come to learn from his institution”, she said about Father Mascarenhas of St Xavier’s College, Mumbai, “then it is certainly wrong”. Just a minute: exactly what happens when we send our kids to schools and colleges? When they run into teachers and researchers, principals and librarians in those institutions? When they listen to lectures by or get into conversations with all these people? That is right: our children’s minds get influenced. In fact, that is precisely why we send them there. In fact, that is even a reasonable quick definition of the whole process of growing up, of learning, of education: our minds get influenced. Period.

You influence your daughter’s mind when you tell her stealing is wrong. Her mathematics teacher influences her mind when he teaches her the Pythagoras theorem. Her principal influences her mind when she tells her that the college has a dress code. This is trivial stuff that nobody would argue with, probably not even Sitharaman. So why does she suggest that it is “wrong” for this principal to “influence the minds of students”?

Because of course, this particular principal wrote a letter to his students about voting. And Sitharaman and her party are not happy about it.

So let us be clear: No doubt it was obvious which party Father Mascarenhas wanted his students not to vote for, even if he did not name it in his letter. No doubt he praised certain policy initiatives of another party, even if he did not name that one either. No doubt such opinions will annoy some people and gladden others’ hearts.

But such emotions, by themselves, do not make his letter “wrong”.

After all, and especially in the weeks and months leading up to the elections, many of us have expressed our political opinions every single day. Why so? Fundamentally, because we want others to appreciate our point of view and eventually vote like us. In other words, because we want to influence others’ minds. That may not happen, but that does not ever stop us from airing and sharing our views. And it should not, because the essential promise of democracy is that every voice is heard one way or another.

This is the spirit in which Father Mascarenhas wrote his letter. He had opinions about the elections and the parties involved. He wanted to share these opinions with his college, and in fact anyone else who cared to listen (or read). Those who have different opinions, or even feel offended are, as always, free to share their thoughts and argue with Father Mascarenhas. That too is the promise of democracy: that each of us is unafraid to express our various views. This is exactly what that little document called a Constitution assures to each of us Indians.

Yet what happened after Father Mascarenhas wrote his letter? A small storm broke loose and the BJP complained to the Election Commission (EC) about him. “BJP would have appreciated if Father Mascarenhas would have discussed BJP and taken its view on Gujarat model to give a fair assessment”, they wrote to the EC. “However, he didn’t contact BJP to get our side of view.” Party-man Balbir Punj summed up their resentment: “In all fairness, this father should resign and join the Congress.”

If you find things to criticise in Gujarat, whether by visiting or by reading reports or by speaking to people, is it immediately necessary to get the BJP’s side of view? Is it immediately necessary that you join the Congress? Conversely, if you find Mumbai’s large piles of garbage nauseating, do you join the BJP because the Congress runs the state? Or the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena because the Shiv Sena runs the municipality?

And an angry ex-student of St Xavier’s wrote a response to Father Mascarenhas on a website called “Force NaMo”. Perfectly fine, of course, to respond. But this man calls Father Mascarenhas “weak”, “misguided” and “sickular”; says something has “dulled [his] vows of abstinent (*sic*)”; suggests he is “being drawn by the lure of power and politics”; and claims he is “demeaning the state of Gujarat”. Near the end, he ups the ante: “Why did the Pope recently have to apologise for all the abuse by priests?”

A fairly run-of-the-mill litany, really, for Modi’s always thin-skinned fans. Find in that letter the abuse, the illogic (criticism equates to “demeaning” a state), the irrelevance (the Pope) and the merely opaque (“vows of abstinent”).

Just the usual, for minds that are influenced.