

Topic of the week for discussion: 13th to 19th Oct. 2016

Topic: Yemen Bombing

Years ago when famine struck Biafra, in Africa, there was at least a protest, a concern, consternation. Biafra became a metaphor and, like Sahel, created some impact. Yet **today the death and starvation in Yemen** hardly affect people. You watch a child withering, dying a slow death and flip the page. He does not touch us. We are able to move on without batting an eyelid. **There is no anger, no pain.** It is as if 'not caring' is an essential part of surviving the global world.

Failure of our imagination

Yemen does not capture the imagination. Yemen seems an **Arab backwater**, an agricultural country, **not oil rich like Saudi Arabia**. The contrast itself captures the realpolitik of the situation. Saudi Arabia is the paradigm of Arab respectability and hypocrisy. It is backed by America and Europe. The West, in fact, helped create the Islamic respectability of Saudi Arabia at a time when Indian and other Islamic countries were far more creative and plural. In this moralistic contrast, **Saudi Arabia is as respectable** as its banks and its oil wells **while Yemen is backward**, a failed country in terms of the Arab dream. To an Indian, going Saudi is to search for a fortune, Yemen hardly enters the imagination.

There is almost something botanical about Yemen, as if **it is a failed or endangered species**. The State of Food Insecurity in the World report of 2014 states: "Yemen is **one of the poorest countries in the world**, with a **Human Development Index ranking of 160 out of the 187** countries. Progress in economic and social development over recent years has been slow, mainly as the result of the **political crisis of 2011**, ongoing instability and weak governance." The language is antiseptic. It is as if Yemen suffers from an epidemic instead of a man-made catastrophe orchestrated by the Saudis.

Being obsessed with the **political economy of the struggle** alone will not do. To reduce Yemen to a surrogate **war between Iran and the Saudis** explains little. Today few have the courage to demand and label the **U.S. and Saudi Arabia for a crime against humanity**. People often blame it on **disaster fatigue**, observing that the world is tired of reacting to disasters, that mass death and refugee politics haunt every page of international relations. People expressed shock and sadness at the diabolical attack on one of **the Mother Teresa homes in Yemen**, where **four Missionaries of Charity and 12 others were murdered**. Yet Yemen as a whole seems to elude the Pontiff. We are in a strange situation where charity and humanitarianism are equated to conscience, where politics creates the demography of our time, but ethics and the everydayness of citizenship have nothing to say. The standard narrative is of a **civil war between Houthi rebels and the deposed President now backed by Saudi Arabia and the U.S.** The very logic of the power struggle seems to permit and exonerate a slow genocide.

Topic
Introduction

A narrower citizenship

It is to wonder whether **India has any stand** on it. One senses that the **BJP government** in its narcissistic pursuit of India as a great nation state **has no sense of global issues**. One would have thought a nation which sends so many workers to the so-called Gulf would have something to say about Yemen. For Prime Minister Modi, **Aden or Addis Ababa** creates no trigger of action. He knows it is not a topic for Davos. But beyond the ethical illiteracy of regimes, one has to think of the India, the middle class, its sense of ethics and citizenship. It is to be thought whether **apart from feeling a paranoid superiority over Pakistan** in ethical terms, whether any crisis of conscience haunts India. We want to be global in terms of economic and technological participation; we are not international in our concern. Our media is America-centric or obsessive about India. To transform an old observation, we think a dog fight in Brooklyn is more important than the **starvation of half a million children in Yemen**.

There is a deeper problem in terms of civil society and our social movements. Our movements have been **theoretically acute and organizationally substantial** on issues like the right to information, the question of biotechnology, but they have been parochial, failing to combine the local and the international in creative ways. At a time when **civil society should have reinvented the UN** and its idea of peacekeeping, it has been retreatist and parochial. **India has to step out and take stands on starvation, rights, energy, violence, sustainability without being knee-jerk and imitative**. We cannot wait for the power game of the West to code our responses. In terms of responses to **Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen**, India has been complicit with the West or tongue-tied. Its moral imagination in a post-Cold War world lacks the confidence to stand up, to challenge current frameworks. It has little empathy with the downtrodden and in fact tries to distance itself from what the West calls “**the failed societies**” of Asia and Africa, lest it be tarred with the same brush. It is captured in the opposition of the idea of the migrant versus the refugee. **The Indian elite feels Syria, Somalia, Bosnia are refugee material at the mercy of the West**. India feels that along with its non-resident Indians it shares the American dream. Sadly, it also replicates the American need for hegemony and its lack of political ethics. Otherwise one cannot grasp what India has in common with sordid states like Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Responding as a community

India has to respond as a community. Caring has to go beyond aid to create a new sense of community. If India fails, and all we do is pat ourselves pompously for a few aerial rescues from the Gulf, **we fail as a moral community and a democratic nation**. Yemen might survive but India’s moral idiocy may take decades to rehabilitate.

Read further:

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/146203-The-war-in-Yemen>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/17/the-guardian-view-on-yemen-stop-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia>

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/such-a-long-silence-on-yemen/article9014799.ece>

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>