

## Fear and identity politics in urban spaces

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Collision course Not the way a river flows V SREENIVASA MURTHY

*A climate of insecurity over the Cauvery dispute has led to linguistic assertions. A similar trend is evident in Europe and the US*

Cities across the world have to come to terms with something not usually discussed in urban studies: fear. The extent of fear can vary from anticipating death in Aleppo to women in Delhi hesitating to step out alone after dark; it can range from fear of a terrorist attack to fear of violence during a bandh. But there is little doubt cities have increasingly to come to terms with fearful citizens. And a surprising response has been to fall back on identity politics.

This has too often been dismissed as part of the inability of the developing world to deal with the challenges of growth. As can be seen in the Cauvery dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, as cities grow, particularly when they grow rapidly, they place an additional burden on essential resources, including water. And in a regime of linguistic States identity politics is the favoured weapon of inter-State disputes.

### **Beyond development**

The notion that identity politics is the response to fear only in the developing world is, however, now being put to the test. The fear factor among urban citizens in the developed world is clearly on the rise. The blast in New York luckily did not have any fatalities, but it still generated fear across the US. In the midst of a close presidential election contest, the two candidates had to respond. And Donald Trump chose to fall back on identity politics.

Trump's response was to call for profiling. As with much else in his campaign there was a paucity of detail. The immediate assumption was that his call was for Muslims to be profiled, but he could have meant Hispanics as well. Indeed, given the difficulties in identifying the religion of a person at first glance, he may well have meant the entire non-White population in the US. But whatever his conception of profiling was, his statement in the midst of an election campaign is a clear indication he believes that when fear increases in a city, people get more open to identity politics.

This is not a short-term reaction. Angela Merkel in Germany responded with great humaneness when faced with the challenge of dealing with Syrian refugees. But their ingress contributed to an increase in identity politics. Therefore it was not entirely surprising that the people of Berlin rejected her party in the recent elections.

The response to the Paris terror attacks too has had a similar impact. On the surface it would appear that the French have come down on identity politics by targeting specific forms of dress used by Muslim women. But the unwillingness to accept diversity in dress can also be interpreted as an effort to enforce a single French identity on diverse groups.

### **No safety nets**

Even when identity is not at the forefront, there is a broader tendency to fall back on one's own. Internationally there would appear to be a reversal of the earlier trend towards large regional groupings. Britain's exit from Europe was only the most dramatic example of this trend. Both the candidates in the US presidential elections have promised to reverse some of the steps Barack Obama has taken towards a Trans Pacific Partnership. It could be argued that despite the emergence of the Trumps of the world, the scope of identity politics remains far greater in the developing world. The falling back on identity as a response to fear is a visible tendency among urban groups in India.

An unfortunate feature of Indian urbanisation has been the complete absence of an official safety net for workers migrating to cities. Some of those who come to the city continue to retain a rural base even if that means staying away from their families for months on end. To deal with the fear of uncertainty they tend to stick together. This includes helping each other and finding common interests.

The consolidation of identity politics has consequences for cities across the world. The assumption that it was some kind of passing tendency is proving difficult to sustain. Rather than expecting these groups to disappear, cities must learn to deal with varied identities, including helping their members come to terms with fear.

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