

Use artists to combat terror, Irish expert tells India

Indian artists across the spectrum can play a major role in combating extremism and terrorism, an Irish expert on the scourge says.

Muslim religious leaders in India too have a key role in wiping out the menace, says Tom Deegan, who has closely studied the rise and fall of terrorism in his native land, Northern Ireland, and draws parallels with the situation in India.

'Drama and storytelling can be effectively used to discourage extremism,' the London-based Deegan, who is on a lecture tour of India, told IANS.

'Negative propaganda has to be countered with truth. Indian artists, writers, cinema and TV filmmakers in particular have an enormously influential reach into the psyche of India, specifically its youth.

'Separatism and factionalism based upon shallow religious or communal differences can be countered by emphasising the values of unity and by exposing the motives of the primitives,' Deegan added.

'Drama has always been a powerful formative influence in nation-building and it should be used to a greater extent. This really can be done in a competitive market by skilful artists,' he maintained.

In this context, he noted that playwright William Shakespeare and author Charles Dickens were 'propagandists' whose social messages 'were often subliminally delivered in a popular marketplace.

'Indian artists could certainly not be short on such subtleties,' Deegan contended.

As for the role of Indian Muslim clerics, Deegan said he 'can't understand why the imams are not countering suggestions by rogue mullahs in Pakistani and Bangladeshi madrassas on waging a holy war as a means of attaining martyrdom and reaching heaven'.

'You cannot elect to be a martyr. Martyrdom is when it is inflicted on you. You cannot choose to be a martyr. Mahatma Gandhi was a martyr, Bhagat Singh was a martyr; these so-called jihadis (in Jammu and Kashmir) are certainly not martyrs,' Deegan asserted.

'Why can't the imams (here) play a greater role in countering jihadi propaganda?' he wondered.

Speaking about the roots of separatism and terrorism, Deegan said: 'In all composite nations, there are always elements who seek to divide their people from the mainstream on the grounds that they should have political and economic independence because of their perceived differences.

'Sometimes, these separatist elements have a cause. However, when dialogue fails and agitation is met with repressive brute force, the result invariably leads to the formation of separatist groups and often to communal violence,' Deegan pointed out.

At the same time, he saw no danger to India in spite of a spate of terrorist and extremist groups operating in various parts of the country.

'Along with many other people, I see India as a shining example of a whole nation built on a diverse culture which is specifically common to the subcontinent and to wider parts of Asia.

'There may be social and communal problems from time to time, but no group is being actively persecuted; neither is there any serious discrimination against sub-groups.

'India's encouraging political, social and economic advances represent the achievements of an enlightened progressive Indian composite culture implemented by wise Indian men and women who have proved themselves to be great servants of their people,' Deegan maintained.

Ireland was the first colony that Britain portioned in 1921, retaining Northern Ireland and giving independence to the Republic of Ireland. Thereafter, Northern Ireland went through three decades of what is termed as 'The Troubles' from the 1940s to the 1970s with armed groups of Catholics and Protestants ranged against each other in a virtual civil war like situation. Peace was finally restored in 1998.

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