To live is to be political

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TM Krishna, who is incessantly trolled online for his stance on political issues, was recently asked to clarify whether he was an artiste or a politician. By that logic, doctors and farmers can only comment on deadly diseases and soil fertility, and they should not speak a word on social issues. But sirs and madams, to live in a modern democracy is to be political. If there is one thing this book, ‘Why India Votes?’, can tell us, it is how rural women make their own independent choices when it comes to voting.

From those who assert that you can only be either a political activist or an artiste — we beg to differ. We can be and are — a woman, a lawyer, a mother, a Hindu, a teacher, a Maharashtrian, a writer — all at the same time. I cannot be boxed into one role. All of us carry multiple identities and draw advantages and disadvantages from each of them as well as the combination of them.

The concept of intersectionality developed by American black feminists like Kimberly Krenshaw, Anjela Harris, Bell Hooks encapsulates the operation of the multiple forms of power structures on a given individual by virtue of her many identities. It would be best to acknowledge that the views expressed by a seemingly neutral artiste stem from the positionality and privilege that she carries. To not have an opinion about politics when the world is crumbling around you — like Nero playing the fiddle when Rome was burning — is very much a political position or a statement.

Art cannot be an apolitical sphere if artistes are to be the conscience-keepers of society. But in tyrannical reigns, expression in the form of art is first curbed and then smothered. This suppression can have two effects; the timid artistes dance to the tunes of the existing tyrannical power and allow their art to be rendered insipid. But the strong and meaningful art is a sharp weapon against the same tyranny.

It turns rebellious and all the more poignant and beautiful. Remember Iqbal Bano’s defiant voice and stance when she sang ‘Hum Dekhenge’ in 1985 wearing a black saree in protest against the ban on sarees in Pakistan? Or, as scholars like Anne Buckley argue, the instrumental role of political graffiti in helping Argentina’s transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy from 1974 to 1983.
The cancellation of the concert in which singer TM Krishna was supposed to participate cannot be treated in isolation. We all have a democratic right to perform, express and protest without fear and unreasonable restrictions. This right gets curtailed when trolls virulently attack anyone who critique the Hindutva ideology and the government allows them a free reign and, in general, foster an environment where they thrive. We can learn from Georgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher, who explains how the sovereign creates a ‘state of exception’ where normal law and rights get suspended and create ‘bare life’ – like bodies in nature — as opposed to political beings that are citizens.

The brand ‘desh prem’ and loyalty to the country that matches with the right wing perspectives everywhere demands loyalty and mute acquiescence. But those coming from the streams of Marxism understand that thesis and anti-thesis make way for synthesis. Love for anybody — family, community, country — does not mean blind obedience. On the contrary, to challenge in the form of offering other perspectives and moving ahead in debates is to foster progress.

Labelling critique and challenge to the regime as “anti-national” is falsely equating an individual, a political party or an ideology with the nation. As a devout Hindu one can challenge Hinduism. As a proud Indian, I can challenge some traditions in India. Love then becomes consciousness. What benefits the nation — a mute herd of blind lovers or conscious citizens guiding the progress of the nation?

It is fashionable of the abhijan (the upper class) to say politics is a dirty business or politics means corruption. But the bahujan (masses) do not have the privilege to distance from politics. Political scientist and anthropologist Partha Chatterjee describes them as members of a ‘political society’ who are unable to enforce their rights due to lack of their recognition as justiciable rights, use politics and political engagement as a tool to ensure survival. One cannot detach politics from their lives, just as politics cannot be distanced from art. For them, and for all of us, to live is to be political.

Lastly a cautionary tale from the old Chinese legends, for all of us to learn from. You decide whether you want to be the parrot or the sparrow:

The warlord Han Fu-chü doted on his parrot. He fed it fresh meat and live insects every day; manicured its claws and massaged its tongue; he loved it more than his concubines. He taught it to repeat ‘Old Han is a Great Man!’ until it was fluent.

At a morning cabinet meeting, the Parrot soiled his hat with its droppings. The Warlord realised that his bureaucrats were all secretly laughing at him. In a fit of rage, he threw the bird out of the window. The creature writhed on the ground, still chanting ‘Old Han is a Great Man! Old Han is a Great Man!’

Having witnessed this, the sparrow asked the Parrot: ‘He’s murdered you, why are you still chanting that?’

‘It’s the only line I ever learned,’ replied the Parrot.