

Indian Muslims: Past, Present and Future

Centuries of insecurity drove Muslims in India away from the very forces – English, science and modernity – that would have helped them cope with the changing world. Now at last – in the aftermath of the Babri masjid demolition and the Gujarat killings – they have begun emphasising the need for a modern education. There is much more that needs to be done – on the gender imbalance, family planning and attitudes to divorce – and Muslims have to fight their ghettoisation in the cities and towns. Goodwill and understanding between members of the two main religions in India is, of course, necessary to help the Muslims in their struggle for a place of honour in the Indian sun.

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The interaction between Islam and the subcontinent, begins with the Prophet's remark that there is a fragrant breeze coming from India. Within a few years, a mosque was built at Cambay. The early Muslims were traders or preachers. Islam's insistence on honesty in trade dealings and a rigorous moral code appealed to local people. Ismaili preachers from Yemen were able to convert sizeable brahmins and rajputs in Gujarat. This trend was further boosted by Sufi saints, particularly Khawaja Moinuddin Chisti and Hazrat Nizamudin Aulia. Most important the Islamic belief in the equality of all mankind, was a powerful attraction to dalits and backward classes.

The second phase begins around 1050 AD with raiders from central Asia, coming through the north-west. They found a rich country, they loved the loot, but were soon Indianised and stayed on to rule for over 650 years. It is this phase that arouses the passions of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and casts a long shadow over Hindu-Muslim relations. Today, there are hardly any Indian Muslims, with pure Arab or central Asian blood. Most Muslims are descendants of dalits and backward caste converts. Their low standard of living suggest that Muslim rule, gave them social equality, but failed

to improve their economic plight. Most continued performing their traditional work. The old castes became the new 'jamaats'. Inter-jamaat marriages are still rare, and can often lead to a violent reaction. I made the mistake of asking a Syed, to consider the proposal for my US-based son, for his daughter. The answer was short and brutal: get out. Islam could not break the caste apparatus in India. These conversions have often resulted in odd historical paradoxes. Narendra Modi is a Hindu Ghanchi. The Godhra accused are Muslim Ghanchis. The forefathers of both, Mahatma Gandhi and Jinnah, may have been in the same caste. The same is true of the poet Iqbal and the Nehrus. No wonder India is the only region, in the arc from Morocco to Indonesia, to not have a Muslim majority. It also proves that forced conversions were rare, because of the Quranic injunction (2,256) "no force in religion".

Withdrawal into a Shell

Religious association with the rulers, gave the vast poor multitude, a sense of empowerment. But the collapse of Muslim rule, also brought with it a deep insecurity, for both the nobility and the poor Muslims. The response was a turn towards religion, and equally a rejection of all symbols of the new rulers. Tragically this included English, science and modernity.

Part of the current Muslim alienation, anger and frustration is traceable to the unfortunate responses of the past 200 years. To close our eyes to the future, and live the present in a fantasy of a glorious past, is an ideal concoction for social disaster. Incidentally, the worldwide Muslim anger against the west is due to a similar historical phenomenon: the collapse of the Ottoman empire after the first world war, and the colonisation of almost all Muslim lands, especially the holy places of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Instead of responding to the western challenge by plunging into science and modernity, Muslims withdrew into a shell. It was disgraceful that the great Syed Ahmed Khan was roundly condemned for propagating modern education through the Aligarh movement.

It is ironic that a religion, whose very first command was 'Iqra', meaning "read"; and where Allah commands devotees in (20, 14), "Pray to the Lord, to increase you in knowledge"; has been so totally cut off from the pursuit of knowledge. There are no Muslim Nobel prize winners in physics, chemistry and medicine. Oddly the one exception was Abdus Salaam, the physics laureate, who belonged to the Ahmediya sect, which the Pakistan government declared as non-Muslim. The Prophet himself had a passion for knowledge, asking his followers to "go to China, if need be, to acquire knowledge". After the battle of Badr, he declared that a scholar ranks higher than a martyr. One of his descendants, Jafar us Sadiq, declined the high office of Caliph, stating that the quest of knowledge was paramount. Early Islamic centuries saw a flowering of knowledge, unknown to the world before, in fields as varied as medicine, astronomy, philosophy, law, music or chemistry (the name comes from al-chemy or the science of converting other metals into gold). While the rest of the world lay in the dark age, these scholars preserved the best of Greek and Indian thought. India's discovery of the "zero", was combined with the 10 numbers, to give the foundation of science and mathematics. Avicenna, also called Ibn Sinna, born 980 AD, is considered the greatest intellectual in the 1800 years between Aristotle and Leonardo da Vinci. Muslims discovered algebra, and gave its

name. Rather some of these scholars became so involved in their subjects, that the clergy felt they were ignoring Allah. Then suddenly disaster struck, with Halagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan and a forefather of the Mughals, who ransacked and destroyed all the great cities in 1254, and was particularly brutal on the libraries of Samarkand and Baghdad. The ulema interpreted this tragedy as a sign of Allah's anger, for devoting so much time and attention to issues other than Allah himself. Muslims were ordered to avoid mathematics, science and philosophy. A curtain of darkness came down over the Muslim world. Later there were great Muslim empires, such as the Ottomans, the Persian and the Mughal. But none could revive that passion of knowledge, which was a hallmark of the first 600 years of Islam.

Focus on Religious Education

Today countless dedicated souls have devoted their whole lives to rectifying this serious imbalance. Education societies are to be found in almost all Muslim areas in the country. But the task is Herculean, more so because the ulema is focused exclusively on religious education. Here too the method of teaching is to read and recite the holy Koran. But there is hardly any effort to understand its content. Shockingly few Muslims can understand the very first 'Surah Fateha', which is recited in every prayer. This Surah is so beautiful, moving, and universal, that if imbibed in their lives, the identity crisis facing Muslims, in India and the world, would almost disappear. How ironic, for the Koran is Allah's message to mankind. Even the Prophet's principal title is 'the Messenger'.

Religious education is necessary. Yet we have to realise that it heavily taxes the limited resources of a poor community. Consider the central Gujarat region. There are about 23 darul ulums, the equivalent of a university preparing ulema. These institutions receive huge funds, particularly during the month of Ramazan. Most Muslims consider financial support to mosques, madrasas and darul ulums as a pious act. The larger darul ulums cannot find enough local students. They advertise for students from poor families in UP and Bihar, offering them free lodging and boarding. The tragedy lies in that most graduating maulvis, are ill-equipped to find jobs outside, other than in a mosque, or

as petty traders or as shop assistants or labourers. Shockingly this entire area, does not have a single college, other than a dilapidated one at Cambay. I remember a visit to the riot refugee settlement at Modasa, Sabarkanta. In 2002, about 580 families were shifted here, from regions adjoining Godhra. Row houses were built for each family. One donor built a mosque. But soon another donor came, and built another mosque just 100 metres away. He rejected a request that he rather build a reading hall-cum-hostel, where students could study and stay.

Change in Muslim Society

The good news is that Muslim society, as a whole, is changing. The Babri demolition and, more important, the Gujarat killings, have altered the world views of Muslims. They are convinced that their security is linked to their acceptance of good education. This demand for quality education is very strong, particularly in the riot scarred areas, such as Gujarat. It is a reflection of this trend that even darul ulums and madrasas are incorporating subjects like computer training and English in their curriculum. The government of India must be congratulated for setting up the Maulana Azad Education Foundation, to help Muslims raise their educational level. This good work must continue, for the best way to bridge our communal divide is to educate Muslims. Reservation in educational institutions and in employment, is not the answer to Muslim backwardness. It may benefit a small creamy layer. But it may cause a further widening of the gulf between communities. Muslims must stand on their own feet. Fortunately many are doing so right now. The number of Muslim students in all medical colleges in Gujarat is about 225, out of a total strength of about 4,500. This works out to about 5 per cent. The Gujarat Muslim population is about 10 per cent. In other words the number of medical students is about half, of what should have been. Yet each student has been admitted on his own merit, without reservation or payment. No wonder most Muslim doctors, even in the Gujarat after Godhra, have a good private medical practice. For the popular impression is that they are good doctors. Otherwise they would never have survived the economic boycott of the VHP. With reservation, the public will view them as back door entries.

I have never understood the clamour for reservation at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). The best tribute we can pay Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, is to have the best and the brightest students, Muslims and non-Muslims, enter AMU, making it the Harvard of the east. Such a university could serve the larger Muslim interests far better than, one in which Muslims admission is reserved. A 50 per cent admission reservation in one university, will automatically reduce the chances of Muslims being admitted to the hundreds of other universities. The reservation demand is sharper in the liberal arts.

No to Quotas

Frankly Muslims would be much better off, by moving away from the liberal arts and languages, to the sciences, medicine and technology. In a similar vein is the Andhra Pradesh proposal for 5 per cent government job reservation. In an era of fewer government jobs, why are we fighting for these few crumbs? The Muslim future in India does not lie as a community of clerks and petty traders. Muslims must accept the fact of discrimination with grace and a steely determination. They can certainly beat the system. Better educated and determined Muslims will get more jobs and at a higher level, than reservation can ever offer. The same is true of the army. Highly qualified Muslims must apply for army recruitment. I am sure they will be selected, for it is in the army interest to do so. Most important we have to stop complaining and stop demanding separate quotas. That is the road to stagnation and decay for the community as a whole. The example of dalits and tribals is too obvious.

The silver lining is the success of the Muslim girl student. Six months ago, a function held at Vadodara, to honour all distinction students graduating from the university and board exams, saw 95 Muslim girls, but only 28 Muslim boys. Vadodara is not an exception. Similar figures are to be found all over. How do we explain this development? Once family and society approve of female education, girls grab the opportunity, and with dedicated hard work, seek to break the psyche of "minority within a minority". I wish boys would also apply themselves in the same manner. There is no greater joy than to see these brightest young women excelling in research in

fields as varied as nuclear physics, and biochemistry. The role of these scientists in transforming Muslim society may be as vital as that of Sania Mirza, through sports. Within a few decades, a stage will come where women may no longer accept the glaring distortions that have crept into Muslim personal law.

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) should apply itself to the gender imbalance. To begin with they must nominate far more women, than the one member, Naseem Iqtidar, currently on its board. The All India Women Personal Law Board, set up by Shaista Amber, must not be viewed as heretics. Their energies and talent must be directed to the larger good of the community. The activists must also be conscious of ground realities. Muslim family life is quite stable. Triple talaq and polygamy are repulsive to our women activists and rightly so. Fortunately its actual practice is quite low. Dowry deaths are rare in the community, although dowry demands are rising, and must be condemned very strongly. Note that the one individual dearest to the Prophet was his daughter Hazrat Fatemat us Zohra. Similarly, he imparted the highest knowledge to his wife, Hazrat Ayesha. Amber and her friends must use these historical facts to win community acceptance for women's rights, within the ambit of Islam.

Triple Talaq

The Koran refers to divorce in (2, 226 to 232); and also in (65, 1 to 7). There is no mention at all of instant triple talaq. This is a later modification, brought in to suit the demand of soldiers on long duty far from home. Our ulema must accept that the triple talaq violates the letter and spirit of the Koran and the Hadith. The Koran directs the husband to treat his divorced wife with dignity, honour and kindness. If only we had imbibed these commands, the disaster over Shah Banu would not have taken place.

The reference to polygamy is most interesting. In (4,3), the Koran allows men to marry up to four wives. But then it stipulates that all must be treated just and fair. The very next sentence says that even if you try to be just, you will not be able to do so. This implies monogamy is the rule in Islam. Polygamy is permitted only under extreme conditions. In actual practice most second marriages are a result of sexual

passion. This clause is misused by many rich and famous non-Muslims, by declaring themselves as Muslims, to marry a second time. Fortunately census figures show that the rate of polygamous marriages are highest among tribals, Buddhists, and Jains. The Muslim rate is the lowest. Most Muslims are so poor that they cannot afford a second wife. Yet Narendra Modi could win an important election by rabble rousing: 'Hum Panch Hamare Pachees'.

Family Planning

In Islam a child is conceived once the egg meets the sperm. Allah gives it a soul. Hence Islam treats abortion as murder. But coitus interruptus was sanctioned by the Prophet. This method just stops the egg meeting the sperm. Then why do we oppose family planning so vehemently, when it does the same work? I know of a case where a woman having seven children, was told by the local maulvi, that she must not undergo a family planning operation, otherwise her final rites after death, would not be performed. The wretched woman will for ever be a child producing factory. Further any such operation requires the consent of the husband. In poor families, this is often difficult to obtain. The result is that the poor woman goes through repeated abortions, as that does not require the husband's consent. In the process she stands guilty of murder, before Allah. At the same time, frequent abortions affects her physical and mental health.

Ghettoisation

Ghettoisation is another major problem confronting the community. Recurrent riots have generated a deep sense of insecurity. In Gujarat 2002, Hindutva forces targeted those Muslims staying in Hindu localities, for they were so easy to attack. Even a sitting high court judge had to flee. Sadly these were the very people who acted as a bridge between the two communities. Most of them fled to Muslim enclaves. To make a personal mention, I was among the first to move into the Sama locality of Vadodara. As housing societies sprang up around my house, I soon became a rare Muslim in a purely Hindu area. I was happy, as I firmly believe that all communities must live together. That is the best guarantee of a plural society. My Hindu

neighbours treated me with much respect and affection. They were pillars of strength, as my wife suffered and died of cancer. The situation changed horribly on the day after Godhra. Suddenly rumours spread that I was an ISI agent and that my name implied guns were hidden in my house. With police complicity, my house was destroyed in 15 minutes. My daughter and I just escaped an almost certain death. I had no choice, but to leave Sama. I asked for a university quarter. I was given one flat, in a block having four flats. All were occupied when I moved in. But soon all the others left, and the three flats remain unoccupied even after three years. Incidentally almost all university housing is occupied, except for the three flats in my block. I retire one year from now. Where do I shift? Muslims would certainly welcome me in their areas. Yet the dream of a plural society cannot die within me, my first choice is a cosmopolitan locality. A recent inquiry for a flat I liked, brought about the standard reply, "We do not mind, but promise not to eat any non-vegetarian food".

Today it is impossible for a Muslim to buy or rent a house in most urban areas of Gujarat. The situation is similar all over the country, except that the severity may not be that strong as in Gujarat, where Muslim areas have become ghettos. The largest is Juhapura in Ahmedabad. Retired high court judges, senior IAS and IPS officers, and industrialists live therein. In Modi speak, it is Pakistan. There are about 2.5 lakh residents. Yet there are no banks, as it is classified in bureaucratic language as a "negative rating". There are no bus services. Roads are not maintained, nor is water provided adequately. Garbage pickup is also totally inadequate. But there are police posts around to control "terrorists". Muslims localities are deliberately partitioned into different municipal wards. No Muslim can be elected to the municipal corporation. Without representation and in a climate of extreme communalism, these areas soon become ghettos.

What is the answer? We must improve these areas on our own. Each locality must have a committee to keep the place clean. Sweepers must be hired, through private contributions. Trees must be planted, and nurtured. As the pressure on these lands is very high, special care must be taken to prevent any encroachments. Political pressure must be applied to have nationalised

banks open branches. Hopefully with rising education levels, improved living standards and god willing a lowering of hate from Hindutva elements, things will change. After all the Koran repeatedly says, "Bear in the name of Allah, for the fruits of patience and steadfastness are sweat indeed".

Muslim Insecurity

Insecurity runs very deep in the Muslim mind. Modi, Advani and Togadia will ever remain imbedded in the Muslim consciousness. The rape and killings of women were particularly horrifying. Trishuls were inserted into their private parts. Incidentally these trishuls were earlier blessed by Swaminarayan sants. What do we make of Ashok Singhal's statement that the Gujarat violence had the blessings of Lord Ram? This mass frenzy of hate, aided and abetted by the state, had its origin in the thoughts of Golwalkar. It encompassed all segments of Gujarat Hindu society, from the rich to the poor, from brahmins and jains, to dalits and tribals. Intellectuals, godmen, industrialists, high court judges, even certain Gandhians became a part of Narendra Modi's scheme to teach Muslims a lesson. Gujarat 2002 will forever remain a dark blot on Hinduism. Although there were a few brave souls who stood apart from the maddening crowd, and did everything possible to bring succour and relief to the victims and their families. We will ever be grateful to them.

I was a strong advocate of a dialogue between Muslims and the RSS. To improve relations, I even responded to their invitation to speak on Veer Savarkar on the night of February 26, 2002. Twelve hours later the Godhra train incident occurred, and my house was the first attacked in Vadodara. Whatever illusions I had, died on that day. Now I am convinced there is no possibility of any understanding with the RSS. The core of their belief is Golwalkar's hatred of Muslims. It is impossible for them to abandon their fundamental beliefs. Muslims have to be eternally vigilant.

Yet we must distinguish between the saffron forces and the vast mass of Hindus. I am convinced most Hindus are good and secular at heart. I say this, even though most Gujarati Hindus surrendered to their hate in 2002 and few have shown any remorse. Nevertheless, how do we ignore geographical reality? The 150 million

Muslims and the 850 million Hindus, live side by side, in almost all the towns and villages of India. It is impossible to separate them. This basic truth has to be accepted by both sides. Muslims must reach out to Hindus. Our words and deeds must never be such that they alienate Hindus. Their goodwill is essential, as we struggle to give our community a place of honour in the Indian sun.

We must learn to see national and world problems in a larger perspective. To expect our foreign policy to be centred on Iran is plain myopic. However angry we may be with president Bush, to oppose his visit so vehemently, at a time, when vital national interests were involved, is self-destructive. Similarly we have to condemn the cartoons of the Prophet. But to attack property here, to spite the cartoonist in Denmark is horrifying. We must be wise enough to see through the gimmicks played by politicians. It is disgusting that these worthies view Muslims as so easily amenable to emotional lollipops.

Finally, a word about Muslim dignitaries. We have had three Muslim presidents, a vice-president, three chief justices, countless governors and cabinet ministers. Yet shockingly they have had almost no impact on the Muslim masses. Why? After great persuasion I have taken some of these dignitaries to address Muslims inside mohallas. But they end up speaking on

Ambedkar or Sardar Patel. They could so easily have spoken on education, with references to the Prophet. It would have endeared them to the Muslim audience. But somehow they are frightened about any action or word that may provoke a minority appeasement charge. President Kalam is a most distinguished man. He gives high priority for interaction with children. In December 2003, I personally urged him to visit a very good school, run by a Muslim trust in Vadodara. Half the students are Hindus. This school was organising a Gujarat Science Fair, in which students from all over the state were participating. Further it was dedicated to president Kalam's guru, Vikram Sarabhai. His widow was to participate. The president refused, and his secretary curtly told me that the president had visited Gujarat recently, and could not come again so soon. Imagine my shock, when just 20 days later, he visited a Gujarat Swaminarayan gurukul. I write this more in sorrow, for there is so much these dignitaries could do, to calm Muslim fears and increase their emotional attachment to the country. By avoiding the Muslim masses, they lose all credibility. Worse they make it possible for political charlatans and even criminals to project themselves as the protectors of the community. [77]

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