

Mani Means A Gem

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Mani Shankar Aiyer is fortunate that his parents decided to give him the name, Gem, because after all Mani means Gem. In many ways he is truly a precious stone in that he is endowed both with a high level of intelligence and an even higher ability to articulate. In his speech he is sarcastic, acerbic and at least superficially witty. He likes to be in the news and, therefore, makes controversial statements. He has also set himself up as a champion of Muslims in general and Pakistan in particular. All I can say is, God help the Muslims if Mani is to be their apologist. Commenting on the attack on the satirical French journal, Charlie Hebdo, in which twelve leading cartoonist and journalists of France were shot dead by two self-proclaimed Al Qaeda terrorists, Mani said that considering the fact in the war against terror America had killed thousands of Muslims there was bound to be a backlash and the Paris killings, far from being an act of terrorism, were actually an act of revenge. Arnab Goswami of Times Now has termed this as a totally unacceptable justification for terrorism.

We moved away from the primitive world which lived on the principle of survival into a world where there is a social contract and a society of laws. One is free to choose which social contract to accept, that of Thomas Hobbes or that of Jean-Jaques Rousseau. Hobbes argues that in the absence of a government based on a social contract, the state of being would be that there would be , “ no arts, no laws, and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. If Mani Shankar’s theory that acts of terrorism are actually derived from a sense of injustice and, therefore, are means of bringing justice to people, then certainly as Hobbes has stated, the life of man will be nasty, brutish and short.

Even if we reject Hobbes’s theory of the social contract and accept the much more gentle one of Rousseau, we have to accept that there is a civil society, which alone can ennoble man. To quote him, “The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked”. It is the existence of civil society which makes man determine how he will be governed and as has been proved time and again, the organisation of government as a democracy, in which there is rule of law, is perhaps the best way of promoting the welfare of civil society. The Second World War was fought to contain the tyrannical Nazism and Fascism unleashed on the world by Hitler’s Germany and in a way it was a civilisational war of civil society versus the tyranny of the few. Luckily civil society won and the world has, however haltingly, tried to move towards a society of laws.

India is a democracy, as is the United States of America. In a democracy the elected representatives of the people enact the laws which will govern society, a fact of which Mani Shankar should be aware because he himself has been a beneficiary of our democratic system by having been elected to the Lok Sabha once and being subsequently nominated to the Rajya Sabha, of which he is still a member. Any law enacted by Parliament which is ultimately not acceptable to civil society would be subject to both judicial review and public protest, which can take the form of unseating the party in power in the next election or forcing government to review the legislation with a view to remove infirmities in it. Democracies can make mistakes; some of them of horrendous dimensions. America’s war in Vietnam was one such a mistake, but public protest in the United States forced the United States to review its policy and ultimately withdraw from Vietnam. This was not so much the military victory of North Vietnam as the victory of public opinion in a democracy which cherished free speech and action.

I am prepared to concede to Mani that a great deal of the problems of the United States and the western world with radical Islam is because of the policy in West Asia. Historically the Jews were never oppressed by the Muslims. It is in fact the Christians, at the time of the Crusades, who persecuted the Jews and forced the diaspora on them and scattered them all over the world. The largest concentration of Jews, however, was to be found in Germany and Central and Eastern Europe. It is in Germany, Poland and Russia that the Jews faced the maximum persecution, with an attempt by Hitler at total genocide of the Jews. After the Second World War it would have been best if Israel had been carved out of Central Europe as a show of repentance by those who had harmed them the most. Instead the Balfour Declaration established Israel in Palestine and since then the Jews versus Arabs conflict has begun. Today the Jews have virtually ousted all Palestinians. This has made the Arabs hostile to the Jews and the United States stand firmly behind Israel. If the United States were able to sort out the Palestinian problem in a just manner the root cause of Arab hatred for the western world would either disappear or substantially abate.

A feeling of hostility is one thing, but its conversion into systematic terrorism is something else again. Terrorism is not a battle for justice. Even if we take the present multiple jihads launched by radical Islam, most of the victims are Muslims, whether in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan or Pakistan. All the children killed in the Army Public School in Peshwar were Muslims. Bomb blasts in markets in Iraq kill Muslims. A guerrilla war is a revolt against government and targets an enemy. Terrorism, on the other hand, targets innocent people and uses violence as an instrument of intimidation. How can Mani Shankar justify the killing of innocent journalists as a legitimate response to military action by the Americans in Afghanistan?

Mani wants publicity. The way to shut him up is not to throw him out of Parliament. The best way is to ignore him because every publicity seeker fades into oblivion when denied the life giving force of publicity.
