

Indians Of The Islamic Faith

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When India became independent and Pakistan was founded on the basis of Islamic homogeneity, India opted for secularism and a State which recognised healthy national plurality. That is why the Muslim is so much a part of the Indian fabric that India today has the largest Muslim population after Indonesia. India is also the largest Hindu country in the world, the largest Jain country, the largest Sikh country and the largest Parsee country, besides being the second largest Muslim country. India has a Sikh majority State, the Punjab, two Buddhist majority States, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, three Christian majority States, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram and one Muslim majority State, Jammu and Kashmir. In a country where over eighty-two percent of population is Hindu, this configuration represents a magical kaleidoscope of myriad hues when seen through the prism of the eyepiece. India is virtually a working miracle of unity in the face of so much diversity.

A major complaint of the more orthodox elements of Hindu society is that the Indian Muslim tries to perversely maintain an identity different from other Indians. What absolute nonsense! Does not an Iyer try to show himself as different from an Iyengar by the two having different types of caste marks on their foreheads? Does not a Keralite dress differently from a Punjabi or have different eating habits? Incidentally, the Muslim community is not as monolithic as we think. For example, the Khutba in the Thousand Lights Mosque in Madras is read in Tamil and not Arabic or Urdu. That is because the language of the Tamil Muslim happens to be Tamil. In Indonesia they celebrate the birthday of the Prophet, Salallah Walleh Sallalam, with a rath yatra, which is basically a chariot procession of the Hindus, but without any Hindu symbols. Ninety-five percent of the population of Indonesia is Muslim. Even within Islam whereas the Koran is the defining factor and religious practice is universal, social customs will always be dictated by local conditions. That applies to Muslims in India also.

Let us look a little deeper into the Muslim mind. Does a Muslim think differently from other citizens? Does he have different aspirations? It is a fact that after partition many people looked on Muslims with suspicion, especially because Indo-Pakistan relations from the very beginning were strained. The war in Kashmir soon after independence, the 1965 and 1971 wars and the Pakistani intrusion into Kargil proved that the Indian Muslim is as loyal as any other citizen and today if the average Indian Muslim were to be asked whether he would like to go to Pakistan he will give a pointblank refusal and state that he is happy to be in India and to be Indian. This even most hard-line Hindus recognise. The Islamic fusion with Hindu India has been a happy one. The people from Central Asia brought with them their architecture in which the dome was introduced for the first time into a country where, because of easy availability of wood and construction stone it is the lintel and the steeple (shikhar), which dominated. Can one imagine India without a domed Taj Mahal, the Jama Masjid at Mandu and the dome of the Hari Mandir at Amritsar or the palace of the Maharaja of Bikaner? Or for that matter the Rashtrapati Bhawan. The Sultanate and Indo Saracenic styles of architecture are a felicitous example of the happy interaction between Islamic and Hindu architectural styles. Our cuisine, music, language, literature and medicine are all examples of the influence of Islam on Hindu traditions and vice versa. The influence of Sufism and the interaction with Hindu society has softened the contours of Islam in India and taken it back to its original liberal roots which the Prophet, Salallah Walleh Sallalam, gave to Islam as the messenger of Allah, in a pagan, corrupt Arabia, the land of the birth of Islam.

Partition and the subsequent communal troubles which took place have driven the Muslims into a ghetto, from which it is only now that Muslim society is emerging. This is the liberal face of Islam which, unfortunately, most politicians shun. To the Indian politician a backward, insular orthodox Muslim community is an ideal gathering ground for votes. Extremist Hindu politicians ask for Hindu votes by pointing to the Muslim as someone different, of whom society should be afraid. The Congress Party and other so-called secular parties seek Muslim votes by representing themselves as a protector of Muslims from predatory Hindus, playing upon Muslim fears of communal violence. No specific programme for development of the Muslim community have ever been presented to the Muslim voter. He is only given the fear of the communal forces and the promise of reservation in government jobs. The Muslim is then expected to vote en bloc for so-called secular parties, who look on the Muslims as a solid vote bank.

The Muslim is both educationally and economically behind the Hindu. To a large extent the community has to blame itself because, unlike Tamil Brahmins who had been excluded virtually from every opportunity for advancement in Tamil Nadu and so took to educating their children wherever possible so that Tamil Nadu's loss became the gain of other States in India and of the United States of America, Muslims have never given that priority to education. Without education the community will remain backward and will necessarily withdraw into an even deeper mental ghetto. Fortunately one now sees evidence of more Muslims coming into the world of education, including Muslim girls and a good example of this is the Al Barkaat Education Foundation which runs excellent educational institutions in Aligarh in which large numbers of Muslims girls have come forward for education. This is a most encouraging sign.

The Indian who happens to be Muslim has all the aspirations of any other Indian and no longer wants to be treated as part of a herd of compliant sheep. Nitish Kumar has proved that caste and religion need not be the defining factors in elections and in Bihar the Muslims have voted on the same platform as every other community, that is, the platform of development. Even in Gujarat, not the best example of communal harmony, most Muslims have benefited by economic growth and there are many amongst them who feel that notwithstanding, Narendra Modi has been able to create an environment of development which benefits Muslims also.

The way forward for Muslim is not the path of reservation but the path of opportunity created by education. Let us stop treating him as vote bank and to begin to look upon him as a person desirous of development and progress. In other words, the Muslim is a citizen demanding all the rights of a citizen and, at long last, has begun to fight for them. To fob him off with the carrot of reservation is a cruel joke.