

How Secular Are The Indian Muslims?

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

This is a strange article coming from me when I have repeatedly averred that in the matter of secularism the Indian Muslim completely accepts the fact that he is living in a country whose Constitution in its very Preamble mandates secularism as integral to the republic, he accepts the laws of the land he believes that his religion does not preclude secularism in all temporal matters and that he is heir to the traditions set by the Sufi saints and by Emperor Akbar's concept of Deen-e-Ilahi. He has lived through the trauma of partition. A group of Muslims leaders, driven partly by the fear of being swamped by a Hindu majority in independent India and partly by the desire to regain the power and authority of Muslim ruled India, even if it be in a truncated country called Pakistan opted for a separate state of Pakistan. The majority of Muslims rejected the two nation theory and by refusing to migrate to West Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan and NWFP, which together constitute today's Pakistan, they voted with their feet to be Indians simply by staying put.

The communal violence which followed partition certainly put Muslims at an initial disadvantage in India because they were treated with great suspicion as crypto Pakistanis, but it speaks volumes for their patriotism that they were prepared to put up with all this in order to retain India as their home. Wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 only reinforced their belief in secular India and one fallout of these two conflicts was that suspicion of the Indian Muslim faded. The Indian Muslim was no longer looked upon as a would-be Pakistani, not even by the lunatic fringe of Shiv Sena and VHP. No Hindu, however, anti Muslim he might be, can ignore the fact that after Indonesia India has the largest Muslim population in the world and the Muslim is now very much a part of the Indian fabric.

The above statement has been made so often that it is now both hackneyed and clichéd. What does the Indian fabric consist of? Every fabric has to be woven and, therefore, it has the warp and weft, the warp being longitudinal and weft being horizontal or latitudinal. A monolithic fabric would have the same thread of the same colour in both warp and weft and in a way the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has tried its best, though not with any great success, to weave a monolithic fabric. A society which is multi ethnic, multi religious, multi cultural, multi linguist can never consist of a monolithic fabric and, therefore, both warp and weft consist of threads of many hues which are woven into multiple colours and bear many designs. Such a fabric is bound to be much more exciting and pleasing than a dull, monolithic grey and because India is such a healthy polyglot society which is truly multi dimensional, it is a very exciting country in which to live. The sheer vibrancy of India ensures that whatever one's religion, one is acutely aware of a nationality which transcends the narrow confines of religion, caste, culture, language, region, or any similar compartment. The Muslim is a part of this society and, therefore, the belief that he holds himself isolated from the rest of India within a cocoon of communalism is not only erroneous, it is downright foolish and even dangerous.

There are many amongst us who do not accept that the Muslim is not communal and as evidence they point out the ghettos into which in many cities the Muslims have retreated. A locality in Bhopal largely inhabited by Muslims is considered a ghetto. A locality in Bhopal largely inhabited by Kayasthas is not considered a ghetto. Is there a real difference? In the city of

Madras even in Mylapore one can not only distinguish between the Brahmin quarter and the areas inhabited by other castes, but within the Brahmin areas there is a further sub division between the street of Iyengars and the street of Iyers. Do we consider these ghettos? I have a definitional problem here with what constitutes a ghetto. When the Nazis drove all the Jews of Warsaw into a particular segment of the city that was a ghetto, because it was a deliberate segregation by the State of people whom the Nazis called the Untermenschen, or sub-humans, they were deprived of all their rights and forced to live in an area which was only one step above a concentration camp. This was a ghetto, but the Kazak Camp at Bhopal (popularly known as Quazi camp) was the camping ground of the Kazak soldiers of the Nawabs of Bhopal, which has now become a kind of slum largely inhabited by Muslims. The Kazaks were themselves Muslims and because they came on bad days their locality degenerated into a slum which, because its population was and is largely Muslim, is now considered a ghetto, whereas in reality it is a slum.

It is a fact of which we must take notice that if communal riots occur there is a likelihood of some segregation taking place in which Hindus move out of Muslim majority localities and Muslims out of Hindu majority localities. This is an understandable security concern which can lead to such segregation, but the term ghettoisation is a bit extreme. If the law and order situation in a city is under control and people feel secure everywhere there is unlikely to be much segregation and people will continue to live together. One example of these is Ibrahim-pura and Chowk in Bhopal where Hindus and Muslims live cheek-by-jowl and whose business establishments abut each other, culminating in the Jama Masjid whose shops are all rented by Hindu businessmen. No riot in Bhopal has ever touched the Chowk because people know that fire, which is indiscriminate, will burn a Hindu house just as it will the house of his Muslim neighbour. Both communities have learnt to live in peace here, which proves that integration is always better than separation. This point is very important because ghettoisation only occurs where the law and order situation is out of control and people seek safety in the company of their co-religionists. Clustering for safety is a very different phenomenon from naked communalism and even communities which have drawn apart in terms of residence continue to work together in the work place. I would not call such a society to be communalised.

This brings us to the question of secularism. Article 14 of the Constitution mandates equality before law and equal protection of laws and Article 15 prohibits any form of discrimination on account of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. In such a cosmopolitan society perhaps the best definition of secularism would be that given by Henry II Plantagenet in his "Constitutions of Clarendon". The effort was to separate the State and the church, with the church having no say whatsoever in the management of temporal affairs by the State. The Constitution of India recognises this, which is why in Article 25 it gives freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion. At the same time in Articles 29 and 30 it gives certain special rights to minority institutions to maintain their own educational institutions without undue intervention by the State. Similarly, Article 26 gives the right to manage one's own religious affairs. The Constitution, therefore, recognises that this country has all kinds of people and those who were a minority group have to be given the special protection of the State so that they can manage their own affairs without let or hindrance. This applies to all minorities, including the Muslims. This does not make the Muslims communal but recognises their minority status and affords them the protection of the State. Theoretically this should be equally applicable to Hindus in the Kashmir Valley, where they form a minority.

Very often the question of secularism in the context of the Muslims is seen against a background of terrorism, almost entirely sponsored by Pakistan, in which the terrorist elements happen to be Muslims. Of course it is conveniently forgotten that in a number of cases, for example, the Samjhauta Express blast, Malegaon incidents and the Mecca Masjid explosions, it is Hindu extremists who were found to be at fault. By and large terrorism in which there is the hand of Muslims is not home grown and it is but natural that Pakistan is unlikely to recruit Hindus to do its dirty work. The victims of acts of terrorism are as much Muslims as they are Hindus and, for example, in Kashmir almost every act of terrorism has resulted in Muslims being killed. To take the acts of a few misguided Salafist Muslim youth and enlarge them to encompass the entire Muslim community is absolutely wrong and unacceptable. Unfortunately reaction by certain extremist Hindu groups has only aggravated the situation without in any way ending terrorism because it is axiomatic that terrorism can only be combated by reasoned, measured counter action and not by an extremist reaction. In fact all indications are that the Muslim community dislikes acts of terrorism as much as does the Hindu and, therefore, to question the secular credentials of the Indian Muslim on account of acts of terrorism by a few would be both unfair and unreal.

Far worse than any Pakistan sponsored acts of terrorism in India is the menace of violent Naxalism which now affects more than 150 districts in the country. By and large the Maoists are Hindu or tribals whose religion approximates to primitive Hinduism. The Naxalites deliberately target policemen and other state employees. They blow up roads, burn down schools, prevent development activities being undertaken in tribal areas, they extort money, terrorise people and kill innocent people. They are masters of guerilla warfare and the police has taken huge casualties on account of Naxalite activity. If terrorism is the virtual monopoly of the Muslims, then how is it non Muslim Naxalites are much more successful as terrorists than the Muslims? Terrorism has no religion and one is coming around to the point of view that terrorism really has no ideology, claims to the contrary notwithstanding.

Let us begin with Islamic terrorism. Much of Islamic terrorism is termed as Jihad because the Salafists, who are the main instigators of such terror, do not understand the meaning of the word Jihad. When the Prophet, Salallah Walleh Salallam, finally returned to Mecca from Medina he stated that issues relating to Islam had been sorted out and there were no room now for a violent Jihad. However, it was the duty of every Muslim to wage an internal Jihad in which he constantly reviews his own behaviour or the errors which might have crept into interpretation of Quranic injunctions and by such introspection to correct the errors and to himself ensure that whatever shortcomings that had crept into his own conduct were removed. That is the true meaning of Jihad. In any case killing of innocent people is contrary to every tenet of Islam. Every so-called Jihad launched by Muslim extremists has resulted in so many Muslims being killed. The war between Iran and Iraq, the killing of Muslims in daily acts of terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and in India can never be termed as Jihad. Fortunately the Indian Muslim, by and large, recognises that what the terrorist groups are doing is nothing but criminal activity of the most heinous kind and to term it a Jihad is in itself a mockery of Islam. Therefore, the Indian Muslim neither supports terrorists nor terrorism, which is why the Indian Mujahiddin have not met with any great success in India. Is that not evidence of the Indianness of the Muslim and, therefore, proof positive of his basic secularism?

One cannot be secular in isolation and if India were to move away from the secular nature of its polity different communities would be forced to adopt a more communal stance just for the sake of survival. Sometimes we force communalism on to people by the way in which we behave towards a particular community. Recently riots broke out between Muslims and Jats in Western U.P, in particular Muzaffarnagar District. The cause of the riot was a dispute between one Muslim and two Jat boys which, because the matter was not nipped in the bud, led to the death of the three boys and a massive breakdown of law and order in which more than fifty people have been killed and more than fifty thousand people have become refugees within their own country. Parts of Western U.P. are even today engulfed in fear. What sort of a government do we have that fifty thousand people can be displaced within a hundred miles off Delhi and continue to live as refugees in camps because the government is not able to restore order and inspire confidence in the people that there will be peace! The Western U.P. Muslim is an agriculturist who has coexisted very happily with the Hindu for the past several hundred years. Even in 1947 this area largely remained peaceful and not many Muslims migrated to Pakistan. The Muslim, like the Jat, was first and foremost a farmer, then a family person and only then either a Muslim or a Hindu. There was no conscious feeling of alienness either amongst the Muslims or the Jats. It is a total administrative failure in that in this region law and order was not maintained and, therefore, the situation rapidly degenerated into one of communal violence. In this case the Hindu Jat has been more active than his Muslim counterpart and, therefore, the question may well be asked whether it is the Muslim who is communal or the Hindu Jat.

I have one final proof to offer about the basic Indianness of the Muslim, which is that despite the massive riots in Bombay in 1993 and the riots in Gujarat in 2002, Muslims have not migrated in any sizable number from either Maharashtra or Gujarat. The aberration of riots notwithstanding, the Muslim is sending out a message that he is Indian, he believes in the secular traditions of India and that he cannot be driven out of his own homeland through mob violence. To me this is proof positive that the Muslim is Indian first and foremost. He happens to follow the Islamic faith but he accepts that he is a part of the larger Indian whole and, therefore, need not have separatist ambitions.

The Muslim accepts this but unfortunately the political parties do not seem to have the same broadminded approach to life. I refer here specifically to the political parties and their approach to Muslims as voters. When we look at the list of the candidates of all parties we find that the number of Muslim candidates is very small, which means that whatever one's religion is, the likelihood is that in a Christian dominated area of Kerala the candidates of all parties would probably be Christian. The voter, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc., has to vote for one of the candidates and since he is not necessarily a co-regionalist, the voter would exercise his choice in favour of the candidate or the party that he favours. In the rest of India the numbers of Muslims who stand for elections and have been given party tickets are few and far between and in the majority of constituencies a voter is likely to have a choice between Hindu candidates only. By and large the voter turnout of Muslims is quite impressive, which means that when the Muslim votes he is unlikely to find a Muslim candidate whom he should support. If the Muslim were totally communalised he would abstain from voting under these circumstances, but the fact remains that he does exercise a choice.

The political parties, especially the Congress, Samajwadi Party, the Left, do try and get Muslim votes. Even the BJP has jumped on this bandwagon. The Congress, in particular, together with the Samajwadi Party and a number of smaller parties such as that of Nitish Kumar

have made a particular pitch for Muslim votes. The Sachhar Committee report, the Gujarat riots, the fear of the big bad wolf, Narendra Modi are all trotted out as means of obtaining the Muslim vote through a process which comes very close to polarisation of votes. Votes are not sought from voters by projecting one's own party image as progressive and aimed at developing all communities. Instead an effort is made to ensure that the Muslim votes are blocked for a particular party without asking too many questions about the track record of that party. That is why when Rahul Gandhi goes to Azamgarh he ensures that his face is somewhat hirsute, almost as if an incipient beard will make him acceptable to the Muslim community. If a beard made one a Muslim then every Indian Sadhu would represent the pinnacle of Islamic piety. In the last elections in U.P. the Muslim proved that he has seen through the game and that he cannot be fooled by futile gestures. Incidentally, the political parties should also realise that by making a blatantly Muslim appeal they have trivialised a great religion and reduced it to a caste to which an appeal is made for votes as it is to Rajputs in an area of Rajput eminence, Jats in Haryana or Yadavs in U.P. An appeal to a caste is as blatantly communal as an appeal to the Muslims as a religious group. The Congress Party, by seeking a Muslim vote bank, has in fact made a mockery of religion and it is about time that the Muslims realise this.

The Muslim has concerns, especially because he is at the bottom rung of education, employment and gainful business. What he needs is a massive injection of education so that he becomes competitive and is thus able to advance in the temporal world. In this his aspirations are the same as those of any other Indian. He wants peace, good law and order and in particular an opportunity for advancement, through education, training and placement. There is nothing communal about any of these objectives. Therefore, my plea would be that the Indian Muslim is as good a citizen as any other Indian. There is no need to doubt either his nationalism or his secularism. In fact there is every reason to doubt the secularism of the political parties who make a religious appeal to Muslims to vote en masse for a particular party. That is communalism.
