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Understanding Indian Muslims: A Vision Document

Mohammad Arif

Research Scholar, Jammu University, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Abstract:

Muslims constitute the largest minority of India and who according to the official census of 2011 are 14.2 percent of the total population. Despite much talk of developmental discourse in post independent India, they still occupy the position of a marginalized community. Unfortunately, India's tryst with destiny runs parallel with a perceived animosity nurtured by the legacy of partition that visibly started targeting Muslims. Muslims have been educationally backward, economically poor, socially enslaved, and suffer from grave political disabilities, from which no other minority community suffers today. The community has been utilized either as a vote bank or victimized by certain sets of stereotypes at the hands of successive political regimes. As revealed by Sachar Committee report, Muslims rank below S.C's and S.T's and they are deprived of every opportunity of development. Hence, this vision document will throw a deep insight into the grievances nursed by this downtrodden community and anticipate a positive response from the system in order to elevate (not alienate) the community at least at par with other subjugated classes.

Keywords: Appeasement, alienation, communal media, Muslim backwardness and electoral compulsions

*"Sarazameen-e-Hind Par Aqwaame aalam ke Firaq
Kaarwa'n aate Gaye Hindustan Banta Gaya"*

1. Introduction

The above mentioned couplet of Firaq Gorakhpuri gives us a clear description of India's composite civilization. This is the complex web of India's diversity in every sphere which makes the project of its nation-building distinct. India had never been a mono-religious, mono-cultural, mono-lingual or mono-ideological country.

At the hour of mid-night on 14th to 15th of August 1947, when the whole world was sleeping "India's tryst with destiny" begins. It was an era of new consciousness as per Pt. Nehru, as this political revolution awaits a bigger social revolution. It was an envisioned dream of wiping out tears from every single eye and usher us in a new era of balanced development with human face. For fulfilling this vision despite much ideological provocations from Pakistan, India decided to adopt a secular path. Pt. Nehru in his letters to Chief Ministers on 15th of October 1947 writes, "We have a Muslim minority who are so large in number that they cannot, even if they want, go anywhere else. That is a basic fact about which there can be no argument. Whatever the provocations from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors, inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilized manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic state. If we failed to do, so we shall have a festering sore which will eventually poison the whole body politic and probably destroy it." It was this pledge taken by the architects of this nation as they were fully acquainted with the plural social universe of this country which designs India into a unique fabric of sovereign, democratic, socialist and secular, republic. But this was not going to be an easy task as India was born in very difficult circumstances perhaps no other country by then was born in a situation more difficult than that of India in 1947. At that time it is widely believed that a country full of such kind of diversity could not remain together for long. The year of 1947 was of unprecedented catastrophe, violence and trauma. The partition of the country appeared to prove everyone's worst fears. Yet the turmoil that accompanied independence did not make our leaders lose sight of multiple challenges that faced the new nation.

2. Muslims in India: Issues and Perceptions

The advent of Muslims in India after Aryans further enriched the already diverse nation. They came here as Arabs, Turks, Persians as well as Afghans, but with the passage of time they forgot the places of their origin and permanently settled here. This country was decorated with the best architectural marvels never witnessed before in the entire world. But, in the era of colonial masters communalism was nurtured and promoted by the Britishers under the policy of divide and rule. The emerging religious differences in the post census era (1871) first used to project the social and cultural variations and then promote political divisions by treating Indians, basically not as Indians but as members of religious communities. Partha Chatterjee rightly remarked that, the very first

census conducted by the Britishers divided the people. Asghar Ali engineer has analyzed the phenomenon of communalism in the socioeconomic perspective. The fight between Shivaji and Aurangzeb was not religious in nature, but a political struggle reflecting crisis of the feudal system in that epoch. From the very beginning Muslim league was fighting basically for greater share in the power structure and not on any substantial issue of theological or even broadly of a religious nature.

Ironically the creation of Pakistan (later to become Pakistan and Bangladesh), ostensibly in order to give the Muslim minority a state of its own, created a new minority problem within India. While the Muslim majority areas became separate (with the exception of Kashmir) the Muslims living as a minority in Hindu areas were left more isolated than previously. From being one quarter, Muslims were now only about 10% of the total population of newly partitioned India. The greatest population transfers were in the areas close to the borders, but some of the Muslim elite, principally from Uttar Pradesh, who fought the battle for a separate nation, left for Pakistan. In the south of India, there was little movement of peoples; to this day Muslim-Hindu relations are better there than in the north — even when there is a large Muslim population as in Kerala. The Muslims of the north were therefore left without their previous leadership. The elite band of Muslims who left for Pakistan created untold miseries for those who chose to remain in India. These people belonged to the lower stratum of Muslim society like small landholders, poor peasants and landless labourers in rural areas and artisans and petty traders and other lumpen elements in urban areas.

2.1. Partition and Muslims

Partition was not merely a division of properties, liabilities and assets or a political division of the country and the administrative apparatus. Above all, it was a violent separation of communities who had hitherto lived together as neighbours. There was no single belt of Muslim majority in British India. There were two areas of concentration, one in the west and the other in the east. There was no way these two parts could be joined. So it was decided that the new country, Pakistan, will comprise two territories, West and East Pakistan separated by long expanse of Indian Territory. Mostly it was the choice of Political elites as the religious elites of Muslims belonging to Doeband and Nadwat-ul-uloom rejected this unnatural partition. Even Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the undisputed leader of North-West Frontier Province known as frontier Gandhi, was staunchly opposed to this. But all these voices were simply ignored and the end product was partition. It is estimated that partition forced about 80 Lakh people to exchange borders and close to 1 million people were massacred. Even after large scale of migration of Muslims to the newly created Pakistan, the Muslim population in India accounted for 12% of the total population in 1951.

Many Hindus were embittered by the Partition and Muslims were blamed collectively for this. Although India has fought three wars with Pakistan and there has been no collective disloyalty to India by Muslims, nevertheless Muslims are seen generally as “anti-Indian” and “anti-national”, which in turn affected their own perceptions of themselves. It was only in the 1970s that Indian Muslims began to reassess their own position within India. A generation was growing up which had no personal experience of Partition and the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 demonstrated that a Muslim state in itself did not necessarily ensure equality. The Emergency of 1975-77 was also a watershed, as Indian Muslims, particularly in the north, suffered from forced sterilization campaigns. From this time Muslims began to shake off some of their previous passivity and demand rights. The issues which they are facing reflect the discrimination meted out to them. There are some institutional biases and structural stereotypes which have placed some at the core and others (Muslims) at the peripheral distances. The wave of hatred which gained momentum and some sort of justification that Muslims cannot be trusted has been permeated generation after generation.

2.2. Backwardness of the Muslims

Muslims have been educationally backward, economically poor, socially enslaved, and suffer from grave political disabilities, from which no other minority community suffers today. The community has been utilised either as a vote bank or victimised by certain sets of stereotypes at the hands of successive political regimes. It was hoped that after independence equal opportunities had been provided to all under the constitution, the Muslims in India will also take fullest advantage of that. But even now the percentage of Muslims going to educational, technical, medical and other professional institutions is much less than their population. Although their number has been increased from 12 % (1951) to 14.2% (2011), yet they are highly underrepresented in bureaucracy, parliament, security forces and other governmental institutions. From corporate angle also, there has been no conscious policy to facilitate the Muslim representation. They are highly represented as per their number among rickshaw pullers, drivers, scavengers etc. This disparity between communities is creating deep rooted cleavages and misunderstandings; some are being pampered by the government and others are being constantly marginalized.

2.3. Communal Parties and Organisations

Unlike Pakistan, India has no state official religion. Hence parties or organisations spreading communal virus in our body politic must not have been allowed to operate. But it is a tragedy that communal parties make their presence felt both overtly and covertly. Sometimes, this gives us an indication that our secularism is under a big threat. The Jana Sangh, R.S.S, Jamaat-e-Islami, VHP, Bajrang Dal, Akali Dal, Durga vahini etc., and a host of both political and non political actors have divided our country from within. These actors are the self appointed custodians and gate keepers of their respective religions with little or no knowledge of what the religion actually preaches. They have no sentiment of community development, rather keep the community under darkness by raising wrong questions, and in support of their wrong questions, they come up with wrong answers. They portray their personal interest as community interest. When these communal parties and organisations are allowed to operate with the sense of impunity, Hindu chauvinism and Muslim communalism continues breeding day by day. After the partition of country many among the Hindus forcefully argued that since the Muslims had got their homeland, India which was now left behind should be the land of Hindus.

Rooted in the 19th century this Hindu chauvinism of Arya Samaj and extremism of Tilak, Hedgewar, Savarkar, and Gowalkar is mostly represented by the political organisations like RSS, Hindu-Mahasabha, VHP and BJP as the political wing of RSS. The Jana Sangh which was created in 1951 is influenced by the ideology of this chauvinism and was not reconciled to the partition of India, hence committed the establishment of Akhand Bharat. The RSS always blames Muslims as anti-nationals and resented the concept of secular India. They demanded government to take steps to ban cow slaughter all over India, to introduce Hindu religious, ethical, spiritual teachings in educational institutions and to propagate the tenets of Hinduism through such mass media as the radio and press. With the liberation of Ram Janambhoomi in Ayodhya as its religio-political battle cry launched a fresh struggle, a Jagran (awakening) to arouse Hindu militancy through a four point programme, (a) bring Hindus under one bunch to fight for Hindu causes (b) ban proselytisation (c) promote Sanskrit as uniform language and (d) back political candidates who support Hindu interests.

2.4. *Appeasement Policy of the Congress*

A noted sociologist of India, Mr. Kancha Ilaiah argued 'if BJP is a white snake in green grass, then congress is green snake in green grass'. Despite Congress remaining in power both in centre and states, either on its own or in coalition for more than thirty years, Muslims have never been treated above vote banks. It is this appeasement policy of congress which has ruined Muslims in terms of education, health, representation, employment etc. Their talk of Muslim development has never been above lip service and no stern action has been taken to implement various minority commission reports (Sachar or mishra), nor the government took any initiative in the reforms of Muslim personal law. The 'en bloc' voting of Muslims to the congress for long has been tactfully exploited by the congress leadership to appease the Muslims in all possible ways.

2.5. *Electoral Compulsions and Political Opportunism*

Today our politics is purely ballot box oriented and elections have become an end in themselves. Selection of candidates for particular constituency is generally made after considering the relative strength of different communities residing in that constituency. Communal loyalties of voters are covertly and sometimes even overtly, appealed at the time of propaganda campaign. For example, throughout the election campaign a BJP-Shivsena combine in Maharashtra assembly elections (1989-1990), the recurring theme was Hindutva or anti-Muslim propaganda. And of course, the Ramjanambhoomi-Babri controversy was exploited to the hilt. It served as if there was an understanding between Congress and BJP on this core. Both had planned their election strategy cleverly. The BJP apparently carried out very aggressive propaganda on Ramjanambhoomi issue and took out Ramshila Pujan processions which invariably resulted in violence. The Congress administration deliberately led the violence spread. By doing this Congress wanted to play a double game. The Hindus would feel that the congress did not use its administration to suppress Hindus and Muslims would feel that the aggressive BJP is responsible for communal violence and only the congress could protect them. Thus, they would gain some Hindu votes as well as Muslim votes 'en bloc'. Furthermore, the Congress government in UP declared Urdu as second official language a few months prior to elections and riots in Badaun erupted. The government first gave in to Muslim fundamentalist Shah Bano case and later it equally blatantly gave it to Hindu fundamentalists. In Shah Bano case for wooing Muslim voters Judgement of Supreme Court was reversed by passing the 1986 Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce) Act. On the other hand, for wooing Hindu voters disputed site of Ayodhya was opened for Shiliniyas Pooja. During election campaign from Faizabad, (1989 Lok Sabha elections) Rajiv Gandhi promised Ramrajya which completely put off Muslims. The idiom which Mahatma Gandhi has used in a very positive sense, Rajiv Gandhi used most cynically to improve his chances for winning the elections. Both these acts were used for election propaganda. It was pure opportunism. No conviction was involved in either case. He was neither convinced of the superiority of personal law and situations of Shah Bano case, nor of the case of Vishva Hindu Parishad was that Lord Rama born at the site where Shiliniyas ceremony was performed.

2.6. *Communal Media, Literature and Text Books*

The circulation of such communal newspapers as Akali Patrika, Sobat, Organiser and Marmik is no lesser responsible for alienation and estrangement of Muslims from the mainstream discourse. They often pass on news that cause communal tensions. The text books on History have also helped in perpetuating the communal cracks. The interpretation of History by many Historians is one sided and anti-thetic to Muslims. The whole History of medieval India is presented in distorted form and fundamentalists of both the communities try to seek the answer of present day rivalry in the past which was not at all existent. Allauddin khilji, Mahmood Ghaznavi, Aurangzeb and other Muslim rulers have been consistently painted as anti-Hindu and the destroyers of the Hindu places of worship. So these history text books, literature and such communal media inject communal passion in the minds of youth and produce a generation with a distorted version of our composite heritage.

2.7. *Isolation and Separatism among Muslims*

The communal groups among the Muslims are also working in such way which has kept the sentiment of separatism and isolationism among Muslims alive. They don't represent the real Muslim opinion in this country and real grievances which need redressal viz., education, government jobs, business, modernisation etc. Rather they always keep the community in darkness by raising lollipop type of issues, like shameful treatment to Urdu language, protection of Muslim personal law, issues on vande mataram and also have kept community internally divided on sectarian basis.

3. Conclusion

Muslims in India are scholarly referred by various authors as middle India. So India can never aspire to be a confident nation if this middle India is not included in the general paradigm of development. This vision document is a future oriented scholarly attempt to diagnose the real causes of Muslim backwardness. It upholds development as a step forward in every aspect of life. Be it economy, intellect, education, health, representation, etc. It stresses that the discourse of development should also be articulated rather only confined to mere lip service. Muslims must be brought up at par economically with other communities so that their sense of security is enhanced. The law and order machinery should be depoliticized and preventive measures should be adopted to eradicate group tensions. Muslims representation in electronic and print media must be promoted for ending the media apartheid against them.

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