

Historical Perspective and Unreason in Politics

BY Jamal Khwaja

A prominent and important politician declared some time ago that the *Babari Masjid* was a 'symbol of slavery' and it ought to be removed or relocated from its present site just as the statues of Queen Victoria and other foreign dignitaries have been removed from prominent places in independent India. Another well known journalist recently suggested that just as the postwar German government apologized for Hitler's atrocities on the Jews the present generation of Indian Muslims owe an apology for the atrocities perpetrated by the fathers and uncles of the present generation of Indian Muslims, up to a man, had voted for the Muslim League, i.e. the creation of Pakistan, the present generation Muslims have no moral right to seek the protection of their rights under the Indian constitution. Another thesis is that India is the *Hindu Rashtra* and *Hindu Rashtra* is India. The propounders of the equation unceremoniously reject the clearly composite character of Indian culture as it has evolved over the centuries. They thus, turn the unquestionable centrality of the Hindu stand into a questionable absoluteness.

The people of India are, basically, tolerant and permissive in their religious approach, vitiated though it has been by a rigid caste orientation. Unfortunately, the focus of the political agenda today has shifted to the *Mandir* issue which is polarizing the Hindu and Muslim segments of our people, and the *Mandal* issue which is intensifying caste fissures, while issues concerned with nation building and the quality of life stand sidelined. The promoters of a hate campaign against the Muslims or against 'pseudo-secularists' are ignoring the long term effect of displacing liberal Indian nationalism by aggressive Hindu nationalism. This strategy assumes that promoting the welfare of the Hindus (comprising 85% of the Indian people) must, of necessity, promote national welfare. The reality is, however, much more complex. Any policy which is perceived by any sizeable section of our people as opposed to natural justice and human rights will, inevitably, prompt them to fight for their due rights under the Indian constitution. This, in turn, will generate internal friction and conflict. And, surely, forcible removal in the 20th century of any place of worship existing for the past 500 years is bound to be perceived by the affected persons (as well as by all reasonable persons irrespective of religion or nationality) as an attack upon fundamental human rights, irrespective of where the truth might lie concerning the *Janmbhumi* controversy.

Notwithstanding the occasional reassurances from some of the top BJP leaders that Muslims have nothing to fear from the Hindu side, once the *Ram* temple is constructed on the desired site, Muslims today, quite understandably, feel gravely threatened and insecure. A very substantial section of the Hindus, both politicians and ordinary citizens, are actively and sincerely opposing the threatened violation of fundamental human rights. The tragedy is that the BJP and allies diplomatically project this principled stand as sheer appeasement of the minorities and a ploy to secure the block Muslim vote, while the secular parties level the same charge against the politics of *Hindutva* in regard to the Hindu voters. Thus the entire nation today stands trapped, as it were, in the vicious circle of charges and counter-charges of political opportunism and

appeasement. This vicious circle can be broken only if we all try to understand the basic attitudes and assumptions which generate the politics of unreason and hate.

1. The first basic (unconscious) assumption that does, perhaps, the most harm is that the first and also subsequent attacks by Muslim invaders of India were a confrontation between Islam and Hinduism. The attacks by Muslims were, in reality, nothing different from the numerous earlier migrations, invasions and forays by those in search of greener pastures and greater glory than was possible in their immediate environment. The struggle for power and the rise and fall of different segments or wings of the larger human family are perennial features of the human story. At different periods of time different races or large ethnic groups have experienced a great and overpowering release of onrush of creative energy which has resulted in their territorial and cultural expansion. The actors have varied from period to period, but the rhythm has remained the same. The emergent group sweeps all obstacles in the period of its rise, contributes something or other to the sum total of human civilization and culture and then begins to decline. In the course of time some other wave of human creativity sweeps it aside in the ceaseless flow of the ocean of humanity. The true historian and the humanist rejoice at the creative advance of the human family, though they may justly shed an honest tear at the decay or fall of a kindred or admired individual or group. Jawaharlal Nehru's work, *Glimpses into World History*, performs this difficult and delicate task admirably well. But, in general, people tend to become selective in the range of their historical empathy. Thus, the German writer, von Pochhammer, displays commendable empathy for the Indo-Aryans when they invaded the Indus and Ganges valley in approx. 1500 BC and overpowered the local population. But his empathy strangely dries up in the case of the Arab and Turkish invaders who repeated the same exercise in India a few centuries later. The historical phenomenon in both cases was, however, the same.

2. Another false assumption is that Muslim rule in the medieval period extending to several centuries was foreign rule and that the *Sultans* kept India enslaved for centuries. The truth is that as and when the foreign Muslim invaders chose to settle down in India as their adopted home, rather than depart, laden with gold and women, for the home of their origin, hardly any difference remained between the *Sultans* and the *Kshatriya Rajas* of the Hindu period in their style of functioning and role in the then monarchical and extremely hierarchical Indian society. The monarch, be he Hindu or Muslim, was the legitimate and almost exclusive centre of power and decision making, and he brooked no rivals. The apparatus of the nobility, the religious scholars or priests performed advisory functions only and did not exercise any effective power. The idea that Muslim conquest had turned India into a land of Islam (*dar ul Islam*) under the jurisdiction of the *Khalifa* was a pure political fiction and a paper position. The cardinal regulative principle of the Muslim rulers was non-interference in the purely religious matters of Hindus and Muslims alike. The advent of the so called Muslim rule meant, in reality, merely a shift in the personal religious allegiance of the sovereigns without any corresponding structural change in society, apart from power relations among the upper Hindu classes. In short, Hindu and Muslim sovereigns alike fought over territory, made and broke alliances cutting across religious lines, caused loss of life and property, made prisoners of war, occasionally maltreated the vanquished foe and their women,

or desecrated places of worship. 'Sutee' and 'jauhar' were practiced as much before as after the advent of Muslims in medieval India. The right approach, therefore, is not to make sweeping charges of temple destruction or misdeeds against women, but to examine specific instances of the destruction of temples or shrines, in the context of the full facts, as far as they could reliably be ascertained after the lapse of several centuries. It must be kept in mind that the Hindu Pantheon and its centers have waxed and waned in importance during the passage of the centuries, and they have been subject to the ravages of time quite apart from deliberate destruction by any human agency. We must also determine the significance of the fact that Muslim rulers (including Aurangzeb himself) endowed several Hindu temples in different parts of the country.

3. Another false assumption is that the Hindu rulers or populace waged protracted bloody wars against the hated invaders in the name of religion or race. In fact, the fortunes of wars (that were fought with great personal valor on both sides) were rather quickly decided because of the superior military tactics of the Muslims. The Muslim rulers also achieved moral legitimacy in a surprisingly short time. This happened because of two main reasons. First, Hindu religious thought and ethos are conceptually permissive though rigid in regard to caste distinctions and social observances. The personal religious convictions of the Muslim rulers, thus, did not stand in the way of their gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the common Hindus, so long as the Sultans did not disturb the Hindu social system. Second, the then enlightened Hindu leaders soon came to appreciate that the Muslims, at that point of time, had become the political and cultural leaders at the world stage. The Hindu populace, specially the deprived and the depressed among them, gravitated to the simple ethical monotheism of Islam, its message of social equality and the promise of greater vertical mobility. It is significant that their descendants still constitute the overwhelming majority (approx. 90%) of the Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent. The view that fanatical *Sultans* or *mullahs* had spread Islam in India at the point of the sword was a myth that had gained currency years back in some misinformed Western quarters. But the propounders of this myth have themselves repudiated it in the light of objective history. Some Indian intellectual and educated circles are now misinterpreting the forward looking historical vision of the enlightened and perceptive Hindu leadership in medieval India as a betrayal of Hindu ideals and values. They attribute the liberal Hindu response to cowardice or internal disunity or both. This assumption is bound to produce a sense of guilt and inferiority in the Hindu psyche and to make Hindus hostile and defensively aggressive against the present generation of Muslims.

4. Another false assumption is that what was prescribed by a section of the *Ulema* in the medieval period must have actually been the case. Some *Ulema* and others, for example, had interpreted some Quranic texts to the effect that the Islamic ethos prohibited close and friendly relations between Muslims and the unbelievers. Eliot and Dowson, in their English version of contemporary Persian writings, have gone out of their way to point out such views. Unfortunately, some eminent Indian scholars, (including Jadunath Sarkar and Majumdar) have fallen into the trap of drawing factual conclusions from prescriptive writings of a section of the *Ulema*. The fact of the matter is that the *Sultans* and the Muslim nobles, with only a few exceptions, followed their own lights and patronized and befriended able and loyal persons, Hindu and Muslim alike.

The Sufi saints, also with a few known exceptions, preached and practiced universal love and brotherhood. The impact of Sufis on both Hindus and Muslims was far stronger than that of the *Ulema*.

5. The last assumption or misconception to which I must draw attention is that the overwhelming majority of the Indian Muslims had voted in the 1946 general elections for the creation of Pakistan. It is true that the victory of the Muslim League, in the name of Pakistan, was near complete. But this was so merely in terms of the number of Muslim seats won by the Muslim League. But approx. 35% of the Muslim votes polled had gone against the League. Moreover, the franchise then, both Hindu and Muslim was limited to the upper classes only, and the overwhelming majority of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent had no say in the fateful issue of partition. Why, then, should the Muslims of post-partition India be made permanent scapegoats for an agreement which (howsoever reluctantly) was agreed upon by all concerned?

The partition of India on religious lines was, indeed, a great tragedy since it greatly weakened the forces of liberal humanism not only in the subcontinent but also in the entire third world. The fantastically absurd two-nation theory which was put forward to justify the demand was nothing but sophistry and illusion. Unfortunately, now there seems to be a real danger that the theory might get a secret lodgment in the Hindu psyche. This would be a still greater tragedy. The commitment of many educated Hindus to strive for the solidarity and welfare of the *Hindu Rashtra* may be sincere and passionate, but its wisdom is superficial. It is hurriedly gathered from an uncritical historical interpretation of Indian history. It lacks the range and depth of the thinking of the great Indian leaders and shapers of the modern Indian Renaissance whose symbol is Ram Mohan Roy. The true beauty and glory of Hinduism have eluded the grasp of a section of Indian intellectuals and educated classes today in the heat and dust of electoral battles. The new enthusiasts among the retired top civilian and military officers will soon realize that the beauty and glory of Hinduism lie in the perennial wisdom of the immortal Hindu sages and classical savants, not in the questionable wisdom of the Hindu politicians of today.