

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #1

Solan,
August 15, 2002

My Dear Judge Sahab,

Do I need to say how much I cherish our mutual friendship, which sprang up in rather unexpected circumstances? Un-neighborly behavior from some quarters (from which it was least expected) had pushed us into litigation. When we stood alone and helpless your spontaneous kindness and sense of fair play moved you to help us, knowing well of the gap between our respective ideological and political orientations.

Such is my respect for your integrity and love of truth, as you see it, that I feel moved to share with you my sorrow at the recent events in Gujrat, starting from the Godhra incident. I shall avoid all polemics and an adversarial approach, but remain honest to myself and candid with you. A friendly dialogue bears maximum fruit when it flows from a bare minimum of shared basic values and of mutual agreement on recent and some important historical facts. Even such recent events as the burning of the train at Godhra railway station and the subsequent mass killings and loot in Gujrat have lent themselves to several versions or narratives. These differences pertain to facts as well as to values and attitudes. These differences, in turn, are deeply rooted in the way one looks at Indian history and the human situation in general. It will promote better mutual understanding of some recent issues if I share with you my basic worldview and value system and my accepted interpretation of Indian history.

If even highly responsible ministers, administrators and observers differ on the what, why and whither of Gujrat in 2002, how much more difficult, then, must it be to determine the real cause or causes of historical events long past, say, the partition of India in 1947, or of the great upheaval of 1857, or, going back still further, the causes of the defeat of the Indian confederacy in the third battle of Panipat in 1761. Difficult as it is to establish conclusively without any measure of controversy or disagreement the sheer factual course of events in their exact sequence, far more difficult, if not impossible, is the further task of correctly interpreting them or looking at them in the proper perspective. For instance, Muhammad Ghori won the battle of Tarain in 1192, and became the first Sultan of Delhi. But was this victory the victory of Islam over Hinduism? Was Shivaji's defiance of Aurangzeb the struggle of Hinduism against Muslim tyranny? No one answer can be proved true or false in the sense we can prove truth claims of natural science or mathematics. Yet, we have to take some stand or position on such issues. If we turn to remote or pre-historical events the issues become still more complicated, but we continue to hold beliefs or make judgments with an amazing certainty or emotional conditioning. For instance, were the ancient Aryans native to India or had migrated here from some other region? It is well known that a century ago, Tilak seriously contested the, then, Western consensus about the origin of the Aryan race in central Eurasia. The growing consensus of informed opinion in the West, now, is that North Africa is the original home of the entire human race. These issues lie in the fields of Anthropology and Evolutionary Biology. In such matters the considered consensus of experts should count more than the views of theologians, politicians or partisan intellectuals.

Let us return to historical times. It is significant that the 'data of history' are not given to the truth seeker as the 'data of nature' are given to the scientific investigator through sense perception or through experiments under controlled conditions of observation. The 'data of history', themselves, are, in part, constructs out of surviving remains of past things or events. Moreover, no two historians select exactly the same set of data out of the total range of data, actually or possibly available. Every historian selects his own unique 'effective' data for a systematic narrative and analysis of the past.

Once he fixes his own 'effective' data of history the historian fits them in his favored framework of ideas and values out of several alternatives available. No such framework as such, can, conclusively, be proved true or valid. Yet, one must have some 'basic frame of orientation' (as pointed out by Eric Fromm) in order to

understand or existentially respond to the human situation in its totality. Religions and philosophies perform this function. They 'hold' the effective data together and provide one's worldview or total perspective on the human situation as such. Thus, a historian having a 'Hindutva' frame of orientation would view Sultan Mahmud's destruction of the Somnath temple in the 10/11th century as an Islamic attack against Hindu India. A historian having a humanist-sociological orientation would view the same episode as a medieval Sultan's lust for booty. This admission, however, does not, necessarily, land us into the bog of the unredeemed relativity of all historical interpretation. Let me explain this point.

A reliable contemporary Persian record states that on his triumphant return to his capital Sultan Mahmud sent valuable gifts to a venerated divine living in Ghazna, Qazi Abul Hasan Baulami. The Qazi returned the royal gifts and severely chastised the Sultan on the ground that Islam did not permit the desecration of any place of worship. Obviously, the honest and bold response of the Qazi had no effect upon the Sultan or on the general course of events in the medieval period marked by religious intolerance or destruction of the places of worship of the 'out-group'. However, in the light of the above authentic story it becomes quite clear that the primary 'leitmotif' of the medieval Sultans was personal aggrandizement and expansion of power, not the promotion or forcible imposition of Islam on infidels. In this sense and to this extent the humanist or secular interpretation of history is more true or valid than the current 'Hindutva' approach that gives a rather blurred picture of the past. It is worth pointing out that the Talibanist also does the same by glorifying Mahmud's exploits as a Muslim hero or normative figure.

The above remarks apply equally to Nadir Shah's or Ahmad Shah Abdali's role in the 18th century. Their marauding armies killed and looted innocent Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike. This, to my mind, clearly shows the real nature of their motives - lust for booty rather than service of Islam. This also shows that the great Indian Muslim divine of the 18th century, Shah Waliullah of Delhi, was ill advised and grievously mistaken in inviting Abdali to save Islam in India by checking the further rise of Maratha power in the country.

Likewise, the Hindutva approach avers that the conflict between Shivaji and Aurangzeb was a confrontation between Hindu resurgence and the Islamic establishment. The liberal humanist approach looks upon this chapter of Indian history as a confrontation between a well established, but declining, imperial Delhi and a rising regional power in the Pune region. The destruction of selected Hindu temples during the medieval period, according to the humanist angle of historical interpretation, was, basically, an exercise to contain political rebellion or defiance rather than an attack on the Hindu faith. Is there any justification for preferring one line of interpretation to the other, or is each interpretation merely arbitrary, so that both are equally right or equally wrong? Well, I submit, valid reasons can be advanced in support of the humanist approach.

For instance, Shivaji had mixed troops or regiments, and respected religious sentiments of all communities or groups. So did Aurangzeb and the Mughal rulers in general. Shivaji did not spare Hindus when he twice attacked and despoiled the wealth of the prosperous citizens of Surat, the, then, principal seaport of India. Again, Aurangzeb endowed several Hindu and Jain temples in different parts of the country, though he did demolish some selected Hindu places of worship that had become centers or rallying points of political defiance. The above facts are well documented in reliable contemporary sources. Even the Mughal-Sikh relations during Aurangzeb's long reign were far more cordial than gradually came to be believed in later times, primarily due to Abdali's plundering raids and other political developments after the decline of Mughal power. Ranjit Singh, again, inaugurated an era of religious liberalism and tolerance in kingdom, but his successors failed him woefully. The Muslims of north India lost their self-confidence and élan and withdrew into a fundamentalist shell, under the impact of a steadily growing British domination throughout the land.

This is the right place to refer to the Ayodhya Mandir-Masjid dispute that has become a defining issue for the Indian family. Barely thirty years ago it was a non-issue. So it was for Tulsidas in the time of Akbar and for all the greatest builders and normative figures of the modern Indian value system and cultural renaissance inaugurated by Ram Mohan Roy. How come that the Shiv Sena, Visva Hindu Parisad, and Bajrang Dal etc.

hit upon the rather sensational discovery that Babar was an Islamic Ravana and arch villain of Indian history and his legacy of the Babari Masjid was a standing national humiliation, the removal of which was the primary demand of Indian patriotism?

The Ramjanmbhumi issue had first cropped up in the closing years of the Avadh kingdom under Wajid Ali Shah in the mid 19th century. Local Hindu and Muslim militias had engaged in armed fights over the right of possession or use of ancient sites or buildings and this had resulted in considerable bloodshed. Some Muslim records of the time in Urdu and Persian boast that the Muslim warriors dispatched thousands of Hindu infidels to hell and that God had sent angels to help Muslims against the attacking infidels. Such writings and records betray their utter partiality or lack of objectivity and accuracy of approach.

Whatever the exact nature and course of the dispute might have been, it remains clear that there was no general consensus that Ram was born on the very place where the Babari Masjid had been standing for the last several centuries. All that constituted the popular belief or faith was that the region of Ayodhya was the janmbhumi of Ram. There was a plethora of claims about the exact site as such. This disagreement is not at all surprising in the case of a remote supernatural event. The crux of the matter is this: the fabric of the charge that Babar was a Muslim Ravana (who desecrated the birth place of Ram) has been spun out of the deep pre-rational interpretation that the original incursion or advent on Indian soil of Arab, Turkish, or Pathan tribes was an Islamic attack on Hinduism.

Is this interpretation true or valid? I have already said that historical interpretations are organically related to still more basic existential interpretations of the total human situation and such interpretations do not admit of proof in the conclusive scientific or logical sense. It is incontrovertible that the Arab or Turkish tribes who invaded India were Muslim by religion. Therefore, if one insists upon emphasizing the religious identity of the invader, the invasion will always appear as an attack of Islam upon Hinduism. But if one surveys the human situation in general one will realize that dispersal of peoples and races on earth, and the struggle for power and wealth is universal and an integral part of the human story as such. Before Sultan Mahmud and Babar had turned their attention to India they had conquered or tried to conquer lands in central Asia that were inhabited by their own coreligionists. The Aryans and Hindus, in earlier times, had done the same in the vast stretches of the Indian sub-continent. So have all other races and peoples the world over, be they Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese or Europeans. Now this awareness can and usually does liberate the impartial and careful observer of the human situation from the habit of seeing every person or event under a religious label. The observer becomes open to the concrete quality of life as it flows in history and judges men and matters accordingly. This humanist interpretation of history not only appeals more to several well-informed and noble souls but is more useful for promoting universal peace and harmony.

When one adopts the humanist approach to life the conflicts between different peoples, races, regions and religions in the past do not divide humans into permanently hostile in-groups and out-groups. One starts looking at the conflicts of the past as stages in the slow growth of the human family on a global scale. The victory of an Alexander and the defeat of a Porus, the devastation of a Halaku or a Nadir Shah, the compassion of an Asoka, the statesmanship of an Akbar, the aberrations of a Hitler all become achievements or failures of the human family. The true historian, from this angle, does not identify himself or herself with any particular group or adopt a partisan attitude. The rise and fall, achievements and failures, virtues and vices of all peoples and all times become his own. With charity for all and malice towards none he passes judgment on the deed, rather than the doer. His standard remains consistent, but takes into account that human ideas and ideals are subject to the law of evolutionary growth. In short, his range of sympathy gradually becomes universal instead of remaining congealed at a particular parochial level determined by his birth or early conditioning.

Finally, the humanist approach to history and life in general should give due importance to every aspect of human experience. All these aspects or spaces interact and shape the movement of history. Economic historians

may not treat cultural historians as a B team, and vice versa. Man does not live by bread alone. But without bread he cannot live at all.

More next time. With kindest regards,

Yours very sincerely,
Jamal Khwaja