

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #5

My Dear Judge Sahab,

The Godhra violence was, indeed, a heinous criminal method of settling scores. Human nature being what it is, the brutality and magnitude of the violence was bound to provoke strong revulsion and feelings of revenge, not only against its actual perpetrators, but the entire Muslim community as such. Since rulers, be they elected representatives of the people or hereditary despots, share the same human instincts and feelings, it was also very understandable that the dastardly act infuriated the Gujrat government itself, traumatized, as it were, by the magnitude of the violence. Yet, every sane and balanced judge of human nature in politics would concur that rulers must govern, administrators must administer, and not be swept away by revenge, no matter how intense the raw human response. It is unpardonable for a ruler, administrator or judge to be swept by passion into punishing the innocent for a crime committed by somebody else. Now this is where the state government grievously failed to perform its 'rajdharm'.

This is, precisely, the charge that was leveled against Rajiv Gandhi's government immediately after Indira Gandhi's assassination. This similarity is, formally, correct but the analogy is, materially, misleading due to the following reason: Modi Sahab had long been in power as Chief Minister at the time when innocent persons were made scapegoats by infuriated mobs, while Rajiv Gandhi had just assumed the reins of government in the midst of a terrible national and personal crisis when innocent Sikhs were tortured and killed in sheer reprisal. Moreover, once the state machinery came into action the administrative work of rectifying the wrongs done started in right earnest, even though prosecutions could not be effected due to legal or procedural obstacles.

This is not the place to go into the details of the background or the mechanics of the Godhra incident. Was the burning of the railway coach a deliberate planned exercise by Muslim terrorists, or just a desperate retaliatory act against 'Ramsevak' for continually provoking and harassing local Muslim vendors? In any case it was a onetime heinous act of a relatively small group. What happened the next day and days was, however, a total breakdown of all law and order and massive loss of life and property of, palpably, innocent Indian citizens. Here again, more important than the details of the mass revenge is the pattern of revenge and the role of the state in the entire extended period of revenge.

Despite the blood and tears, and a satanic dehumanization in Gujrat it is my honest and firm belief that the Indian people, as a whole, have never accepted, and never will accept the gospel of hate and violence that some sections among both Hindus and Muslims preach and practice. The common Indian, no matter what his or her religion or politics, instinctively realizes that the fire of hatred, if it is allowed to spread, will engulf and destroy the entire nation. The Hindu majority has always been tolerant of religious plurality, though, unfortunately, they have remained trapped in the bog of caste. The Indian people as a whole (including Muslims in undivided India) had also accepted the fact that Indian society, is, essentially, multi-religious, and that mutual understanding is the basis of national welfare. The partition was a traumatic experience for

Muslims in residual India, whatever fleeting elation and joy it may have brought about for the votaries of political separatism and the surgically delivered nation of Pakistani Muslims.

As is well known, the political architect and founder of Pakistan, Jinnah, was himself a very modern and Westernized Muslim and he had no sympathy whatsoever with what is termed 'Islamic fundamentalism', in modern parlance. The other Muslim League leaders at the top, and the professional classes, in general, also had a liberal Islamic outlook in varying degrees, though they were highly confused on some basic religious and political concepts of modernity. This conceptual confusion prevails in Pakistan to date. One thing is, however, clear. While religious fundamentalism is an active and highly organized movement possessing considerable money power in Pakistan, the vast majority of the Pakistani Muslims do not care to join or even to follow 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the strict or strong sense advocated by late Mawdudi, the venerated founder of the well-entrenched Jamaat-e-Islami. This party is fiercely critical of President Musharraf's liberal Islamic approach that draws inspiration from Jinnah and Kamal Ataturk. The Indian Muslims are even less bothered to listen to the talk of Islamic fundamentalism. Their political commonsense has already convinced them that the mixed society of India in which their Hindu brothers form 85% of the population is ill suited for the politics of religious fundamentalism. The vast majority of Indian Muslims have cast their lot with the direction set by Gandhi, Nehru and Azad.

Many Indian Muslims do feel inwardly uneasy with the modern idea of de-linking politics with religion because they have been used to the idea that shariah covers every aspect of life. But they have reconciled themselves, in all good faith and sincerity, to make adjustments in the traditional or classical idea of Islam in view of the realities of the Indian situation. I submit that this approach is a half way house rather than a full or unqualified commitment to spiritual Humanism and secularism. But, then, inner attitudes require centuries to grow and evolve in the minds and hearts of men enjoying security and freedom. Gandhi and Nehru understood the human condition and showed patience and generosity to all. Perhaps, the votaries of Hindutva politics today are impatient and their insight into the human condition is blurred, and this makes it hard for them to arrive at a proper and balanced evaluation of the genuine Muslim response to the Indian situation.

The doubts and fears in Hindutva quarters arise, more because of Islamic terrorism outside India than because of the religious fundamentalism among Indian Muslims. Since Muslim terrorists in Pakistan, and elsewhere carry on the heinous crime of killing innocents in the name of Islam, non-Muslims are led to accept this claim at its face value. But the truth is entirely different. Religious fundamentalism, as such, springs from cultural isolation and a closed society that hampers free enquiry. Political terrorism, on the other hand, springs from existential anxiety and despair in the face of perceived injustice and the tyranny of the strong over the weak. Moreover, political terrorism cuts across different religions. Here an unexpected parallel exists between Hindu and Muslim perceptions.

Muslims in India may have demanded and loudly cheered the birth of Pakistan, but felt traumatized and suddenly left in the lurch by its creation. They are becoming increasingly insecure in India due to the rising Hindu fascist trends in Indian politics. The Hindus, on the

other hand, constitute eightyfive percent of the population and more or less totally control the politics and economics of the land. Yet, they do not feel inwardly secure and in full control of the situation in India. They are scared of the dangers latent in Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

The Muslim logic is that Hindus do not behave like a 'big brother', as they should, towards the rather backward small brother. The Hindu logic is that, far from being a younger and weak brother, the Indian Muslims themselves claim to be and, in fact, are members of a mighty and potentially rich Islamic power bloc stretching from North Africa to South East Asia located right on top of the Indian land mass. In other words, the Hindus do not perceive the Muslims as a weak younger brother but as a potentially larger and more powerful world community. A fear seems to lurk in the depths of the Hindu psyche that neither the Western world, nor the Islamic world wants the peace loving and patient Hindu community to live in peace under their own sky from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. And fear is the mother of hate and aggression. In all humility, I submit that this is the root cause of the rising incidents, in recent years, of physical violence against Indian Christians in several parts of the land.

Whatever Christian missionaries may or may not have done in the past to 'save' lost souls in India, the Christian church today has nothing to do with the theory or practice of forcing Christianity on the throats of infidels or of bribing them to join the flock of Christ. The plain truth is that the vast majority of Christian missionaries in India today are models of selfless service, piety and religious scholarship. Even the Pope has accepted plural paths to salvation. The adversarial approach to other religions has undergone an internal revolution in the contemporary Christian value system. On this point all the major religions of the world are fast converging. It is a pity that some Hindutva quarters still nurse or air old grievances against Muslims or Christians.

There is no dearth of compassionate and fair-minded Hindus or Muslims in India and Pakistan. They are, in fact, the silent majority. A vocal minority may be said to have hijacked the role of spokesman for Hinduism or Islam, as the case may be. However, it will not be long when the relative supremacy of good over evil in the human heart, armed with the advantages of modern technology, will empower the liberal humanist vanguard within each community to initiate interfaith dialogues. And this is bound to produce very fruitful results in terms of mutual understanding and appreciation of the spiritual wealth found in every religious tradition. This will pave the way for removing ignorance and prejudice in each in-group against out-groups. This will dilute human ethnocentricity that is the natural human condition. This is how modern intellectuals and savants in the West, say, Newton, Gibbon, Goethe, Carlyle, Browne et al came to respect and admire Sufism and Islamic liberalism, while others, say, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Max Mueller, Romain Rolland et al. came to respect and admire Vedanta and Yoga. The same was the case with Ram Mohan Roy in the late 18th century and M.N.Roy and Tarachand in the 20th. They all greatly appreciated the historical role of Islam in world history.

The human pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty knows no boundaries of religion or race. This approach is fast spreading in the Western world and America. I, therefore, submit that an inclusive and catholic approach to culture will always score over an exclusive and restrictive approach, be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian. In the final analysis, love for the human and the

humane will win over and attract more minds and hearts among good Hindus, Muslims and Christians and Sikhs than love for any limited or exclusivist category, no matter what. This is the destination of man in the modern age of cultural pluralism and global tolerance.

Some in the Hindutva quarters (perhaps, with genuine sincerity) say that the Muslims should earn the goodwill of the majority. But goodwill has to be reciprocal. Some voices proclaim that Indian Muslims must prove their loyalty to India. But is or can loyalty be the monopoly of any group? The test is common to all. Is not an unknown lowly paid clerk or school teacher doing an honest job with dedication and efficiency more loyal and a better patriot than those out to amass ill begotten wealth and to misuse power? Where does religion come into the picture? Indeed, those who have nothing else to convince or impress others are tempted to put labels on their ontological shallowness or poverty. There is hardly any need to mention or parade the gods we really love and surrender to, be they Hindu or Muslim. Moreover, the simple goodness of heart and the beauty of the spirit cut across all religious divides. This should suffice to put at rest all mutual fears or doubts in the hearts and minds of all true Hindus and Muslims who really care for patriotism rather than power over others.

The letter is getting too long. I shall develop some relevant additional points in my next letter. Meanwhile accept my profound regards and best wishes.

Sincerely yours,
JAMAL KHWAJA