

The Vision of an Unknown Indian Muslim

Excerpts

There are no printed or written records in my possession dealing with my ancestors. Whatever follows is, of necessity, confined to my parents, grandparents, paternal and maternal, and to my maternal great grandfather, Molvi Sami Ullah (d.1908). I, however, understand that my ancestors on the father's side are the descendants of Khwaja Obaidullah Ahrar, the renowned saint from Tashkent in the 16th century, and, reportedly, the spiritual mentor of Babar. Our first ancestor who lies buried in the family graveyard in Aligarh city is Khwaja Abdul Qadir. His ancestors had earlier lived in village Sasni, about twelve km from Aligarh city.

Firmly adhering to the fundamentals of Quranic Islam, father had long outgrown the orthodox stress upon Hadis literature, and popular beliefs in the supernatural powers of saints and mystics. A sort of Islamic rationalist and modernist, like his friend and associate, Maulana Azad, he affirmed the essential unity of all religions and gave great importance to inter-religious understanding and harmony. A confirmed and ardent Muslim as he was, he repudiated the mixing of religion with politics, even though he firmly stood for the ethical approach to politics as championed by Gandhiji who remained his mentor for life. This was the climate of thought and feeling in which I grew up in my childhood and youth.

Father held that the Quran was sufficient as a permanent source of guidance to humanity and that the traditional stress on the literature of Hadis and Islamic jurisprudence was not called for. He doubted the authenticity of several traditionally accepted reports of the Prophet's sayings or actions but he had his own repertoire of the same. He loved to relate them and they genuinely inspired him. He frequently reiterated in conversation with family and friends and also in public pronouncements that he had found Gandhi, among the moderns, to be nearest in purity of character to Prophet Muhammad. Father also taught his children to revere the Bhagwad Gita as a great scripture.

The issues which consistently gripped my mind were proofs for God's existence, the nature of mystical experience, the justification of pain and suffering in a universe created by an all powerful and loving Creator, Darwin's theory of evolution, incompatibility between the freedom of the will and predestination, the philosophical problem of perception, the modern Western rationalistic criticism of traditional Islamic social ethics and the idea of the perfection and infallibility of the Holy Prophet. I am afraid my teachers in the Philosophy Department could not help me much in attaining clarity and intellectual satisfaction.

Later I heard Jinnah speak several times at the AMU. I was struck by his magnetic personality, and even more so, by his magnetic voice that compelled attention and respect. His extraordinary voice still rings in my ears though I never came under its spell, even in the hey-day of the two-nation theory that I have always held as the height of absurdity and folly. Here I must recount an argument to support partition, reportedly, advanced by Jinnah. The argument was doing the rounds at Aligarh and several Muslim circles elsewhere during my student days at Aligarh.

The Quaid's reported argument was based on the analogy of a ship caught in a violent storm when the lives of only some but not all passengers could possibly be saved with the help of the available lifeboats. The conclusion was that it is better that some lives be saved rather than all be lost. Those who could be saved were the Muslims belonging to the Muslim majority provinces or states, and the Muslims in the rest of the country (amounting to almost 45% of the total Muslim population) should, therefore, willingly sacrifice themselves for the good of the majority of their co-religionists. The analogy and the argument were both fallacious, but most unfortunately, the urban Muslims even in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and elsewhere were politically seduced by religious pedagogy.

During this crucial period I often heard from father that the idea of Pakistan conceived as the largest sovereign Muslim state in the world, would, automatically, give birth to the idea of India as a Hindu state. My father used to say that whatever Indian Muslims may say about Jinnah being their greatest benefactor, as the prospective founder of the largest Muslim state in the world, the establishment of Pakistan will also make him the greatest benefactor of narrow Hindu communalism. My father used to warn Muslims both privately and publicly that Muslims in the Hindu majority provinces would have to pay a heavy price, in 'installments' for supporting partition. All the prominent Muslim leaders in the Congress and allied parties were unanimous on this score. But partition came all the same.

As stated already, my prime inner perplexity was how to reconcile the vast extent of human pain and suffering (*prima facie* quite sporadic and unmerited) with my traditional faith that an almighty and loving God was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Suffering as a punishment for evil deeds was quite understandable as a natural or logical recompense as well as a means of education or reform of the evildoer. But this could not justify the suffering of children and also of morally good or virtuous persons in the case of gruesome accidents, diseases, natural calamities, crimes, etc. The difficulty could be removed if we were to qualify our initial belief in the innocence or goodness of the children or the adults concerned. But this appeared stretching the argument too far just in order to support or defend one's faith, and this procedure had little appeal for me, once I had started on the path of reasoned free enquiry. It was in this frame of mind that I had arrived at Cambridge. The problem continued to haunt me, but I persisted in patient reflection and analysis, helped by my Cambridge teachers and the wealth of books recommended by them.

The next meeting remains virginally fresh in my memory. A great world famous thinker had carefully gone through and made written comments on a student's essay running into fifteen or twenty hand written notebook pages. The subject was 'The Freedom of the Will'. I had done my best and I believed that my language was very clear and precise. However, Broad's powerful and sharp mind made me realize the utter folly of my belief. What I had supposed to be transparently clear now began to appear to me as capable of several possible interpretations that Broad proceeded to spell out, one by one, in his even, measured but rather halting manner. This was Broad's typical philosophical behavior. When listening to my talk or reading some word or expression I used he quietly interrupted me and with disarming innocence asked me to explain the exact sense I had in mind, and I was hard pressed to do so. Later on I learnt that Broad never rejected or dismissed even the most absurd view or theory without first coolly and respectfully analyzing all its implications.

In other words I was just blissfully unaware of the spectrum of meanings hidden in ordinary words or philosophical theories. I, therefore, decided to focus all my studies on Broad's method of rigorous analysis of philosophical term and theories far more exactly than I had ever done before). Broad's famous pupil, John Wisdom, had done precisely the same in his early phase (before Wittgenstein entered his life) in his early work, Problems of Mind and Matter.

Babu Bhagwan Das, the eminent sage and savant of Benares, one of the earliest recipients of Bharat Ratna knew our family well. It occurred to me that I should seek his blessings at my entry into politics. I had already read and admired parts of his voluminous book, The Essential Unity of All Religions, and thought I must seek the blessings of an outstanding scholar and patriot in addition to Jawaharlalji. I was gratified and delighted when he said he was recommending my case to Sri Govind Vallabh Pant. I knew that Pantji had become rather estranged from my father due to some differences over UP politics. And Pantji did remain cool towards the idea of my elevation to the Lok Sabha at such an early age. Since, however, Nehru had already included my name in the 'new blood category' my name had a smooth sailing in the long and complex process of the final selection of Congress party candidates for the state and central legislatures. I felt no resentment at the honest opposition to my name in several quarters since I was well aware of my political inexperience.

Akbarbhai Chavda Sahab was a Congress member of the Lok Sabha from Gujrat. A Muslim by religion, he dressed exactly like Gandhiji, his political mentor and spiritual guide. Akbarbhai lived in the servant's quarters of the houses meant for Members of Parliament. He thought the servants' quarters were decent enough for the simple needs of a Gandhian social worker like him.

Akbar Sahab also told me that it was Gandhi who had encouraged him to take Islam more seriously than he, on his own, was inclined, and to read the Quran in the original. On Akbarbhai's telling Gandhiji that he was rather attracted to the higher version of Hinduism followed by Gandhiji himself, his mentor pointed out that there was no need for anybody, whatever his or her religion, to convert to some other religion. All that was required was the willingness to give up whatever violated one's depth conscience and to accept whatever accorded with it after an honest and 'prayerful' submission to the God within every soul.

As I matured and reflected on the history of the human family I grew increasingly conscious of the recurring pattern of historical change. Cultural cycles are no less a fact than the impact of material or technological factors. The theme of the philosophy of history became my focus of intellectual interest, next only to Meta-philosophy. Classical metaphysical concerns almost withered away in my intellectual pursuits. It was in this period that I wrote a long paper titled The Wisdom of History. It was published in the journal, Man and Development in the issue of June 1983. Writing this paper helped me clarify the notions of historical causation, explanation and evidence. I also put forward my own independent views relating to purpose in history.

Psychoanalysis and personality Psychology had been my area of special interest even earlier than philosophy of history. I had admired the writings of Karen Horney and Erich Fromm from my Cambridge days. I found Fromm's Fear of Freedom and Horney's Neurosis and Human Growth especially illuminating. Much later I began to appreciate the existentialist approaches of Albert Camus and Simone Dubois. I had no difficulty with their atheism precisely because they had no quarrel with the theism of others. The agreement to differ was the grand part of the existentialist passion for freedom and authenticity. Moreover, the existentialist approach to religion was quite free from the pretensions of the so-called rationalistic approach to religion.

The moment I reached the rooftop and the full Kaaba complex became visible my spirits seemed to be touched by some inner current of overflowing energy and peace at the same time. I just let myself go and started to praise the Lord and surrender myself to Him to be molded as He wished. I recited the Sura Fatiha, short Quranic suras and verses and some of the 'beautiful names' of Allah that I knew by heart. I effortlessly recalled such Arabic religious expressions and symbols that had a special appeal for me and my entire being was suffused with deep inner joy, peace and a sense of surrender to a mysterious Being or some Mystery beyond all comprehension. This 'peak condition' lasted for half an hour or so though there were 'ups and downs' or 'highs and lows' in the level and intensity of this remarkable experience. My eyes were moist with tears, which sometimes rolled down my cheeks.

The vast Kaaba complex was aglow with special electric light coming from very highly placed multiple high wattage lamps, which turned night into day without creating any glare for the eye. This special light enveloped the oval courtyard down below as well as the roof level and the high minarets creating an ambience of sheer beauty. Looking below one could see a never ending circular movement of tens of thousands of white robed pilgrims circumambulating the Kaaba as if a billion human moths were ardently but orderly moving in an endless attempt to catch a glimpse of some intensely loved but elusive and mysterious sight. The total effect upon me of the illuminated minarets and arches above and the glowing courtyard of the Kaaba below, every inch of ground space filled with tens of thousands of believers moving in concentric circles evoked in my mind the image of living human electrons revolving round the Divine Nucleus of total existence. The core spirit of the expressions I now use was actually compresent in my 'peak experience', though trying to describe or capture it conceptually, as I have tried to do above, has been hard labor for me. In other words, my total experience was a complex of aesthetic delight, spiritual insight and total inner satisfaction and peace.

The Hajj experience has affected me profoundly at the level of human relationships and inner attitudes, but my basic outlook or philosophy of life, and my value system remain what they were prior to Hajj. I am still unable to equate myth or legend with history. I happily identify myself as a Muslim and I feel hurt if somebody dubs me an atheist, Communist, heretic, hypocrite and so on. However, my hurt does not partake of bitterness or hostility. I enjoy being a Muslim, but I have no ambition or desire to save the souls of non-Muslims by working towards their formal conversion to Islam.

Medieval Indian society was a fresh incarnation of some vital and deeply embedded features of ancient India. The prince waged wars of conquest and wielded power, the nobles and warriors fought for their prince and shared in his wealth and glory, the creative elite enriched culture and were venerated by both prince and the common man, the traders ran the economy and amassed wealth, the artisans engaged in manufacture of simple goods and the farmers in agriculture, and the rest supported the entire structure with their sweat and tears. Each group comprised both Hindus and Muslims. Each group honestly believed (in different ways) that a Supreme Power controlled history according to a plan not fully transparent to man. Whatever happened was just and served some higher purpose. This was the inner world of medieval India. By the time the medieval era came to a close a synthesis of Bhakti and Sufi outlooks and a composite folk culture had already evolved and was reflected in the modern regional languages, architecture, painting, music, dress, entertainments, amusements, proverbs, folk-lore and folk religions of India.

What follows in this chapter is meant to give meaningful glimpses into the political, social, economic and cultural features of the undivided Indian family from medieval times right

till the partition of 1947. A proper insight into our past is indispensable for understanding our present and rationally planning our future.

As prudent statesmen the Muslim Sultans and emperors did not mix religion with politics. They adopted a policy of non-discrimination between their subjects the overwhelming majority of whom were Hindus. A section of the Ulema were not happy at this state of affairs. They held that in an Islamic state the Sultan was bound by the law of the shariah, which according to them, prescribed harsh treatment against non-believers. The friendly relations, which obtained between the Muslims and non-Muslims and the power and position enjoyed by Hindu nobles and top administrators irked the narrow-minded section of the Ulema. The expression of these views in the writings of some contemporary divines has misled some scholars into thinking that this was the general view and the actual practice. But this was far from being the case.

Muslim divines such as Qazi Mughisuddin of Delhi (during the time of Alauddin Khilji), Mir Hamdani of pre-Mughal Kashmir, Abdul Qadir Badauni (during the reign of Akbar), Shaikh Ahmad Sarhandi (during the reign of Jehangir) all proclaimed in their writings that the shariah precluded non-Muslims in an Islamic state from enjoying equal rights with the Muslim citizens. However, Muslim rulers just ignored this stand and opted for a 'functional' secular approach in state matters. Hence, quotations from Muslim religious writings do not tell the actual story, but only reveal the mindset of the Ulema. It must also be remembered that the Ulema themselves held different views.

The Hindu segment of the population, generally speaking, accorded full legitimacy to the Muslim ruler and gave him due loyalty. According to the Dharmashastras, every ruler was duty bound to enlarge his dominion and to strive to become the world ruler (chakravarti). Territorial expansion was the highest duty of the king, provided he ruled justly according to the shastras. The raja fought, but the 'praja' pursued the prescribed ends of life (purusharthas) without being much bothered about the identity of the raja. His legitimacy depended, more than any other factor of race or religion, upon victory in battle. Battles did not escalate into extended wars involving the participation of the populace.

Victory or defeat in battle meant only a change of rulers, within the system prescribed by the Dharmashastras, not any enslavement of the people. The erstwhile subjects of the defeated ruler did not feel called upon by duty to oppose or overthrow their new ruler. This martial and socio-political ethic was also extended, later on, to the Muslim kings and warriors.

The division of the Indian family must have been an inner torture for all Indian nationalists, but there were some silver linings of subjective satisfaction that their long struggle, appreciated by their own people, had borne some fruit. Gandhi became (very rightly) the father of independent India, Nehru its Prime Minister, Sardar the architect

of its consolidation, Rajendra Babu the President of the Union, Azad the conscience keeper of the Party, Rajagopalachari, the wise old pilot of the 'Rath' of modern India, and so on. But Badshah Khan, the brave tragic hero, became a villain and traitor to his own countrymen and was put into prison in his own land by those he had liberated from foreign yoke. A tragedy of this sheer poignant intensity is, perhaps, without parallel in world history.

Little did the architects of a sovereign homeland for Indian Muslims realize that slightly less than half of the total Muslim population of India would be excluded from the proposed 'homeland'. In other words, that almost half the Indian Muslims, even after the creation of the homeland, would still remain at 'the mercy of the Hindus' in independent India. Little did the ardent champions of Pakistan in UP, Bihar and other areas of Hindu dominance realize that the logic of Pakistan, as a Muslim homeland, would precipitate the parallel idea that India was or ought to be a Hindu homeland. Little did the ardent dreamers of Pakistan belonging to and living in India realize that those who did not go or could not go would have to live under the shadow of a continuing suspicion of divided loyalties. Little did the young hearts and minds of the dreamers understand the logic of politics and of human passions. The argument they gave was twofold. One, that saving one half of the population was better than the destruction of all; second, that the presence of minorities on both sides would act as a check upon the tyranny of the majority. I recall my revered father's observation that this argument was absurd and that the Muslims in India would have to pay a heavy price, in installments, for their folly. He just could not digest the irony of the fact that Muslims living in UP, Bihar etc. were clamoring for a Muslim homeland (which, by definition, would not include their actual homeland), while the Muslims living in the actually Muslim majority areas of Punjab, Bengal, Sind etc. (that were going to comprise Pakistan) were not at all enamored of the idea. The Muslims of the Muslim majority provinces joined Jinnah's bandwagon rather late, only when they realized that partition was just round the corner.⁶

It was as if the Muslims of UP, Bihar and other Muslim minority provinces in India behaved as a suicide squad paving the way for a sovereign state, which, by definition, would not include their own hearths and homes. A tiny fraction of such Muslims might well have played with the idea of immigrating to the 'golden land' after its birth. But the vast majority of the Indian Muslims had never given any thought to the political and sociological ramifications of their irrational and confused dreams that they quite innocently equated with being good Muslims or with fidelity to Islam.

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, in the long run the relative dominance of good over evil in the human heart will make the fair-minded liberal vanguard in each community, score over the forces of negativity

and stagnation. This will pave the way for removing ignorance and prejudice. This has happened several times in history though new tensions and conflicts arise with the passage of time. But this is the limitation of humankind. The human pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty knows no boundaries of religion or race. I have no doubts that an inclusive approach to religious and cultural diversity will gradually score over an exclusive approach, be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian. This is the destination of man in the modern age. However, temporary ups and downs, setbacks and spurts in the movement of history can never be ruled out.