

Need for a Power Sharing Pact

Hindu Muslim Relations in Post Independence India

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The Hindu-Muslim conflict is not a religious or theological conflict between two contrary religions, as is often assumed but a conflict between two differing and opposing versions of nationalism.

However, in the late nineteenth century, the educated elite among the Hindus created a new secular deity — Bharat Mata—as an all-India unifier of Hindus. Unlike goddesses such as Kali, Bharat Mata is herself a benign and a nurturing mother. She is not a fear-evoking deity nor does she turn vindictive when annoyed and is, therefore, never presented in the Kali-Chandi *roop*. But some of her worshipping sons do not hesitate to inflict punishment on those presumed to be lacking in devotion to her. Loyalty to her requires that her devotees put her worship above that of all other deities and gods. This is where the minorities, especially the Muslims, come into deep conflict with the Hindu majority. For the Muslims it is sacrilegious to worship any other deity except their one God. Their refusal to sing *Vande Mataram*, their resistance to accepting the Hindu version of nationalism and refusal to define their relationship to India as loyal sons of Bharat Mata are proving to be powerful ammunition in the hands of the Sangh Parivar.

To quote Balraj Puri: ‘For the Hindus, the difference between Hinduism and Indian nationalism, Indian history and Hindu mythology, national and mythical heroes is altogether blurred. In fact, Indian

mythology became the basis for Indian nationalism. Hinduism in fact, is a religionised version of nationalism because the Hindu mind turned revivalist in response to the Western onslaught.’¹ For instance, Swami Dayanand, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and Tilak turned towards the *Vedas*, the *Gita*, and the *Ramayana* to seek intellectual sustenance for their nationalism. They all attempted in

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various ways to go back to the ‘roots’ of our civilization. However, these ‘roots’ were discovered for the Hindus by British administrators and Orientalist scholars.

The Hindus were never governed by *Shastric* or *Vedic* tenets in their day to day living. It was the British who revived these ‘scriptures’ for the Hindus and convinced them that these ancient texts defined their civilization and provided a framework of do’s and don’ts. Modern Hindus can’t distinguish between the secular and the religious because there is no well

defined religious boundary or scriptural authority to demarcate the two realms. By contrast, the Muslims can more easily draw a line between the two realms even while they are more prone to theocratic politics. Jinnah seldom quoted the *Quran* to press his claims for Muslim nationalism but Gandhi did imagine that there would be adequate safeguards for Muslims in his *Ramrajya* if they could have recitations from the *Quran* and *Gita* in the same prayer meeting.

The choice of Hindu ‘national’ heroes shows this confusion clearly. For instance, Shivaji and Maharana Pratap are accepted in their respective regions as fighters for local interests against central domination. At the national level, the same figures have been transformed into symbols of Hindu resistance to Islamic kings as well as fighters against ‘foreign domination’ and hence projected as national heroes. (*Ibid.*) Ram, who is a

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¹(Balraj Puri, *Anatomy of Communalism, Religion and Society* Vol. XXX, No. 4, December 1984, p.12.)

mythological figure, has been formally adopted by the Sangh Parivar as a national hero.

The success of the Sangh Parivar on the Ram Mandir issue lies in precisely this fusion. It is not presented as a fight between two religious communities over a religious monument but as a fight between nationalist and anti-national forces. A foreign invader, Babar, is alleged to have destroyed the Ram Mandir, believed to be the birthplace of Ram, who they project as a national hero, not a Hindu religious figure. In this scenario, Babri Masjid becomes a symbol of national humiliation at the hands of a foreigner. Thus, all those Muslims who sought to defend the monument came to be projected as anti-national.

The Sangh Parivar's demand that in order to prove their patriotism, Muslim communities should accept the arbitrarily chosen figures of Hindu mythology as not only common national heroes but put national loyalty above religious commitment, makes for a deadly stalemate. For Muslims this is theoretically not possible, even though in actual politics various ethnic identities do come to play a more overwhelming role than their religious identity. For the Muslims, the *Quran* is a symbol of their distinct identity within India; it also links them to a pan-national identity. Most Hindus have no problem in respecting the *Quran* as a religious text. But they cannot stomach the idea that for the Muslims it is more sacred than the Indian flag or Bharat Mata herself. They resent the way it unites Muslims across national borders, and especially how it ties Indian Muslims with those of Pakistan.

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Constitution as their most sacred symbols, Bharat Mata as their most sacred deity, and *Vande Mataram* or the national anthem as their most sacred hymns. The Muslim insistence on having separate personal laws thus becomes a 'proof' of their disloyalty to the nation-state because many Hindus see them as going against the Constitution and creating their own separate universe. This also explains why a Congress Muslim leader, Salman Khursheed, could easily become a celebrated hero for the Sangh Parivar simply because he defended India's standpoint with ability and conviction in the United Nations when Pakistan challenged India's right to Kashmir and pressed for a plebiscite. In their eyes, by that one act he proved himself a loyal son of Bharat Mata, no matter what their other political differences are with him.

Loyalty Tests and Traps

The issues that are picked up by the *Hindutvavadis* are all proxies set out as traps to test the 'nationalist' credentials of the Muslims. The Sangh Parivar's insistence on building a Ram Mandir at the site of the demolished Masjid, their insistence on imposing a common civil code on the Muslims or wanting to hoist the national flag at a disputed Idgah Maidan in Hubli are all symbolic of the majority community's desire to subject

Muslims to a loyalty test to prove that they are not 'anti-national'.

It is the same with the recurring irritant in Hindu-Muslim relations over occasional celebration by some Muslims if Pakistan wins a test match against India. Many of us have argued in defence of Muslims pointing to how Indians in Britain often behave likewise and rejoice when India wins a match against England, even though they may be British citizens. But it is not convincing to most Hindus beyond a point because it confirms their fears about Muslims being pro-Pakistan and, therefore, by definition anti-Indian. As trivial and phony these issues seem to be, they have become major irritants in Hindu-Muslim relations even while they take attention away from some more genuine irritants and grievances of the two communities.

Dramatic Swings in Mood

The Kashmiri Muslim demand for secession in recent years further deepened this anxiety and fear that Muslims are inherently disloyal to India and will not hesitate to break it up further, pushing Hindus out of territories in which they are a majority. One often hears statements such as, 'If Kashmiri Muslims want to join Pakistan and drive out Hindus we will not let a single Muslim stay in India.' However, the much discredited Farooq Abdullah overnight became a national hero when, after leading his party to victory in the last elections to the Kashmir assembly, he declared that J&K would stay an integral part of India and that he would take on and marginalize all those leaders who were playing pro-Pakistani politics. However, within no time he became a hated man when he failed to give a sense of belonging to Kashmiri Hindus who were driven out of their own home state following targeted attacks by Islamic *jehadis*. Similarly, Mufti

Mohammad Syed was seen as a threat to Indian nation when as Home Minister in the V.P. Singh government, he allowed four arrested terrorists to be released in return for the release of his abducted daughter. However the same man quickly won the confidence and respect of the educated Hindus and the entire spectrum of political leadership of India, including *Hindutvavadis* after his assuming the Chief Minister's office in October, 2002 because he made genuine and concrete gestures to restore people's faith in Indian democracy and is effectively combating the secessionist movement in Kashmir.

A moving example of a dramatic swing in Hindu-Muslim relations was narrated to me by several people in Meerut (a city with a long history of communal rift) after the Kargil war which led to a new high in anti-Pak feelings which easily translate into anti-Muslim sentiments in India. The first few dead bodies of war heroes that came to Meerut were those of Hindu soldiers. With a view to whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria, some leaders of the Sangh Parivar decided to take those dead bodies in a procession through the city. When they reached the Muslim majority areas, they began raising provocative slogans like: "Musalman, Musalman, Pakistan ya Kabristan". (Muslims belong either to Pakistan or graveyard.) They expected the Muslim youth to react with anger, shout counter slogans or throw stones at the procession.

However, they were completely stumped to see that as their procession passed through the Muslim neighbourhoods, people in thousands standing in the balconies and verandahs of their homes and shops showering flower petals on the dead bodies of Kargil war heroes. To top it all, they were greeted with slogans like: "Hindustan Zindabad, Hindu-

Muslim Ekta Zindabad, Pakistan Murdabad." This totally disarmed even the diehard among *Hindutvavadis*. They not only joined the Muslims in shouting slogans of Hindu-Muslim unity, but also when the bodies of Muslim soldiers killed in the Kargil war began coming to Meerut, members of the Sangh Parivar are reported to have assumed an active role in the processions taken out to honour Muslim war heroes of Kargil. I was told by members of both communities that the astute handling

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of the situation by experienced Muslim leaders in Meerut led to an unprecedented show of warmth and solidarity between the Hindus and Muslims in the otherwise communally charged city.

Oneness vs Separateness

In most parts of the world, majority-minority relations are soured by the majority insisting on the 'otherness' of the minority and their own 'superiority'. In India, the situation is the reverse. Here the problem is created by the insistence of the Hindu intellectuals that the Muslims are not really different from Hindus, that the term Hindu includes all the people of Hindustan and is not

a religious marker. They bolster this argument by pointing out that an overwhelming majority of Muslims are converts from various Hindu sects and that the term Hindu was used to denote people living in the land of the Sindhu river.

Muslims fear this assimilative tendency of Hinduism perhaps more than its aggressive attacks. The thrust of twentieth century Muslim politics has been to stress the separate identity of the Muslim community and differences between Islamic and Hindu civilization and culture. Their political demands are not simply for equal rights on the basis of common citizenship. An essential component is the recognition of their separate identity and concessions or special rights based on that separateness.

Muslim politics moved through distinct phases depending on the emphasis the leadership placed on both separateness and commonality. It started with Sir Syed Ahmed describing Hindus and Muslims as the 'two eyes of Bharat Mata'. From there it moved on to a recognition of certain power imbalances between the two but within the framework of a sibling relationship—the two being compared to the elder and younger brother. It required the genius of Iqbal and Jinnah to convince themselves and their followers that "the two eyes of Bharat Mata" were actually two distinct, separate and irreconcilable nationalities and, therefore, requiring a partition of the country so that each could claim a separate territory as homeland.

Iqbal, the leading brain behind the idea of Pakistan, had in his early years sung many a beautiful song to the composite culture of Hindustan. His famous poem, 'Sare jahan se acchha Hindustan hamara / hum bulbulein hain iski, yeh gulsitan hamara,' evokes the sentimental image of both Hindus and Muslims singing joyously

together as bulbuls and belonging to the same *gulistan* (garden). However, he outgrew and rejected Indian nationalism after he returned from Europe in 1908 and became obsessed with safeguarding and strengthening Muslim solidarity because he felt they were a 'distinct' cultural community. His demand for Pakistan was based on the headcounting majoritarian principle that he imbibed from Europe. He advised Jinnah to 'ignore Muslims of minority provinces and concentrate on the north west' where Muslims were in a majority.²

Jinnah's 'Secular' Agenda

Jinnah developed the idea of Pakistan in such a muddle-headed political direction because he was faced with a practical limitation. In the Muslim majority provinces of the north-west, he found hardly any support for the idea of Pakistan because his phobias about Hindu domination did not evoke much response since Muslims felt they could wield power and hold their own through the democratic process. In the Muslim majority areas it was the Hindus who lived under the cultural hegemony of the Muslims. However, in the Muslim minority provinces, notably among the educated Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, Jinnah found a responsive chord to his frenzied campaign that in Independent India Muslims would end up having to live under Hindu domination.

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²(Letters to Quaid-e-Azam Mohd Ali Jinnah, Ruh-i-Makatib Iqbal, Mohd Abdullah Qureshi, Iqbal Academy, Lahore p. 638. Quoted in Balraj Puri, "Azad and Iqbal: A Comparative Study", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXI, No.10, 9 March, 1996, p. 592.)

³See M.A. Karandikar, *Islam in Tradition to Modernity*, Orient Longman, 1968.

for the minority within the framework of democracy. If the one person-one vote principle was applied, the Hindus would be, at the all-India level, at a permanent advantage on account of being the majority community. Therefore, he came up with the bizarre idea of Pakistan as a homeland for all Muslims. His success in mobilizing Muslim masses at a critical point of time in favour of the demand for Partition was not a triumph of religious appeal over secular politics, as is often believed, but because he could convince them that he alone could safeguard their economic, political and cultural interests and protect the Muslim community from the assimilative tendencies and domination of both the Congress Party as well as Hindu culture.

Emphasis on Separateness

The emphasis on separateness, and on irreconcilable differences kept growing as the Hindu leadership responded with emphasis on the essential oneness of the two. For instance, the more Gandhi harped on his Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* theme, the more he used the Ram-Rahim approach of the Bhakti-Sufi tradition to bring the two communities together, the shriller became Jinnah's insistence on Muslims being irreconcilably different from the Hindus. The more Gandhi worked to include Muslims in the Congress, the more hysterical

Jinnah became about claiming that he was the sole spokesman and his Muslim League the sole representative of all Indian Muslims and that no Hindu could claim to represent or include the political interests of the Muslims. It is noteworthy that this insistence on radical separateness and the idea of partition originated with Iqbal and Jinnah, both of whom were products of Western education, more British than the British. Both their families were recent converts to Islam. Iqbal, in fact, boasted of his Brahmin ancestry and Kashmiri origin. Jinnah's Gujarati family had also taken to Islam only a generation ago.

By contrast Maulana Azad, who stood steadfast in his commitment to India, was born in Mecca where he spent his childhood in a very orthodox Muslim family. He traced his ancestry to Maulana Jamaluddin who refused to sign the infallibility decree of Akbar. He was often hailed as 'Imam-ul-Hind'. Even after the Partition, Azad remained firm in his commitment to Indian nationalism while remaining an orthodox Muslim to the end of his days.³ He carried a large number of Muslim *ulema* with him whereas the non religious Muslim leadership and the Western-educated elite among the Muslims came to be more enamoured with Jinnah and Iqbal. Thus, the theory of Muslim separateness does not owe its inspiration as much to Islamic history and tradition of the Muslim community, as it does to the idea of national ethnic identity as it developed in Europe and came to play an important role in shaping the aspirations of many Western educated Muslims.

Bhai-Bhai Approach Fails

There were indeed serious flaws in the Gandhian approach to Hindu-Muslim relations. Mahatma Gandhi tried to forge Hindu-Muslim unity by:

- (i) Insisting on the oneness of all religions. His Ram-Rahim approach was drawn from the Bhakti-Sufi tradition;

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- (ii) Insisting on the shared common heritage and bonds of co-living;
- (iii) Expecting Hindus to play the role of indulgent, large-hearted elder brothers willing to make unilateral gestures of generosity towards their Muslim ‘younger brothers’.

While Gandhi made numerous attempts to placate Jinnah through moral appeals and by unilaterally offering him the prime ministership of free India, he did not try to arrive at a political settlement by working out a concrete formula for power sharing among the Hindus and the Muslims. Nor did he confront Jinnah with the logic of his own demand for Partition. He stayed rooted in the Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* world-view and expected the Hindus to play the patronizing role of a generous elder brother dealing with a rather difficult younger brother. This patronizing attitude became a major irritant for leaders whose goal was to acquire power. It continues to be an irritant in Indo-Pak relations even today. The Muslim elite of Pakistan feel that Indians treat them like errant brothers who will one day realize the “mistake” they made in demanding the break-up of India.

As the failure of the *bhai bhai* approach became obvious, Gandhi and other Congress leaders moved from one pendulum swing to another—

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from ‘partition over my dead body’ and total refusal to make that the basis of negotiations to supinely accepting the Partition as a fait accompli when the Muslim League leadership forced the transfer of population through riots and massacres. It is this image of a hapless Hindu majority meekly accepting the will of the minority with millions being forcibly uprooted from their homes that has given the Hindus a deep sense of fear of the supposed power of the Muslims and mistrust of secular Hindu leadership. The memories of small armies of Muslim invaders coming and building their empires in India alongwith the Muslim minority forcing its wishes down the unwilling throats of the Hindu majority adds to the sinister image of the Muslim community in the minds of most educated Hindus.

The tragedy of India’s Partition is due to the failure of the Congress leadership to work out a workable power sharing pact with Jinnah and Jinnah’s intransigence because he felt he could count on the British to get him a larger piece of the cake than he could legitimately negotiate with the Congress leaders on the basis of the proportion of Muslims in the population in pre-Partition India. On the other hand, most Congress leaders, especially Gandhi counted over much on the power of old civilisational bonds and failed to grasp the corrosive power of ethnic nationalism.

Revival of Failed Formula

Ironically, the failure of Nehruvian secularism in creating harmonious relations between the Hindus and the Muslims is bringing about a revival of

the Gandhian *bhai-bhai* approach to sorting out Hindu-Muslim relations, even though Gandhi’s Ram-Rahim approach was a tragic failure. Even the Marxists who used to call Gandhi derogatory names and condemned the religious overtones in his politics, among other things, have taken to organising festivals of Sufi-Bhakti songs to combat the Hindu-Muslim divide following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Similarly an important thrust of the BJP-RSS campaign is that the Muslims ought not to consider themselves different from the Hindus. Late RSS leader, K. R. Malkani’s thesis, for all his anti-Muslim prejudice, essentially argues that the Hindus and Muslims were inseparable till the British came and divided them.

It is time we recognised that this emphasis on “oneness” cannot be the basis of solving the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Even to the extent that Gandhi succeeded in his life long endeavour to forge emotional and political unity among the Hindus and Muslims, we would do well to remember that the Bhakti-Sufi approach works only if those who preach it are genuinely inspired by the love of humanity emanating from their love of God—rather than by political considerations, as is the case with today’s politicians using to ‘secularise’ politics and expand their own base among the Muslim “vote banks”. Gandhi could inspire millions of Hindus and Muslims to resist divisive politics because his life was his message and he sacrificed his all, including his very life for this cause. For him it was an article of faith, not a political convenience or tactic, as it is for today’s Congressmen.

Ram-Rahim Approach

The Ram-Rahim approach historically evolved in the process of resolving theological conflicts between Islam and Hindu faiths in medieval times. It is not appropriate

for solving political conflicts of today. We have wasted too much time insisting on oneness. However, when a group has come to a point when its primary urge is recognition of its ‘separate’ identity with a view to demanding a share in political and economic power as a distinct cultural entity, emphasis on oneness can only act as an irritant. In fact, the more similarities there are between two groups, the more the emotional bonding – the more violent is the assertion for a separate identity when differences arise over sharing of power and resources, as the recent experience of ethnic genocide in Eastern Europe shows. Failure of a polity to provide a legitimate space for identity assertion of various types along with well worked-out norms of power sharing between different groups can lead to deadly breakdowns of social compact and a civil war type situation, or give rise to strong secessionist movements as has already happened in many regions of India. The Hindu-Sikh conflict of the 1980’s and early 90’s provides a good example of how over-insistence on ‘oneness’ on the one hand and absence of institutions for conflict resolution can tear asunder even those who were actually inseparable.

Power Sharing Pact

The problem between the Hindus and Muslims is not due to any irreconcilable inherent conflict between the two communities, despite their difficult past history. The problem is due to our failure to work out decent workable norms for majority-minority relations. All over the world, majorities tend to turn fascist or at least tyrannical in the absence of decent procedures for resolving conflicts. So far we have relied only on pious sermons on communal harmony, on appealing to their common heritage and bonds, on the oneness of all

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religions and the virtue of religious tolerance. The Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* approach has long outlived its utility not only because modern politics has in basic ways destroyed the old *bhaichara* bonds but because modern politics demands a new kind of pact. The emphasis has to be on workability based on mutual agreement rather than pious goody-goodyism. For example, in Malaysia, after going through prolonged instability and riots against the Chinese minority, the majority Muslim leadership has worked out a deal with the Chinese minority, including their prosperous business leaders, whereby the Chinese are allowed to do business and provided security from violence or confiscation of property; in return the Chinese keep away from involvement with Malaysian power politics, including the distribution of government largesse and offices. This compact may not put

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citizenship rights of the two communities at par but has major advantages for averting ethnic pogroms as long as the terms are mutually acceptable and lead to a more stable society.

Similarly, as long as the dominant Christian group and the various Muslim and other groups in Lebanon worked according to the norms established in their pre-World War II political pact about power sharing in the offices of the state, Lebanon was a thriving city with a world class economy. However, it exploded into unimaginable violence as soon as the deal broke down due to the perception among Muslim groups that they had through population growth become a majority, though they were formerly a minority within Lebanon.

In India we do not need to have such unfair pacts between different communities because of some inherent advantages of our society. Given India’s heterogeneity, it is actually a country of numerous minorities and not exactly a Hindu majority country as some politicians would like us to believe. For example, the Hindus are a minority in Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab and Nagaland. The Muslims are a minority everywhere else except in Kashmir. The Sikhs are a minority everywhere except in Punjab; the Christians are a minority elsewhere but not in Nagaland; the Tamils are a minority except in Tamil Nadu; the Brahmins are a minority everywhere except in certain government jobs and elite professions.

As of today, our country does not have a well worked-out policy framework for minority rights which will have safeguards for the Hindus as well as Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and all others, where ever they are situated as a minority. We need to define decent, workable norms for power sharing, be it with the Hindu minority in Kashmir or Punjab, or Muslims in Madhya Pradesh, or Christians in Tamil Nadu. □