

Constitutional Framework and Structures of Governance in India: A Historical Perspective

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE XII, Saturday, September 22, 2012

SUMMARY

At the beginning, Dr. J. K. Bajaj mentioned that we were unable to meet on September 15 because of the sad demise of Pujya Sri Sudarshanji that morning at Raipur. Dr. Bajaj recalled with gratitude the great personal concern, affection and warmth that Sudarshanji bestowed upon him and other colleagues associated with the PPST (Patriotic People-oriented Science and Technology) group and the Centre. Before beginning his talk, Sri Devendra Swarup recalled his long and varied association with Sudarshanji. He especially mentioned the great efforts that Sudarshanji always made to visit, understand and bless any new social experiment or initiative in society undertaken by anyone anywhere. It was his natural humility, passion and warmth that allowed him to take interest in so many diverse people and activities.

In his twelfth talk of this series, Sri Devendra Swarup focussed on the importance of the Muslim issue in the context of the Indian nationalism. As discussed in the last talk, the British blatantly used the Muslim issue to counter the Swadeshi movement and blunt the great upsurge of national consciousness that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, to woo the Muslims, they proposed partition of Bengal on communal lines. And a few years later, when they introduced the elective principle in the emerging Indian constitutional framework for the first time in 1909, they created separate electorates for the Muslims and non-Muslims; the latter was termed as the “General” category.

How and why did the British come to identify the Muslim issue as a useful tool for impeding the growth of Indian national consciousness and decided to exploit it through the colonial policy of divide and rule. The British seem to have had their first understanding of the Muslim issue in the Calcutta Madrasa, established in 1781; they virtually used this Madrasa as a laboratory to study the Muslim psyche. Several experiments were conducted there in this direction. Muslims vehemently opposed any attempt to appoint Hindu teachers to teach English at the Madrasa; Hindus, they asserted, were an inferior and an erstwhile subject race and therefore Muslim students could not be expected to study under Hindu teachers. For similar reasons, Muslims refused to study in the Hindu College which was established in 1817. They did not relent even when the name of Hindu College was changed to Presidency College in 1852. Summarising the long experience of the British with the Calcutta Madrasa, Captain W. N. Lees, the Principal of the Madras from 1854 onwards, submitted a detailed report to Governor General in 1858. In this report, Lees unambiguously stated that the Muslims did not consider themselves to be ‘sons of the soil’; instead, they associated themselves with foreign Muslim invaders.

Muslims had always entertained hopes of re-establishing Muslim rule in India. Wahabis strived to achieve this cherished objective of Indian Muslims in 1857, but they failed. And, as the instigators of the revolution, they faced the British ire for several years following 1857. It was in that period that the Muslims forged the new strategy of cooperation with the British. Sir Syyed Ahmad Khan was the first to work out this strategy on their behalf.

Syyed Ahmad Khan's speeches at Lucknow and Meerut Congresses summarise the Muslim reaction to the Indian National Congress, which came into being in 1885 and whose sole objective was to demand the introduction of democratic system in India. The crux of Syyed Ahmand Khan's arguments in his speeches was that the Muslims were the erstwhile rulers of this land; they could not possibly live together on equal terms with Hindus. For this reason, the Muslims were also wary of democracy, which would necessary relegate them to a minority; they, Syyed Ahmed Khan insisted, would prefer to defend their interests by the sword rather than by votes. In his correspondence with Badruddin Tayyabji, Syyed Ahmad repeated that he could not ascribe to the Congress' demands for democracy because democratic rule would mean Hindu rule. Other leaders of educated Muslims, like Abdul Latif and Justice Ameer Ali, also advanced similar arguments. Muslim leadership continued to use this argument throughout the period of India's struggle for Independence; Jinnah used this argument even more vigorously. It is indeed matter of record that the number of Muslim delegates to Congress sessions did not rise to any significant levels despite best efforts of the pre-Gandhi Congress leadership.

The fear of Hindu majority led Muslim League to oppose even the idea of a loose federation proposed at the second Round Table Conference. The League realised that any such federation would include the princely states, which would further reduce the relative number of Muslims.

But the Muslim opposition to Indian nationalism was not merely a matter of immediate political compulsions and the relative balance of numbers between Hindus and Muslims. The Islamic ideology does not accept the concept of territorial nationalism. The Ummah that the Muslims revere has a global extension, it recognises no territorial boundaries. It is not surprising therefore that Mohammad Ali in his letter to Gopal Krishna Gokhle in 1908 had unambiguously stated that Muslims of India felt greater affinity for their pan-Islamic identity than for their Indian roots.

This is the reason why the Muslim issue is not limited to India alone. Islamic assertiveness of the last few decades is forcing even the West to reconsider the concept of Multiculturalism. Even the West has begun to speculate that there may be something in Islam which prevents Muslims from living on equal terms with non-Muslims. Today, nationalism throughout the world is being challenged by pan-Islamism. Because, for the Muslims, it is the Mode of Worship alone that determines affinity amongst people and defines their collective identity.

Another issue concerning the Muslim ideology is its insistence on the Quran and Hadis as the ultimate and unchanging sources of authoritative truth. In fact, history for the Muslims begins with Mohammad. The whole of pre-Mohammad history of Arabia is dismissed as *Jahaliya*,

as a period of ignorance and error. This tendency has become stronger in the recent times. The kind of radical changes, that Mustafa Kamal Pasha was able to bring about in Islamic Turkish society after the First World War, cannot even be imagined now.

Indian connection with the Arabs goes back much before the birth of Islam in Arabia. Arab traders have been visiting and finding welcome in Indian ports since early times. Later, when Islam came to Arabia, rulers of Gujarat and Kerala even constructed mosques for the Arabs. It shows that the Indians had no problem with the Islamic form of worship and it was indeed welcomed by the local communities. From the beginning, there have been attempts to integrate Muslims in the Indian society. In recent times, Mahatma Gandhi made a great effort in this direction by making Khilafat Movement a part of the Congress programme. But, Khilafat ended in communal riots. At the end, even Mahatma Gandhi was disillusioned. In 1924, several people, including Bhagwan Das, asked Gandhiji about the cause of Muslim alienation from Hindus even though they shared the same ancestry and the same blood. Gandhiji replied that though the blood was the same, their religion and history had changed their psyche, and that changed everything.

Both the historical and the current experiences make us seriously consider why it has been so difficult to integrate the Muslims in the Indian national mainstream? Why Indian society has not been able to assimilate the Muslim community when both Hindus and Muslims share the same ancestors, traditions, and soil. Have we failed to understand the Muslim psyche correctly? Within India, Hindus are losing both in land and in numbers to the Muslims. The very integrity and unity of India is coming under question. What is the way out?

To understand the Muslim problem, we should study Islamic theology and how the world-view of a convert changes after his acceptance of Islam. We should study movements like the Naqshbandi movement of the seventeenth century led by Sheikh Ahmed Sarhandi, the ideological basis of the conflict between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh, and Shah Wali Ullah's role in the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761.

Muslims, it seems, are clear about their ideology and future agenda. The argument that illiteracy and lack of opportunities for higher education have led to their alienation is a myth. There is no dearth of highly educated Muslims in media, academics, higher services and professional jobs. Exposure to higher education has not made them more accommodative of others. The perpetrators of 9/11 were highly educated young men living in the West. In the Indian context, Khalid Mohammad is a typical example. Born in India, brought up in Pakistan, and educated at MIT and Harvard, Khalid has been vigorously advocating creation of five separate Muslim zones within India. Today it may sound absurd. But, history is witness to the fact that in time such absurd ideas also turn into reality. When Rahmat Ali, a young Cambridge graduate, first proposed the idea of a separate homeland for Indian Muslims and named it Pakistan, in 1933, it was ridiculed and treated as a far-fetched joke; but within less than quarter of a century later, Pakistan became a reality.

Iqbal, the writer of *Saare Jahaan Se Achha Hindustan Hamara*, offers the perhaps the most telling example of the Muslim psyche. He was well aware of his Hindu ancestry; incidentally,

so was Jinnah. Iqbal converted to Muslim separatism after 1905 and became one of the earliest champions of two nation theory and even rewrote his famous song, which we in India continue to sing even today. In his Presidential Address at the Muslim League session at 1930, Iqbal, went to the extent of saying that Islam cannot survive without Shariat and Shariat is possible only in a separate Islamic nation.

The talk was followed by intense debate. A dominant theme of many of the interventions was that as the Muslim society becomes more educated and starts participating in the middle class life and professions, it would get integrated into the Indian milieu and the separatist tendencies would disappear. Several interventionists, however, insisted that such questions are always solved through balance of political and other power between different communities. Therefore, we must begin looking at the issue from that angle, rather than being distracted by the ideas of changing Muslim ideology, philosophy or psyche through the spread of education, scientific temper etc.
