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ISLAM'S ENCOUNTER WITH HINDUISM IN SECULAR INDIA

Islam came to India with a handful of its followers and has stayed here as a very powerful religion of the country. In a multi-structured Indian Society where religious pluralism and cultural dualism, no religious group can retain its original identity in tact. Changes in its style of operation, pressure to adjust and readjust to local environment become inevitable. What is ultimately required is peaceful co-existence without diluting its basic structure. Christianity which is also an alien religion has adopted an all together different approach and faces less problems today. Islam is not opposed to any other religion. On the other hand, it permits its followers to adjust to local situations wherever possible. Its encounter with Hinduism ultimately does bear a greater degree of impact on both Muslims and Hindus. Today, neither Muslims nor Hindus can boast of retaining the original cultural behaviour expected within the parameters of the concerned religion.

In this article, an attempt is made to highlight the socio-cultural behavioural dimensions of Islamic ways of life in a country where Muslims are just 12% of the total population. The main focus of this article is Islam in secular India with nearly 80% Hindu population.

One of the most important social problems that the contemporary Indian Society is witnessing and suffering from is lack of proper understanding of the role of religion in the Indian secular democratic society. Many tensions and conflicts of communal nature have emerged consequent upon misunderstanding and mis-reading of the interwoven net-work of relationship between religion and secularism. Of the many religious groups in India, it is among the Hindus and Muslims in particular that such a situation has emerged. Very little has been done to focus public attention to find remedial measures.

The two broad objectives of this paper are to present a conceptual frame of "Religion" and "Secularism" as generally understood in

the Indian society, and to illustrate why and how these two concepts are considered to be conflicting with each other, rather than mutually reinforcing so as to provide stability and security to the Hindus and Muslims. In other words, the focus is on the need for "Change and continuity" for transformation of the social behaviour of Muslims without sacrificing the essence of their religion in a multistructured Indian society where they are numerically less dominant.

Muslims in India

Islam is the youngest religion in the world where there are about 600 million Muslims ranking next to Christianity. India has the second largest Muslim population in the world. The Muslims of India occupy a very unique position in the Indian polity. After creation of Pakistan, many thought that the Muslims would totally disappear from India. As a natural corollary, they were expected to migrate to Pakistan. But a large number of them decided to stay back, and today they account for about 12% of India's total population. The annual growth rate of Muslim population is slightly faster than the Hindu population. As a minority group, they have a very important role to play.

Since they live in a culturally pluralistic society where the Hindus constitute the majority, the Muslims have to readjust themselves to the social realities. The Hindu leaders deserve praise for making India a secular democratic State instead of a Hindu State. If the then Hindu leaders had decided to convert into India a Hindu State, Muslims had no choice, had no right to resist because they had virtually supported creation of Pakistan. This was decided at that time when thousands of refugees from Pakistan had come to India with great sufferings and sorrows. The emergence of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (R.S.S.) was mainly because of their desire to protect the rights of the Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi was brutally murdered by those who were against the Muslims. Still the Indian leaders chose to eschew communalism and therefore, preferred to lay the foundation of Indian democracy on the strength of secularism.

Concept of Religion

Religion has both theological and sociological significance. There is also some difference between the religion of a theologian and the religion of a sociologist. To the former, the main focus

is the relationship between man and God. But to the latter, the relationship is between man and the Society, centred around God.

What is religion? Durkheim defines it as "Religion is a unified system of beliefs in practice"¹ A modern and even broader definition states that "Religion is a recognized way of entering into a relationship with those aspects of reality that are non-rational or non-empirical".

Religion is a social phenomenon and is therefore, preeminently social. While religion has been characterised as embodying the most sublime of human aspects, as being a bulwark of mortality, a source of public order and inner individual peace, as a social institution, it has both manifest and latent functions as a part of the social system.²

Religion gives human existence a meaning and a purpose. It helps people to develop a sense of identity and can assist individuals during the crises of transitional stages in life.

Religion as a social Institution can affect a social cultural system of which it is a part. This can be seen in two ways. It can extend its support to the socio-cultural system and maintain it. Secondly, it can also serve as an instrument of change. As said earlier, religion is considered as a vehicle for human salvation, according to the theologian. But from the view point of the sociologist, religion aims at social stabilization.

Concept of Secularism

The Indian constitution has no reference to secularism or secular State. But the spirit of secularism is emphasized. The constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of religion (Art, 325). All religions in India are treated alike. The State has neither a religion of its own nor pampers any particular religion. It has decided to root out communalism in every form and substitute secularism.

1. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary forms of religious life* New York, Free Press, 1912, p. 62.

2. Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* Glueco, The Free Press, 1958, pp. 19-54.

Secularism has to be examined in the context of religious freedom guaranteed to the Indian citizens. Generally, the concept of secularism is not understood properly by the Indians. Does secularism mean an attempt to deprive the Muslims of their religious freedom? or does it mean that the Muslims can retain their total religious identity at the cost of national integration? These issues need to be examined thoroughly.

Religion and Secularism

The line dividing "Religion" and "Secular" is not specified anywhere and therefore, it is subjected to the individuals' perception and understanding, and it is this individual discretion that has caused great damage to the communal harmony in our country. This complicated issue not only pitches Hindus against Muslims but also one group of Muslims against another group and the issue becomes so delicate, so sensitive that any time there will be an explosion. For example, marriage and divorce systems are strictly within the frame work of religion according to some, but according to others these are within the frame of secularism. The need for common civil code is asserted by certain sections of the Hindu population. But certain sections of the Muslim population have totally opposed it. Those who advocate it, talk in terms of secularism and those who oppose it, argue in terms of *shariat* as the basis for interpretation of Islamic way of life.

Intellectuals and Secularism

Secularism is not properly understood by many educated people. There is a tendency among the intellectuals to explain this concept in their own subjective fashion. Their educational, religious and communal background would largely decide the meaning of this term. As Mushirul Huq observes, the relationship between secularism and religion is seen in terms of hostility or indifference, determined largely by the background of the persons using the term.³ He further observes that Muslim community in secular India is more concerned with its religious identity than is usually realized by others.⁴

3. Mushir-ul-Huq, *Islam in Secular India*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972, p. 2.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 4

Moulana Moududi's views on Indian secularism represent the views of one extreme section of the Muslims. He observed that Islam is a perfect religion and a panacea for the ills of the world. He reminds the Indians that secularism amounts to non-recognition of God's guidance in human affairs. A secular system of Government is atheistic and irreligious. Secularism releases people from the fear of God and makes them irresponsible slaves of self.⁵

Mujeeb, a well known scholar, observes that the *Shariat* is believed by generality of the Muslims to be the Islamic way of life, comprehending beliefs the rituals, practices, public and personal law, and being stretched even to include dress, personal appearance and rules of behaviour in social interactions.⁶

Huq observes that the Indian Muslims generally hold Islam as faith and Shariah as practical exhibition of the faith to be inseparable. Faith must show in action and action has to be strictly in line with rules and regulations formulated in the Golden days of Islam. Secularism and secular state have to be accepted or rejected on the basis of Shariat.⁷

Abid Hussain observes that Muslims view secularism as an attitude of the mind which completely rejects religion as one of the highest values in life. But as a matter of fact, secularism is not opposed to indifference to religion.⁸

Khundmine explains secularism as "simply an attitude of the mind which is compatible with any metaphysical theory and religious doctrine in so far as they do not usurp the right of man to solve the problem of his earthly existence in the light of his own reason and in the guidance of the principle of human happiness."⁹

5. M. A. Karandikar, *Islam in India's Transition to Modernity*, Connecticut, Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1969, p. 279.

6. M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1967, p. 67.

7. Mushir-ul-Huq, *op. cit.* p. 15.

8. S. Abid Hussain, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims*, Bombay, Asia, 1965, p. 170.

9. S. Alam Khundmiri, "Secularism a Religion and Education" in V. K. Sinha (Ed.) *Secularism in India*, Bombay, 1968, p. 90.

Another social situation of much significance is how the various social groups look at persons - modern and secular - who feel that they have come out of the fetters of Shariat. The non-muslims have a tendency to spread right royal carpet and arrange decorated banners to welcome them as liberals, rationalists, secularists, progressive and so on. But these very Muslims are dubbed as un-Islamic, anti-Muslim and strangers to Muslim society by some Muslims. This situation has to be examined very carefully. Persons like Maududi would not hesitate to condemn outright such Muslims. Moududi¹⁰ made a severe attack on Chagla's theory of secularism. He observes that Chagla's advise to follow the cultural pattern of the majority by giving up their own cultural identity, to adopt Devanagiri script for Urdu and to agree to amend and modify some parts of their *Shariat* is totally irreligious and dangerous. Shaheed Kamal observes "what is 'red rag' to a bull, the word 'Muslim' is to Chagla, the ultra-secularist son of India."¹¹

Coercion

Islam has guaranteed freedom to its followers. It has laid down certain guidance which, if followed, would guarantee peaceful existence in this world and better returns in the other world, but these principles have to be understood, voluntarily accepted and practised. There shall not be any type of coercion, threats and compulsions. Islam has not permitted an official judge or inquisitor so far as the acts of Muslims are concerned. It is upto the Lord to assess the records of the believers, and based on these records punish or reward them. But the Champions of Fundamentalism, the Mullas and Moulvis and others are trying to usurp the rights of Almighty God. This is an un-Islamic behaviour of the very people who preach and propagate the Islamic way of life among others, while they themselves are often found guilty of side tracking Islamic principles to suit their own ends. They hardly believe that Muslims in India are different from Muslims in Iran in many ways. While there cannot be any difference between Muslims of these two countries in so far as the basic pillars of faith are concerned, there is significant variation in the day-to-day social and cultural, besides economic activities of these people. The local cultural influences are so powerful that they cannot escape from them. Further, it has also to be

10. M. A. Karandikar, Op. cit. pp. 352-353.

11. Ibid., p. 354

noted that there has been scope for interpretation of the 'Hadis'¹² and 'Shariath',¹³ while it is conceded that the essential principles of Islam are universal, eternal and immutable, the ways and means of practising these principles are mutable. Further, Islam was born at a time when there was total ignorance, darkness and barbarism in Arabia, Prophet Mohammed gave them light and life. He advised his followers to respect the Christians and Jews who were their neighbours. That does not mean he was against Hinduism and Buddhism. Had he been born in India, he would have certainly made a direct reference to Hinduism and Buddhism.

Further, the advancement of Science and Technology has also forced people to adopt themselves to the changing social situations. Muslims cannot be an exception to this rule. Muslims are guaranteed religious freedom. But they cannot live in social isolation. They cannot live in ghettos. They have to and they are forced to have social interaction with the Hindu since the Muslims and Hindus live together, brought together and interact together, mutual influences are immutable and natural. And, therefore, while the Muslims are at liberty to practise their religious faith, they are bound to practise the synthetic Indian culture. In one sense, they are Muslims and in another sense they are Indians. But they are Indians first and Muslims next. They have a dual role to play as Indians and as Muslims.

Concept of Indianization

Indianization is neither Hinduisation nor un-Islamization. It is rather a synthetic secularism. The rise of fundamentalism in some parts of the country has to be carefully studied. If fundamentalism is an anti-secular movement endangering the social solidarity, national integration, this movement has to be resisted not by Hindus but by the Muslim intellectuals. The recent trends of revivalism, both among the Hindus and Muslims, should be welcomed provided they have the force of acting as social stabilizer. But even if certain amount of fanaticism is seen in the movement, then the movement has to be arrested at any cost and by any means.

12. 'Hadis' means traditions and customs laid down by the Prophet

13. 'Shariat' means the code of conduct derived from the Holy book

Religion and secularism, from Muslim view point, can go together hand in hand. There is nothing self contradictory between the two. While the former is needed for the worldly life and ultimately related to the other world, the latter is needed to act as a check on the possible extremists approach in life by totally ignoring the needs of the multistructured society where cultural pluralism is the basis for our understanding and mutual relational situations.

Cultural Pluralism And Secularism

There are some cultural activities which lead to heated debates whether such activities are irreligious or secular. Some Muslim women keep *bindi* on their forehead. This is, to large number of Muslims, a violation of religious faith. But some argue that religion has nothing to do with it. This is a secular act in their opinion. Wearing sary is opposed by the fundamentalists on the ground that this is un-Islamic. But some Muslims argue that religion has nothing to do with it. All that Islam says is that a woman has to dress herself decently and fully. *Vande Mataram* was opposed to by some Muslims on the ground that it is a Hindu devotional song. We have seen communal riots on mass scale in the past over this issue. The secular Muslims did not see anything wrong in it. Muslims are reluctant to see the realities in the life. In India, Hindus constitute the majority, and they have a right to impose their culture, other than religion, on the Muslims, if they want. But they have not done it by and large because they believe in secular outlook in a society where there is cultural pluralism. But Muslims generally fail to respond to this call.

Take the controversy over the films. It is argued by one section of the Muslim society that Islam prohibits Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular from witnessing movies. There are instances where punishment is given to such Muslims who go against this ruling of the Muslim Jamaat. Recently in Gulbarga and Bijapur districts the powerful Muslim lobby imposed total ban on Muslims visiting films. One Miss Najma Bangi, an educated and employed Muslim girl, threw the challenge that there was no such prohibition in Islamic literature. When she actually visited the movie, she was physically pulled out of the theatre by some Muslim rowdy elements. A false case was filed against her. The Police arrested her for offending the religious feelings of the Muslims.

This is the reward given to a Muslim girl who believed in personal freedom and her own religion.

The practice of observing *pardah* and wearing *burkha* is said to be an act of religious faith, according to some Muslims. But some Hindus argue that it is a sign of anti-secularism. And some Muslims also find fault with those who do not practise this custom, and dub them as anti-religious. There are instances where stones and chappals were thrown on Muslim women for not observing this custom. Neither wearing *burkha* is a religious requirement, nor its discard is an anti-religious act. It all depends upon the socio-economic environmental conditions which shape the social behaviour of the people.

Using the appellation "Shri" for all even in English also led to some controversies. The appellation 'Mr.' is considered to be secular and 'Shri' religious. This is a narrow understanding of the social realities. Every country has its own appellation. For example, in France use of 'Monsieur' is common. Whether the person addressed is a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu nobody objects. But in Indian situation, it is directly linked with religion. And, therefore, the argument is that 'Shri' should be used for Hindus, 'Janab' should be used for Muslims and 'Mr' should be used for Indians, irrespective of their religion. This type of interpretation is anti-secular. When we have our own culture, use of an indigenous appellation should be welcome. Religion has not given any specific direction in this regard.

It is a custom among the people to greet each other when they meet. The salutation may be 'Good morning', 'Namaskar', 'Adab Arz' and so on. Is there any religious prescription about the sound and symbol one has to adopt in greeting the other? Children are socialized in a particular way. Later on when they become adults, they adopt a slightly different style of salutation, not that the religion has prescribed so, but because of cultural influences. A Muslim salutes another Muslim with the words 'Adab Arz' or 'Salam alikum'. He may also say 'Good morning' to a Muslim or a Hindu. But he does not normally say 'Namaskar' to a Muslim; but he may say so for a Hindu. But a conservative Muslim not exposed to pluralist cultural pattern may hesitate to say 'Namaskar' to his Hindu

friend. His consideration is that 'Namaskar' is a Hindu culture based on Hindu religious principle. But if he says 'Namaskar' with folded hands to a Hindu, the Hindu considers him secular; but a Muslim takes him to be irreligious. When a Muslim says 'Good morning' which is a sign of western culture, no religious colour is given. But then, why he is mistaken if he says 'Namaskar with folded hands'. Religion has not prohibited it. But the conservatives prescribe it and it becomes, therefore, secular to one and anti-religious to another.

Some Muslims consume beef.¹⁴ Cow slaughter has become a subject of great controversy. Some Hindus generally give religious colour to it. There is also legal ban on slaughter of certain animals, under certain circumstances. If a Muslim slaughters a cow while violating the law, he is not only legally punishable, but also socially accountable. Islam permits slaughter of animals for consumption purposes. But it does not permit slaughter in such a manner which would wound the feelings of those who worship it. In a place called Alipur about 30 miles from Bangalore City, the majority of the population consists of Muslims who are known for strict religious observances and also economic prosperity. They consume beef. But they do not slaughter the animal right under the nose of the Hindus who are their employees. This is done to respect the feelings of those who worship the animals. This is the true spirit of Islam which is definitely in the direction of positive secularism. It is the duty of the Muslims, wherever possible, to adjust to the local cultural requirements when they live in a country where they are a minority.

Another instance which leads to secular and anti-secular controversy is the language problem. If a Muslim learns Sanskrit, he is immediately condemned as anti-Islamic because Sanskrit is the language of the Hindu Gods. If a Muslim opposes Kannada, the regional language of Karnataka, he is considered to be anti-secular by the Hindus, and the Muslims consider him to be their champion. Language has absolutely nothing to do with religion. There are Hindus who learn Arabic for economic purposes now. Can the Muslims bring Arabic under the Copy Right Act and exclude the

14. Only a small percentage of Muslims consume beef. On the other hand, more Hindus do so.

non-Muslims from learning it? Were not the Non-Muslims of Arabia speaking Arabic when Islam was just born? Then, how could it be the exclusive language of the Muslims? If a Muslim champions the cause of Kannada or Sanskrit, the Muslim society may look down upon him as he is indulging in anti-religious activity. But when he does not know the alphabetic of the language of the Holy Book, he still remains a Muslim.

Muslims of Bangladesh speak Bengali, not Urdu. Still, they are Muslims. The Holy Book of the Muslims was translated into Bengali language by a Hindu Scholar, and this is considered to be the best translated version. Muslims of Kerala and Tamil Nadu do not have Urdu as their mother tongue. But still they are more religious than the Urdu speaking Muslim population of Karnataka.

If Muslims attempt to get better status to Urdu language or resist annihilation of Urdu language the immediate reaction of some of the Hindus is that these Muslims are anti-secular, and this is one of the reasons for communal clashes.

No language per-se is secular or anti-secular, religious or irreligious. Language is after all a medium of communication. Had Islam been born in India, Arabic would not have been the language of the religion. However, it should be noted that respect for the languages of the other religious groups is a sign of positive secularism which does not destroy one's religious faith, but rather promotes better understanding through cultural bondage.

Participation in religious functions among the people of India, both intra and inter-religious groups, has been a traditional feature particularly in the rural areas. No social taboos were seen all these years. But of late, there are signs of protests from certain Muslim religio-social groups against Muslim participation in Hindu festivals. This is the direct outcome of the rise of fundamentalism today. Contrary to the broad frame work of Islamic perception of the world and social realities, some Muslims propagate the notion that Muslims should strictly maintain their Muslim identity and should not participate in Hindu religious functions. Visits to temples, even out of sheer curiosity, is said to be un-Islamic acts. The great contribution made by Tippu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, to foster Hindu-Muslim unity, gifts to Hindu temples, encouragement to the priests of Hindu

temples should be adequate grounds to dub him as anti-Islam. But today he is respected as a Saint by the Muslims, generally called a 'Shaheed' (Martyr). This is nothing short of hypocrisy and double standard observed by some. A muslim may not worship a Hindu God, but Islam does not prohibit him to enter the temple and appreciate the architecture. Faith is more important. As long as one's religious basic faith remains unaffected, secular outlook is definitely tolerated.

What Secularism Should Be?

India has produced a large number of secular minded Muslim leaders as well as academicians. Often many of these people are scholars in Muslim theology also. But the conservatives would not mind resorting to character assassination and label them anti-Islamic elements and enemies of Islam. Threats are held out with dire consequences if a Muslim tries to be liberal in his outlook and in his interpretation of the Islamic way of life. Therefore, such secular minded people, however limited their number may be, remain extremely passive out of fear.

Radicalism which is an ingredient of secularism is said to be anti-Islamic thought. But if some people pose that they are secularists and want to spread the movement, much depends upon the quality of the Islamic life they lead. In other words, the much wanted leadership for selling the idea of secularism effectively and meaningfully can come forth only if such leaders have faith to their religion and command some amount of respect from the Muslims. If, on the other hand, they rebel against the Muslim society, employ abusive language and humiliating words to attack Islam and Muslim Society, they can hardly do any service to the movement. What is needed is that they should be with the Muslims, enlist their support, command their respect and then attempt to reform it. Hamid Dalwai started the Muslim Satya Shodhana movement in Poona. He was out and out against everything in Islam and therefore, he had more enemies than friends among Muslims. He could hardly make any dent in the Muslim Society. His very name was resisted by Muslims, excepting his own friends. His idea was good but approaches were bad. Similarly the late M.C. Chagla also failed to carry the Muslim society with him, both before his life and after his death. He was very

blunt in attacking Islam in his life time. When his body was cremated according to his own wish, the Muslims did not consider him to be a Muslim at all. But what is more important from the point of view of secularism is that one has to be a good Muslim and take up the cause of secularism. Then only its impact is felt. If one is derecognised as a Muslim by the Muslim society, one is practically of no use for the movement. The argument that a Muslim is directly answerable to God and the support he gets from Hindus will not alter the social fact that he is no longer a force to be considered.

Therefore, a congenial social environment will have to be created both by the Muslims and the Hindus to establish and maintain secularism, while reposing faith in and respect for the religion. Religion and secularism can go together and usher in a new era assuring mutually beneficial Hindu-Muslim relationship only when rationality is the basis for religious outlook in life.

It is no doubt true that secularisation of culture involves both a diminution of the sacred and an increase in rationality in the thinking of men. It is both a metamorphosis of thoughts and transformation of society. Because, it involves certain radical changes not only in the fashion of thinking, but also in the basic pattern of behaviour and activities of men.

Secularization has two important fundamental elements related to transformation in human thinking. These are: (i) de-sacralization in attitudes and (ii) rationalization of thoughts.

The secularization of culture combining both desacralization and rationalization means that a religious world view is no longer the rigid basic frame of reference or thoughts. Some of the Muslims may not agree with this, while the majority of the Hindus endorse it. The obvious reason is that whatever was said, or done when Islam was born remains unquestioned. But there are ample evidence to prove that Islam is a dynamic religion and stands the acid test of rationality. Islam is a pragmatic religion, not a dogmatic. But the essence of Islam remains relevant for ever. This second line of thinking is shared by many Muslim intellectuals, both theological and secular.

Secularism is, therefore, neither anti-religious nor pro-religious. It is a process through which people belonging to different shades of faith can live together amicably, respecting the principles of their religions as well as the religions of others; but at the same time take note of certain social realities in the modern age of science and technology which promote common participation in national activities. Secularism aims at binding the Indian citizens to the advantage of the nation, without sacrificing the essentials of their religions.