

Future of secularism in India

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THE question of future of secularism in India is very important particularly at this juncture. The fundamentalist forces are raising their heads in India as in other countries of the world. No religion is exception to this. There are many reasons for this. In India Hindu fundamentalism has become much more aggressive than say Muslim fundamentalism. Secularism today is in much greater danger than ever before due to Hindutva militancy.

Secularism is highly necessary if India has to survive as a nation. But apart from survival of Indian nationalism and Indian unity, secularism is necessary for modern democratic polity. And this need for secular polity becomes much greater if the country happens to be as diverse and plural as India. Secularism is a great need for democratic pluralism.

Our leaders and freedom fighters were well aware of need for secular and modern democratic polity for India. They also knew that India is highly religious country and that secularism in the sense of hostility or indifference to religion will never be acceptable to people of India. Secularism was never meant to be indifference to religion by India leaders. It is for this reason that even most orthodox among Hindus and Muslims accepted it as a viable ideology for Indian unity and integrity.

The most Orthodox Muslim 'Ulama of Deobandi school preferred secular India to Muslim homeland or theocratic Pakistan. They outright rejected the idea of Pakistan when mooted by Jinnah. They denounced two nation theory on the basis of religion. Nehru, though personally agnostic, but never imposed agnostic or atheistic secularism. He was too much of a democrat to attempt that. He said in his answer to a query by an Indian student at Oxford University in fifties that in U.K. state has a religion (Anglican Christianity) but people of England are quite indifferent to religion but in India state has no religion but people are very religious. Therefore, in Indian situation secularism means equal protection to all religions.

Nehru was greatly committed, more than anyone else in post-independence India, to the concept of secularism. He never compromised on this question. He was well

aware of the fact that secularism is a great cementing force for the diverse people of India. He, as an idealist, thought that with spread of modern scientific and technological education secularism would spread and find greater and greater acceptability. However, not only it that did not happen that way but communalism and obscurantism spread with more intensity than secularism.

There are several reasons for this all of which we cannot analyse here. Some of them of course must be mentioned. Like Nehru very few people were genuinely committed to secularism in the Congress. Many eminent Congress leaders were opposed to it in their heart of heart. They tried to sabotage Nehruvian vision in his own lifetime and they became much more active after his death. Nehru could not pay much attention to educational system in

tinued to strengthen communal mindset among the educated middle classes. The Muslim leaders in independent India, after the death of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Zakir Husain, could not provide moderate and wise leadership to Muslim masses. They also remained not only extremely cautious in their approach but never prepared Muslim masses for modern secular polity in India. They were more insistent on minority rights than on necessity for change.

This attitude was further strengthened among these leaders due to frequent occurrences of communal riots. The Jabalpur riot of 1961 shook Nehru as much as Indian Muslims to the core. For the first time they became greatly apprehensive of their security and began to withdraw in their shell. This further reinforced conservatism and became a hurdle in developing

became much more pronounced and led to Hindu militancy apprehensive of division of Hindu votes.

And in the beginning of nineties Babri Masjid was demolished which pushed Indian secularism to the brink. It was the greatest disaster and was followed by Bombay riots, which shocked whole world.

Thus we see Indian secularism has followed a tortuous course all through in the post-independence period. It is not surprising in a underdeveloped country like India with its immense poverty, insurmountable levels of unemployment and widespread illiteracy. The BJP, which came to power using its Hindutva card is not likely to give it up in near future. With every election it intensifies its Hindutva agenda. The other members of the Sangh Parivar, specially the Vishva Hindu Parishad, tend to be more irresponsible as it does not have to govern. It

polity cannot be sustained without the state being neutral to all religions or equally protective for all religions as Nehru put it. And it is in this sense that secularism in India will become more and more relevant. It should also be noted that we should not pose secularism and religious orthodoxy as binary opposites, as some rationalists tend to do.

Faith will always remain an important component of human behaviour and there will always remain an element of orthodoxy in faith behaviour. Rational faith is certainly not an impossibility but it tends to be an elitist phenomenon. On the level of masses orthodox reigns rather than rationality, even in advanced societies. Also, economic advancement and reduction in levels of poverty and illiteracy will ultimately sideline communal bigotry and enhance forces of secularism. Religious orthodoxy, if not challenged by the other's threats, would not lead to communalism. There is a Laxman Rekha between religious orthodoxy and communal discourse.

India has stupendous challenges to meet due to its economic backwardness and unemployment, which sharpen communal struggle. Unemployed and frustrated youth can easily be induced to think and act communally as he thinks his unemployment is due more to his caste or community than economic backwardness. Thus chances of secularism will certainly brighten with more economic progress and reduced levels of unemployment, particularly educated unemployment.

Indian democracy, which is here to stay, is in itself a guaranty for future of secularism. A pluralist country like India needs secularism like life-blood. India has been pluralist not since post-modernism but for centuries and no one can wish away its bewildering pluralism and this pluralism can be sustained only with religiously neutral polity. India has been passing through very critical phase now but there is nothing to despair. The present communal turmoil is not here to stay. It would certainly yield to more stable secular polity.

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Lest we forget

Aziz-ul Haq

An architect of rural development

HARI PADA BHOWMIK

IT is always painful for me to recall that Mr Aziz-ul Haq is no more with us. He left us forever on 3 September last year. I see his demise as passing of a legend. We can miss his physical existence but he lives and will always live in the hearts of people, followers, fans and friends for all time to come.

Mr Haq was an architect of rural development, a meritorious government servant, and a veteran Rotarian. A thinker, philosopher, organiser and policymaker. For his contribution to the aged, the Help Age International UK recognised him as an "Unsung Hero".

Born in February 1923 at Chanda village under Brahmanpara police station of Comilla district, Mr. Haq comes of a respectable Muslim family. Among his three sisters and one brother, he was the eldest. His father late Muhammad Sharafat Ali was a government servant.

Mr. Aziz-ul Haq started his career as a college teacher in 1944 soon after he passed the university degree. In 1945, he joined the Civil Supply Department of the then Government of Bengal and served as Sub-District/District Controller of Food. After independence in 1947, he opted for Pakistan. At first he joined the Central Government Secretariat at Karachi, Pakistan in the Ministry of Education and then in the Ministry of Industries.

In 1957, Mr. Haq was made Managing Director of the then East Pakistan Small Industries Corporation. Later on he became the chairperson of the Corporation. During his tenure he helped establish small industrial estates at the district level. In the mid-sixties, he was transferred to East Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation.

He received the award Sitara-i-Khidmat (1970) for his meritorious services to the people as a government servant.

Mr. Haq worked as the Chief Executive of the then Pakistan Academy for Rural Development (PARAD), now known as BARD, during 1968-73. As its Director, as a friend and a great follower of Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, he used to wear "Khadi" (locally made cloth). He organised village people of Comilla to adopt innovative projects to increase yield of crop and enhance income. Thus he helped promote self-help movement with self-management and self-reliance principles through rural cooperatives.

As UNICEF's Special Consultant in Bangladesh (1974-76), he was active in post-liberation rehabilitation of primary schools and primary training programmes, and in initiating the Manually Operated Shallow Tubewells for Irrigation which later on became an important development programme. UNICEF also honoured

him with the Regional Award for Services to Mothers and Children.

In the year 1976 he was appointed as an Adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and then became a Minister in the Cabinet of the Government of Bangladesh. During his tenure, he contributed a lot to reduce, protein-gap and vitamin-gap by taking up extensive dry-season cropping, intensive transplant rice cultivation, and crop diversification programme with an emphasis on horticulture and community forestry.

He was also instrumental in establishing Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) in Comilla. Different countries were interested to have CIRDAP headquarters in their territory. But it was Mr Haq's relentless

family of Rotary Clubs. Aziz-ul Haq was the Charter President of that club. Later on, in recognition of his outstanding service, the members of the Rotary Club of Comilla named their club building after him as "Aziz-ul Haq Centre".

Comilla people learnt a lot from him about production of fish-ry and agriculture, the way people learnt from Dr Akhter Hameed Khan about irrigation system and cooperatives.

As the first District Governor (1984-85) of Rotary International District 328, Bangladesh, he organised district Rotary programmes. He proposed adoption by the Rotary International of a global programme named ROFA (Rotary's Fight Against Hunger) and Operation Lift (Livestock, Fish, Fruits, Forestry) for Bangladesh. He always sought for greater involvement of Rotary in increasing productivity of Bangladesh agriculture. At the Rotary International Assembly in 1987, he was an Instructor/Group Discussion Leader.

Mr Haq was appointed as the Chairman of the Santosh Islami University Board of Trustees in 1988. As Chairman he rendered honorary service to the Islamic educational complex for promotion of work-oriented education.

In the year 1988, he was the Team Leader of local and foreign experts to study Cooperatives in Bangladesh, a subsidiary short-term project of the Government of Bangladesh in collaboration with the World Bank, UNDP, CIDA and DANIDA. He was a member of the Board of Trustees, Asian Institute for Rural Development (AIRD), Bangalore, India -- a non-government organisation with an International Board of Trustees.

My association with Mr Haq for more than a decade is always a soft memory of mine. I started my service life under his close guidance and supervision. I learnt a lot of useful things from him, which, I believe, will go a long way in my life. As his personal assistant, I gathered some practical experience in various fields. I found him as a great man of commitment, punctuality, active and hard-working. He had a vast knowledge on rural development economics and on its scientific application.

Mr. Aziz-ul Haq was a veteran public servant and a dedicated rural development volunteer. Since his retirement from the government service, he was more active in getting things done. He believed that in a developing country a thing done is a lot more valuable than a lot of more things that are left undone. He enjoyed and continued to serve the less privileged, the children, the aged and the poorest, the farmers and the artisans until the end of his life.

Hari Pada Bhowmik works at CIRDAP Finance Department.

Though religion will never cease to be a force in human life secularism will not lose its relevance either. The modern democratic polity cannot be sustained without the state being neutral to all religions or equally protective for all religions as Nehru put it. And it is in this sense that secularism in India will become more and more relevant. It should also be noted that we should not pose secularism and religious orthodoxy as binary opposites, as some rationalists tend to do.

his lifetime. It could not be reformed. The old textbooks with communal approach introduced during the British period were never changed. The Congress leaders themselves approved of them. Those who did not, could not show enough courage to demand essential changes in history textbooks. Thus most of the Indians grew with subtle or pronounced communal mindset.

In fact the educated were thus more affected with communal virus than the illiterate masses who never studied in schools and colleges. Similarly urban areas were more affected with communal virus than rural areas. Formation of Pakistan also greatly affected thinking of educated middle class Hindus and they looked upon Muslims as responsible for creation of Pakistan. They were never explained the complex political factors which brought about existence of Pakistan.

Thus the education system did not cultivate secular outlook and conservative political outlook con-

secular outlook among Muslims. The Jabalpur riots were followed by more intense communal violence in Ahmedabad in 1969 and Bhivandji-Jalgaon in 1970.

The end of seventies and early eighties witnessed number of, major communal riots in which hundreds were killed brutally. The RSS propaganda, on the other hand, was bringing more and more Hindus in the fold of Hindutva. All these developments were sure prescription for increasingly weakening secular forces in the country.

The decade of eighties saw rise of religious militancy among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. This decade also witnessed horrendous communal violence in North India. It was again during this decade that Khalistan movement came to the fore on one hand, and the Shah Banu and Ramjanamboomi movement; on the other. Mandal commission was implemented by V.P. Singh towards the end of eighties, which further gave boost to Hindutva forces. The caste stratification

assumes extremist postures and threatens minorities. It is this irresponsible extremism which resulted in the Gujarat carnage which again shook the world. The BJP Government tends to be buffeted between the VHP extremism and National Democratic Coalition compulsions. It thus fails to adopt consistent policies.

In the given political circumstances the future of secularism does not seem to be bright. However, one should not take short-term view based only on given context. Human beings have always struggled to transcend their given situation. A purely contextual view tends to be realistic but also restricted one. A vision, on the other hand, may not always be realistic but has a much broader sweep. And it is this broader sweep which shapes new realities and these new realities enables us to shape our future.

Though religion will never cease to be a force in human life secularism will not lose its relevance either. The modern democratic

Politics and politicians of the partition era

SIRAJUL ISLAM

THIS is a book of documents with a difference. With the purpose of making known the contemporary character of Muslim politics and political personalities, Professor Harun-or-Rashid has selected 95 unpublished letters passed during the period, 1936-47, between the major Bengal leaders on the one hand and two central leaders, MA Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, on the other. The Bengal leaders to correspond to the central leaders are A K Fazlul Huq (1873-1962), H S Suhrawardy (1892-1962), Khwaja Nazimuddin (1894-1964), Maulana Akrum Khan (1868-1968), Abul Hashim (1905-1974), Raghb Ahsan (1904-1975), and Hamidul Huq Chowdhury (1901-1992). A few letters were also exchanged with Bengal governor Sir Frederick Burrows, Lord Ismay (chief of staff of Lord Mountbatten) and Sir Eric Mievile (principal secretary to Lord Mountbatten). Bengal Muslim politics make the contents of the letters. Leaders were addressing the League president Jinnah and secretary general Liaquat Ali Khan to apply their good offices to clear the mess created by political rat racing and cutthroat factionalism. Every faction leader tried to create an impression among people that he enjoyed the favour of the 'great leader'. All top and even some mid-level leaders are seen to have been engaged in factionalism for consolidating their respective positions within the party and factions. Lucky and safest in the race was one who got the blessings of the 'great leader' Jinnah, the ultimate dispenser of validation.

The contents of the select letters mostly deal with relations subsisting between various factions within the Bengal Muslim League. Under the given situation, Jinnah and Liaquat found it expedient to present themselves as neutral and thus maintain their credibility with everybody. Liaquat and Jinnah's strategy was to reply rarely to the craving letters of aspiring Bengal leaders. Rashid's selected letters give the following statistics: 7 from AK Fazlul Huq to MA Jinnah and 2 from the latter to the former; 13 from H S Suhrawardy to Jinnah and three from Jinnah to Suhrawardy; 5 from Suhrawardy to Liaquat Ali Khan and one from Liaquat to Suhrawardy; 7 from Khwaja Nazimuddin to Jinnah and two from Jinnah to Nazimuddin; 2 from Akrum Khan to Jinnah and one from Jinnah to Akrum Khan. So far as the selection of this book is

concerned, one Raghb Ahsan, a mid-level Behari leader in Calcutta politics, wrote maximum number of letters to Jinnah and he was also to receive maximum number of replies from the leader. He wrote 28 letters to, and received 6 replies from, Jinnah. The ratio of Jinnah's replies to his Bengal correspondents was one to four.

When necessary, Jinnah issued decrees to which the faction leaders quietly acquiesced. They never took it as an offence if their letters were not responded to all. Being unsuccessful in receiving any letter from Jinnah, Suhrawardy is seen to have tried his luck to reach his leader via Liaquat Ali Khan, the secretary general of the League. Even Liaquat

(1941) and then from his second ministry (1943). In the wake of Huq's resignation from his second ministry, Jinnah remarked gleefully, "...today Fazlul Huq is no more, and I hope for the rest of his life he will be no more.... He has met his Waterloo" (p. 17). The statement was indeed a warning to other leaders to behave.

H S Suhrawardy aspired to be the sole caption of the Bengal ship after the fall of Fazlul Huq. But he had the Nazimuddin faction to obstruct him. Thus Suhrawardy tried to win Jinnah's favour by demonstrating his ability as an organiser. But to the Great Leader, organising ability was the secondary consideration for bestowing his favour. His primary

authority on the eventful decade 1937-47. He has very objectively analysed the faction ridden Muslim politics of the time and his narrative is extremely fascinating. His introduction and the letters evince that politicians of the time essentially stood for themselves. Rashid, however, seems to have a soft corner for Suhrawardy and his ideal for a united independent Bengal scheme. But we seek to know why should he enunciate this great plan as late as February 1947? Was he not aware that the Lahore Resolution was eroding fast after 1942 and the movement was proceeding towards a united Pakistan? Was he not a party to the trend himself?

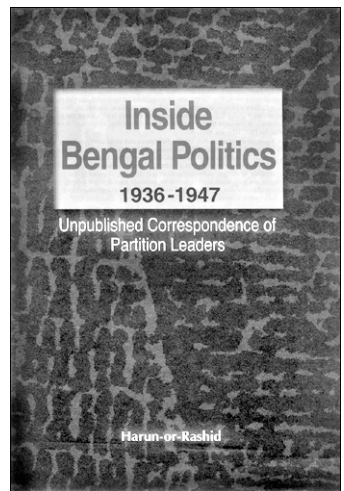
Suhrawardy though its political utility for Bengal was questionable. Suhrawardy's role in wrecking the Hindu-Muslim coalition Ministry of Fazlul Huq and in the events of Great Calcutta Killing and country-wide communal riots in the wake of his Direct Action programme had almost totally alienated him from the Hindu community and sealed all prospects of any Hindu-Muslim accord on the question of independent Bengal.

Finally, I must note that the documents in the book make such a fascinating reading that one must feel that as if he/she was reading a successful tragic fiction. In these letters, a reader would never miss to notice the character of contemporary politicians. It seems politicians could do anything to serve their own ends. Mutual relations among politicians assumed so much complexity that, as though all were suffering from paranoia, and all were seeking something at the expense of others, and even at the expense of self-respect.

Rashid's introduction and the select letters demonstrate how factions within the Muslim League were formed and re-formed and how blindly the Bengal Muslim League leaders obeyed the High Command, more precisely, Mr. Jinnah. Factionalism was rooted in personal ambition, regionalism, family control, kinship ties, patron-client relation, careerism, corruption, and sometimes ideology. The worst kind of factionalism we notice in the wake of the 1946 elections when the League scored a massive victory. It was really the victory of the Suhrawardy faction. But ironically, soon Suhrawardy and his faction were overtaken by the Nazimuddin faction. Backed by Jinnah, Nazimuddin led the 'divisionists' making the partition of Bengal inevitable and turning the election hero of 1946 into a villain of the tragic partition-drama of the very next year.

We congratulate Harun-or-Rashid for unearthing many important but hitherto unknown documents, which shed new light on the nature of politics and political personalities of the partition era. We also thank him for his very illuminating introduction to the book.

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An independent Bengal case could have been really forcefully presented, had it been a product of the secular principles of politics. With 51% Muslim and 49% Hindu populations, Bengal could remain united only under a secular politics, which eroded beyond repair through communal politics of the last decade. Suhrawardy established the Muslim League in Bengal and organised Muslim nationalism in Bengal. He organised the movement to overthrow the Hindu-Muslim coalition ministry of Fazlul Huq. AK Fazlul Huq's second ministry could have been used as a giant step forward towards a united independent Bengal eventually. But what role Suhrawardy played then? Animated by Jinnah, the Suhrawardy faction launched a relentless resistance movement to wreck the coalition ministry. The election campaigns of 1946, which Suhrawardy led, articulated the idea of a single independent Pakistan, though not so openly. Jinnah's communally charged Direct Action directive was faithfully executed by

While Prime Minister AK Fazlul Huq tried to stand on his own feet politically, Jinnah set all other actions against him. He was forced to resign from his first ministry