

Liberal Muslims Face a Dilemma in India

Mayhem on the Road — Again

For the umpteenth time, the main highway connecting the capital with northern and southern districts via Aricha ferry ghat was blocked on Tuesday following a clash the previous day between students of the Jahangir Nagar University and transport workers. Angry workers from Gabtali, a major bus terminal, blockaded the highway after five of their colleagues were reportedly detained by JU students and a number of trucks burnt. The violence perpetrated by the transport workers was even more heinous, as students were beaten up at Gabtali and on buses travelling on the road.

This latest incident, judging from reports, was sparked off by a minor accident between a truck and a JU bus, on the highway. But the relation between these two groups of citizens, both relying on the Dhaka-Aricha highway for their respective occupations, is such that even a minor incident can ignite a major conflagration. This is most unfortunate, since students are the future leaders of the country's socio-economic arena, while transport workers and owners are major contributors to the nation's economic progress. Group identification and gang mentality may well be responsible for pushing both the students and the workers into respective fortresses from which there is no compromise, no understanding of the other's problems or sympathy.

One thing, however, is inescapable. Even though Tuesday's blockade was precipitated by what may well have been gross overreaction on the part of the students following the bus-truck collision the previous day, students have not been responsible for terrorising anyone on the highway or at bus terminals or at ferry ghats. Transport workers on the other hand, have time and again held the public hostage by blockading highways and river crossings at the most flimsiest of excuses. For their part, the students seem to have become too prone to resort to vandalism at the slightest provocation, causing damage to public and private property, not to mention their reputation as a responsible, enlightened and principled body of citizens.

Quite clearly, the time has come for some serious discussion about the problem, involving university authorities, transport owners and workers' bodies, students' representatives, and Savar area political, administrative and police officials. These discussions should address how the highway could be made a safer place, and increase confidence of travellers including students of JU, most of whom have to travel everyday from Dhaka. This will have to include greater police vigilance on the road, and swift action against any vehicle which may appear to be violating existing laws.

In addition, the talks should centre around ways to find a solution to the problem of extreme hostility and distrust that currently exists between the students and the workers. A liaison committee may be set up with a local respected person, such as the Vice Chancellor of JU or Savar area member of parliament, acting as the chairman. This committee should have the task of keeping open a link of communication for dialogue between students and workers. The two groups, in the form of the JU Central Students Union and elected representatives of the transport workers and owners, should pledge to refrain from any instant, violent action whenever an incident may occur, and try to solve the resultant problem or settle grievances through dialogue. The political leadership and administrative officials of the area have a major stake in seeing this problem contained and solved peacefully, as does the government itself. With luck, common sense will prevail.

Teachers Indeed!

Four teachers of a Jamalpur primary school have been drawing their monthly salaries regularly till now although their school does not exist ever since it was eroded way back in 1989. The information is contained in a despatch from that district town, published in an English-language daily under the headline "Teachers Indeed!".

The headline smacks of a belief in old role models and a preference that people keep to it. Which means teachers should lead an exemplary life, something the students can learn from and emulate in their own lives. The police, the keepers of law by definition, are now accepted to be in the corruption game. This is also a kind of role model, but reversed. After the police came the contractors who filled the bill by supplying and building things of less value than contracted for. All trades and professions one after the other, fell in line with the police and contractors, hoarders and black marketeers. Engineers are no better than contractors and doctors are, in their bloom, worse in as much as heartlessness goes. Administration is riddled with corruption.

The last to join in this mad role-reversion game are the trusted keepers of people's money—the banks and their owners-operators. There are a plentiful lot of people who have borrowed from banks tens of crores of Taka and never paid back a paisa. It is inconceivable that they could do that without political clout and the bankers' connivance. Some indeed could have amassed a billion without losing a centimetre of his social standing.

And we are still sticking to our insistence that let everything go to hell—the teacher, hungry or whatever, must continue to be an ideal man. This in spite of knowing that there are teachers who supply answer scripts to exam halls and who sell question papers days before the exams. Are they any worse than those who coach short-cuts to success in exchange of pots of money? The whole educational set-up and system have been brought out of the class room and into the lap of the coach and the private tutor in a matter of a billion Taka swindle played on the brain power of the nation.

Still, if we rile against those four teachers, it is due to our own limitations of proportions and ideas of where the actual malaise lies. Show us a father who is a father as a father should be—not feeding his progeny on money earned on the quick. Very difficult. We must be able to be harsh and ruthless where it is socially and morally due and sympathetic and understanding where that will help. We can hardly play a heap of stones in insisting unred primary teachers to be ideal men while allowing indentors and investment trap owners and big borrowers — may be with kick backs offered to the right pockets—to carry off the wealth of the entire nation.

SHAH Bano died in Indore the other day, unsung and unwept. The Indian Muslims forgot her the moment the constitution was amended to specify that the community, not a law court, would fix and finance the alimony for its divorced women. No lesson was learnt then, neither by the Muslims nor the Hindus, from the intensity of emotions, for or against the Shah Bano case had built.

In one way, it was the triumph of the purists. But in another, it reflected the Muslims' fear of outside interference in their religious affairs. The more the Hindus emphasised on compulsions of secularism, the greater was the feeling of insecurity among the Muslims. It unnecessarily developed into a confrontation between the 'believers' and 'non-believers'.

Significantly, the Muslim intellectuals in Pakistan still recall what they describe as India's 'surrender'. The grand daughter of General Ayub, former martial law administrator, said last month in Peshawar at a seminar, where I was present, that as a secular society, India failed when it gave in to the demand based on religion.

The role of liberal Muslims in India was, indeed, disappointing. Their initial reaction was that of horror over the community's defiance to the Supreme Court judgment; they also made some noises. But practically all of them fell silent when fundamentalism took over. It was as if they were saving their skin.

I have witnessed a similar burst of Muslim intellectuals'

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outrage at the Jamia Millia in New Delhi petering into a tacit acceptance. Prof. Mushirul Hasan is a hapless victim. His observation in a weekly magazine that the ban on the Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was no solution is, by no stretch of imagination, a support to the book. He condemned it even when he made the observation. The Muslim intellectuals were rightly worked up because Hasan had not said anything objectionable. Vice-chancellor Bashiruddin Ahmed stood by him and so did some 20 faculty members. He closed the university sine die.

For the first time, a Jamia professor was bold enough to say that "while the Muslim community claims and needs the right of dissent and protest to organise itself against the Hindu fundamentalism, it is not prepared to concede the right to dissent of any intellectual in its own ranks." Another professor condemned the students, even when roughed up. The 50 odd Muslim students of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi said that what had been done to Hasan would only lead to "distance the sober intellectuals from our society."

But as the pressure of the community increased nearly 180 teachers of the Jamia signed a petition for his dismissal. Political demogags, hitched themselves for opportunistic reasons to the students' wagon. This was the

time when liberal Muslims began to withdraw, not only in the Jamia but in other institutions as well. A wall-poster, screaming "Hasan's dismissal or his dead" drove them indoors.

Why liberal Muslims do not join the battle is the question that has been bothering many in India for a long time. Progressive Hindu intellectuals challenge their community even when it is more or less united on a particular issue; why not the Muslims? I do not

I am not a scholar of Muslim theology. But I recall one incident from the life of Prophet Mohammed (SM) to infer that he was not against dissent. Whenever he would pass through a street in Makkah, a woman, who differed with him, used to throw dirt on him. This continued for some time. One day it stopped. The prophet was surprised. When there was no dirt thrown on him even on the subsequent day, he knocked at the door of the woman's house

Ayodhya, has demanded that all the structures in the disputed area should be left as they were till the court's verdict. But the Bharatiya Janata Party's reiteration at its annual session in Gujarat that the Ram temple would be constructed has raised the fears of Muslims once again. The fundamentalists have got yet another opportunity to heighten the community's fears.

The reason why religious zealots have been able to contaminate the gullible students at the Jamia is the despair in which they live. Those who have joined the university or have migrated to the area are the run-aways from prejudice and bias of the majority community. Somewhere along the line at some time or the other they have felt threatened and they have taken refuge at a place where the 'mullaism' rules the roost. The population has developed a ghetto mentality and it readily believes those who say that Islam is in danger. Any dissent is seen as an inroad and hence resented.

But where the community has gone wrong is in its assessment that it would be able to protect its entity by raising the walls of religious bigotry. This has only deepened the Hindu prejudice and revived the fears of old days. Both communities are going apart, with fewer and fewer social contacts. In fact, the Hindu and Muslim abadis (exclusive habitations) are a stark reality today. And the

distance between the two is more than before.

The Muslim community is justified in fearing the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. It has a point when it feels that it is not treated fairly. But what it fails to appreciate is that the rule of law in India is so pervasive and public opinion still so strong that the Hindu chauvinists cannot have their way. For example, the BJP will not dare demolish the Babri Masjid. If it could, it would have done it long ago. The majority Hindu community does not want that to happen. The credit for saving the mosque does not go to the Muslim fundamentalists but to the country's commitment to secularism, however watered down it may be today.

Dissent is an integral part of a democratic society. The Indian polity is a political and religious pluralism where the people have a right to differ. If liberal intellectual inquiry is smothered, the Muslims, who are in a minority will suffer the most. That the Jamia, which has a long tradition of secular values, should be the scene of fanaticism is tragic.

The fallout will be the grist for the Hindu fundamentalists' propaganda mill against the Muslims. They will restate the fires of prejudice by arguing that secular India has not been able to make any dent in Muslim bigotry. They may not succeed in whittling down the secular ethos but they will make a plausible case that the Muslims still follow obscurantist leadership and zealous preachers. The sad aspect is that all this will be done for electoral politics.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

think that Islam has anything to do with their attitude. Were it to, Pakistan and Bangladesh, both Muslim countries, would have been under the rule of fundamentalists. In fact, political parties with religious credentials have done badly at the polls in both the countries.

My impression is that the Muslim intellectuals in India are reluctant to stick their neck out. They would rather stay alone. They would rather stay away than get involved in the rough and tumble of dissent. The result is that they have been passed over. They are now a sad lot, criticised by the Hindus for not speaking out and suspected by the Muslims for having reservations even when "the community's interests are at stake."

to enquire whether she was all right. He found her ill and gave her all the assistance he could render.

That being the ethos of Islam, why fundamentalism is increasing among the Indian Muslims is the question. Perhaps it is due to the threat they perceive to their identity in a country where they are only 12 per cent. Perhaps communal riots and poor economic conditions had made them exaggerate the threat. Perhaps the lack of education — there are hundreds of Muslim dropouts in schools and colleges — has made them a prey to religious fanaticism.

The Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi dispute has also come in handy to the fundamentalists. True, an all-party delegation, which went to

Watts to Blame for L.A. Lawlessness?

Kevin J. Kelley writes from Washington

Now that the United States is picking up the pieces of the American Dream strewn across Los Angeles in recent rioting, black leaders, analysts and politicians — especially politicians — are trying to explain the cause of the violence. As Gemini News Service reports, the cause of American racial tension is far more simple to explain than the solution.

Anger flares across America



expectancy than a man in Bangladesh.

"We are the future," declared Richard Weinstein, dean of the school of urban planning at the University of California's Los Angeles branch.

"What is happening here is already happening to other major cities. It is hard to imagine how these kinds of questions can be addressed without federal attention. It means a whole reordering of domestic priorities."

At the same time, some of the causes of the LA outburst are unique to that area. While riots broke out across the country, even in neighbouring Canada, no major violence occurred in Chicago, New York and several other cities with large populations of poor blacks.

The videotaped police beating of black motorist Rodney King — and the subsequent acquittal of the four accused officers — reflects the unusually

high degree of tension between uniformed authorities and racial minorities in Los Angeles.

Last year, an investigating panel confirmed that many members of the LA police force harbour racist attitudes and engage in unwarranted violence. The Los Angeles police also emphasise high-tech and high-speed intervention rather than the costlier method of cultivating a day-to-day rapport with neighbourhood residents. The ratio of police to citizens in LA is two per 1,000 people, the lowest proportion for any city in the country.

The poor training and insufficient resources available to the Los Angeles police come from the budget-cutting that has been underway in California for a decade, ever since the state's voters forced a drastic reduction in property taxes.

California's economy, while still the tenth biggest in the world, has lagged badly of late, further limiting social spending. Nearly 700,000 jobs have been lost in Southern California, which is heavily dependent on industries wounded by cuts in US military spending.

And although Los Angeles has had a black mayor since 1973, the 74-year-old Tom Bradley lacks the power to implement reforms, particularly in policing. Bradley has also done little to promote job opportunities and improve hous-

ing conditions in the infamous Watts district, the city's main black neighbourhood which was ravaged by rioting 27 years ago. Tellingly, that earlier upheaval, which took 34 lives, was triggered by another incident involving white police and a black driver.

African-Americans in Los Angeles also feel threatened by other immigrant groups. Blacks today comprise a little more than 10 per cent of the city's total population, with whites accounting for 44 per cent, Latinos for 34 per cent and Asian-Americans for 11 per cent.

According to census projections for the year 2000, the percentage of blacks in the city will shrink slightly, with Latinos increasing to more than 40 per cent and the number of Asians surpassing blacks. Whites are expected to soon account for fewer than two in five Angelenos, as LA becomes even more polyglot in its composition.

What civic boosters have long depicted as a key source of the city's dynamism now stands revealed as perhaps a prime factor in its unravelling. In hardly any other city in the world do so many different peoples live in such contrasting proximity to one another.

Relations between blacks and Korean-Americans are especially raw. A number of Korean-owned businesses were singled out for looting and destruction following the Rodney King verdict.

The rioters were motivated in part by the March 1991 killing of a 15-year-old black girl, shot in the back of the head by a female Korean grocer in a videotaped dispute over a bottle of orange juice. The shopkeeper received a light sentence, sparking angry protests over alleged racism on the part of Koreans toward blacks.

Gang violence among black teenagers is also more ferocious in Los Angeles than in almost any other American city. The city's soaring homicide rate, though concentrated in predominantly African-American districts, has been a strong incentive for whites to flee to segregated suburban enclaves. Black-on-black crime is growing rapidly in many other cities as well, prompting more and more politicians to demand a crackdown on lawlessness.

The rioting is virtually certain to embolden those opinion-leaders who argue that violence in black communities must not be explained as a symptom of economic despair and racial inequality. A few notable African-Americans have already joined the chorus calling for greater emphasis on personal responsibility and less tolerance for anti-social behaviour among poor blacks.

It remains to be seen which political course the nation will take, in response to the sacking of parts of the country's second-biggest city. Given the prevailing conservative outlook, however, it seems likely that tougher law enforcement will take precedence over efforts to eradicate racism and to alleviate socio-economic crises.

KEVIN J. KELLEY is the editor of *Toward Freedom* magazine.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Peace and stability

Sir, In my letter on Mr. Golum Azam's case published in your paper, I did put a question saying — "Mr. Golum Azam is claiming that he never lost his Bangladeshi citizenship but does he possess a Bangladeshi passport?" In reply, some correspondents asked whether it was indispensable for a Bangladeshi to have a passport in order to get his nationality confirmed. Do all Bangladeshis possess passports? Well, for me, or even for the Prime Minister of Bangladesh or the Leader of the Opposition, it is not compulsory to have passport just to prove their citizenship but it is indispensable in case of Mr. Golum Azam because the then Bangladesh Government had cancelled his citizenship. Moreover, Mr. Azam entered Bangladesh with a Pakistani passport as a citizen of Pakistan. In this circumstance, the State can file a case with the court of justice against Mr Golum Azam for his

illegal stay in Bangladesh as a foreign citizen.

Now let us come to the issue of 'Gono Adalat' (people's court). The verdict passed by the said court may be considered as a public demand because almost every family in Bangladesh had lost at least one family member or nearest relative during the war of liberation. Those who were actively associated with the occupation army should be held responsible for genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. But there stands one vital fact that after the liberation of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the then government granted general amnesty to all the war criminals and collaborators. Hence, after twenty years, formation of a 'gono-adalat' to try certain war criminals is not logically, legally or politically valid. Now the question arises, what was the actual intention behind granting general amnesty? The intention was obviously a noble one. Perhaps they didn't want

to disturb the peace in the greater national interest. Bangabandhu's soft heart also acted for this. So, formation of the gono-adalat has rather undermined the dignity of the post-liberation government as well as the country's judicial institutions. Still, people's sentiment acted to form this people's court. I think, the verdict of the gono-adalat may be placed before the authority as a public demand for legal consideration. Of course, the organizers of the gono-adalat can also institute a case with the court against Mr. Azam with legally acceptable charges, one being his active involvement in the mass-killing carried out by the Pak army during our war of liberation.

It is sincerely expected that none will undertake any activity which might disturb the country's peace and stability. Let us all work for the well-being of our nation.

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India and Israel

Sir, Since I was a boy of 12 I used to enjoy Indian films. I could still remember films like Anarkali, Uran Khotola, Aan

and many others. The other day I have seen the film 'Naya Kadam' in which the story gave much importance to the fact that all human beings are equal — we all breathe the same air and our blood is of the same colour. Such Indian films generate the feeling of love and affection. We admire and respect the people of India. Sub-continentwise, we are all of the same race and culture. Knowledgeable and learned people believe that all major religions of this world teach good things, to be good human; reward for good deeds and punishment for evil deeds etc.

We know India fought and struggled for independence. Similarly the people of Kashmir are also struggling for independence. As they believe in such a destiny, they cannot be termed as terrorist.

We observe that in the recent changes of Indian foreign policy India has decided to establish diplomatic relationship with Israel. This is quite a normal move and Israel being a nation deserve recognition. But I felt sorry reading a news item that the Indian Government would seek help from Israel for anti-terrorist expertise in which Israelis are now considered best (a modern Gestapo unit?).

Colonial powers divided

over manhandling of a civilian by Los Angeles police (disgracing L.A. law?) coloured the community sentiments, these unlawful activities of some racists reveal their dissatisfaction over social justice once more.

Despite lingering racial tension in many neighbourhoods, cross-cultural relations are growing among different ethnic populace in the Country of Rich and Famous boasting integrated multi-cultural new generation alongside conservative ethnocentric subcultures.

Evidently, the widespread free-for-all showdowns have somewhat downgraded civic respects for US that championed Civil Rights, Anti-apartheid, Anti-communism, Human Rights, Counter-aggression, and is now destined for Utopian Universe and must have exposed the disheartening development of American morality since the discovery of New World over five centuries ago.

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