

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The Spanish Moriscos: Were They True Muslims?

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

In my last two letters, published in the issues of 20 April and 5 May, I wrote about the prohibition of Islam in medieval Spain, the forcible conversion of the Muslims into Catholicism, the massacre and the final expulsion of the remaining Moriscos (most of whom professed Christianity in public but practised Islam in private) from Spain (1609-1611). When at the end of this long and cruel persecution, the Morisco survivors arrived in different parts of the then Muslim world (Egypt, Algeria and Morocco), they thought that finally they had reached the end of their sufferings. Unfortunately, it was not so. No generalised statement can be made about the treatment they received from fellow Muslims in these host countries. It varied from place to place and often depended on factors beyond their control. Needless to say, they tried to cope with the problems as best as they could and often with success. However, there was one, in particular, which besides causing them great pain and suffering, touched the core of their inner soul and which they had never expected to encounter. That was a problem concerning the process of construction and reconstruction of identities, meanings, social and religious values, which even today is so common to immigrant communities all over the world. (I, as an immigrant can vouch for it personally).

Serious doubts were raised in certain quarters in these countries about the authenticity of their devotion to Islam. Were they good Muslims, bad Muslims or Crypto-Muslims? They had Christian names, they spoke a language which was rather different to that of their hosts and their eating habits were also different. In short, they looked too Christian and European (after all, most of them were of mixed Hispano-Visigothic and Arab or Berber origin). Islam, for them was the symbol of their collective experience and hence their identity. To them the word Islam meant a lot more than to many others—it was loaded with emotional, ritual, religious and even ideological implications. To deny it or to raise doubts about their adherence to it, meant almost a denial of their very existence. The purpose of this paper is to analyse their situation with a view to helping the reader to draw his or her own conclusion on whether the Moriscos were true Muslims or not. Luckily, the Muslims do not have an organised ecclesiastical authority (there are, of course, theological experts to interpret the law and to give religious guidance) to act as an intermediary between them and their God. Therefore, it follows that in Islam there is no one, who is authorised to issue a document certifying the validity of one's

claim to be a true Muslim or otherwise. So we are forced to look for other methods to examine such a claim.

The basic Islamic doctrine (the *shahada*) is very straight and simple and does not leave any room for doubts or interpretations i.e., "La ilah illa Allah wa Muhammad rasul Allah" meaning "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God." Unlike other major monotheistic religions, Islam's prophet is not a divine figure. He is a human being, albeit of the highest moral standards whose life and work are to be emulated by all Muslims. The acceptance of and obedience to this basic doctrine, in my opinion, are the first requirements of being a true Muslim.

Next is the requirement to practise the five Pillars of Islam: First, reciting the confession of faith (*shahada*) as often as possible (at least once in one's lifetime); second, performing the five obligatory daily *namaz* after the ritual ablutions; third, paying the *zakat* for the poor; fourth, fasting from dawn to dusk for thirty days in the ninth month (Ramadan) of the Islamic calendar; and fifth, performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) at least once in a lifetime. These then are the central precepts of Islam. Now we shall examine how well these Spanish Moriscos performed these duties.

Before we do that I think it would be worth our while to recapitulate the circumstances under which the Moriscos lived for several generations in Spain (1492-1611). After the fall of Granada, the last Muslim kingdom in Spain (1492), the Spanish Muslims became a conquered people. Although for a short time legally they enjoyed equal rights, soon the conquerors started treating them as serfs. The Muslims were denied the right to carry arms. Very soon they lost their right to acquire new land and properties. Many choice properties were confiscated. The tax system was revised to levy special taxes on them. In certain parts of the country they were forced to wear distinctive badges and live in specially designated areas. Even these humiliating measures were not enough for the Crown and the Church. So in December 1499, a decree was promulgated authorising forcible conversion of all the Muslims into Christians. On October 12-1501, instructions were issued to burn all books related to Islam. All the mosques in the country were either razed to the ground or converted into Catholic churches. Good arable land in the valleys was taken away and given to Christian settlers from the north. Young children were separated from their parents

and sent off to the north (Castile) to be educated in the Christian way but the expenses had to be borne by the parents.

A series of other measures like the prohibition of the use of Arabic and Arab dresses, the banning of the Muslim ritual for sacrificing animals and the Arab baths were taken to acculturate the community and obliterate the last vestiges of Muslim culture. Luckily, these measures were enforced with more or less rigour in different parts of the country at different times because Spain's political structure as one single nation was still in the process of being negotiated and defined. Since no option but conversion or expulsion from the country was given, the vast majority of the Muslims went through the formalities of mass conversion and accepted Christian names, in private they continued to practise Islamic rituals. The conversion immediately changed their legal status. They were no longer classified as Muslims but as new-Christians or Moriscos. One of the principal reasons of forcible conversion was to bring them under the jurisdiction of courts of Inquisition (non-Christians fell outside its jurisdiction), which had been set up all over the country to seek out and punish the heretics, especially the new-converts (the Crypto-Jews and the Crypto-Muslims). If declared guilty, the punishment was death by burning at the stakes. So, these were the legal, political and social conditions in which the Moriscos tried to keep their faith alive for more than a century. Now we are in a better position to assess whether they were good Muslims, bad Muslims or simply Crypto-Muslims.

There is no doubt that the Moriscos with only a few exceptions accepted and obeyed the basic Islamic doctrine, "La ilah illa Allah wa Muhammad rasul Allah", because this was a question of inner faith and it could be maintained in secret but with the support of an extensive network inside the community. But as far as the requirement to practise the five pillars of Islam was concerned, it was not that easy to comply with. The *Shahada* could be pronounced as often as one wanted to but always in private. Any such pronouncement in public would inevitably lead a Morisco to the courts of Inquisition and then most probably to death.

The Moriscos could not observe the five daily prayers regularly. Since the prayers had to be performed within the confines of their homes and in a clandestine fashion, they were denied the right to carry arms. Very soon they lost their right to acquire new land and properties. Many choice properties were confiscated. The tax system was revised to levy special taxes on them. In certain parts of the country they were forced to wear distinctive badges and live in specially designated areas. Even these humiliating measures were not enough for the Crown and the Church. So in December 1499, a decree was promulgated authorising forcible conversion of all the Muslims into Christians. On October 12-1501, instructions were issued to burn all books related to Islam. All the mosques in the country were either razed to the ground or converted into Catholic churches. Good arable land in the valleys was taken away and given to Christian settlers from the north. Young children were separated from their parents

Was Congress Split Avoidable?

Dr Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

Evidently, Sonia Gandhi is very much in the run. She said that the decision would be made by the parliamentary committee of the Congress party as per convention. But this does not clinch the issue. What the parliamentary committee does is to generally endorse what has been otherwise agreed upon. Only it is formalised by that body. In other words, Sonia Gandhi continues to be a candidate for the top political office of the country as much as anybody can be a candidate on behalf of a political party.

Despite all the brave words that are being spoken, there is a feeling in the Congress rank and file that it would have been better had the three Working Committee leaders not walked out of the Congress. Strictly speaking, they were expelled. But, as everybody would agree, this came to pass because they chose to take a hostile stand about Sonia Gandhi being projected as the would-be Prime Minister of the country. Since all these details are widely known, it is not necessary to repeat them here. But perhaps the following three things need to be discussed somewhat candidly for they have a bearing on the future of the Congress party and the political life of the country.

The first one is whether the acceptability of Sonia Gandhi as a potential Prime Minister should have become a matter of such acute public controversy. This issue had been raised off and on but not as seriously as it was raised by the three members of the Congress Working Committee. Even some senior persons connected with the BJP leadership had referred to this issue. George Fernandes too had touched upon it. But the issue caught on only when three members of the Working Committee chose to take a public stand.

The issue has not yet been settled. The whole melodrama of Sonia Gandhi resigning and then withdrawing her resignation and the convening of a special session of the ACC has left behind a feeling that the matter has been pushed under the rug and no final decision has yet been taken. Evidently, Sonia Gandhi is very much in the run. She said that the decision would be made by the parliamentary committee of the Congress party as per convention. But this does not clinch the issue. What the parliamentary committee does is to generally endorse what has been otherwise agreed upon. Only it is formalised by that body.

Sharad Pawar might have been willing to play this role but for two reservations. One was the unfortunate fact that he was not allowed to play even the second fiddle. It was being played by Arjun Singh all the time. The rivalry between these two leaders goes back to a

decade. After the death of Rajiv Gandhi, both Sharad Pawar and Arjun Singh emerged as the main contenders for succession. That P V Narasimha Rao walked away with the mantle of leadership is another fact but that does not have to be discussed here. It was this kind of rivalry between the two which was always bothering Sharad Pawar. How to put an end to this situation must have bugged him constantly.

Thirdly, this rivalry between Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar should never have been overlooked or given due importance. For Sonia Gandhi to have permitted Arjun Singh to come so close to her as to virtually overshadow Sharad Pawar was, tactically speaking, a wrong thing. Had the gamble to form a new government paid off, it could still have been dangerous for the survival of the government. In that situation, Sharad Pawar could have threatened to walk out unless he was given his due. Balancing the interests and ambitions of both these heavyweights was a prerequisite for the smooth management of the party. In the existing circumstances, not only was Sharad Pawar consigned to the dog house, so to speak, Arjun Singh was virtually allowed to run the show.

There would be nothing original in saying therefore that Sharad Pawar was looking for an opportunity to settle old scores. With the failure of the attempt to form a new government and Arjun Singh (in the wake of that frustrated attempt) in the dog house and a potentially explosive issue about the original origins of Sonia Gandhi, all that Sharad Pawar had to do was to take advantage of the situation. Not to have done so would have been an act of total cowardice. He is generally known to be a cautious person. All these years he had exercised caution. But if he had to hit out, this was the time to do so and it did not take long to ignite an acceptable way of functioning sometimes.

Will Sonia Gandhi learn anything from this messy and avoidable experience? No one can answer that question. Only time will tell.

—Mandira

The author is a former Vice Chancellor of Delhi University.

Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

Towards Military Conflict Part II

I recall that Aga Shahi, the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations, interrupted Sardar Swaran Singh's speech by twice raising points of order. Both the points of order were basically for accusing India of interfering in the internal affairs of Pakistan and questioning India's dubious intentions towards Pakistan. But a more interesting point of order was raised by Jameel Baroody, ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations. Baroody was a Lebanese Christian who represented Saudi Arabia at the United Nations for a very long period of time. He was prompted to interrupt Sardar Swaran Singh by the Pakistani delegation. He proceeded to the podium and suggested that the United Nations was already seized of the problem of refugees in India; so there was no need for India to agitate the issue in the general debate. He then went on to make the extraordinary suggestion that Sardar Swaran Singh need not deliver his whole speech; the text of the speech had already been distributed to the members of the General Assembly and could be taken as read. This would save time of the General Assembly and would also help to avoid controversies.

Sardar Swaran Singh gave appropriate answers to the points of order raised by Baroody and Aga Shahi. He insisted on delivering his whole speech stating the case of India and Bangladesh. What was particularly notable was his sense of humour and its display as he came down from the podium after delivering the speech. All of us on the delegation asked him whether he was not upset about the interruptions, particularly the interruption by the Saudi Ambassador. Sardar Swaran Singh's response was: "You young people should understand that before I became the Foreign Minister or came to the Cabinet, for long years I was a lawyer practising in the courts of Jallandhar and other parts of the Punjab. I am used to calculated and frequent interruptions by opposing lawyers and related harassment. But Baroody underestimated me if he thought that I would give up making the speech to gain cosmetic approval from these delegations in the General Assembly."

The upshot of the General Assembly debate was a stark revelation of the fact that members of the UN did not react to critical political developments in member states on the basis of merits of the issues involved or high moral and human rights considerations, democracy and the rule of law which the UN upholds. When the agenda item on the East Pakistan crisis was put to vote, a resolution in which India demanded the fulfilment of the aspirations of the people of East Pakistan, an overwhelming majority of the UN membership, as far as I recall 111 or 114 countries, voted against India. There were two votes cast in favour of the resolution, those of India and Bhutan, and one or two countries abstained. This voting pattern in turn was used by the Pakistani delegation and the US as the basis to argue that India should be pressurised to withdraw its support to the East Pakistan Freedom movement. In casting their votes and in their policy statements, member countries articulated their assessment of the enormous complexity of the East Pakistan problem and the tragedies inherent in it.

Senator Edward Kennedy sought separate meetings with representatives of the Mujibnagar government, which was organised both in Calcutta and Delhi. He returned to the United States and spoke understandingly about the plight of Bangladeshis in the Senate, in American political circles and before the American media. Andre Malraux was so moved after visiting the refugee camps and talking to leaders of the Mujibnagar Government that he wrote about his desire, if possible to implement, to mount an army tank of the Indian forces to launch a war against the military oppressors of East Pakistan.

Being transparent about the ground situation and allowing foreign observers access to the refugees made an impact on world public opinion. By the middle of October Pakistan started receiving serious appeals and suggestions from distinguished persons and even from some governments to release Mujibur Rahman and to resume negotiations. India had to simultaneously make an assessment of the ground realities and imminent prospects. D P Dhar asked me to prepare a position paper for consideration by the cabinet committee dealing with East Pakistan. I was asked to analyse and assess the likely reaction from the major world powers and from United Nations members to India providing open military support to the liberation groups of Bangladesh which had the potential of resulting in an open war with Pakistan. He also asked me and S K Singh, then director in charge of external publicity, to visit Calcutta with a mission. He wanted us to speak to representatives of the Mujibnagar Government and the West Bengal Government to evaluate whether the government in exile and the various freedom fighters' groups could sustain their military operations considering the size and operational capacities of the Pakistani army.

S K Singh and I visited Calcutta in late September and in the first half of October. We jointly submitted a report to D P Dhar providing a categorical assessment that the Pakistani army was becoming progressively successful in neutralising the freedom fighters, including the groups consisting of former members of the Bengal Regiments and East Pakistan para-military forces and police personnel, all led by former officers of the Pakistan army including Major Ziaur Rahman. As far as I recall, our assessment was that the Pakistan army would overcome the resistance movement latest by January or early February, 1972 unless India improved its qualitative support to the liberation cadres, even at the risk of getting involved in another Indo-Pakistan war.

The position paper which I prepared about the likely international reaction to an Indo-Pakistan war contained the following assessments:

1. The international community was ambivalent about the prospects of an independent Bangladesh coming into existence.

2. There would be no disappointment or concern about the resulting predicament of the people of East Pakistan.



Outskirts of Dhaka: Freedom fighters in action Dhaka 1948-1971

3. If the Pak military regime succeeds in stabilising the situation the world would accept the *fait accompli* and support the Pakistan Government.

4. If India moves in the direction of a military conflict with Pakistan the US, western democracies and China will not only oppose India but provide full political and indirect military support to Pakistan. But the military support would stop short of direct involvement in the war by Pakistan's supporters and allies.

5. The Muslim countries will give general political support to Pakistan's military regime but it is unlikely that they would give any meaningful material assistance to Pakistan.

The members of the non-aligned movement would not have a united approach to the East Pakistan crisis. The non-aligned movement is fragmented. It will only indulge in impartial admissions while a majority of NAM members will support Pakistan's advocacy of the importance of safeguarding its territorial integrity.

6. Except for Bhutan, India's neighbours will have reservations about direct Indian intervention in a neighbouring country in the context of their own real or imagined threat perceptions about India. Russia would be generally supportive of whatever policy decisions India takes because of its strategic calculations vis-a-vis the US, China and the China-Pakistan-US nexus.

I also gave the general assessment that even though Russia would be sympathetic towards India, the United Nations and the Security Council would intervene successfully if the prospective war or conflict is prolonged. I concluded this assessment with the general opinion that the timing, the nature and the content of future support to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh should be decided primarily on the basis of consultations with our intelligence agencies and the armed forces headquarters. If their advice is that an open support will result in a surgical and short-term successful operation, then India could consider this option. If their assessment is that the conflict is likely to be a long one, the government should be cautious in converting India's general sympathy for the liberation struggle into full operational support.

Continued on Sunday...