

FOCUS

A Gutter-Level Poll Campaign
Plebiscite on Prejudice?

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

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Vajpayee groupies like Mr Pramod Mahajan took their cue from the PM. Mr Mahajan's outrageous comparison of Ms Gandhi with Ms Monica Lewinsky is an assault on decency. It was quickly followed by Mr Fernandes' vituperative remarks reducing Ms Gandhi's entire "contribution" to India to giving birth to two children. These remarks have rightly excited strong condemnation from scholars, political leaders and feminists. It is insulting to any civilised mind that Ms Gandhi, a full-fledged Indian citizen, should be put in the same category as Ms Lewinsky. It is even worse that she should be reviled in this gutter-

level campaign because she happens to be a woman, and a White woman at that.

Women like Ms Rabri Devi, Ms Jayalalitha and Ms Gandhi are being singled out for sexist barbs, the last two even by Mr M. Karunanidhi. Abuses like "crooner" and "kaalmukhi" are not used against men. Mr Fernandes chose to diminish Ms Gandhi to a mere bearer of children — a passive reproductive machine. He did not do this even to Rajiv Gandhi, no favourite of his.

The special "White" angle in maligning Ms Gandhi derives from the widely prevalent middle-class prejudice that White women are either saints (e.g. Mother Teresa, Annie Besant or Meera Behri) or (mostly) sinners (Monica Lewinsky). The latter have "loose morals". Even the chief minister of progressive Kerala once poured scorn over the outrage caused by the rape of two White women. What's all the fuss, he asked. For Whites, rape is normal, like having a cup of tea....

The Gandhi-Lewinsky comparison captures a stereotype, the opposite of the Bharatiya Naari, the artificially constructed Hindu woman of pure character. The White, foreign, *mleccha* woman is seen as sullied, immoral, a mere sex object. We should feel offended at this not only because the president of India's oldest party is being equated with a former White House intern, nor even because this insults Indian "motherhood", but because it reviles Ms Lewinsky (rather than the older, more powerful, Mr Clinton) for having had an affair. This amounts to revictimising the victim.

This mindset regards a rape victim as guilty — an "impure" woman who "must have done something". It is typical of the *sangh parivar*. Indeed, a former president of the BJP's Mahila Morcha, Mridula Sinha, says that wife-beating has "two sides". The same attitude characterises the parivar's adherence to Manusmriti, some of its leaders' defence of sati and the VHP's demand that women must not perform sacred rituals.

Even Mr Fernandes now uses the parivar's favourite language — e.g. terming all Congress members as hijras (leechus). Hijras are here contrasted, real, virile, strong males. All other sexual identities are inferior, low or unauthentic. The fact that the Mahajans and Fernandes use such language in the presence of Mr Vajpayee speaks of our political debasement and cynicism. It is hard to believe that Mr Fernandes really thinks that Ms Gandhi's claim to Indianess is primarily based upon her wearing a sari. The attack comes from political calculation. At the heart of all this is an attempt to tug at national loyalty.

This is grossly unfair. But clearly, the NDA thinks all means are justified by the end: defeat their secular opponents. On this logic, anything can be rationalised. Indeed, why stop at verbal attacks? Even character assassination is permissible. As is politicising Kargil, communalising the army. Scoring points like the small-town criminal lawyer can become a higher priority than grappling with substantive policies. Ultimately, it is an either-or choice. We must make it wisely.

Today's campaign confronts us with a stark choice, imposed by the decision of the BJP-NDA to concentrate on identity, and play with symbols. We are not being asked to choose between policies or candidates for what they do, but for who or what they are or claim to be: Indian or foreign, Hindu or otherwise. Their trade-marks are promoted through clever marketing.

However, we must take a stand against false patriotism, manufactured nationalism and Kargilised identities. We must reject "security" obsessions and macho symbols of "strength" divorced from flesh-and-blood people. The NDA-BJP campaign is an assault on our sensibilities: we are being asked to cater to xenophobia, legitimise male supremacism, and suppress plurality by wearing Mera-Bharat-Mahan on our sleeves, and fooling ourselves that our real problems are not hunger, deprivation, inequality, corruption or bigotry.

In this sense, this election is a plebiscite on prejudice. It is of course an extremely complicated affair with many competing parties, and conflicting choices. The BJP's opponents are divided. The Congress is in no great shape. The Third Force is almost finished. No one is presenting dazzling new alternatives. And yet, at one level, the choice is starkly simple. Either we succumb to the politics of false identities and vote for the NDA. Or we reaffirm our real priorities, re-emphasise our true concerns, and vote for secular, democratic parties. Ultimately, it is an either-or choice. We must make it wisely.

IVEN the approach of the final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, it seems worthwhile to record here the lengths to which right-wing Zionists will go to further their claims on all of Palestine against those of the country's native Palestinian inhabitants who were dispossessed as an entire nation in 1948.

To this very end, an article has recently appeared in *Commentary*, a small extremely conservative Jewish monthly, which attacks my life and story as a Palestinian by pretending to show that I am neither Palestinian, nor ever lived in Palestine, nor that my family was evicted from Palestine in 1948.

It should be remarked that this is the third such attack on me by *Commentary* in twenty years, the first being an enormously long critique in 1981 of my book *The Question of Palestine*, the second a reckless article in 1988 or 1989 entitled "The Professor of Terror," the third being this one, written by someone called Justus Weiner, an Israeli who claims to work for an obscure Israeli right-wing research centre in Jerusalem.

Weiner's argument is buttressed by his pretence that he spent three years on his study of my life, spoke to 80 or so witnesses, and found many inconsistencies in what he says is "my story," which he fabricates more or less at will. It seems astonishing that he obtained funding for this project, although he tactfully doesn't say why, how much, and from whom. Thanks to the extremely pro-Zionist *Daily Telegraph* his article has aroused the interest of the international press, which has been calling me for comment and reaction.

I didn't attend St George's School. This is an outright lie.

He does not admit that the school's records end in 1946, and I was there in 1947 or that my father and cousins had attended the school starting in 1906. Had he been a decent researcher he might have sought out one of my classmates, Haig Boyagian (who lives in the US now and quite coincidentally called me a week ago) and my mathematics teacher, Michel Marmour, a retired professor at the University of Toronto, for verification.

Weiner says that my mother was Lebanese, whereas she was only half Lebanese; her father was Palestinian. She had a Palestinian passport and in 1948 did in point of fact become refugee. The Talbiyyeh house was built for my family in 1932 by Sabi Samaha. Weiner gets that wrong too. The Egyptian branches of the family business were not nationalised but sold to the Nasser government; nor were they burned by revolutionary mobs but rather by the Muslim Brothers and so on and on. All this from someone who claims that I have falsified the past to pretend that I am a victim. What he cannot understand, and has not been able to understand from any of my writings, is the fact that I have been moved to defend the refugees' plight precisely because I did not suffer and therefore feel obliged to relieve the sufferings of my people, less fortunate than myself.

Weiner is a propagandist who like many others before him has tried to depict the dispossession of Palestinians as ideological fiction: this has been a constant theme of Zionist "information" since the 1930s. Actual sources are never given, but innuendoes are used. In the body of his article he does not name the people he allegedly talked to "on four continents" or the documents he consulted, or what exactly they said, when, and in answer to what question.

My cousin Robert, for example, told me that when at first he refused to talk to Weiner, Weiner then threatened him. And because he is relatively unknown Weiner tries to make a name for himself by attacking a better known person's reputation. I have had many such attacks levelled against me in the past. Weiner's attempt now may be useful as a way of discrediting all Palestinian claims to return and compensation, which will be a central issue in the terminal phase of the peace process.

Weiner's polemic also covers up the racism of Israel's Law of Return, which allows any Jew anywhere to emigrate to Israel, whereas no Palestinian, even someone born there, has any such right. If someone like Edward Said is a liar, runs the argument, how can we believe all those peasants who say they were driven off their land?

The Likud argument (Weiner's) is that the land all belongs to the people of Israel given to them by God. All the other claimants are therefore prevaricators and pretenders.

Luckily several survivors of 1948 from my family are still alive and well. My oldest cousin, the last person to leave our Talbiyyeh house, is eighty years old now and lives in Toronto. Why was he not contacted? As my widowed aunt's oldest son he negotiated with Martin Buber and took him to court when he refused to leave the house after his lease was up and our family returned from a year in Cairo. What about our neighbours, other relatives, friends, members of the church community? They were never contacted.

Several children of the pessotor who baptised me are still alive also: they could have been contacted. No: what *Commentary* wants is not the truth but the big Zionist lie. The irony is that a few weeks ago American newspapers carried a front-page story on the revision of Israeli history schoolbooks which, thanks to the efforts of the new Israeli historians and, of course, the Palestinian themselves, are beginning to acknowledge the events of 1948 as they really occurred, with the ethnic cleansing, destruction of villages, massacres, etc., which have for so long been denied.

It is not entirely surprising, however, that an American Israeli and an American Zionist journal turn out to be more Israeli than Israelis themselves, less honest, less willing to deal with facts, more inclined to propaganda and smear tactics, less likely ever to understand history or how their skewed perspective produces only calumny and falsehood.

I have always advocated the acknowledgment by each other of the Palestinian and Jewish peoples' past sufferings. Only in this way can they coexist peacefully together in the future. Weiner is more interested in using the past — either an individual or collective past — to prevent understanding and reconciliation. It is a pity that so much time and venom as he has expended couldn't have been used for positive purposes.

Courtesy: *The Dawn of Pakistan*

Defamation, Zionist Style

by Edward Said

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It is part of the Palestinian narrative to prove one's existence and history! The only problem with the school's records end in 1946, and I was there in 1947 or that my father and cousins had attended the school starting in 1906. Had he been a decent researcher he might have sought out one of my classmates, Haig Boyagian (who lives in the US now and quite coincidentally called me a week ago) and my mathematics teacher, Michel Marmour, a retired professor at the University of Toronto, for verification.

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Courtesy: *The Dawn of Pakistan*

Communal Politics: Dealing or Doing Away with?

by Monirul I Khan

The wise response of the progressive forces would be persistently upholding the ideological superiority of secularism than doing away with it. When it is visible its vices are permeable and when banned it gains virility. Thus the trade off is ours.

though their ideological basis might be apparently so. For instance, the conflicts between the Hutsu and Tutsi or Black and White or Chinese and Malays are different in terms of manifestation at the surface level but they run a common binding chord. And that common chord is hatred. Tutsi hate the Hutsu, Whites abhor the Blacks and Malays despise the Chinese.

There is a view differentiating religion from communalism.

The argument goes like this: all religious people are not necessarily communal. This is empirically true but the insulating factor is not precisely figured out. In other words, the argument does not clearly point out what is there in religiosity that prevents one turning into a communal person.

Concrete Basis of Communalism

To what degree communalism emerges from one's deeper commitment to a certain religious ideology? Is it a part of some political strategy? Such complexity merits one's attention to disentangle the knot.

For example, there is a proverbial saying about Muhammad Ali Jinnah that he was not a regular religious practitioner whom one can compare with a long bearded and white *alkhalat* clad *mullah*, still he championed the cause of the Muslims. In other words, even without being a religious devotee one may strategically use religious ideology to pursue non-religious goals. If not passion for religious ideology what else would then account for the emergence of communalism? This is something what we would like to call the concrete basis for communalism. It would allude to a sense of deprivation/exploitation/discrimination/subjection harboured in a person that from time to time may ventilate in communal terms. Although examples will not be few to illustrate how communal sentiment was whipped up to realise some ulterior motives, the most common is economic and political deprivation that provokes one religious/ethnic community against another.

Communalism is an outcome of a long drawn process. In simple terms the people of a religious community who feel deprived gather under common platform before they rise against the cause of deprivation. How that is alluded to by internal supportive condition? It goes like the following. Hindus were far ahead of Muslims both in terms of education and economic condition during the colonial period. Muslims sought to overcome the gap by religious rhetorics. Some might disagree with the above analysis in empirical terms. If the politics of Zia and Ershad, it might be argued, is compared with the variant of a communal

built-in communal spirit in both Hinduism and Islam because the evidence of backward consciousness of the community. However, in everyday parlance the connotation of communalism is generally branded as something reactionary.

This is not to rule out that there is no existence of religious fanatics who would not be carried away by the zeal of communal politics. What is notable, however, is the higher probability of coming across such fanatics more among the rank and file than the leaders. One may turn attention to the quite old Machiavellian tactic to appreciate the meaning of such inclination of the leaders to religious ideology despite the fact that in their heart such attachment is of doubtful quality.

One very pertinent example in this regard would be General Ershad who during his rule very religiously visited Dhaka city's mosques on several Fridays while his bold statement about his extra-marital life hardly matched with the religious edict. The meaning of communal riot would be correctly perceived if one filters it through the concept of hegemony as propounded by Gramsci. This concept says that the ideology of the ruling class emerged as a popular political leader despite his manifest religious tinge. Or how to account for Sheikh Mujib's joining the conference of the Islamic states being the head of a secular state? If it was to appease the