A liberal Muslim goes to America

IYANATUL ISLAM

West. A US-based academic of West must find a way to cooperate Indian origin, he is a fellow of the and co-exist with prestigious Brookings Institution. liberal Islamists who believe in The author of American Muslims: democracy, tolerance and pluralism, Bridging Faith and Freedom, he is but within the Islamic rubric'. engaged in an admirable quest to demonstrate the relevance of Islamic Bush's foreign policy' without subvalues in enriching mainstream scribing to the thesis of American American society. Khan suggests a imperialism. This is evident in his strategic alliance between America reaction to the 'civilizational diaand liberal Muslims to defeat Al logue' hosted by France in Paris. He Qaeda and their affiliates. Is this a was distressed by the way in which realistic proposition or a case of naive optimism? A cynic will point to the latter possibility, but such a conclusion needs to be preceded by an appreciation of the intellectual and ethical universe of an American Muslim

There are several strands in Muqtedar Khan's scholarship. They are clearly on display on his website entitled litihad which is seen as an ...intellectual tool to bridge the gap between Islamic texts and our contemporary context'. Khan rejects the view that secularism is the inevitable the French were using the Paris legacy of modernity. He draws attention to the way religion intrudes on colonial power seeking to dominate public life in the West, whether it is the debate over the banning of the by force. Clearly the objective was to Hijab in France or the discourse over the legality and morality of gay mar-villain and France as the internariages in the United States and tional hero that is defending interna-'unyielding support for Israel tional norms, the multilateral order ..among certain Republican politicians with evangelical connections.'

secularism' leads him to dismiss to Europe's history American colonial 'secular, Westernised Muslims' as ambitions are insignificant and as far being unworthy of playing a leading as democracy and freedom of reli-

and more

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

to be raised again.

of the Muslim heartland. As he puts it: 'Secular westernized Muslims have UQTEDAR Khan is one of little influence in the Muslim World. the rising stars among Islam has become the dominant Muslim intellectuals in the idiom of the Muslim World and the

He is a 'very vocal critic of George

gion was concerned the US was streets ahead of the French ... I reminded them that the US was, as former Secretary of State Albright pointed out, the "indispensable

His allegiance to America leads Khan to delineate the kind of role that American Muslims ought to play as citizens of that country. Writing in the New York Times. he sets the context of his thesis by emphasising that 9/11 has been a traumatic experience for American Muslims. They now face 'hostility and prejudice in many corners of society'. Yet,

Khan emphasises that liberal Muslims are critical of American foreign policy, concerned about Islamophobia in the West and the way in which it is fuelled by ignorance about Islam and the Muslims. At the same time, they are aware that one cannot 'blame the US or modernity for all the problems in the Muslim world.'

forum to depict ' the US as a newthe oil resources of the [Middle East] paint the US as an international and a champion of third world rights."

He reminded Europe of its double Khan's thesis of the 'myth of standards. As he puts it: 'Compared

'Agattya', mosquitoes

N our health culture, mosquitoes have since been in the centre-

stage, albeit with a negative stance. I am nevertheless tempted to

recall the anecdotes of the early fifties about mosquitoes that

Driven to desperation, a reader of "Agattya", a popular Bengali period-

ical of the day, wrote a letter to its editor asking what was the way out of

this veritable nuisance. The editor replied quoting a line from a hit song of

a Bollywood movie, Barsat, "Hamse na puchho, puchho Baharse" which

obviously directed the letter-writer to refer his question to Mr. Habibiullah Bahar who was then the provincial health minister under Pakistan

Mosquito-oil in those days used to be sprayed in derelict spots in the

city almost regularly by the employees of the Dhaka Municipality. In their rounds, the DM employees used to spray mosquito-oil in the surrounding area of the office of the daily Azad -- the premier Bangla newspaper of the time -- in the vicinity of the Dhakeswari Mandir in old Dhaka. The DM employees were given complementary copies of the paper whenever they came to the Azad premises on their rounds. As indeed, over

the period, mosquitoes decreased considerably, but the premises were

not out of the woods. When asked the reasons, the DM employees were

embarrassed; they however came out in the open with their reply. They

said they deliberately left some unkempt spots unattended to allow

mosquitoes to breed. They feared if all the mosquitoes were gone they

stood to loose their job and their families would starve. The Azad authori-

ties were stunned by their reply. An unspoken "truce" was enforced tout

de suite between the two sides, and the matter was left at that point, not

To note, over time, health minister Mr. Bahar accomplished an excel-

Coming back to "Agattya", may I request our noted academic and

cultural personality, Mostafa Nurul Islam (as one personally involved

with the "Agattya") to do a piece recapitulating its role in promoting the

cause of the Bengali people along with the contribution of a band of

those pioneering journalist-writers who ventured to bring out "Agattya"

confronting great odds of the day. It remains a signature-periodical in the

realm of our socio-cultural movement, and merits a space particularly in

Lastly, a word on Mr. Mahbub Jamal Zahedi. A founder-editor of the

'Agattya", Mr. Zahedi is now a paralytic patient. We wish him early recov-

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lent job in ridding the Dhaka city of mosquitoes.

our history of journalism so patently.

invaded the Dhakaites bitterly and made their life miserable

regime. Quip aside, novelty of the reply was no less striking.

this traumatic experience also provides a window of opportunity to reconstruct the identity of American Muslims. Some positive changes are underway, such as endowments to fund Islamic Studies in American Universities, but a lot more needs to be done. As he puts it: 'We need to

demonstrate that Muslims in this country constitute an ethical and philanthropic community that cares about humanitarian causes, about America and Americans and stands for justice and rights as embodied in the Constitution.

He reminds fellow Americans that there are mutual obligations. 'They cannot allow events overseas to foster anti-Muslim sentiments and Islamophobia at home'. Ultimately, Khan sees a reconstructed American Muslim identity in which '... Muslims must realise that the interests of our sons and daughters, who are American, must come before the interests of our brothers and sisters. whether they are Palestinian, Kashmiri or Iragi'.

Khan interprets anti-Americanism in the Muslim world as the product of dual forces. Thus: ..they are the manifestly unjust consequences of current and past American foreign policies towards the Muslim World and the use of America as the "designated other"

in Islamist discourses seeking to reconstruct an Islamic identity and create a global Islamic political power.

In his view. Islamic fundamentalists are 'roque Islamists'. a variation. it seems, of the idea of the 'roque state' favoured by American policy makers. Rogue Islamists have managed to use foster implacable hostility towards the US on a global scale. They need to be resolutely opposed by 'liberal Muslims' because it is a battle for the 'soul of Islam'. Ultimately, ordinary Muslims will be the victims of anti-Americanism

Khan chastises prominent Western scholars, such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, for failing to appreciate that modern liberalism is compatible with both Islamic values and Islamic history. As he notes: 'Liberal Islam is that interpretation of Islam that is sensitive to liberal values such as religious tolerance, freedoms of conscience and speech, civil liberties, social iustice, public welfare, and educational development ..

Many liberal concerns have been protected in the heydays of liberal Islam in Islamic Spain, under Emperor Akber in Mughal India and under the Abbasid caliphate in the heartlands of Islam.'

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As noted, Khan suggests a strategic alliance between America and liberal Muslims to delegitimise and ultimately defeat rogue Islamists. But he laments the fact that American policymakers '... have so far shown interest in only using moderates to give legitimacy to some of US policies in the Muslim While one appreciates Khan's sense of betrayal, a cynic might be tempted to say: 'I told you

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Whose fundamentalism?

The Congress, the Right and the Left



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

T his first press conference as Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh said he's opposed to "fundamentalism" of both the Right and the Left. This may appear a reasonable statemen of neutrality and fairness. But the context in which it was made compli cates matters.

That context was set by journalists' questions about the government's attempt to reverse the "saffronisation" of education, and the Savarkar controversy triggered by Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar.

It wasn't the Right, but the Left, that the questioners put in the dock - as if the Left were somehow guilty of distorting history and corrupting education. "Neutrality" in such an unequal situation, with the dice loaded against one party, doesn't speak of fairness or balance.

Yet, the UPA has given the impression that it wants to please the Right, not the Left. Thus, Dr Singh gave his first exclusive interview to RSS organ Panchajanya, in which he didn't criticise the Sanah

The UPA has done little to bring justice to the Gujarat victims, barring the Railways' inquiry into Godhra. Guiarat failed to find a mention in Dr Singh's first address to the nation. The UPA has been passive on Ayodhya.

Similarly, the UPA hasn't vet mplemented the Common Minimum Programme's promises to the toiling poor, like an Employment Guarantee Scheme, food security, and a doubled health budget.

Its economic agenda is preoccupied with issues outside the NCMP, like raising foreign-investment ceilings in telecom and insurance. It has been soft on the NDA's malfeasance in the Centaur Hotel sell-off and the AK-47 deal --despite damning evidence.

The relationship between the UPA and the Left, its crucial supporter, has become uneasy. Although Dr Singh says he has "great faith" in the Left's "inherent patriotism", he wrongly tried to settle the "foreign experts" controversy over the Plan review by dissolving the consultative committees alto-

The Left feels the UPA takes it for granted. The Left's support to the

authority and believe in the "one leader, one people, one nation". Fascists, ultra-nationalists, and Right-wing moral police fall in this group.

Then, there are "market fundamentalists" who have limitless faith in the virtues of greed: the state -indeed all human agency -- must be kept out of social and economic life; the market will take care of itself. All fundamentalism is parochial and profoundly distrusts openness,

In today's India, Left-wing fundamentalism doesn't exist as significant force. Of course, there are some fringe groups like remnants of former Naxalites. But they are marginal. They command no influence or power -- unlike the sangh parivar. It's the Hindutva Right and the "free-market" dogmapeddlers that constitute the real threat to Indian democracy. Dr Singh should systematically combat the threat -- with his Left-wing allies.

UPA isn't based on cynicism. It genuinely wants the UPA to flourish because that will weaken the Hindutva forces. A durable Centre-Left alliance will undermine the BJP's claim to the "natural" leadership of coalitions.

The Left's attempt to give a propoor thrust to the UPA's agenda is perfectly legitimate. The Left's 60odd Lok Sabha MPs are crucial to the UPA's survival. When they press for certain policies, they do not exercise power without responsibility. They act democratically.

Dr Singh has a historic chance to forge an alliance between the Left's radicalism and the Congress' inclusive centrist orientation. This will give the Congress a healthy populist direction. Therefore, it's especially unfortunate that Dr Singh wants equidistance from the Left and the

What's "fundamentalism"? If connotes fanatical, dogmatic belief in the infallibility of the scriptures. Right-wing fundamentalism has many variants. There is religious fanaticism which interprets sacred texts literally and wants to violently reorganise society along their

There are social ultra-

inclusion and democracy

In today's India, the two main avatars of Right-wing fundamentalism are Hindutva and neoliberal market-fundamentalism.

Hindutva rejects India's religiouscultural pluralism. It has visited untold havoc upon us through hateacts and by ideologically poisoning

Market fundamentalism is equally harmful. It takes a Social-Darwinist view of the world, in which only the fittest may survive: others deserve to die. That's a law of Nature! Fundamentalist policies have worked against the poor, further marginalising them, and further privileging the rich. This has widened social-economic disparities explosively, spreading insecu-

Under neoliberalism, global inequalities have reached unprecedented proportions. Of the world's 100 largest economies, only 49 are nations; 51 are corporations. The top 200 multinationals' combined turnover exceeds the aggregate income of all countries barring the The Top-200's sales are 18 times

the combined income of the 1.2 billion people (24 percent of the Top-200 account for 27.5 percent of world economic activity.

In India too, neoliberal policies have had disastrous effects on employment, regional balances and incomes, and caused agrarian

Now consider Left fundamentalism. The term at worst applies to Stalinism, which forcibly collectivised agriculture, super-exploited workers, destroyed the Soviets (or councils) of workers, solders and peasants -- and hence, killed the seeds of a new kind of democracy sown in 1917. Stalinism turned the USSR into a police-state.

All this was justified by quasireligious dogma that gave socialism a bad name. Integral to it was the 'one-party state" and "dictatorship

"Fundamentalism" also describes, somewhat less appropriately, Charu Mazumdar-type cults of violence, with Annihilation of the Class Enemy as the sole method of 'revolution", and countless groupuscules for whom Marx, Lenin, Stalin or Trotsky are the Gospel. They substitute clichés for thought. The slogan, "China's chairman is our chairman" is an

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India's organised Left parties have repudiated or freed themselves of the Stalinist legacy. None even remotely believes in the "oneparty state" or centralised planning. 'Left fundamentalism" is a parody. The Left, with all its inadequa-

cies, represents responsible, solidly democratic politics, committed to justice and equality. One might disagree with tactics, but not with its moral clarity, openness and commitment to popular emancipation. It's the Hindutva Right and the

'free-market" dogma-peddlers that constitute the real threat to Indian democracy. Dr Singh should systematically combat the threat -- with nis Left-wing allies.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian

Creating an environment for development

MD. ABDUL KADER AND AYUB

NITED Nations has presented us a new dream namely, "Millennium Development Goal (MDG)". It is expected that, if this dream can be realised, it will contribute significantly in poverty reduction. Bangladesh has promised to achieve the goal by signing the charter. But it will not be any exaggeration to say that, cumulative anarchism, terrorism and over all criminalisation are main barriers in the way to achieving the MDG. In addition, there remain incidences of furious and ruinous natural disas-

This year Bangladesh experienced not only over-flooding but also over-raining. More than 40 districts were affected by flood. Crops washed away including seed and seedbed of next year. About two

million houses and other structures were damaged. Five million farmers have been directly affected. So far loss in agriculture sector alone stands as 2291.16 crore taka. According to the Disaster Management Ministry, total loss caused by the flood is 700 crore dollars which amounts to about 42 thousand crore taka.

If we watch the post-flood situation carefully, two important pictures emerge. First of all, the most affected people are none other than the poorest of the poor. They don't have plough and cows as they are landless, their hut was their only property. But flood has taken away that too. And this happens almost every year. Thereafter they leave their ever-known village for unknown destinations -- cities and towns. A life of uncertainty begins. They try heart and soul to adopt an occupation for their livelihood but

misguided when some of them involve in different anti-social activities. Space of terrorists and terrorism expands and law and order situation deteriorates. Different antisocial activities like terrorism, extortion, hijacking and kidnapping are increasing in the society in this way. Thus Bastis have become a centre point of crimes.

These floating people have become a burden for the city. This current of rural-urban migration of poor and disaster-stricken village people has turned into one of the reasons for disorder and instability in urban society. The government and its agencies are facing difficulties to keep law and order situation under control. But the government has to protect lives and properties of the citizens for its own sake. However, the reality proves that government is failing in this respect to some extent. A lot of destructive and terrorist incidents took place in recent time with very disturbing fallouts. Common people are passing their days in fear and helpless-

To overcome the situation many experts have expressed their con-

The government is also trying to tackle the situation by creating new law enforcing agencies. But so far all attempts have failed, because it could not lessen people's concern. We want a strategy based on the reality of our country. All these antisocial elements are increasing

cumulatively due to some basic causes like lack of resource, unemployment, hunger etc. If we can adopt proper strategy in this regard, then we can think of freedom from this ugly situation. We have to take initiative to keep resource within the reach of common people through proper and effective distribution. Realistic and practical measures have to be taken so that villagers have not to come to cities leaving their home and hearth. Affected people have to be rehabilitated within their original areas. Resources have to be provided to them so that they can meet the demands of their livelihood. Still now, agriculture is the main-

stay of livelihood for the majority of our population. Still, we have a lot of land resource which are unused, less used or misused. But those supposed to own this valuable land,

have no rights there upon. Land is in the grip of landlords, jotdars and land grabbers. Well experienced landless peasants are pursuing agricultural production in exchange of minimal wage. Out and out, land reform is essential for proper distribution of the resources and optimum output there from. Everyone in the country hoped after the independence that land rights of the landless people would be established by land reform. Each successive government of the independent Bangladesh promised in this regard but none ever tried to implement.

There are 40 lac acres of khas land in the length and breadth of the country. If we can distribute this land among real landless people in proper way, we can say that a Herculean task would be completed from the perspective of poverty reduction. In all corners of the country, there are haors, chars, and beels. Though these are khas properties, land grabbers have been occupying all these in illegal way. If these lands can be recovered and distributed among the landless poor then the damaging trend of rural-urban migration will be diminished. Many odds of the society can be reduced. An example in this regard can be cited as model. Ghughu beel of 9.5 hundred acres in Pabna district has been recovered now, but once it was in the occupation of illegal land grabbers. Movements of landless people around the beel enabled them to own the beel. By establishing their rights in the beel, they have been able to drive away their poverty. Besides, they have been able to create an environment of solidarity and stability free from terrorism and other odds. They got awareness and assistance from Samata, an NGO in the field. They have formed Women Action Committee through which they are fighting against superstitions, and for establishing rights. Again, they are involving themselves in the empowerment process through election to local power structure including Union Parishad.

Many sectors, irrespective of government and non-government. are talking about Millennium Development Goal. Let us try to assure it with deeds.

Md. Abdul Kader is Executive Director of Samata and Avub Hussain, a researcher and development activist.

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