THE ORIGINS OF COMMUNALISM

Salimullah Khan, Professor, General Education Department of ULAB, is one of the most respected academics and essayists of the country. In this interview with *the Star* magazine, Khan shares his insights on the origin of communalism in the subcontinent, language of rumours and the politics behind it.

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Politicians, journalists, writers and intellectuals are used to saying that people have been living with "communal harmony" in this region for a thousand years. Do you agree with this statement?

How can one talk of 'communal harmony' without identifying what one means by a 'community' or its derivative 'communal' for that matter? They signify completely antithetical stuff in South Asia and in most of the world. 'Communalism,' is an extraordinary word. It's a special gift of India to the English vocabulary. It signifies something completely different in South Asia than what it does, say, in North America. It hits like 'fascism' in your face. However, it is a British import to India, it thrived well there. I would go so far as to say that the British conquest of India would not have been complete without it. Many Indians, or a good majority of them, stood behind it, didn't they?

I think it suffices to cite Rabindranath Tagore, just for one, who too succumbed to this hideous ideology of communalism, in so far as he too considered the six centuries of Muslim rule in South Asia as 'foreign' (*bideshi*) rule and equated that with British rule. This was Tagore in his middling years, say around age 45 to 50. Did he ever shy away from this position? I am sorry to say, never, at any rate not entirely. For him, as for many others in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Mughal rule or pre-Mughal rule in South Asia was just as foreign as British rule. And I believe this world view lies at the root of communalism in Indian history. It originates in the view that Indian history might be divided into Hindu, Muslim and British eras. Curiously, one does not find the British as Christian era.

Ever since Islam came to Bengal, and I cannot vouch for India as a whole, until the advent of the British you cannot find any evidence of what may be called 'communal' riots or communal warfare. As the late Professor Abdur Razzaq used to say, you cannot cite one single war between a Muslim king and a Hindu king fighting on communal ground.

Interestingly, Akbar in trying to occupy Bengal in that good old imperial manner sent a Rajput general Mansingh. And he was opposed by Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore, Isha Khan of Mymensing and many others (the legendary twelve feudal kinglets), wasn't he. So both Hindus and Muslims, in a manner of speaking, opposed Akbar. It cannot be depicted a Hindu struggle against a Muslim king. In modern parlance we can say it was a political struggle for regional autonomy. One refers to occasional clashes between some Muslim clerics or Qazis with sundry Hindu priests, as one finds in the biographical accounts of Chaitanya. But I don't think they reflect patterns of conflict.

It is only in this sense that, namely by postulating an absence, one can say communities lived in communal harmony. There was hardly a Muslim community by the 16th century in Bengal. But who can say that there were no conflicts or contradictions. Again this presupposes the meaning what do you mean by harmony? I would define it in a negative way. By excluding warfare I will call it harmony. In the five hundred years or so before the British presence you would hardly locate one single fight or war exclusively between Hindus and Muslims, or between Buddhists and Muslims.

Do you think the term 'minority' while referring to people of a particular faith is a contradiction to democratic ideals?

It all depends on what do you mean by community, again. If the nation is a community then how is it constituted? In one view, the nation is composed of its members, the 'population' as it is called today. Fie, we don't even use the word "people" any longer, we call it "population". There is a mechanisation of the concept of the "people", it has been turned into a statistic, i.e. the "population". Now the population consists of men and woman, nearly 50 percent are man and 50 percent are woman, which is called sexual division, a divi-