

Making of a composite culture

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Allow me to begin with some recollections. In the 80s of the last century, I spent four happy and purposeful years in this city, a resident of Mugga Way, travelling across the length and breadth of the continent, dividing my time fairly evenly in robust discussions with Australian friends, watching cricket, learning to play golf, endeavouring to rejuvenate Indo-Australian relations and highlighting the communality of interests that characterize it. Some of this was acknowledged in a reference made to me in the House of Representatives on April 6, 1989 and in a Report of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade later that month. Since then our two countries have travelled a good distance and today have a vibrant relationship.

The recollections of those years are vivid in the minds of the Ansari family. I was therefore happy to receive today's invitation from my old friend, Professor Amin Saikal, to talk to this learned audience on a subject that, one way or another, is of relevance to humanity in terms of history, culture and contemporary geopolitics.

Professor Saikal had suggested a lecture 'on any aspect of the civilization of Islam' and utilizing this leeway I propose to focus today on the interaction that characterized the role played for over seven centuries on the soil of India by people of Muslim faith. Today, they constitute the third, perhaps the second, largest community of Muslims in the world. They are geographically dispersed, linguistically heterogeneous, unified in faith, influenced by its culture as well as by local cultural practices, and are citizens of a vibrant democracy. By the same logic, they are called upon to respond to contemporary domestic and global challenges having an impact on them,

A look at the map is helpful. India as a geographical entity was not terra incognita to the Arabian Peninsula or other lands of western Asia where Islam had its first followers. This was particularly true of contacts with the trading communities of the coastal regions of western and southern India; records show that established trade route existed well before the advent of Islam. So was the presence of Indian trading communities in those lands and tradition records Prophet Mohammad's familiarity with persons 'who looked like Indians.'

India was thus a known land, sought after for its prosperity and trading skills and respected for its attainments in different branches of knowledge. Long before the advent of Muslim conquerors the works of Al Jahiz, Ibn Khurdadbeh, Al Kindi, Yaqubi and Al Masudi in the 9th and 10th centuries testify to it. Alberuni in early 11th century studied Indian religion, philosophy, sciences, manners and customs and produced a virtual encyclopedia remarkable for its detail and objectivity. In fact, a closer reading of his short second chapter 'On The belief of Hindus in God' might have saved centuries of misperceptions arguably on theological grounds.

The new faith came to India through diverse channels – through traders in the south and through conquerors and travelers in north-west. A historian has noted that 'the presence of Muslims in India can be traced to three different sources: conquest, immigration and conversion with the mingling of different stocks taking place in a manner that was beyond social or political control,' adding that the vast majority of Indian Muslims are converts and that the main agency for conversions were the mystics, principally in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The imprint of this interaction is writ large and was delineated many years back with some precision by another historian. Indian culture, he wrote, 'is synthetic in character. It comprehends ideas of different orders. It embraces in its orbit beliefs, customs, rites, institutions, arts, religions and philosophies belonging to society in different stages of development. It eternally seeks to find

a unity for the heterogeneous elements which make up its totality. At worst its attempts end in mechanical juxtaposition, at best they succeed in evolving an organic system.'

Heterogeneity was the core of this process. It was a characteristic of the social, cultural and philosophical landscape. Interaction with its own people who had opted for a new faith produced a variety of responses, conscious and sub-conscious. One aspect was formal and political, another was social and intellectual. The first adapted to the ground reality, benefited from it and in turn induced the second.

What was the ground reality? In a general sense and right through the medieval period of Indian history two sets of readings are available: the imperial system in northern India and the more modest principalities in the south that developed their own distinctive identities before eventually succumbing to the political pressure from the north.

It is a historical fact that for almost seven centuries from the eleventh to the eighteenth century the state system in India was headed by persons who professed to be Muslim. Despite this at no stage in this period was the state theocratic nor was Islam declared to be the State religion; instead, the norms of governance were regal in a non-denominational sense. Practice thus drew a clear distinction between rules emanating from the Sharia and those from Zawabit or Jahandari (secular state laws). Overtime, the imprint of the structure of Indian society was visible, and so was adaptability. Professor Richard Eaton has observed that 'the Indo-Islamic traditions that grew and flourished between 711 and 1750 served both to shape Islam to the regional cultures of South Asia and to connect Muslims in those cultures to a worldwide faith community.' He adds that 'it is precisely this double –movement between local cultures of South Asia and the universal norms of Islam that makes the study of Indian Islamic traditions so rewarding.' He also notes that 'even within South Asia, one finds enormous variations of Islamic traditions not only across social classes and over time, but also across space.'

II

Adaptability and accommodation, and attendant creativity, can thus be depicted as two dimensions of Muslim culture as it developed and flourished in the Indian subcontinent. This was reflected on a wide canvass in many segments of social life. A survey of these in a single lecture can only be illustrative. I therefore propose to explore this in four areas: statecraft, social life, creative arts, and spirituality.

I begin with statecraft. There is a consensus among historians that 'it is a mistake to see the Moghul Empire either as an Islamic state, in which Sharia prevailed, or a Muslim state in which the Muslims, as an entire community, were part of the ruling class.' Thus a doctrine of 'supra-religious sovereignty' became the operative norm. This was reflected, among other things, in 'the composition of the Moghul governing class where, by 1707, the Rajputs and other Hindus came to have a share in the resources as well as positions of authority within the state roughly to the extent of a third of those available.'

The same was also true of earlier dynasties. The classic text on the medieval Indian theory of kingship is Ziauddin Barani's 14th century work, *Fatawa-I Jahandari*, on the techniques and rules of government. It is based on an examination of the working of the institutions of Delhi kingship for over ninety five years. Its postulates were amplified and re-enunciated in the 16th century by Moghul Emperor Akbar's chief secretary Abul-Fazl Allami in his monumental work *The Ain-I-Akbar*, which itself is part of a larger work *The Akbar Nama*.

Barani's principal dictum was that the institution of monarchy was necessary for social order and the enforcement of justice and that 'the king should have the power to make state-laws 'even if in

extreme cases had to override the Shariat.' Barani defined Zawabit or state-laws as 'rules of action which a king imposes as an obligatory duty on himself for realizing the welfare of the state and from which he never deviates.' Abul Fazl's observations on the subject followed and amplified a line of thought no different from the earlier Indian prescriptions of Kautilya's Arthashastra written in 4th century BC.

Two instances recorded by historians substantiate the Moghul approach. Responding to a letter from the Persian king Shah Abbas I, Jalaluddin Akbar said 'we must be kind to all people who are the treasures of God and have mercy for everybody no matter what their religion and idea is (since) the state of each religious group has two alternatives: either he has made the right choice or if he has made a mistake in choice, he must be pitied not blamed.' Several decades later Aurangzeb, notwithstanding his anxiety to restore the primacy of Sharia in state matters, wrote to one of his officers: 'What have worldly affairs to do with religion? For you there is your religion and for me mine.' In another letter, he observed: 'what concern have we with the religion of anybody? Let Jesus follow his own religion and Moses his own.'

The same was the policy in the Deccan kingdoms where in the philosophy of governance the necessity of a pragmatic approach towards the subjects of the state prevailed. Thus, in the Qutbshahi kingdom of Golconda, 'very little differentiation was made between the Hindus and the Muslims so far as the affairs of the state were concerned' and 'the whole outlook of the state as centered in the person of the Sultan was non-communal.'

The resulting situation has been summed up by another historian: 'Thus the Akbarian concept of a state based on peace and harmony with votaries of all religions, a composite ruling class representing basically the regional ruling elites and a section of middle bureaucracy, and promotion of a culture based on the poly-cultural traditions of the country combined with Persian and Central Asian culture had struck deep roots and could not be dislodged, despite the efforts of some narrow minded theologians enjoying state support.'

This approach to governance reflected itself in the social life of society. While religious communities, and caste sections within each, lived in segments, compulsions of daily life led to normal cooperation. A study of the pre-Moghul period has observed that 'it was somewhat difficult to distinguish the lower classes of Muslims from the masses of Hindus' and that even in the case of conversions 'the average Muslim did not change his environment which was deeply influenced by caste distinctions and a general social exclusiveness. As a result Indian Islam slowly began to assimilate the broad features of Hinduism.' Record shows that 'there was in principle no change in the basic pattern of life and thought between 1350 and 1600.' Thus 'the blending of social customs was prompted by necessity but it was not hindered by sectarian or caste considerations. The result was a cultural pluralism that continued for centuries.'

In an essentially feudal order, any assessment of social life has to be in terms of social classes. The condition of the poor was aptly described by a 17th century Dutch trader who observed that 'the common people lived in poverty so great and miserable that the life of the people can be depicted or accurately described only as the home of stark want and the dwelling place of bitter woe.' Those at other steps of the social order, middle classes and higher nobility, were better off. The empire had 120 cities and around 3200 towns. Trade and commerce flourished though by the middle of the 18th century the direction of external trade changed and some of the traditional centres of foreign trade suffered considerable losses.

Developments in creative arts were distinctive and constitute a significant phase in the annals of Indian art. The period saw the arrival of a new style of architecture reflected in the mosque and the tomb in the religious domain and the palace, pavilions, town gates, gardens and landscape architecture in the secular domain. The combination of scale, detail and good taste is breath-

taking.

The same was the case with painting in which the refined Persian style was combined with the lively vision of Indian artists. The Hindu art of mural painting underwent a remarkable change with the arrival of the Mughals. The themes of the paintings were varied and often focused on religion and mythology. Towards the later part of the Mughal rule, the Rajput School and Pahari School of painting began to develop under local patronage. Though Rajput school was indigenous by nature, after coming in contact with Muslim painting it was completely transformed and gave birth to Kanga School of painting in the 18th century.

Particular effort, under royal patronage, was made to translate religious texts and other major Sanskrit works into Persian. The cultural intermingling in Persian and Sanskrit literatures was a characteristic of the age and has been dwelt upon by scholars. Akbar had the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Atharvaveda translated in Persian. Yet another area of excellence was the writing of history and so was calligraphy, vividly visible to visitors on the panels of the Taj Mahal.

Nothing characterized the medieval Indian society as well and as comprehensively as the broad realm of spirituality. The 11th and 12th centuries were a period of vigorous Sufi tradition in Khurasan (eastern Iran and western Afghanistan) that was transmitted to northern India and later to other areas. This coincided with the growth of the Bhakti movement that stood for intense personal devotion and complete surrender to God and in the unity of the godhead and brotherhood of humans. It began in South India in the 7th-8th century to bridge the gulf between the Shaivas and Vaishnavas. The Bhakti preachers disregarded the caste system. It is in the life and teachings of Kabir (b 1440), Guru Nanak (b 1439) and Chaitanya (b 1485) that the Bhakti movement may be considered to have attained its zenith. Their teachings had an impact on the development of local languages. The two trends imbibed each other's thoughts, traditions and customs. Both minimized the differences and distinctions between the Hindus and the Muslims and promoted mutual understanding and had a perceptible impact in the cultural domain.

The liberal ideas and unorthodox principles of Sufism had a profound influence on Indian society. 'By the thirteenth century, Sufism had become a movement and it would not be an exaggeration to say that it brought Islam to the masses and the masses towards Islam... The Sufis made an intuitive choice of the common ground of spirituality between Hindus and Muslims and opened the way for a mutual appreciation of aesthetic values which could revolutionize the whole cultural attitude of the Muslims.' The liberal principles of Sufi sects restrained orthodox Muslims in their attitude and encouraged many Muslim rulers to pursue tolerant attitude to their non-Muslim subjects. Most Sufi saints preached in the language of common man. This contributed to the evolution of various Indian languages like Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Kashmiri and Hindi. The impact of Sufi Movement was deeply felt on some renowned poets of the period, like Amir Khusrau and Malik Muhammad Jayasi who composed poems in Persian and Hindi in praise of Sufi principles.

A later manifestation of this, at a philosophical level, was Dara Shikoh's attempt to identify the convergence of the two faiths. In his tract 'The Confluence of the Two Oceans', he 'thirsted to know the tenets of the religion of Indian monotheists...and did not find any difference except verbal in the way they sought and comprehended the Truth.' Another example is a mid-17th century work, Dabistan-e-Mazahib, described by a scholar as the greatest book ever written in India on comparative religion.

III

This manifestation of Muslim life and thought in India over many centuries depicts adaptability, creativity and diversity. It is sui generis. This is reflected in scholarly assessments: 'Indian Islam has been remarkable for its identification with India without ceasing to be Islamic'. It adds 'color to

the bizarre pageantry of India.' A study on Muslim practices in medieval Punjab cites Barbara Metcalf's observation that 'Islam in India has found its expression in both local and cosmopolitan contexts and both these levels have shaped Muslim religious thought and practices.'

This situation underwent a drastic and traumatic change with the advent of British rule and brought forth a multiplicity of responses from social groups and religious leaders ranging from religious reform to militancy. Resistance to the creeping foreign control took the shape of a series of peasant revolts in different regions. The theologian Shah Abdul Aziz proclaimed resistance as religiously valid. The uprising of 1857 was thus the culmination of a process in whose aftermath serious introspection about the Muslim condition took divergent routes, all focused on education. Barbara Metcalf has written in some detail about 'the diversity of Islamic movements' that surfaced and has cited with approval Albert Hourani's judgment that eighteenth century was 'the Indian century of Islam. On the one side, new theological institutions of repute like Darul Ulum at Deoband and Nadwatul Ulema at Lucknow were established while on the other Syed Ahmad Khan and his colleagues struggled against odds to bring to segments of the community modern education in the shape of the MAO College that later became the Aligarh Muslim University. Individuals apart, however, modernism made limited headway unlike the reformist currents engendered by the Brahma Samaj in Bengal and the Arya Samaj in Punjab.

Politically, Muslim approaches to British rule after 1857 ranged between general allegiance (to seek some modest benefits), to protestations on specific issues, and occasional resort to revolutionary language and behaviour. After World War I [Mahatma Gandhi](#)'s effort to forge a broad Hindu-Muslim front by linking and supporting the Khilafat Movement with the Non-Cooperation Movement met with some success but could not be sustained. Record shows that in the late 20's and 30's leaders of the freedom movement having varying viewpoints struggled with competing impulses on political and societal challenges confronting them. Scrutiny also shows that a lesser dose of cultural bias and a greater element of cultural accommodation may have brought forth greater harmony and, perhaps, prevented the tragic happening of 1947. The political perceptions and maneuvers accompanying it did not have the support of most of the religious scholars, exemplified by Hussain Ahmad Madani of Deoband.

Ten years after the event, the resulting situation was graphically expressed by the McGill scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith: 'The Indo-Muslim community, battered by outward circumstances and gripped inwardly by dismay, has stood disconcerted, inhibited by effective self-recognition and from active vitality. And yet not only is the welfare of that community is at stake, now and for future generations is at stake. Also the histories of both India and Islam will in part turn on the success or failure of this community in solving its present problems, on its skill and wisdom in meeting the challenge of today.' Three factors, he observed, would impact on this response: size, past tradition, and involvement in 'the transcending complex of India.'

The process of recovery from the trauma has been gradual and uneven, at times painful, and was and continues to be influenced by three impulses: autonomous initiatives, policy correctives, and stated or unstated impulses to discriminate.

Indian Muslims have hesitatingly sought to tend their wounds, face the challenges and seek to develop response patterns. Success has been achieved in some measure; much however remains to be done. Educational levels remain below the national average and are particularly noticeable in regard to women where slow pace of social reforms also results in low social mobility and workforce participation.

Autonomous correctives are one aspect of the matter; interaction with the larger community of citizens is another and requires candid dialogue and careful calibration without a syndrome of superiority or inferiority. The failure to communicate with the wider community in sufficient

measure has tended to freeze the boundaries of diversities that characterize the Indian society.

In 2005 the government appointed a committee to delineate the contours of the problem. Its findings (The Sachar Committee Report) showed that on most socio-economic indicators – education, livelihood, access to public services and employment market across the states – Muslims were on the margins of structures of political, economic and social relevance and that their average condition was comparable to, or even worse than, the country's most backward communities whose condition is officially acknowledged. This was followed by the Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (the Ranganath Mishra Commission) in 2007. Another report, in 2014, evaluated the implementation of the decision taken and concluded that though 'a start has been made, yet serious bottlenecks remain' and asserted that 'the development of the Muslim community must be built on the bed-rock of a sense of security.'

It is evident from the compendium of official and civil society reports that the principal problems confronting India's Muslims relate to (a) identity and security, (b) education and empowerment, (c) equitable share in the largesse of the state, and (d) fair share in decision-making. Each of these is a right of the citizen in terms of the plural, secular and democratic dimensions of the Indian polity. The defaults by the state are therefore to be corrected at policy and implementation stages by the state at the federal and state levels. Political sagacity, the imperative of social peace, and an informed and educated public opinion play an important role in this.

Is this being done in sufficient measure in word and deed? There are questions in the minds of many citizens about it, about our commitment to the core values of pluralism and secularism, about our capacity to resist the onslaught of ideas and practices that militate against values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity prescribed for us by the Constitution.

The urgency of giving this a practical shape at national, state and local levels through various suggestions in the public domain is highlighted by enhanced apprehensions of insecurity amongst segments of our citizen body, particularly Dalits, Muslims and Christians. The objective of various groups indulging in strong-arm tactics 'is to make minorities feel unsafe and insecure, to force them to become furtive and fearful while practicing their faith or celebrating their festivals and thereby destroy India's pluralist heritage.' These, along with other manifestations of distress in different social segments and regions, tend to suggest that we are perhaps a polity at war with itself in which the process of emotional integration has faltered and is in dire need of reinvigoration.

This rejuvenation is unavoidable given Indian society's living experience of diversity and plurality, tolerance and co-existence. The challenge today is to educate opinion about the consequences of intolerance, of narrow nationalism and of illiberal democracy and to ensure that it does not become pervasive by associating with fellow citizens who wish to retain secular principles and practices.

The Muslims of India, inheritors of a rich legacy, cannot but be a part of this process as actors and as beneficiaries. They recall with pride Abul Kalam Azad's advice to them in October 1947 on the morrow of the Partition: 'come, let us vow that this is our land, we are for it, and that basic decisions about its destiny will remain incomplete without our voice.' They are committed to the Constitution and to the constitutional procedures for grievance redressal. They are concerned over rising incidents of intolerance and violence but there is no inclination in their ranks to opt for ideologies and practices of violence. This is reflective of their moorings in a composite society and their non-alienation. They retain and reiterate their claim of being citizens, endowed with rights and duties bestowed on them by the Constitution, and 'a form of citizenship that is marked neither by a universalism generated by complete homogenization, nor by particularism of self identical and closed communities.'

Despite some shortcomings and occasional aberrations, the Indian model of accommodation of diversity in a country with a complex societal make up remains a relevant example for a globalizing world that requires all members of its citizen-body to go beyond mere tolerance to acceptance of diversity in all aspects of life. Imperatives of ultra-nationalism and geopolitics in recent decades have resulted in projecting the Muslim as 'the new Other' and this Otherness is being perceived as a spectre haunting the world very much like radical ideologies of earlier ages. This drift into apprehension and intolerance has to be resisted and reversed; sanity demands that all of us pull back from the precipice and anchor thought and action on civic virtues national and global.

END

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