

## **Islam in India: The Challenge of Secularism**

By Wajajat Habibullah

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### Introduction:

A concise description of Islam in the making of the modern Indian state is to be found in the words of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India's first Education Minister, who for his invaluable contribution to the nation, was posthumously awarded India's highest civilian honour, Bharat Ratna in 1992. **Maulana Azad**, as Congress President stated, in the 1940 Ramgarh Session of the party, the role of India's Muslims in the making of India:

"I am a Muslim and profoundly conscious of the fact that I have inherited Islam's glorious traditions of the last thirteen hundred years...I am equally proud of the fact that I am an Indian, an essential part of the indivisible unity of Indian nationhood, a vital factor in its total makeup, without which this noble edifice will remain incomplete...This thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality. This cannot be done artificially. Nature does her fashioning through her hidden processes in the course of centuries. The cast has now been moulded and destiny has set her seal upon it." <sup>i</sup>

This is a sentiment not unique to the Maulana although rarely so lucidly expressed. But in today's environment, with the rise of ISIS in West Asia, the extremism sweeping across several Muslim countries, and apprehensions blatantly voiced by elements even within our own country that Islam is alien to India and irreconcilable with democracy, its place in the modern Indian state needs to be placed in context. Is our own society also riven by divisive impulse and can our country survive such internal infraction?

**The Meaning of Hindu** The word Hindu is very much misunderstood and misused.

The fact is that both the words "Hindu" and "India" are of foreign origin. The word "Hindu" is neither a Sanskrit word nor is this word found in any of the indigenous dialects and languages of what we know as India. It should be noted that "Hindu" is not a religious word at all. There is no reference of the word "Hindu" in ancient Vedic scripture.

It is said that the Persians used to refer to the Indus a major river which flows partly in India and mostly in Pakistan, as Sindhu. However, the Persians could not pronounce the letter "S" correctly in their native tongue and mispronounced it as "H." Thus, for the ancient Persians, the word "Sindhu" became "Hindu." The ancient Persian Cuneiform inscriptions and the Zend Avesta refer to the word "Hindu"

as a geographic name rather than a religious name. The ancient Greeks and Armenians followed the same pronunciation, and thus, gradually the name stuck.

The ancient Greeks used to mispronounce the river Sindhu as Indos. When Alexander invaded India, the Macedonian army referred to the river as Indus and the land east of the river as India. The Greek writers who wrote about Alexander preferred to use the same name.

For the Arabs the land became Al-Hind. The Muslim rulers and travellers who came to India during the medieval period referred the Indian subcontinent as "Hindustan" and the people who lived there as Hindus. Thus, if we go by the original definition of the word Hindu, any person living in the land beyond the river Indus is a Hindu and whatever religion he or she practices is Hinduism, the word Hindu is a secular word. Hinduism denotes any religion or religions that are practiced by the people living in the Indian subcontinent. In the strictest sense then the proper word to use for those people who follow the Scriptures of The Vedas is "**Sanatana Dharma**", not "Hinduism" as is commonly used. Yet Hinduism today has evolved into a faith that includes those who are comfortable with being labelled as Hindu. All religions are a way of life and all religions seek to provide a path for humans to liberation of the spirit. But because the Hindu faith springs from no single revelation or dogma, as is the case in the Judeo Christian tradition, and has remained always in a state of dynamism it has been both absorptive and contributory-witness the 19<sup>th</sup> century inputs of Arya and Brahmo Samaj.

The most significant example of this characteristic is the history of Buddhism, which took birth in India, but had come to near to disappearance in the Indian heartland by the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium when it had reached its maximum spread across the world, till its revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the principles of Buddhism, including the elevation of the Lord Buddha to the level of a deity, incorporated into the body of Hinduism by the eighth century sage Adi Shankaracharya. have remained a constant in the evolution of the Hindu faith finding expression in Gandhi's principal of Ahimsa.

### **India-Building a nation**

India represents an unprecedented experiment in nation building after centuries of being part of empires that have laid the foundations of its economic, social and geographic boundaries. This experiment is unprecedented because it differs radically from the idea of a Nation State based on European experience which based national boundaries on the strength of ethnic, linguistic and religious commonalities. Switzerland indeed presents a successful experiment but that is restricted to successfully holding three nationalities together in a form of State based on maximum autonomy in a

minuscule geographic expanse. The concept of 'nation' was no doubt disseminated across the world in an age of colonialism, when subject people looked with envy upon the concept that had fuelled such domination. US President Wilson's insistence at the time of drafting the Treaty of Versailles that the concept be respected gave a formal basis to such an approach. And so small states, emerging from colonial rule, often ethnically diverse with these diversities sometimes hostile were, as in the division of the Ottoman empire, sought to be molded into nation states, with, as we can now see, lasting resentments or, in breaking the yoke of colonial power, seeking themselves to build nations.

Yet South Asia with its sustained engagement with Islam has built a unique identity both for itself and for India's Islam which carries significance for a world moving into an era of globalization. In this region, a consequence of colonial rule was the birth of Pakistan, inspired by an outstanding Indian lawyer with a solid background in English law, seeking to build a nation on grounds of religion. Malaysia sought to build a secular State, with a bias towards the 'bhoomiputra' (indigenous Malays, overwhelmingly Muslim) in a nation with two dominant ethnic communities. The Philippines and Indonesia, ethnically more homogeneous but with differences in religion have also sought, with varying degrees of success, to build their nations by recourse alternating between democratic and dictatorial means.

India on the other hand, has been a cultural and economic multi-ethnic entity for centuries, of which the Taj Mahal can be described as apotheosis. This mausoleum (a concept not in keeping with orthodox Islam) built by a Muslim Sunni Emperor, son and grandson of a Rajput mother and paternal grandmother, to celebrate his Shia Muslim Empress, is, in the tradition of India's temple architecture, located on a plinth, and is built of marble from the Sind-Rajasthan region, semi-precious stones from the farthest reaches of a vast Empire, yet to reach its zenith, patterned into mosaic on its walls and ceiling by artisans drawn from India's rich crafts tradition in gems, stonework and sculpture, silver and gold smithy, mostly Hindu, and calligraphy of majestic proportion, all coalescing into what is the highest achievement of Indian artistry, crowned with a gold plated finial; rising from an inverted lotus on its dome, surmounted by an Islamic crescent reminiscent of the Hindu Shiva trident *kalash*.

But where did this convergence break? Why indeed did a separate state of Pakistan emerge as detritus of the British Indian Empire? In framing its Constitution, India, describing itself as a 'Union of States' gave to itself a Federal Constitution with a strong unitary bias. Emerging from a bloody Partition amidst doubts, most famously voiced by former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill that India was even a nation; India sought to weave itself together, while acknowledging diversities, particularly of

religion, education, culture and language, into a cultural fabric that allowed for minimum political autonomy to ethnic diversities. "India is an abstraction," said Churchill, India is no more a political personality than Europe. India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator." "None knows," pondered Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India 1943-47 "where the partition of India, once it starts, will end, short of Balkanisation". Independent India thus sought recourse to creating a State that would be identified with no single ethnic, religious or linguistic group, thus emphasising the whole but making allowance to minorities without defining what that word might comprise, except as a distinction in terms of faith, education and culture. This emphasis is expressed by the Constitution in describing India in its first sentence as a "sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic."

### History of Religion in India

The origins of India's spiritual tradition lie in the remote past when the people turned to cultivating spiritual faith as distinguished from animism 4 to 5000 years ago in the face of difficulties that seemed beyond their control. Religion gave them hope. About 2600 years ago in India Buddhism and Jainism emerged, while the Middle East gave rise to Judaism, Christianity, Islam. In the 5th century BC Zoroastrianism had risen in ancient Persia and continues to be a practised but little known religion in India. All these religious traditions, along with indigenous Hinduism, Sikhism and so forth, have flourished side by side in India, proving that it is possible to achieve genuine religious harmony.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has explained that, "Just as we need different medications to treat different ailments, we need different solutions to help us deal with our different disturbing emotions. Even when they take a different approach, all these religious traditions share a common message of love and compassion."

### **Concept of God:**

Let us examine this truth in the context of Islam. Islam and its concept of God is often seen at variance with the Indian tradition. But what exactly is God to the Muslim? The very first Chapter of the Quran explains the Islamic concept of God-the worship of Allah being the determining factor of whether or not a person is Muslim; belief in *La Ilaha Illallah*-There is no God but God. The opening lines of the opening Chapter of the Qur'an 'Surat al Fatihah', described by Maulana Azad as the gist of the Quran declares:

"Praise be to God, Master of all creation, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Ruler of the Day of Judgement"

God is therefore a universal force that is just, and the embodiment of compassion

But how did Islam spread to its present proportions particularly in South Asia, where the largest section of the world's Muslims abide? There are several explanations, each of which is examined exhaustively, particularly with regard to Bengal in Richard M Eaton's "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760"<sup>iii</sup> :

- ❖ The Religion of the Sword-The role of military force. But how 'force' was exercised and 'conversion' affected has never been defined. Persian works talk of the submission to Islam of the defeated State, but this is a reference to their military submission to the Indo-Muslim state, not to the faith.
- ❖ Religion of Patronage-Conversion to receive favours from the State. But why was the concentration of Muslims in the Muslim Indian empires most wide in its furthest reaches, where the hold of the empire was at its most tenuous? Why did the first realisation that Bengal had a Muslim majority concentrated in East Bengal, wherein Dacca had remained capital only for one century of Mughal rule and Chittagong became part of the empire, seized by the Emperor Aurangzeb from the Arakanese only in 1660, come only with the census of 1892?
- ❖ The Hindu caste system and the social liberation theory is the most widely accepted explanation. No conclusive evidence has been produced in support of this and presupposes that what are described as the lower castes had already some aspirations of equality and hence resentment against the Brahmanic order. Also, as the Christian experience has shown, unless the 'convert' then left his neighbourhood, he continued to occupy the same status in his society. And this theory fails to explain the fact that Islam's most dramatic expansion in Bengal was not within a stratified social hierarchy reeking with injustice, but in the densely afforested areas of the east where the influence of the Brahmanic order was minimal and the population largely animist.

What then is the explanation? Islam has no missionary institution as does Christianity. It also has no concept of 'conversion'. To be a Muslim, you need simply to accept Islam as comprised in what is called the Kalama: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his Prophet" Hence the question raised by Eaton: what is 'forced conversion'? The question then naturally follows, what becomes of existing religious beliefs for one who has accepted Islam? The answer to that is simple: Islam does not renounce other faiths, but if one is a Muslim one is enjoined to follow the interpretation given by the Quran. Again with reference to Eaton's book on Islam in Bengal it is easy to trace the means of the spread of Islam in relatively recent times. This passed through four phases:

**Inclusion**, during which Islam and Islamic figures are included among traditional deities; a pronounced example of this is found in Kashmir's Sheikh Nooruddin Noorani (1377-1438),

popularly known as Alamdar-e-Kashmir whose wooden shrine was tragically incinerated in Charar-i-Sharif in 1996 and has since been rebuilt in grand proportion, known to Hindu followers as Nund Rishi. Sheikh Nooruddin was spiritual heir to the Saivite Yogini Lal Ded (known as Lal Ishwari among Hindus and Lal Arifa among Muslims).

**Identification** in which the Muslim cosmology is identified with the Hindu. An example is the bilingual Arabic and Sanskrit inscription in a thirteenth century mosque in Veraval, Gujarat. In the Arabic version the deity of the mosque is described as Allah, whereas the Sanskrit text describes Him as Visvanath (Lord of the Universe) Sunyarupa (in the form of emptiness) and Visvarupa (a form that is universal)

**Displacement.** This would mean the supplanting of Hindu entities from religious cosmology with Islamic ones. This was a consequence of Islamic reform movements led by the clergy.

**Conforming to the Monotheistic ideal** In this final phase Muslims would be encouraged to identify themselves as a distinct community. Whereas the first two phases owed much to India's Sufis the next two saw the active participation of the clergy. But it must be remembered that the two are not in contradiction.

This is not to deny each of the explanations described earlier. Indeed, historical examples can be found in support of each. But none of these explains the movement of entire sections of the community into becoming Muslims.

I have explained to start with the concept of Allah in Islam as the embodiment of compassion. Although Buddhism, as explained by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, believes in no God, the fountainhead of the faith comprised in the Four Noble Truths, which begins with *dukkha* or suffering, and concludes with its cessation and the Ashtangika (eightfold) Marg or path to liberation, *dukkha* being a concept springing from the Sanskrit concept of *karuna*. This constituted the Dharma Chakra Pravartana sutra, the first sermon of the Buddha after he attained nirvana or enlightenment. And the Qur'an, in the opening verses of its second Chapter, describes to the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) what the Quran means:

- “2. This Book there is no doubt in it, is a guide to those who keep their duty
3. Who believe in the Unseen and keep up prayer and spend out of what We have given them
4. And who believe in **that which has been revealed to thee and that which was revealed before thee**, and of the Hereafter they are sure”<sup>iv</sup>

Placed in this context, it is easy to see how the phases described above led to the spread of the faith. Indeed the remains of earlier tradition are recognisable in Muslim ritual to this day in Muslim majority

areas of Kashmir and Lakshadweep. So the Islamic belief that every community has been graced by a Prophet, that there is no compulsion in religion and that Allah has innumerable names falls into place. Like the Buddhist concept of cause and effect being the basis of human impulse, Islam itself is the consequence of evolution through the ages. It is then easy to see how India, in 'This thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality', absorbing Islam as 'a vital factor in its total makeup, without which this noble edifice will remain incomplete'. Also clear in Islam is that Allah is a concept, not a form; hence stern restrictions in what is perceived as reducing Him to a human image.

## Conclusion

The 20th century has been, for all its great achievements, a century of unequalled violence. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has stressed humankind needs to work to make this 21st century an era of peace. He said this can be done only if we seek to solve our problems through dialogue and non-violence. Doing this requires that we acknowledge the oneness of humanity, that people are essentially the same, rather than dwelling on secondary differences such as nationality, race, gender, education and so forth. This becomes even more so as globalisation gains pace. Here is where India with its history of uninterrupted spiritual harmony wrapped around the fundamental principle of compassion and understanding can help show the way to the world. Every new religious development in this country may have had an element of violence. But as in the examples cited on the spread of Islam this has usually taken place by building on, not replacing the old. This was the essence of the Sufi tradition as with the concurrent bhakti.

This then, as a part of the larger Indian whole, a convergence with the whole from which it has emerged, while retaining its identity in shape and form must be the Muslim response to India's distinct form of secularism

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted by Syeda Hameed "A harvest of horror and shame" The Hindu Saturday August 23, 2014 p 8 Editorial

<sup>ii</sup> See Viceroy of India (1943-'47) Lord Wavell's undated Minute, "None knows where the partition of India, once it starts, will end, short of Balkanisation;" Turnbull Papers, MSS.EURO/D.714/72

<sup>iii</sup> Richard M Eaton "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760" Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994 p 113-119

<sup>iv</sup> The Holy Quran by Maulana Muhammad Ali, Lahore 1917, Chapter 2, Surat Al-Baqarah, 'Ayat 2-4; p8  
Emphasis mine