Facets of the North-east

Four Views on Hindus and Muslims*

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What is more relevant than the historical record of relations between the two communities is the secular foundations of modern Indian civil society. The historical record suggests that neither side had a monopoly of the truth.

We came across this article on the website and decided to carry it in Ishani. It was first published in The Hindu of Chennai in its issue dated the 20th July 2008 in its magazine section. The author was kind enough to give his consent for its publication in Ishani. The author of this article Shri Ramchandra Guha has dealt with the important question of the relations between the Hindus and the Muslims of India. What we have in this short piece is a collection of statements on this question by four eminent personalities. Everything in it is self-explanatory. This article helps in cultivating right understanding and attitude to this question.

A vision for the nation: Jawaharlal Nehru presents the nation's new flag to the constituent assembly on July 22, 1947.

Photo: The Hindu Photo Archives
I have recently been re-reading Bunch of Thoughts, a collection of talks by M.S. Golwalkar published in Bangalore in 1966. Golwalkar was the long-time sarsanghchalak, or head, of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, an organisation that has exercised a substantial influence on the course of modern Indian history. The book's appendix quotes Golwalkar as saying, in 1956, that "whatever we believed in, the Muslim was wholly hostile to it. If we worship in the temple, he would desecrate it... If we worship cow, he would like to eat it. If we glorify woman as a symbol of sacred motherhood, he would like to molest her. He was tooth and nail opposed to our way of life in all aspects - religious, cultural, social etc. He had imbibed that hostility to the every core".

Reading these remarks, I was reminded of what a chauvinist on the other side had said 16 years previously. In March 1940, the Muslim League held its annual meeting in the Punjabi city of Lahore. Muhammad Ali Jinnah delivered the Presidential Address. Here he argued that "the problem in India is not of an intercommunal but manifestly of an international character, and must be treated as such... It is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits, and is the cause of most of our troubles, and will lead India to destruction, if we fail to revise our actions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature. They neither intermarry, nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects on and of life are different".

Never to meet?

Both Jinnah, in 1940, and Golwalkar in 1956, appeared to believe that a Hindu is a Hindu, and a Muslim a Muslim, and never the twain shall meet. These two men claimed that their views and mentalities, their styles of worship and ways of living, were so utterly different as to not permit them to live peaceably together. The two communities, in other words, were two nations.

This interpretation of Hindu-Muslim relations was vigorously contested by the great Congressman Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. A week before Jinnah addressed the Muslim League in Lahore, the Congress was convened in the town of Ramgarh, in Bihar. In his Presidential Address, Azad insisted that "it was India's historic destiny that many human races and cultures should flow to her, finding a home in her hospitable soil, and that many a caravan should find rest here... Eleven hundred years of common history [of Islam and Hinduism] have enriched India with our common achievements. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour... These thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality... Whether we like it or not, we have now become an Indian nation, united and indivisible. No fantasy or artificial scheming to separate and divide can break this unity."

No monopoly on truth

Who, from the historian's point of view, was correct? Were Jinnah and Golwalkar right in believing that Hindus and Muslims had not and could not amicably co-exist? Or was this, as Maulana Azad suggested, a gross misrepresentation, and that on the other hand they had borrowed and exchanged ideas and values and, over the centuries, evolved into a common nationality?

The historical record suggests that neither side had a monopoly of the truth. Down the ages, the interaction of Hindus and Muslims was marked by love and by hate, by conflict as well as by collaboration. There were times when Hindus and Muslims clashed and fought, and other times when they lived together, harmoniously. Some aspects of Indian culture - most notably, classical music - did bear the "stamp of their joint endeavour". On the other hand, despite centuries of sharing a common homeland, they did not intermarry or interdine. The chauvinists were wrong in claiming that Hindus and Muslims were fated to be enemies. At the time, the idea, much beloved of romantic nationalists, that they had evolved a shared "composite culture" was also a simplification of the truth.

In any case, the historical record should be irrelevant to how Hindus and Muslims relate to one another in independent India. For, as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in October 1947, "we have a
Muslim minority who are so large in numbers that they cannot, even if they want, go anywhere else. That is a basic fact about which there can be no argument. Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilised manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic State.'

Of the four views quoted in this column, the last is the most relevant. Whatever happened - or did not happen - under the rule of Akbar and Aurangzeb in the past, or in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the present, in the Indian Republic, every Indian is guaranteed the same rights regardless of his or her faith or belief. That, indeed, is the "basic fact about which there can be no argument".


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God laughs on two occasions. He laughs when the physician says to the patient’s mother, ‘Don’t be afraid, mother; I shall certainly cure your boy.’ God laughs to Himself, ‘I am going to take his life, and this man says he will save it!’ The physician thinks he is the master, forgetting that God is the Master. God laughs again when two brothers divide their land with a string, saying to each other, ‘This side is mine and that side is yours.’ He laughs and says to Himself, ‘The whole universe belongs to Me, but they say they own this portion or that portion.’

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa

Source: The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Volume I. Published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras. Pages 105-106