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Religious Sectarianism: Lessons to be learnt from Pakistan

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Trust Reinforced

Russian President Vladimir Putin's hectic trip to India—wherein his marathon talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Nehru Memorial Lecture on December 3 stood out as the special features of the visit—has imparted a new impetus to Indo-Russian cooperation.

Russia has over the years emerged as a time-tested reliable friend of India in the true spirit of being the successor to the erstwhile Soviet Union. Since Putin's assumption of power and his seven summit meetings with the Indian leaders Indo-Russian relations have received a new buoyancy that was missing for quite some time. This was also evident during this, his eighth, summit meeting with the Indian leadership that gave him the opportunity to interact with the top leaders of the UPA Government for the first time.

No doubt the Joint Declaration signed by Putin and Manmohan has brought into focus the specific areas of Indo-Russian political affinity—in the common struggle against the menace of terrorism, in the striving for a multipolar world through the instrument of multilateralism, in the cooperation for UN restructuring and reform, in the reliance on "multilateral approaches" to address the prevailing situation in Iraq, in the decision to give priority attention to stabilise the situation in Central Asia, in the extension of support for a sovereign and independent Afghanistan wherein the "Central authority" should be empowered with

"indigenous security institutions", in the joint call for reviving the peace process to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Additionally the Declaration lays emphasis on the importance of trilateral meetings between India, China and Russia in the fight against all forms of terrorism and conveys the two sides' interest in the "progressive increase in the trilateral cooperation" so as to "result in social and economic development amongst the three countries".

However, more significant are the agreements and MoUs signed. These once again reflect the wideranging character of Indo-Russian cooperation—from energy to outer space (not to speak of defence cooperation that is now about to enter a new phase transcending the buyer-seller relationship). What is most reassuring is the identification of practical steps in specific fields—oil sector, nuclear energy, IT, infrastructure, biotech—so as to heighten economic cooperation for mutual benefit while measures have been outlined to enhance bilateral trade that is stagnating at an abysmally low level. The Putin visit has aimed at giving a real thrust in this sphere. Most of the irritants in the relationship have been removed while those like Russia's constraints (in supplying fuel for Tarapur as well as additional reactors for Kudankulam) for being a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) are to be addressed in right earnest in the coming days. As for Russia's unequivocal support to India's permanent membership of the UN Security Council, Putin's unambiguous stand that India and all such new entrants should have full veto power clearly underlines Moscow's transparent position shorn of double-standards.

Russia is of late showing signs of economic recovery though Western attempts to prevent its genuine revival (as is clear from the developments in Ukraine with which Moscow wants to evolve an economic union comprising Belarus as well) are growing with every passing day. The Western powers are also interested in Russia's dismemberment and are trying their level best to realise that objective through devious means. In such a scenario further strengthening of Indo-Russian relations and cooperation in diverse realms of activity constitute an important factor for peace and stability in this part of the world. It is in that perspective that the Putin visit's success needs to be evaluated. And once again this visit has reinforced and deepened the element of trust characterising New Delhi's multi-dimensional ties with Moscow, something that lends uniqueness to the bilateral relationship.

December 8

S.C.

On other pages...

- 3 Putin Upholds Nehru's Ideological Legacy
- 6 DOCUMENT : India-Russia Joint Declaration
- 9 Human Rights Day is Celebrated, but Right to Food Continues to be Denied
B.N. Arora
- 12 Endangered Peace in Nepal
P.G. Rajamohan
From N.C.'s Writings
- 13 In the Name of Ram
- 15 Beyond Kancheepuram
Subhash Gatade
- 18 COMMUNICATION : On Islamic State and Theocracy
- 19 Jammu and Kashmir Conflict Situation and the Human Rights of Women and Children
K.S. Subramanian
- 26 Supreme Audit in the Changing Scenario of Twentyfirst Century
Sushil Anand
- 28 Religious Sectarianism : Lessons to be Learnt from Pakistan
Vikas Kumar
- 31 Chronology of Events (November 28-December 4, 2004)

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Religious Sectarianism: Lessons to be Learnt from Pakistan

VIKAS KUMAR

First they came for Jews. I was silent. I was not a Jew. Then they came for Communists. I was silent. I was not a Communist. Then they came for trade unionists. I was silent. I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me. There was no one left to speak for me.

—Martin Niemöller, German Pastor¹

For those under the fond illusion that the *jihad*-intoxicated sectarian forces in Pakistan would limit their divisive agenda to the trinity of Kashmir, Afghanistan and the religious minorities of Pakistan, the sectarian violence of the last few months should come as a wake-up call. In December 2003 General Pervez Musharraf, the President and Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, narrowly escaped two attempts on his life in 'the high security zone of Rawalpindi cantonment'.² The General blamed the religious and sectarian extremists for the attacks and identified them as "the greatest threat to our nation".³ The two attempts on the General's life were the culmination of series of attacks, across the length and breadth of Pakistan, on 'soft' targets carried out by the sectarian forces in 2003. Over the years religious sectarian violence has become an accepted fact of Pakistani life. It would be worthwhile to go behind the numbers—the number of attackers, the number of people killed and injured—and analyse the process of sectarianisation of the Pakistani society in order to take lessons for the future. I will briefly discuss some of the major attacks on 'soft' targets, before analysing the aforementioned process of sectarianisation, to bring home to the readers the substance and significance of a particular trend in the sectarian violence.

On July 4, 2003 as many as 50 Shias lost their lives when suicide attackers stormed a mosque in Quetta where people had gathered for the Friday prayers.⁴ Again, on October 3, 2003, seven Shias lost their lives when a bus carrying people to a mosque for the Friday prayers was attacked in Karachi.⁵ The sectarian violence has not ended with the failed attempts on General Musharraf's life. Soon after the Rawalpindi attacks Pakistan got engulfed in a fresh wave of sectarian violence, this time against minority

Christians. On January 5, 2004 a Christian priest was shot dead in the city of Khanewal near Multan.⁶ In another attack 15 people were injured when a car bomb exploded outside a Christian reading room in Karachi in January 15, 2004.⁷ Then on March 2, 2004 44 persons were killed and around 150 injured in Quetta when a Muharram procession came under indiscriminate fire⁸ near the mosque that was the targeted earlier on July 4, 2003.⁹ The point to be noted is that most of these attacks were carried out in prominent cities where the security forces have been on high alert since 9/11 and the targets of the attacks were Shias, the second largest (20 per cent of Pakistan's population)¹⁰ religious group of Pakistan.

To consider all these attacks as merely attacks on a community would be restricting oneself to an extremely narrow point of view. Rather, the wave of sectarian violence that has swept across Pakistan has to be seen as an attack on that Pakistan which recently observed the seventyfifth martyrdom day of Lala Lajpat Rai,¹¹ where Christian and Muslim peasants fight together for their rights,¹² and which still sings in ecstasy:

*Naa main sunni naa shiya, mera do haathan dil sadya hu
Muk gaye sab khushi de painde, dariya rehmat vadya hu—*

Hazrat Sultan Bahu

(Neither am I Sunni nor Shia, but my heart is burning for both. Traveling through dry land, I am now immersed in an ocean of compassion.)¹³

Sectarianisation of Pakistan

ISLAMIC sectarianism, much to the dissatisfaction of the modernist founding fathers of Pakistan, such as Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan (assassinated by the sectarian forces in 1951), continued unabated after the birth of that country by the religion-based partition of India. Over the years the Shia Baltis of PoK [Note 1], the Kafir tribe of NWFP [Note 2], the Zikris of Baluchistan, the Hindus [Note 3], the Christians [Note 4] and the Ahmediyas [Note 5], to name a few, have been persecuted for not subscribing to Islam/the 'true' version of Islam as identified by the self-appointed guardians of Islam.

To begin with, the non-Muslims were reduced to

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second-class citizens when Pakistan proclaimed itself an Islamic Republic in 1956. Starting from the early 1950s the Ahmediyas have been the target of sectarian forces for their theological differences and they were declared non-Muslim during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's (considered to be secular and modernist) reign in 1974.¹⁴ The Jamaat-i-Ulema Islam has demanded that the Zikris be declared non-Muslim.¹⁴ It should be noted that Pakistan has separate electorates for Hindus, Christians and Ahmediyas—introduced by Zia-ul-Haq in 1984,¹⁴ among other discriminatory provisions, like Blasphemy Laws (also introduced by Zia-ul-Haq in 1986)¹⁵, targeting the non-Muslims. Since the enactment of the Blasphemy Laws, the Christians have been under attack from the sectarian extremists. The value of non-Muslims as witnesses in a Court of Law has been reduced to half as that of a Muslim as per the quasi-Islamic law of Pakistan.¹⁶

Then in the early 1990s, the sectarian forces turned their attention towards the mainstream Shias. Since then the Shias have been the target of an extremely violent sectarian campaign across Pakistan in which hundreds have lost their lives. Many of these attacks have been carried out on Friday. The Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan has demanded that the Shias be declared non-Muslim.¹⁶

But the 'majority' of Pakistanis who are Sunnis (77 per cent)¹⁰ found themselves caught unawares when in an ironical turn of events they found themselves to be the target of sectarian forces towards the end of 1990s. The sectarian forces are now after the traditional Sunni faith that includes reverence for the Sufi saints. After the Taliban established itself in Afghanistan the symbols of the traditional faith have increasingly come under attack by the sectarian forces. It is doubtful whether the Sufi institutions will survive the present phase of Wahabi propaganda against them for being un-Islamic [Note 6].

Is it not amazing that one after another communities fell prey to the sectarian forces yet no one thought of fighting back? This can only be explained by the implicit belief among the 'majority' communities of Pakistan that somehow their group was immune to the forces that were affecting their fellow 'minority' communities.

Deobandis and Wahabism : Pakistan under Siege from Within

THOSE at the forefront of sectarian campaign in Pakistan, and also in India, are followers of the Deoband school of thought.¹⁷ Deoband (near

Saharanpur in UP) has a highly revered Islamic seminary, founded in 1867, to propagate pure teachings of the Quran and the Hadis. The Taliban (literally means students) were a product of the Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan. The commonality shared by the Al-Qaeda of Saudi Arabia and Taliban/Deobandis of South Asia is their faith in Wahabi Islam [Note 7]. Abbas Zaidi, erstwhile editor of *The Ravi* (published from Lahore), notes the following on the nexus between the Wahabis and the Deobandis :

The Deobandis are close to the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia in their literalist interpretation of Islam. That is why the Deobandis and the Wahabis work side by side, from politics to *jihad*. The ubiquitous proselytising groups in Pakistan and elsewhere are overwhelmingly Deobandi. The Deobandis believe that except for themselves and the Wahabis all other sects of Islam are heretical and must be exterminated. In the 1970s in Pakistan it was chiefly the Wahabis and the Deobandis who succeeded in having the Ahmediyas declared non-Muslims, a decision later constitutionalised by General Zia, himself a Deobandi. The Sipah-e-Sahaba of Pakistan and the Taliban of Afghanistan are Deobandi who are supported by the Saudi Royal family.¹⁸

Lessons to be Learnt

WE, the people of India, need to take the following lessons to heart. It needs to be clearly understood that the forces of sectarianism once unleashed in the society take their own course and sustain by devouring the fabric of the society itself. It is important to note that sectarianism does not remain confined to a particular social group or one sphere of life. Sectarianism, with its own school of thought as 'the' reference point, does not differentiate between minor and major differences. Differences are merely differences for it. It shows intolerance to all kinds of differences. However, it may prioritise the differences present in the society. As we have seen above this is exactly what has been happening in Pakistan where the sectarian forces have targeted one group after another without encountering any serious resistance.

The *modus operandi* of the sectarian forces in Pakistan suggests that one after another they are segregating a community on some narrow basis, thereby making it a minority. Were the Ahmediyas not a part of the Muslim majority of Pakistan when Pakistan was declared an Islamic state? Were the Shias not a part of the Muslim majority when the Ahmediyas were declared non-Muslims? The sectarian violence has to end now itself or it will end with the end of civil society in Pakistan. For instance, the sectarian extremists in Northern Ireland started their career by targeting the 'other' Christian

in their neighbourhood. Ever since the Good Friday Agreement, which has reduced the potential for sectarian violence considerably, the sectarian extremists of Northern Ireland have been hunting for new targets to justify their anachronistic existence. At last they have found one—the social minorities. Racial minorities constitute roughly one percent of Northern Ireland's population and include the Blacks, the Asians and the Chinese. Hasan Suroor has reported a wave of attacks against the racial minorities of Northern Ireland. In recent months over 200 cases of racial attacks have been reported in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland.¹⁹

Therefore, the lesson to be learnt is that if unchallenged in the formative stages the sectarian forces will go ahead with witch-hunting of artificially created minorities/soft targets. If there is a group that is truly in minority it is the sectarian elements. The sooner we understand this the better. Otherwise one after another we will keep on falling prey to the sectarian forces and no state machinery, howsoever secular, or Constitution, howsoever modern, can save us. We have to choose between two contrasting alternatives. Either, resign to fate and become a part of the silent 'majority' which under sustained sectarian pressure will sooner or later disintegrate into minuscule minorities—separated from each other by innocuous differences like number of times they pray etc. Or, become a part of the vocal minority that is not ready to remain silent when the very foundations of our syncretic culture are being chipped away by sectarian forces of different hues. Choosing the second alternative may not change things immediately in today's highly polarised society. But that's no excuse for siding with the sectarian forces. We, Indians, must not make a choice today for which we may have to regret later. ■

NOTES

1. There is a movement among the Baltis for reviving the Tibetan script, which was the script for Balti prior to the imposition of Persian script. The movement does not stop with script. It also aims at preservation and protection of their rich Buddhist heritage, and syncretism between Shia Islam on the one hand and Bon Shamanism and Buddhism on the other hand.²⁰
2. The Kafir tribe of Kafiristan in Afghanistan and North West Frontier Province of Pakistan is a remnant of Hindu/Buddhist community from the remote past. They do not subscribe to any version of Islam, true or false.
3. Hindus are a minuscule minority in present Pakistan. Most of them live close to the Indian border in Thar Paarkar district of Sindh and some in Baluchistan.²¹ People of scavenger caste are spread across Pakistan. Jinnah impounded

them inside Pakistan despite the protest by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. The latter cited the indifference of the Nehru-led Congress towards the plight of Dalits of Pakistan as one of the factors that forced him to resign from the Nehru Government.¹⁶ Some of them have been converted to Islam/Christianity but their socio-economic status remains unchanged.

4. Christians are spread across Pakistan, especially in urban centres like Karachi, Lahore and Quetta.²¹
5. Ahmediyas/Qaidanis are followers of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmed (1835-1908) of Qadian (Punjab, India) who founded a modern Islamic sect in 1889. Ahmediyas believe that all religions of the world are valid religions and that Mohammad was not the last prophet. Ahmediyas have been persecuted by the Sunni majority in India,¹⁷ and Bangladesh²² for their unorthodox belief system. Even though they shifted their headquarters from Qadian in India to Rabwah in Pakistan after Partition²¹, their loyalty to Islam remains suspect in Pakistan.
6. Certain European scholars, and their Third World followers, who view Islam as a monolithic whole without any room for plurality of traditions, have propagated that Sufism was 'an alien importation' or 'a foreign interpolation'. Such half-baked theories have helped the Wahabis a long way who have ever since their inception campaigned for banishing Sufism from Islam. To the contrary Sufism 'being a natural development within Islam' has been an integral part of Islam right from the beginning.²³
7. Wahabism is an extremist Islamic school of thought propagated by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahabaab (1702-92) of Najd²¹ and provides the ideological underpinning for Saudi theocracy. Wahabis are fanatically opposed to Sufism and believe in converting Muslims of other sects to their own sect. They rely solely on Sharia (the Law) thereby discarding the age-old delicate balance within traditional Sunni Islam between *Sharia* and *Tariqa* (the Sufi of mystical spiritualism). In West Asia they destroyed all dargahs and mausoleums of Sufi saints (including that of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, at Karbala in Iraq) that were within their reach. The Al-Qaeda along with Taliban destroyed many Sufi dargahs and Hindu/Buddhist monuments, including the famous Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. In India the Wahabi-Deobandi terrorists destroyed the Chrar-e-Sharif, the dargah of Sheikh Nooruddin Noorani, which has been one of the pillars of syncretic *Kashmiriyat* for centuries. Wahabi Islam became manifold stronger after the discovery of oil in the Middle East. The reason is clear: tremendous funding from the Wahabi states in the Middle East.²⁴

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CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS (NOVEMBER 28-DECEMBER 4, 2004)

NATIONAL

- November 28** ➤ Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil reveals for the first time the exact quantum of the fall in infiltration into J&K from across the border and LoC of late: 60 per cent; this is due to a fence stretching along most of the porous LoC, superior surveillance and relentless vigil. He insists that as a consequence the number of violent incidents in the State has also been reduced—from the average of 11 per day in 2002 to nine per day in 2003 and six per day in 2004; the killings too have registered a decline.
- First indigenously built multi-role fighter aircraft Sukhoi 30 MKI is handed over to the IAF at the Ozar airbase in Nasik.
- Chennai-Lucknow Express mows down 12 persons, aged between 16 and 22, at Sukhisevania railway station near Bhopal; the deceased were heading for a Buddhist congregation and fair at Sanchi.
- A drunk CRPF constable went berserk after a heated exchange with his superior, killing seven personnel, including a company commander and a sub-inspector, before he was shot down at a CRPF post in J&K's Baramulla late at night on November 27; two others were injured.
- Anil Ambani sends a signal to Reliance Energy employees that he is in charge at the power utility, but stresses that he is the Chairman and Managing Director of REL as a professional and not as a stakeholder; Anil, who is also the Vice-Chairman and Managing Director of Reliance Industries, further urges the six REL Directors, who resigned on November 25, to continue as before. He does this in an e-mail to 25,000 employees.
- RJD chief and Railway Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav alleges that Lok Janshakti Party chief and Union Steel Minister Ram Vilas Paswan had swindled money in an Rs 800-crore crane deal in 1996-97, a charge the latter denies.
- Taking note of the Centre's objection to the transfer of Punjab and Haryana High Court Chief Justice B.K. Roy to Patna, the collegium of judges headed by Chief Justice of India R. C. Lahoti has recommended his transfer to Gauhati HC.
- November 29** ➤ In a stunning twist to the Sankararaman murder case, the Tamil Nadu Government tells the Madras High Court that Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati "broke down during the three-day police interrogation" and "confessed" his involvement in the killing of the former *mutt* official. The confession had been video-taped and is testimony to the seer's complicity in the case, senior prosecution counsel K.T.S. Tulsi tells Justice R. Balasubramaniam, who is hearing the Shankaracharya's bail plea. Earlier the seer's counsel I. Subramaniam and K.S. Dinakar argue that one of the accused in detention Kathiravan had retracted his allegation against the Shankaracharya and disclosed that he had been tortured into implicating the seer; at that point Tulsi drops his bombshell and tells the judge he was prepared to even screen the video-taped discussion. Opposing the pontiff's bail plea Tulsi says the Shankaracharya appears to have realised his mistake. BJP General Secretary Sushma Swaraj claims in Chennai that the Kanchi seer is innocent and says the Shankaracharya had dismissed reports about his custodial interrogation as a "blatant lie".
- Brushing aside the ongoing dispute in the Reliance group, investors buy across sectors, pushing the 30-scrip Bombay Stock Exchange Sensex to its second-highest close ever at 6158 and within 100 points from the highest ever level.
- In the wake of PM Manmohan Singh's visit to J&K the Union Government has finalised a nine-point "strategy to achieve peace and development" in the State; devised by the Home Ministry, it lays stress on the government