"Secularism's Double Bind: Muslims, Islam, and the State in South Asia"

Obviously, reform is a slippery concept. One person's idea of reform may seem like retrograde traditionalism to someone else or as an uncritical embrace of the new to yet another. The call for reform in Islam from outside the tradition is often merely a demand for Muslim culture to more closely resemble the American or European. It is a desire for a closer convergence of cultural, political, and social institutions and values with Western societies. Those making such calls are often unaware of the long and profound tradition of reform within the Islamic tradition. Whether understood as tajdid, islah, or ijtihad, the urge, indeed the necessity, to be Muslim in changing circumstances is a constant process in the lives of individual Muslims and Muslim cultures. Reform is not just the province of those claiming the label "progressive," nor is it solely a reaction to demands from outside the faith. While some Muslim authorities see themselves as custodians of the kind of reform that purifies and cleanses the community from the encroachment of outsiders and the corrupting influence of the other. Others work to keep the institutions of Islam connected to the lives of Muslims in diverse and shifting contexts.

In India, Muslim Indians find themselves in a challenging double bind. On the one hand they are called upon to stand up as active participants in the Indian polity, to manifest their loyalty to the secular nation by working through its institutions, investing themselves in its infrastructure, and participating in the nation's public culture. Yet systematic discrimination and underdevelopment coupled with an effective network of Hindu nationalist propagandists and politicians casts suspicions upon Muslim Indians as untrustworthy, a fifth column, an anti-national element. Thus when Muslim Indians enter politics or the cultural mainstream they must abandon any markers of Islam or professions of Islamic identity, and they must take care not to cross certain lines. Shah Rukh Khan is one of the most popular actors in Bollywood, but when he took on the role of Ashoka, Hindu nationalists pounced. Although for some the embracing of the historical role by a

Muslim was evidence of the profoundly Indian nature of most Muslim Indians, for the reactionary Hindutva brigade, it was unacceptable that a Hindu/Buddhist emperor should be so played by a Muslim. Given such an atmosphere, it is perhaps not surprising to find Muslim Indians like the past president of India, Abdul Kalam who wore no beard or topi and called himself a *brahmacari*, a Sanskritic term for one of the four ashramas, or life stages, in classical Hinduism when one is an ascetic celibate student. "I am innocent, I am a *brahmacari*," he said in 2006 reference to the corrupting power of politics.[1] What could be a more vivid example of subjection than this public self-emasculation by a Muslim who owed his position to the Hindu nationalist BJP coalition and its celibate leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. For all Kalam's peculiar personal aesthetic, his association with India's nuclear missile program made him a national hero, if not among the Muslim population. I am not suggesting that Kalam's open religious attitude, pictured here with a Digambara Jain monk and the famous (or notorious) super guru Satya Sai Baba, makes him less Muslim, merely that the social and political culture of India required him to present publicly as unthreatening, as innocent as a key member of the military industrial complex can appear.

This extreme example of a prominent Muslim politician is not to be taken as representative of the average Muslim Indian's experience. But the degree to which the call to participate in Indian politics is answerable only with the public effacement of Islam does point to broader challenges for Muslim Indians. This challenge is indicated in the titles of essays by Gyan Pandey and Barbara Metcalf, the former asking "Can a Muslim be an Indian?" and the latter commenting, "Too Little or Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in Indian History." To some extent both pieces are taking note of the fact that Muslims are either erased from India's public culture or they are presumed to be acting solely as Muslims – not as Indians, or lawyers, or ironworkers, etc. – in all that they do, and

---

[1] New Kerala Times, November 2006.
http://www.feedsfarm.com/article/471fb6e6d6fb27dcb4f21f154ffc6511dd70d3fc.html Accessed February 10, 2008.

therefore are driven by and loyal to the *ummah*, or global Islamic community, before their *watan* or homeland.

The double bind of the Muslim Indian and the challenge of reforming the institutions and practice of Islam in India are particularly clear when we consider Muslim education, Muslim politics, and the recent conflagrations over cultural icons such as M. F. Husain and Taslima Nasrin. Each of these public debates highlights an important aspect of the bind. Since September 11, 2001, madrasas have been linked in the minds of many with terrorist training grounds. Under intense scrutiny, certain changes have been inevitable. The reality that some madrasas are indeed operated by and supportive of extremist ideologies is a challenge for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The need for reform of the madrasa in India is not just driven by outsiders to the faith. Yet what are Indian Muslims doing to reform religious education and how successful are these efforts? The situation of scrutiny and outside pressure all too often has the effect of undermining the credibility of the agents of change. And so we see that the double bind in regard to madrasas has had a depressive and retarding effect on reform. There are many prominent advocates of and severala experimental efforts at establishing Islamic schools that also train their students in fields outside of the religious sciences. In the political sphere, the challenge to Muslim politics and politicians in secular India is that as a minority they must invest in the state as the public institution most capable of ensuring their interests, even while organizing the claims made on the state in communally specific terms. This is a subtle dance, a nervous posture, wherein the presentation of the identity most in need of state protection and support – the under-developed and under-represented Muslim Indian – is also the identity most likely to draw criticism and suspicion for provoking divisiveness and demanding exceptionalism. The cultural sphere is less frequently interpreted alongside social and political arenas, but it is certain that it is through the popular culture that we see both the potential for integration and the most vivid examples of prejudice and xenophobia. Protests over Shah Rukh Khan have not

merely come from Hindus, but also from some militant Muslims objecting to his portrayal of Hindu and Muslim historical figures. The secularist elite in India is particularly vigilant about the public debates over cultural icons, most recently their anxieties have centered on the figures of M.F. Husain, one of India's best known living artists, and Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi novelist who has sought refuge in India after protests from militants in her home country. Both of these Muslim artists are under threat from militants, in Husain's case both Hindu and Muslim, who object to their creative productions as affronts to their religious sentiments – which is a prosecutable crime in India. There are other issues one might discuss here – Kashmir, the Uniform Civil Code and the place of Muslim personal law, caste,

The continuing difficulties faced by Muslim Indians were made vividly clear in a report commissioned by the Government of India. Released in November 2006, "Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India," known as the Sachar Report was authored by a blue-ribbon panel led by Rajinder Sachar a Supreme Court Justice.[2] The report found systemic and widespread inequality, discrimination, and under-development among the Muslim population estimated in 2001 at over 138 million. Muslims are disproportionately excluded from civil service jobs, police and military ranks, and political positions. They have disproportionately high rates of incarceration, illiteracy, poverty, and health problems. The Sachar Report further describes Muslim Indians as carrying the "double burden of being labeled as 'anti-national' and as being 'appeased' at the same time. While Muslims need to prove on a daily basis that they are not 'anti-national' and 'terrorists,' it is not recognized that the alleged 'appeasement has not resulted in the desired level of socio-economic development."[3] Blamed by some for Partition, the ongoing dispute in Kashmir, and

---

[2] Prime Minister's High Level Committee, "Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India," (New Delhi; Cabinet Secretariat), November 2006, hereafter Sachar Report.
[3] Sachar Report, p. 11.

the terrorism that occasionally occurs, Muslim Indians feel caught between suspicion and exceptionalism – a position many find uncomfortable.

Secularism in India refers not to the separation of religion and state but to the equality of distribution of state services to all religious communities within the polity. The term secularism is used to signify something more akin to pluralism or multiculturalism elsewhere.[4] As Partha Chatterjee points out, there is a deep contradiction in the fact that India's ruling elite have historically been involved in supporting and regulating religious institutions even as they and the Constitution declared the importance of separating religion and politics as a fundamental principle.[5] The ambivalent simultaneity of separation and regulation is evidenced by the fact that India's Constitution enshrines many more rights for religious minorities in India than does the US Constitution, prohibiting religious discrimination and guaranteeing freedom of practice and propagation, management of institutions, preservation of language and culture, and the establishment of educational institutions, which must be given equal state aid.[6] The failure of the supposedly secular state to remain neutral towards all religious entities and institutions resulted in it being "seen as hopelessly compromised by its legal protection of the differential and allegedly backward practices of the minority communities."[7] Secularism at the state level is therefore fundamentally a coercive process involving legal judgments and regulatory bodies.

---

[4] For more discussion of the nature of Indian secularism, see Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Partition*, (Boulder; Westview Press 1997), esp. Chapter Five "Secularism: The Post-colonial Predicament"; Partha Chatterjee, "Fasting for Bin Laden: the Politics of Secularization in Contemporary India" in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, editors, *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 2006); and Rajeev Dhavan, "The Road to Xanadu: India's Quest for Secularism" in Gerald Larson, ed., *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Action*, (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2001)

[5] Chatterjee, 2006, p. 57.

[6] Constitution of India, Articles 15, 25, 26, 29, and 30. http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/contents.htm accessed 12/20/07.

[7] Chatterjee, 2006, p. 57.

The remainder of this paper (still in draft form) will address three arenas in which the double bind and the double burden of the Muslim Indian are evident. First, the question of Islamic education, a topic much scrutinized in recent years. Although less than four percent of the population attends *madrasas*, these institutions are labeled schools of hate by Hindu nationalists. Progressive and western oriented critics challenge the stagnancy of the *madrasa* curriculum which has changed little in the last few centuries. Proponents of *madrasas* express cautious criticism of the schools, acknowledging the need to integrate some "secular" programming in order to maintain relevance, yet find it difficult to actually institute such changes. For example, since 9/11 brought the Deoband school under the microscope and linked it to the Taliban's methods of indoctrinating the youth, no substantial change has occurred in the curriculum, though computers are now allowed on campus and have become part of the promotional materials. New institutions have emerged, though their popularity and impact are difficult to measure as yet, that seek to broaden the mission of Islamic education beyond the Muslim community. The Islamic Fiqh Academy and the Markaz ul Ma'arif are institutions that incorporate a variety of social welfare programs into their programs. This may indicate a trend that recognizes the lack of jobs for *madrasa* graduates with no other skills. Whether these students will find positions after completing their degrees outside of Islamic institutions in any significant numbers will be interesting to observe but difficult to measure. As loci of reform, however, these new *madrasas* are certainly challenged to achieve the stature of established schools like Deoband and Nadwat-ul Ulama. Furthermore, if they obtain governmental support, this will have in some quarters a depressing effect on their legitimacy.

Second, political organization remains enormously complicated for Muslim Indians. There are few political parties that are explicitly Muslim, and those that are have little influence. The Kerala Muslim League is one of the few that is successful in returning Muslim Members of Parliament. The League explicitly declares itself to be advocates for Muslim interests in their party literature. Yet the

relative (if minimal) success of this small group is not replicated elsewhere. Certainly there are other Muslim MPs, but they are from ostensibly secular or ethnic parties. Though this could indicate a "post-communal" (in the political jargon current in the USA these days) politics, the endemic discrimination against Muslim Indians suggests that the absence of Muslim parties is more likely due to a hostile political environment, lack of sufficient financial backing, lack of coherence among Muslims nationally, and the in some cases tacit acceptance of the reality that Muslims cannot organize nationally as such without opening themselves up for criticism as unpatriotic and communal. The few national level Muslim organizations such as the AIMPB or the BMAC provide the most powerful public presence of Muslim community interests. yet their very success has the paradoxical affect of linking Muslim interests solely with personal law, regarded by many as retrograde, or as single-issue reactionaries vis-à-vis Kashmir, the Babri Masjid, etc.

Third, in considering the nature and possibility of reform within the Muslim Indian society, the cultural sphere is often neglected. The figures that feature prominently are generally assumed to be exceptional, and their shaping influence on Indian self-perceptions is minimized. Yet for many Indians, Muslim and non-Muslim, the arts and culture are indicative of the quality of Indian secularism. Though the Islamicate aesthetics that infuse Indian architecture, music, painting, poetry, literature, etc, are well established and studied, the ongoing prominence of Muslim artists is important as well. In this regard, the public conflagrations over M.F. Husain, one of India's most celebrated artists now in exile from the Hindu nationalists, and Taslima Nasreen an author and activist originally from Bangladesh but living now under lock and key in India. These two figures place Indian secular values and religious extremism into sharp relief. Indeed one of the few things Hindu and Muslim radicals in India can agree upon is their outrage over Husain and Nasrin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the champions of Indian secularism embrace, even revere, these two figures.