

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #3

My Dear Judge Sahab,

Having outlined my basic world view and value system in the previous letter I shall now briefly indicate the interpretation of medieval Indian history that I accept after having carefully studied eminent humanist historians, Indian and foreign, universally acclaimed for their integrity, objectivity, breadth of scholarship and universal empathy.

The story of India is a chapter of the long and continuing drama of the human struggle for power. New races or ethnic groups have risen from relative obscurity and cultural backwardness to dominate other more cultured and established groups. That Babar was a Muslim does not mean that his attack on India was an Islamic onslaught against Hinduism. After all, Babar had already fought against several Muslim rulers in central Asia before turning his attention to India. In the medieval period one Muslim ruler fought against another Muslim ruler just as in the ancient and medieval eras one Hindu ruler had fought against other Hindu rulers throughout India. Likewise, in the ancient days Greek had fought against Greek no less than against the Roman or Iranian. We see the same happening in the modern age.

The Hindu ethos, in the light of the Dharmashastras, prescribes that the cardinal duty of the ruler is to defend and enlarge his dominion. In fact every raja aspired to become the 'chakravarti' ruler or overlord, if he could manage this. It was the duty of the 'praja' to pursue the four 'purusharthas' or normal goals of life, unmindful of which raja won or lost in the continuing struggle for power. This social ethic was extended to the Muslim rulers when they came on the Indian scene. The legitimacy of the ruler was not made dependent upon his race or religion; his legitimacy flew from victory in battle. Battles and wars did not escalate into extended 'total' wars involving the entire populace. Victory or defeat in battle meant only a change of rulers, within the system prescribed by the Dharmashastras, not any enslavement of the population. The erstwhile subjects of the defeated ruler did not feel called upon by duty to overthrow their new ruler.

The above ethos was put in actual practice in medieval India. The Hindu segment, which constituted the overwhelming majority of the population, gave full loyalty to the Muslim rulers. Rebellions and revolts were common, but they cut across the religious divide. In the course of time Muslim rulers who had settled down on Indian soil came to be looked upon as a new warrior caste that had become an integral part of an already mixed population. Muslims also felt the same way. Intermarriage between Muslims and Hindus was ruled out, but so was inter-caste marriage within the Hindu fold itself, apart from some exceptions.

As time rolled on the lower castes and weaker sections among the Hindu population felt attracted towards the social egalitarianism and democratic complexion of the Muslim ethos. A considerable section from the lower and backward castes saw the promise of more vertical mobility in the Islamic fold. However, the Muslims themselves were not free from the evil of racial pride and pretensions of superiority. Muslims of Turkish, Persian or Afghan origin did not intermarry with Muslims of Indian origin. The continuing trickle of Muslim immigrants from central Asia never stopped. But the main factor of the growth of the Muslim population in the land was the growing

peaceful conversion of the backward and under-privileged Hindu sections and the artisans due to a combination of ideological and economic factors, rather than forcible conversions. These sections saw the promise of greater social equality as Muslims in the new dispensation. As time rolled on a grand composite culture evolved in the form of modern regional languages, architecture, music, amusements, proverbs, and folk religions. In short, the Muslim Sultans acquired political power at the point of the sword (which is the universal pattern of history); but Islam, or rather a particular version of it, spread through an extended peaceful social process.

The Hindu populace enjoyed freedom of religious belief and practice, and their personal laws and customs were not interfered with. But there were restrictions on the building of new temples at public places. Hindu princes who accepted the suzerainty of the central power were accorded high status and full honor, retained their throne and exercised vast powers under the feudal system. The revenue, civil, and criminal laws were patterned after the Islamicshariah, but there was no interference with Hindu family laws of marriage, adoption and inheritance etc.

The Sultans who ruled in the independent kingdoms of Kashmir, Gujrat, Bengal, Golkunda, and Bijapur etc. before their incorporation into the Mughal Empire were tolerant and just towards all their subjects. Zaynul Abidin (d. 1470) of Kashmir, the most illustrious ruler of the region, was universally loved. He patronized Sanskrit no less than Persian, the saint no less than the Sufi. Husayn Shah (d. 1519) of Bengal played a similar role in the eastern region. Later Sher Shah (d. 1545) followed his example and to this day remains a hero to all alike.

In the southern region the Bahmani Sultan, Tajuddin Feroze (d. 1472) gave preference to people from the south (Dakhnees) in state employment, irrespective of religion. Mahmud Gawan (d. 1481) the illustrious Prime Minister of the Bahmani kingdom was noted for his functionally secular approach in matters of state. In 1518 the kingdom split into the five sultanates of Golkunda, Bijapur, Bidar, Berar and Ahmadnagar. The Muslim Sultans fought against each other and the great Vijaynagar Empire, still intact, played one Sultan against the other, irrespective of any religious considerations. This realpolitik continued until the empire collapsed in 1565. Muslim rulers also liberally rewarded all those who served imperial interests irrespective of religion. Ibrahim Qutub Shah (d. 1580) of Golkunda was a great patron of Telugu, endowed Hindu temples and even discontinued the 'jizya' despite the provisions of theshariah. Though theshariah extolled religious tolerance and fair play to all subjects it categorized them into two distinct categories – Muslim believers, and the protected people (dhimmis) who had to pay 'jizya' as an additional levy. However, they were not required to pay 'zakat'.

The fact is that throughout the medieval era the rather pragmatic Muslim rulers and the orthodox Muslim divines and jurists differed on several issues relating to politics and religion. Qazi Mughisuddin of Delhi (during the time of Alauddin Khilji), Mir Hamdani of pre-Mughal Kashmir, Abdul Qadir Badauni (during the reign of Akbar), Shaikh Ahamd Sarhandi (during the time of Jehangir) all stood for the strict application of shariah laws, as interpreted by their own school of jurisprudence. They openly disapproved of the 'functionally secular' approach followed by the vast majority of the Muslim Sultans and the Mughal emperors. The Ulema passionately proclaimed that the Sultan was bound by the law of theshariah and some even resented the friendly relations between Muslims and non-believers and the power and position the latter enjoyed in

the royal court and in society. The expression of such views in the writings of the Ulema has misled some later historians into believing that the views of the Ulema were actually acted upon in medieval India. But this was far from being the case. These writings merely reveal the mindset of the Ulema concerned.

It must also be noted that the Ulema did not agree among themselves and that the Sufis had an entirely different approach. And it was the Sufi approach of tolerance and universal harmony and human brotherhood that was the guiding star for the rulers. The Indian Muslim sovereigns, in general, sincerely held that religion was a personal matter, and it did not come in the way of complete loyalty to the monarch. The Rajput rulers followed the same approach. While remaining sincerely committed to the essentials or basics of one's own religious faith the Mughals and the Rajputs, from the time of Akbar onwards, stood closer to each other than did Muslims to Muslims or Hindus of one caste to those of another. Coming to more recent times, the great princely states of India, Mysore, Gwalior, Indore, Baroda, Jaipur, Patiala, Kapurthala and many others gave liberal patronage to Muslims who rose to the highest positions in the state.

While the Muslim sovereigns and the nobility in general did not accept, in practice, "the 'fundamentalist' stand of the orthodox Ulema they yet never presumed to reform or reconstruct the traditional religious thought and value system of Islam. Akbar, and after him, his great grandson, Dara Shikoh (who never became king himself) are the only exceptions who ventured to attempt this task, instead of being content with a mere working secularism. But the results were far from being satisfactory.

It would, therefore, be a blurred rather, distorted, interpretation to view the struggle for power in medieval India as a confrontation between Islam and Hinduism on Indian soil. Sultan Mahmud was certainly a predator, who came, plundered and returned to his own country, but Muhammad Ghori settled down on Indian soil as an Indian ruler who happened to be a Muslim by religion. Thereafter, the players in the game of power became a mixed lot. Babar fought against the combined armies of Ibrahim Lodi and Rana Sanga, Humayun had to struggle against a Muslim rival. The Mughals and Rajputs became firm allies and their adversaries were a mixed lot. The entire artillery of Shivaji was manned by Muslims. Both the rich Hindus and Muslims of Surat were despoiled when Shivaji twice attacked the prosperous Mughal port. Later Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali looted Delhi, Lahore and other places without any distinction of Hindu and Muslim.

Shivaji's opposition to Aurangzeb was certainly not directed against Islam or the Muslims. Given the energy, daring and ambition he had, Shivaji would have defied any central authority, Muslim or Hindu. Shivaji's father, a mansabdar under the Sultan of Bijapur, was rather unhappy at his brave son's defiant conduct. As an independent ruler, Shivaji was well disposed to his Muslim subjects. The later struggle between the decaying Mughal power and the Marathas, Jats, Sikhs, and Rohilla Pathans etc. was, likewise, a struggle for power rather than a religious confrontation.

I would like to round off the above observations on the struggle for power in medieval India by adding a few sociological observations on the quality of social life, as a whole, in that era.

In medieval India Hindus and Muslims, were not two macro groups living in a state of perpetual confrontation. Each group was greatly differentiated into numerous sub-groups that did not think or behave alike. Power was shared by a thin upper crust within each group. The lower sections of each macro group lived the life of honest toil, enjoyed the consolations of its respective faith, shared the common joys and sorrows of life, were loyal to the ruler, irrespective of religion or race, and hoped for ultimate salvation as taught by one's respective belief system or faith.

A thin elite among the Muslims and Hindus constituted the ruling class whose social and cultural life cut across the religious divide. So did the folk culture of the masses, subject to regional variations, inevitable in a country of the size of India. The prince fought, won or lost and wielded power, the warriors shared in his wealth and glory, the pandits or the small creative elite enriched culture and received full honors but had little power, the traders ran the economy and amassed wealth but little honor, the artisans produced goods and farmers produced food but were starved of both honor and power, and the rest supported the entire structure with the power, as it were, of their sweat and tears. Each group comprised both Muslims and Hindus. Each group believed (in different ways) that a Supreme Power controlled history according to a plan, not fully transparent to man. This was the inner world of the medieval Indian, be he Hindu or Muslim.

The dark side of the above sketchy portrait of the spirit of the age was the social and administrative wrongs the common man had to suffer due to human lapses and misdeeds of immediate neighbors or authorities, despite the benevolence of the ruler. He was the father figure to all, but was he, really, accessible to all? Disputes concerning land, money, women, and power, there must have been. Likewise, tension, intrigue, revenge, crime, miscarriages of justice, there must have been. What happened when the traditional institutional structures failed to bring about proper redress, when the panchayat, the qazi, the kotwal, or even the governor, swayed by passion, greed or prejudice, committed a lapse? The only machinery of redress was to have the ear of somebody in the corridors of power, be he Muslim or Hindu. Perhaps, here the Muslim segment stood at a natural advantage in a system that was presided over, at the apex, by a monarch with whom he shared his cherished religious beliefs or faith. This, however, was a bare psychological rather than any concrete advantage of ready access to the father figure as such. Numerous well placed or well connected Hindus had more ready access to the ears of royalty or the top nobility than did the average aggrieved Muslim subjects of the empire. Even in the modern democratic system those who vote for the party in power are at a better vantage point than others. In any case, in medieval India not every Muslim was a king, nor every Hindu a pauper. More importantly, kindness and cordiality prevailed between them both as a group and as individuals, and the simple goodness of heart knew no barriers of religion or creed.

Medieval India had seen a rich and magnificent composite culture evolve in the land. The process continued, under the impact of the west, during British rule. A free united India would have led to results even more significant, not only for the people of India but for entire humanity. But this did not happen. It is futile now to lay the blame on this or that quarter. In any case, this is not the place for shedding helpless tears at human folly. The peoples of both India and Pakistan have to make the best of a bad bargain.

Judge Sahab, You must be wondering shall I ever come to the subject of Godhra and Gujrat that has prompted me to pour out my heart before you. Well, this I shall do in the letters that follow. Meanwhile do pardon me for a long 'contextual analysis' of a long past. I thought it would be a fruitful preparation for giving a balanced narrative on recent events in Godhra and Gujrat.

Kindest regards,
Sincerely Yours,
Jamal Khwaja