

Towards a Humanist Interpretation Of History And Politics

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Facts of History and their Interpretation:

If one looks at history from the humanist perspective the political or religious conflicts of the human family in the past turn into humanity's march (in circuitous and halting stages) towards a global federal unity. The victory of an Alexander and the defeat of a Porus in India, the almost total destruction of Baghdad by a Halaku and the devastations in north India by a Nadir Shah, the compassion of an Asoka, the statesmanship of an Akbar, the aberrations of a Hitler, all become the achievements or failures of the human family. With charity for all and malice toward none, the historian passes judgment on the deed, rather than the doer. His standards remain consistent, but he takes into account that human ideas and ideals are subject to the law of evolutionary growth. In short, his range of sympathy gradually becomes universal instead of remaining congealed at a particular parochial level determined by his birth or early conditioning.

It is significant that the data of history are not given to the truth seeker, as are the data of nature to the scientific investigator through sense perception or experiments under controlled conditions of observation. The data of history are themselves, in part, constructs out of surviving remains of past things or events. Moreover, no two historians select exactly the same set of data out of the total range available. Historians select their own unique 'effective' data for a systematic narrative and analysis of the past. The historian fits these data in his favored framework of ideas and values out of several alternatives available. No such framework, as such, can be proved as conclusively true or valid. Yet, one must have some basic frame of orientation (as pointed out by Erich Fromm) in order to understand or existentially respond to the human situation in totality. Religions and philosophies, in different ways, perform this function. They hold their effective data together and enable one to arrive at a total perspective on the human situation as such. Thus, a historian having a Hindutva frame of orientation would tend to view Sultan Mahmud's destruction of the Somnath temple, Gujrat, in the 10th century as an Islamic attack on Hindu India. A historian with a humanist sociological orientation would view the same episode as a medieval Sultan's lust for booty. This admission, however, does not amount to unrelieved relativity of historical interpretation as such. Let me explain this point further.

A reliable contemporary Persian record of Mahmud's time states that after returning to his capital, covered with glory and laden with booty, the Sultan sent some valuable gifts to a venerated divine of Ghazna; Qazi Abul Hasan Baulami. The Qazi returned the royal gifts and severely chastised the Sultan for violating the shariah, which prohibited the desecration of any place of worship. Obviously, the honest and bold response of the Qazi had no effect upon the Sultan and the general course of events in medieval time. However, the above authentic story makes it quite clear that the primary 'leitmotif' of the medieval Sultans was personal aggrandizement and expansion of power,

not the promotion of Islam or forcible conversion. In this sense and to this extent, therefore, the humanist interpretation of history becomes more valid than the Hindutva interpretation that rejoices in Muslim baiting and distortion of the past. By the same token those Muslims who glorify Sultan Mahmud as an Islamic hero misinterpret or distort Islam and also harm Muslims and entire humanity.

The liberal humanist approach looks upon the conflict between Shivaji and Aurangzeb in the 17th century as a confrontation between a well established, but declining imperial Delhi and a rising regional power in the Pune region of India. The destruction of some Hindu temples during the medieval period, according to the humanist perspective, was essentially an exercise to contain political rebellion or defiance, rather than an attack on the Hindu faith. Is there any justification for preferring one perspective to the other, or is each perspective merely arbitrary? Well, I submit valid reasons can be advanced in support of the humanist approach.

These facts are well documented in reliable contemporary sources. Even the Mughal-Sikh relations during Aurangzeb's long reign were far more cordial than came to be believed in later times, primarily, due to Ahmad Shah Abdali's plundering raids in the Punjab region and other political developments in India after the decline of Mughal power. Ranjit Singh, again, inaugurated an era of religious liberalism and tolerance in his Lahore Kingdom, but his successors failed him woefully. The Muslims of north India lost their self-confidence and elan and withdrew into a fundamentalist shell, under the impact of steadily growing British domination throughout the land.

As said above, the historical interpretations are organically related to still more basic existential interpretations of the total human situation and such interpretations do not admit proof in the conclusive scientific or logical sense. It is incontrovertible that the Arab or Turkish tribes who invaded India were Muslim by religion. Therefore, if one insists upon emphasizing the religious identity of the invader, the invasion will always appear as an attack of Islam upon Hinduism. However, the dispersal of peoples and races on earth, and struggle for power and wealth is universal and an integral part of the human story as such. Before Mahmud and Babar had turned their attention to India they had conquered or tried to conquer lands in central Asia that were inhabited by their own co-religionists. The Aryans and other Hindus, in earlier times, had done the same in vast stretches of the Indian sub-continent. So have all other races and peoples the world over, be they Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese or Europeans. Now this awareness can and usually does liberate the impartial and careful observer of the human situation from the habit of seeing every person or event under a religious label. He then, becomes open to the concrete quality of life as it flows in history and judges men and matters accordingly. The humanist does not divide humans into permanently hostile in-groups and out-groups. He looks at the conflicts of the past as stages in the slow growth of the human family and the progressive realization of cherished ideas and ideals in history.

Humanism and Secular Democracy:

Humanism implies giving primacy to man's sense of wonder and mystery when he confronts the universe. Secular democracy, as a political concept, flows from humanism. Every religion attempts to unravel the mystery of birth and death, good and evil, joy and sorrow, final release from pain and suffering. Answers to such questions can never be proved and different people at different times are bound to give different answers to such existential questions. Such matters should, therefore, not be dealt with by the state and should be left as matters of individual preference or conscience. Secularism holds that the state should not advocate or oppose any attempt at resolving the existential mystery of the universe. The state should concern itself only with matters of law and order, security, political, economic, educational and administrative arrangements, framing and administering of civil and criminal laws and so on. When Secularism is combined with liberal Humanism this adds up to Democracy. This implies that the state should perform all the above functions with the consent of all its citizens according to previously agreed procedures so that law becomes the ruler, rather than any person or persons. It is, however, inevitable that law will be interpreted and enforced by the persons concerned, and, thus, will reflect their personality and national character in the framing and the application of the laws as such.

A serious complication, however, arises in the above definition of Secularism, if and when any organized religion claims that it is more than an existential perspective on the inscrutable mystery of the universe, and that it is a complete 'blue print of the good life as a whole', and further, that it is the religious duty of the believer to live strictly in accordance with the prescribed code as such. Some believers might be convinced that it is also part of their religious duty to convince all other to do the same. Now, if the state has a mixed population this approach creates tension and conflict. Even if the citizens belong to one religion they may, well, be members of different sects or have diverse views on creedal and social matters. This was the actual situation in medieval Christianity and Islam, and the idea prevailed that the church and state ought to be one.

As we all know, after centuries of doctrinal and also armed conflict the Christians in Western Europe outgrew doctrines that directly or indirectly produced conflict between the church and the state. The Treaty of Westphalia, Germany, signed in 1648, was, in essence, the recognition of the principles that:

- (a) the church and the state have their respective proper jurisdiction, and neither should encroach upon the other; and
- (b) the state should be neutral and impartial to all its citizens, irrespective of the church to which they belong.

The Treaty of Westphalia, thus, initiated the era in which the English philosopher, John Locke, wrote his famous letters on tolerance and The Glorious Revolution took place in Britain in 1688. This was the beginning of the story of religious tolerance in Western Europe, but the story took

two centuries to reach a happy ending when Disraeli, Jewish by blood, became Prime Minister of Great Britain.

The founding fathers of the constitution of free India were inspired by the idea that every citizen of a sovereign state stood equal in regard to basic rights, responsibilities and opportunities, irrespective of religion, caste, region or gender. This approach implied that the Indian republic had no official religion. It will be agreed that this idea was very laudable and also courageous at a time when extreme passions had been aroused due to the unfortunate partition of the country in 1947 on religious lines.

The Hindu and Muslim Responses to Secular Humanist Politics:

When the Constituent Assembly was carrying on its deliberations and also subsequently some Hindu quarters raised voices (perhaps in all sincerity and good conscience) that the term, Secularism, was an unnecessary borrowing or imitation of Western ideas, under the influence of Nehru and that the secular ideal should be displaced by the ancient Hindu ideal of equal respect for all religions (sarva dharma sadbhava). They argued that the idea of Secularism was an understandable response of the Western humanitarian reformers to the never-ending religious intolerance and conflicts between different religions or sectarian groups in Christian society. Since Hinduism was intrinsically free from the virus of intolerance and was committed to the doctrine of free choice of Deity (Isht Devata), free India, having an overwhelmingly Hindu population should substitute the borrowed Western secular idiom with the ancient traditional idiom of sarva dharma sadbhava. They confidently claimed that a true Hindu state would guarantee and fully protect all fundamental human rights as the secular dispensation does today. They held that the stress on secularism not only diluted national pride but also diluted the distinctive spiritual basis of the Indian value system that was her glory from time immemorial. Perhaps, these quarters had in mind the example of several Muslim countries, recently liberated from colonial rule, which became Islamic states and commanded influence and power in the comity of nations without having imitated Western secular democracy. I submit this reasoning is sophistry and illusion.

The definition of Hinduism, or any other religion, for that matter, is a matter of choice and opinion. The basic question, 'what is Hinduism/Islam?' or, 'who is a good Hindu/Muslim?' elicits plural answers. Both Gandhi and Hedgewar were good Hindus, but their idea of Hinduism differed. Likewise, Sir Syed, Maulana Azad, and Mawdudi were all good Muslims, but their idea of Islam differed. Gandhiji remarked that if un-touchability were an integral part of Hinduism he was not prepared to call himself a Hindu. He, obviously, believed that un-touchability was not integral to Hinduism. However, I personally know some Hindus who honestly hold that a good Hindu ought to follow Manu's laws to the letter. I may add that I honestly respect these Hindu friends for their sincerity and integrity though I freely express my disagreement with them. The same remarks apply to some Muslim relatives or friends. I admire them for their integrity without agreeing with their idea of Islam.

Despite the fact that India is a secular state the country has to face serious problems in controlling communal passions and maintaining inter-group harmony. These problems arise due to political or economic factors, but interested parties give a religious or communal color to them as a matter of strategy. A secular state, therefore, would always be better placed than a Hindu state to provide an even ground to players belonging to diverse religions, castes and regions. The same remarks apply to Islamic states whose citizens belong to different religions or sects.

Many Indian Muslims feel uncomfortable with the idea of de-linking politics and Islam. In their hearts they continue to hold that the shariah applies to every aspect of life, but they, reluctantly, reconcile themselves to the realities of the Indian situation. This approach is a halfway house, rather than a full or unqualified commitment to humanist secularism and liberal democracy. But, then inner attitudes require centuries to grow and evolve in the minds and hearts of men enjoying security and freedom. Gandhi and Nehru understood the human condition and showed patience and generosity to all. Perhaps, the votaries of Hindutva today are impatient and their insight into the human condition is blurred, and this makes it hard for them to arrive at a proper and balanced evaluation of the genuine Muslim response to the Indian situation.

The doubts and fears in Hindutva quarters arise more because of Islamic terrorism outside India than because of religious fundamentalism among Indian Muslims. Since Muslim terrorists in Pakistan and elsewhere carry on the heinous crime of killing innocents in the name of Islam, non-Muslims are led to accept this claim at its face value. But the truth is entirely different. Religious fundamentalism, as such, springs from cultural isolation and a closed society that hampers free enquiry. Political terrorism, on the other hand, springs from existential anxiety and despair in the face of perceived injustice and the tyranny of the strong over the weak. Moreover, political terrorism cuts across different religions and regions.

Muslims in fairly large numbers in India may have demanded and loudly cheered the birth of Pakistan in the forties of the last century, but the fateful partition, certainly, traumatized those who were left in the lurch in India by its creation. Now they suffer from a growing sense of insecurity in India due to the rising Hindu fascist trends in Indian politics. The Hindus, on the other hand, constitute eightyfive percent of the population and, more or less totally, control the politics and economics of the land. Yet, they do not feel inwardly secure and in full control of the situation in India. They are scared of the dangers latent in Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

The Muslim logic is that Hindus do not behave like a 'big brother', as they should towards the Muslim or the Christian minority. The Hindu logic is that far from being this case, Indian Muslims, in fact, are members of a mighty and potentially extremely rich Islamic power bloc stretching from North Africa to South East Asia. In other words, the Hindus do not perceive the Muslims as a weak younger brother but as a potentially larger and more powerful world community. A fear seems to lurk in the depths of the Hindu psyche that neither the Western world, nor the Islamic wants the peace loving and patient Hindu community to live in peace under their

own sky. And fear is the mother of hate and aggression. This is also the root cause of the rising incidence in recent years of physical violence against Indian Christians in several parts of the land.

Whatever Christian missionaries may or may not have done in the past to save lost souls in India the Christian Church has nothing to do with the theory or practice of forcing Christianity on infidels or bribing them to join the flock of Christ. The plain truth is that the vast majority of Christian missionaries in India today are models of selfless service, piety and religious scholarship. Even the Pope has accepted plural paths to salvation. The adversarial approach to other religions has undergone an internal revolution in the contemporary Christian value system. On this point all the major religions of the world are fast converging. It is a pity that some Hindutva quarters still nurse or air old grievances against Muslims and Christians.

There is no dearth of compassionate and fair-minded Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan. They are, in fact, the silent majority. However, a vocal minority among the Hindus and Muslims may be said to have hijacked the role of spokesperson for Hinduism or Islam, as the case may be. But I submit, it will not be long when the relative supremacy of good over evil in the human heart, armed with the advantages of modern communication technology, will empower the liberal humanist vanguard, within each community, to initiate interfaith dialogues. And this is bound to produce very fruitful results in terms of mutual understanding and appreciation of the spiritual wealth found in every religious tradition. This will pave the way for removing ignorance and prejudice in each in-group against other out-groups. This will dilute the present adversarial relations between the different religious groups in India and elsewhere.

This is how, modern intellectual and savants such as Newton (d. 1727), Gibbon (d. 1794), Goethe (d. 1832), Carlyle (d. 1881), and Browne (d. 1926) et al came to respect and admire Sufism, while others, such as, Schopenhauer (d. 1860), Max Muller (d. 1900), and Romain Rolland (d. 1944), et al came to respect and admire Vedanta and Yoga. The same was the case with Ram Mohan Roy (d. 1833) in the late 18th century and M.N.Roy (d. 1954), Bhagwan Das (d. 1958), and Tara Chand et al in the 20th century. They all greatly appreciated the historic role of Islam in world history.

The theory and practice of organized Hinduism in modern times does not regulate or control every sphere of human life to the same degree or extent, as does Islam through shariah. Hindu society has been rather permissive and tolerant of plural interpretations of both creed and law. In ancient times it accommodated Jain and Buddhist ideas and values within the wider Brahmanical culture. According to judicious historians, due to this conceptual openness of early Hindu society Buddhist agnosticism, more or less, completely came to over-shadow Brahmanical orthodoxy in several parts of the county. This lasted till the rise and spread of Shankarcharya's revivalist movement of pure Brahmanism in the early 9th century. Thereafter, both Jainism and Buddhism declined or rather withered away and the contours of Hinduism, as we understand it today, emerged. Scholars have viewed this crucial process differently. Some regard it as the result of persecution of dissent.

Others say it happened due to the extreme 'porosity' of Hindu thought and culture. Due to various factors the Hindu population absorbed the conceptual and social innovations of Jain and Buddhist reformers, and took the wind out of the sails of these early reform and protest movements in ancient India.

By the 10th century Brahmanical thought became rigid, as Al-Beruni points out in his monumental work on Indian thought and culture. Hindu creativity had become a spent force, as generally happens in the human family. Political in-fighting between the Hindu chiefs and a vicious social stratification had resulted in a shocking dehumanization of the lowest class. At the same time the Islamic revolution in the 7th century had grown into a mighty world current. This, rather than the sword of Islam, acted as a catalyst in different parts of the then known world. In India the creative impact of Islam led to the ideas of ethical theism and bhakti. A little later in Western Europe it led to the Protestant and Humanitarian versions of Christianity.

The Islamic message of social equality, however, was qualified by the idea of the brotherhood and equality of all Muslims, rather than of all men, irrespective of religion or faith. Not only this, the Islamic idea of equality and fraternity remained entangled with the thorns of racial pride and kingly authoritarianism. To make matters worse, the Sultans in India and the entire nobility could not emancipate themselves from the evil of a vicious caste system in India. Thus, the seed of early Islamic republicanism and democracy lay fallow and dormant for several centuries before they flowered and flourished in the representative democracy of modern times, first in England and subsequently in Western Europe and America. As we all know, this consummation took place in the Christian rather than in the Muslim world. The scientific and technological revolutions that took place in Western Europe from the end of the 18th century onwards were, thus, the complete flowering of the early spiritual and intellectual creativity of early Islam. Paradoxically, Islamic creativity led to a glorious cultural reconstruction in Europe, but not in the regions of Islam itself. Indeed, as the West continued to rise and soar even as Muslim lands continued to decline and sink into decay.

Conclusion:

Western creative modernity reached India via Bengal in the late 18th century. Under its impact as well as the earlier influence of Islamic values Ram Mohan Roy (d. 1833) redefined Hindu spirituality. Almost a century later Sir Syed (d. 1898), leader of the Aligarh movement, did the same for Islam. The liberal Hindu vanguard has retained till today the considerable advantage of their early lead. Moreover, the flame that Ram Mohan ignited soon lighted several other lamps in other parts of the great land. The Brahmo Samaj Movement stirred a new vision before the Hindu psyche leading to the Ramakrishna mission and produced luminaries such as Vivekananda (d. 1902), Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941), Aurobindo (d. 1950), Krishnamurti (d. 1986) et al and Gandhi (d. 1948), Rajgopalachari and Nehru (d. 1964) himself.

Sir Syed, on the other hand, to the misfortune of Indian Muslims, in spite of his laudable creative work in the field of Islamic liberalism, merely founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh that produced good cricketers, Deputy Collectors, and of course Muhammad Ali (d. 1931), the President of the Indian National Congress in 1923. As also Altaf Husain Hali (d. 1914), the poet, Allama Shibli (d. 1914), the liberal historian and the impartial biographer of Prophet Muhammad, Chiragh Ali, the social reformer and a few Westernized, forward looking and progressive men of letters. But no corresponding rethinking on Islam or Islamic Reformation (parallel to the massive Christian and Hindu Reformations of earlier times) emerged in a big way from the efforts of Sir Syed and the Aligarh Movement. To my mind, Sir Syed's followers failed him. He died in 1898 and the partition of India, fifty years after his death, was the nadir of this failure. The responsibility for partition however, falls not only on his followers but also on several exclusive Hindu quarters, both individuals and groups that failed to appreciate the larger inclusive vision of the top ranking Congress luminaries.

The partition of India in 1947 has greatly slowed down the cultural interaction between Islam and Hinduism that had begun in medieval India. However, it is patently clear that the process cannot be arrested, no matter what the political constraints and short-term interests of India, Pakistan and Bangla Desh may demand. None of these independent countries can insulate themselves from the pressures and pulls of cultural modernity, economic inter-dependence and a growing globalism. They are all faced with problems and challenges of over-population, corrupt politicians, misuse of religion or caste for short term political gains, poor political will and discipline, irresponsible trade unionism and a host of similar other problems. Yet, it is a fact that the common man everywhere yearns for mutual understanding and peace and is moved by the simple goodness of the heart, above all talk of religion or politics in the name of jihad, Hindutva or Communism.

Through trial and error, blood and tears the human family is reaching out for the 'religion of the spirit' without any call for converting people to any theological creed or tradition. This approach to religion leaves intact the distinctive idiom and symbols of each historical religion, but unites them all in a common search for values. This is the interfaith approach of all enlightened and noble souls in the world today. Gandhiji was the prophet of the religion of the spirit. He remains the most outstanding combination, in modern times, of mass political leadership, conceptual creativity, statesmanship and sainthood. The RSS has different ideas and sources of inspiration. Persons, like Bal Thackeray, look up to Shivaji for inspiration and guidance. I will respect all sincere devotees and believe even though I may not agree with them. But I strongly protest the behavior of the VHP, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and others when they resort to violence for promoting their vision and values. If militancy or terrorism is evil in the case of jihad it is also evil in the case of Hindutva. There can be no double standards. This is the crux of the matter.

The United Nations is a great step in this noble direction. But super powers are ever tempted to turn the august body into a tool for promoting their own interests. This, again, is quite natural and

understandable. It is, therefore, imperative not to lose faith but to persist in doing what is right and avoid what is wrong.