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ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN INDIA. PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE

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Source: *Oriente Moderno*, Nuova serie, Anno 23 (84), Nr. 1, ISLAM IN SOUTH ASIA (2004), pp. 71-82

Published by: [Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25817918>

Accessed: 03/12/2014 21:43

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ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN INDIA.  
PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

Islam entered into India almost in the lifetime of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam. Generally it is thought that it came into India by way of invasion by Muhammad bin Qasim, a young general sent by Yusuf bin Hajjaj, the governor of Iraq during the Umayyad period in the later part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. But this is not true. Islam entered India through Kerala on the west coast through the Arab traders in a peaceful manner. The region called Malabar in Kerala is Indianised form of *ma<sup>c</sup>bar* which in Arabic means passage. Since the Arab traders passed through that region often it came to be known by that name. The Arabs, in fact, had been trading since pre-Islamic days and then embraced Islam after the Prophet began preaching. They married the local women in Kerala and their offspring spread in different parts of that region. Also, later they were accompanied by sufi saints who converted many local people, mainly from lower classes to Islam. Thus this was the real entry point of Islam into India.

However, as far as north India was concerned Islam entered into India through invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim and it has become the sore point in relations between Hindus and Muslims. The invasion by Qasim was followed by many other invasions, including those of Shihabuddin Ghauri and Mahmud Ghaznavi and the later demolished the temple of Somnath which rankles in the memory of upper caste Hindus. This is projected with prominence in the textbooks of history which perpetuates the bitter memory of hostility and animosity. Such events are not projected in proper context and are ascribed to Islam's 'hatred of Hindus and Hinduism'. However, such hostile projections are product of colonial period from nineteenth century onwards. It is not true that the Muslim rulers simply hated the Hindus and humiliated them throughout their rule. It is later construction. The Hindu and Muslim rulers had mutual alliances as well as hostilities depending on struggle for power.

In fact many Hindu rulers invited the Muslim invaders including Babar in order to settle scores with local rulers. Also, one ruling Muslim dynasty fought against another ruling Muslim dynasty. When Babar, the first Mughal ruler in-

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1 – First published in *Secular Perspective*, Bombay, March 16 – April 15, 2001.

vaded India, Ibrahim Lodhi was ruling over India and he was invited to defeat the Lodhi ruler by Rajput rulers who were, by themselves, unable to defeat the Lodhi dynasty. Still Babar is projected in contemporary school textbooks as invader and strongly condemned for his invasion of India. These constructions and re-constructions of medieval history are done to cater to contemporary political needs. The period between 10<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century is often described in these textbooks as 'Muslim period' and the period before as the 'Hindu period'. The historians maintain that these periods cannot be described by religious denomination of the ruler, as there were serious differences, hostilities and conflicts between the rulers following the same religion. Muslims fought against Muslims and Hindu ruler against Hindu ruler.

It is important to note that neither Muslim nor Hindu community was homogenous one. Both the communities were highly stratified horizontally as well as vertically. Medieval societies were hierarchical along caste and class lines and the lower rungs of the community did not exactly harmonise with the upper rungs. Even the upper class Muslims hated their brethren of lower castes and class. There was greater harmony between Hindus and Muslims of lower castes than between lower and upper castes of the same community. Common customs and traditions and mutual influences among these lower castes and classes amply demonstrate it. However, it is totally ignored in the contemporary history writing especially at school levels. These history textbooks have become breeding ground of communalism and communal hatred between these two communities.

The British rulers initiated this kind of history writing in order to divide their subjects so that they could rule without serious challenge to their colonial power. They also deliberately or innocently homogenised the two communities ignoring all differences and as if their interests were uniform. The Indian National Congress, which was an umbrella organisation of freedom fighters wisely adopted political philosophy of secularism as its foundational philosophy. It helped bring the elite of two communities together to fight for freedom. When Mahatma Gandhi appeared on the scene he involved the masses of people in the freedom movement by championing their causes. He also tried to weld Hindus and Muslims together by taking up religious issues like the Khilafat issue after the first world war when the British sought to dismember the Turkish empire. The Muslims responded enthusiastically to Gandhiji's call and even traditional *'ulama* fraternised with him on the issue and supported the Indian national Congress and its concept of secular composite nationalism.

However, soon after the Khilafat movement serious differences developed between a section of Hindus and Muslims mainly on power-sharing formula. The Motilal Nehru Committee was appointed to solve the 'communal question' but both Hindu and Muslim leaders of communal dispensation opposed its recommendations vehemently and the report consequently drew a blank. Three round table conferences in early thirties also failed to work *Islam and Muslims in India* out any satisfactory formula to resolve the question of power sharing between the two communities. The last attempt to build a political alliance between the Congress and the Muslim League in 1937 also came to a naught. The

Congress after the elections refused to take two ministers nominated by the League in its cabinet on the grounds that it had failed to win majority of Muslim seats. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who later became founder of Pakistan, was furious and vowed to teach the Congress a lesson. He propounded the two-nation theory and sowed the seed of partition of the country. Partition, justified or not, became the cause of animosity between the two communities in India. The upper caste Hindus never forgave Muslims for this.

It would also be wrong to blame all Muslims for the partition of the country. Indian Muslims were divided on the issue. The lower caste Muslims saw no benefit for them in creating a 'new homeland' as it would benefit only upper class Muslims. In fact a section of lower caste Muslims represented by the Mu'min Conference demonstrated against the two-nation theory propounded by Jinnah on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1940 in Lahore. The Muslim *'ulama* too vehemently opposed it and declared their support for composite nationalism of the Congress and also justified it on religious grounds. Thus it shows clearly that all Muslims were not unanimous on the question of two-nation theory and that the theory was not based on Islam but on the political needs of the Muslim élite. Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, a prominent theologian and rector of the Darul 'Ulum, Deoband, a premier Islamic seminary in India was on the forefront of the opponents of the two nation theory and he even wrote a book *Muttahida Qawmiyat aur Islam* (Composite Nationalism and Islam) to refute it. He also undertook a whirlwind tour of India to appeal to the Muslims not to be misled by Jinnah and his two-nation theory. This is clear proof of the fact that a section of Muslims strongly opposed creation of Pakistan. But it is strange irony of politics that the Indian Muslims as a whole are being held as guilty of dividing the country and paying the price for it.

## II

Partition resulted in human massacre on both the sides of divide. More than a million people were killed and many more were displaced and cut off from their roots. The ruling classes in Pakistan mainly comprised the feudal lords, military and bureaucracy and never shared power with the masses. Its Islamic foundation also proved quite fragile and it broke into two in 1971 when the Bengali Muslims seceded from Pakistan and formed Bangladesh. The Pakistani ruling élite led by Z.A. Bhutto refused to share power with the Bengali Muslims and tried to suppress their legitimate aspirations by sending army to former East Pakistan. Pakistan founded as it was, on the aspirations of Muslim power élite had often to resort to hate India campaign to divert attention of the Muslim masses from their real problems. Pakistan faces great challenges today in the form of ethnic and sectarian conflicts.

Partition as pointed out above, far from solving the communal problem in India, further aggravated it. The innocent Muslim masses in India continue to pay heavy price for creation of Pakistan. It created hatred in the minds of upper caste Hindus towards Muslims. These Hindus are even unable to distinguish between the interests of upper class Muslim élite who created Pakistan and the

backward illiterate Muslim masses who were victims of partition. In many communal riots the fanatics raise the slogan *Muslim jao Pakistan ya qabrastan* (i.e. O Muslims go to Pakistan or to cemetery).

Thus partition neither solved the problems of Muslims in Pakistan nor those in India. It (i.e. partition), on the other hand, shattered the unity of Muslims in sub-continent who are now divided in three units – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Partition had sought to create homeland for Indian Muslims. Far from it; Indian Muslims are not only divided in three units but today, of all these three countries, number of Muslims is highest in India for whom the Muslim homeland was meant. The Muslim masses in all these three countries are facing problems of acute poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. If at all anyone benefited from partition it was the élite Muslims who created so called Muslim ‘homeland’ in the name of Islam.

### III

Indian Muslims faced problems of security and identity from the day one after India became independent. First partition riots made them terribly insecure. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims were killed during the partition riots in India as Hindus were killed in Pakistan. Thus independence brought a great calamity for both Hindus and Muslims in India. Moreover Indian Muslims were totally confused and did not know what to do. They lost even the sense of confidence. It was leaders of stature of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who instilled sense of confidence and made them proud of their Islamic heritage in India. Maulana Azad’s speech from the steps of Jama Masjid, Delhi acted as a balm and had a healing touch. However, Muslims had hard days to face after partition in India.

The Constitution was drafted and adopted on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950 declaring India a republic. The Constitution declared all citizens of India equal in every respect without any distinction of caste, creed or race. The Articles 25 to 30 of the Constitution also gave special religious and cultural rights to minorities. The Article 25 thus declares: “Subject to public order, morality and health and to other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion”. This article even allows the Sikhs “...wearing and carrying of kirpans (a weapon) shall be deemed to be included in the profession of the Sikh religion”.

Under cultural and educational rights of minorities articles 29 and 30 are very important. According to the Article 29 “(1) Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same. (2) No citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving State funds on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them”.

The Article 30 is also of fundamental importance. This Article is entitled “Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions”. It says: “(1) All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the

right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. (2) the State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions discriminate on the grounds that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language”.

Needless to say, these provisions of the Constitution are of fundamental importance for preserving the religious practices and identities of minority communities based on religion or language and culture. The Indian Muslims and other religious minorities like the Christians, Sikhs and neo-Buddhists highly value these provisions of the Constitution of India. For the Muslims in particular who constitute the largest religious minority these provisions are of special significance. The Muslims have resisted and preserved – this we will discuss in some more detail in the subsequent pages – their personal laws or *shari‘a* laws under the Article 25 which allows all persons to profess, practice and propagate their religion. However, there are differences among legal luminaries whether State can regulate or legislate in respect of the personal laws or not in view of the Article 25. Muslims of course maintain the State cannot.

The Article 29 and 30 are also of great importance for preservation of minority languages and cultures and the Hindu communalists often attack these provisions and want them to be done away with. But it requires two-third majority in the Parliament to change the Constitution and hence the Hindutva forces have not succeeded so far in tampering with these important provisions. However, there are violations of these provisions in practice and there are numerous grievances in this respect. But it is another story altogether.

While incorporation of these articles in Indian Constitution instilled a sense of confidence among Indian Muslims in post-independence period their loyalty to India remained suspect in the eyes of most of the people of majority community, particularly of north India. As pointed out before, it is sociologically and politically wrong to homogenise any religious community, but ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ became political categories since the British days in Indian political discourse as if they were monolithic bloc without any political, religious, linguistic and cultural differences. Commonality of religion, as the two-nation theory also assumed does not lead to commonality of politics, nor does it lead to commonality of culture. The north and central Indian Muslims who spoke Urdu were distinctly different from Muslims from south who speak different south Indian languages. They have their own political inclinations and compulsions.

The Muslims from south were indifferent to the question of Pakistan right from the beginning. They did not support the partition with same enthusiasm as the Urdu speaking Muslims of north India. Communalism and communal violence remained centred right from the British days in the north. Even in the post-partition period south was relatively free from communal violence until late eighties. It spread in south only during late eighties. Until then there were hardly any communal riots in the south except in Hyderabad which has been centre of Urdu speaking Muslims and was under the Nizam rule. However, after late eighties the communal situation deteriorated very fast in some parts of South, particularly in the state of Tamilnadu.

## IV

*Communal violence*

In north India too there was relative communal peace during the fifties as the entire focus during this period was on linguistic re-organisation of states. In parts of India there were linguistic riots, particularly between Gujarat and Maharashtra on the question of inclusion of Bombay. However, an unending cycle of communal violence began from early sixties. The first major riot took place in Jabalpur in 1962 which shook the whole country. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, was also thoroughly shaken. He did not expect communal violence on such massive scale as he thought the communal question was 'resolved' by partitioning the country on communal lines. His illusion was thus shattered. Communalism and communal violence was here to persist as partition had not changed the communal mind-set of some people. It had, on the other hand, aggravated it.

However, Nehru was committed to secular politics. Shaken by the events in Jabalpur, he formed National Integration Council after Jabalpur riots and Chinese invasion of 1962. However, unfortunately the Council remained only a paper organisation and could not become an active agent of promoting secular values and communal harmony. Most of the Congressmen were communal at heart and never had commitment to secularism as Nehru had. Many Congress leaders were known sympathisers of Hindu communal outfits. They were opposed to Nehru's policies both internal as well as external i.e. his policy of non-alignment. The Jabalpur riots shook Indian Muslims' confidence in Congress as well as in secularism.

It was commitment to secularism that had inspired minorities to stand by the Indian National Congress and thousands of Indian Muslims had supported Indian freedom struggle because of Indian National Congress adopting secular philosophy. Indian secularism of course was far from being atheistic or antagonistic to religion like secularism in the Soviet Union. Indian secularism guaranteed religious freedom to all and it was this concept of religious freedom which made Indian Muslims feel Islam was safe in India. However, their confidence was shaken with every major communal riot. During Nehru period too several large communal riots took place. The situation was greatly aggravated after his death.

Nehru's death in 1964 left a great void but Indian democracy proved to be vibrant enough to overcome this crisis. Lal Bahadur Shastri took over as Prime Minister but did not live long and died of heart attack after signing peace treaty in Tashkent after 1965 war between India and Pakistan. On his death Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister and to strengthen her position she tried to win over minorities by strengthening secular forces in the country. Thus she succeeded in winning over minorities who were feeling quite unsafe after series of communal riots in the country since Jabalpur riot.

However, Indira Gandhi had to face enormous challenges from her opponents both from within the Congress and outside it. The Congress bosses opposed to her split the Congress and Indira's faction became the ruling Congress. To make her position shaky all those ranged against her engineered a communal



holocaust in 1969 in Ahmedabad in Gujarat (western India) where the Congress faction opposed to her was ruling. The Ahmedabad communal riots spread to other parts of Gujarat State and were much worse in intensity than the Jabalpur riots. The Jan Sangh which was the Hindu rightist and communal outfit was actively propagating against Muslims and doubting their loyalty to India in those days. It passed a resolution for 'Indianising' the Indian Muslims as if they were not Indian enough. Its president in those days was Balraj Madhok who was known to be extremist in his views. The print media played up the resolution and some papers like *The Times of India* even editorially supported the resolution.

The Indian Muslims were feeling terribly insecure and felt their very existence was in danger. And it was in this suffocating atmosphere that Ahmedabad holocaust occurred in which more than thousand Muslims were killed in Ahmedabad city alone. And the Ahmedabad riots were followed with equally ferocious communal riot in Bhivandi in 1970. Another communal outfit called Shiv Sena came into existence in Maharashtra in late sixties and some senior Congressmen of Bombay were supposedly behind it. These Congressmen who were nursing grievances against Nehruvian leftward policies lent their discrete support to a Marathi demagogue Bal Thackeray. Mr. Thackeray aroused both strong regional as well as communal feelings among the Maharashtrian youth. Bal Thackeray was also staunch enemy of communists and it was at his instance that a communist activist Krishna Desai was murdered by Shiv Sainiks.

It was Shiv Sena which was behind the Bhivandi riots of 1970. Bhivandi is around 40 miles from Bombay city and is centre of power looms mostly owned by Muslims. It has Muslim majority. It is reported that more than 400 persons, mostly Muslims, were killed in these riots. What was worse which made Muslims more insecure was the biased role of the police in these riots. In all these riots there were instances of unabashed partiality of the police towards the Hindu communal elements. However, it must be said that only a section of Hindus took communal positions and showed anti-Muslim bias, not all Hindus. Many Hindus, perhaps a great majority, either remained neutral or stood on the side of Muslims or fought communal forces in their own community. Shiv Sena in Maharashtra was backed either by communal elements or by those Congressmen who were nursing grievances against Indira Gandhi.

The period between 1970 and 1977 was comparatively peaceful and there were no major communal riots during this period for various reasons. It was during this period that the liberation movement in erstwhile East Pakistan started and Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan through active intervention of Indian army. The attention of whole nation was in that direction. Mrs. Gandhi's stature was boosted tremendously and she emerged as a great heroin of Indian politics. However, this proved to be quite short-lived and soon opposition gathered momentum. Jayprakash Narayan, a socialist leader of great stature in Indian politics, launched an anti-corruption movement against her and her prestige went down considerably. She also lost an election petition in Allahabad High Court and was unseated. She declared emergency in 1975 and large number of opposition leaders were arrested including Jayprakash Narayan. Most of the Jansangh and RSS leaders were



also rounded up and there was complete political vacuum. Thus there was no one left to provoke communal violence.

However, emergency was lifted in 1977 and in the ensuing elections Mrs. Gandhi and her party lost heavily and the newly formed Janata Party formed the government of which the Jansangh was a constituent. The Jansangh ostensibly renounced its communal philosophy and pledged at Gandhiji's Samadhi (where his funeral ashes lay buried) to be secular and votary of Gandhian socialism. The north Indian Muslims who had greatly suffered during cleansing programmes in emergency overwhelmingly voted for the Janata Party knowing fully well that the Jansangh was part of it. It was the first and last time that the Muslims voted for the Jansangh in sheer desperation. They expected the Jansangh to reciprocate this gesture towards Muslims but were soon disillusioned. A series of communal riots followed from 1978 onwards. Major riots took place in Jamshedpur, Aligarh and Varanasi in north India. Many innocent lives were lost.

The RSS which provides ideological direction to Hindu communal forces was quite unhappy at the Jansangh renouncing communalism and adopting secularism which is perceived to be anti-Hindu. The Jansangh members were forced, by their RSS mentors, not to renounce their RSS membership. All the top leaders of the then Jansangh were also members of RSS and the socialist leaders like Raj Narain in the Janata Party raised this issue – known as the dual membership issue – and asked the Jansangh members in the Janata Party to resign their RSS membership. The RSS made it plain to their members not to resign and planned several communal riots in Aligarh, Varanasi, Jamshedpur etc. to display its strength. The Janata party Government fell apart on this question in 1979 and replaced by the government led by Charan Singh which also lasted for few months. In the ensuing elections in 1980 Mrs. Gandhi came back to power though with less popular vote.

The Jansangh after break up of the Janata Party took a new *avatar* now calling itself Bhartiya Janata Party and adopted moderate posture still claiming to be committed to 'secularism' and Gandhian socialism. To symbolise its commitment to these ideals, a moderate leader like Atal Bihari Vajpayee was made its president. But this strategy soon came to naught as Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in order to compensate for her loss of Muslim votes, began to mobilise Hindu votes adopting Hindu communal postures from behind the scene. This upset BJP's apple cart and it lost its own ground. They faced threat from Mrs. Gandhi and lost heavily in the general elections of 1984 when they got only 2 seats in Parliament. The BJP was thus forced to rethink its strategy to keep its political base intact and seen to widen it.

Thus it began to adopt its earlier aggressive communal postures once again. Vajpayee was replaced by Shri L. K. Advani as president of BJP who is known for his strong Hindutva proclivity. In order to compete with the Congress soft communalism the BJP adopted hard Hindu communalism from the early eighties and even began to question the Nehruvian concept of secularism. Now a debate took place publicly whether Nehruvian secularism was at all relevant to India, it being a western notion. The BJP, under the leadership of Mr. Advani even dubbed Nehruvian secularism as nothing more than a policy of 'appeasement of

Muslims'. The only example the BJP could give of appeasement of Muslims was that of Muslim personal law under which a Muslim man could marry four wives whereas the Hindus cannot. They can marry only one wife. It greatly appealed to the Hindu middle class.

The BJP also aggressively propagated that the Muslims do not practice family planning and that their population is increasing much faster than that of Hindus and that the Muslim population will take over the Hindu population by 2050 and India will become part of Pakistan. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a member of the Sangh Parivar (The RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal apart from the BJP constituted what is called the Sangh Parivar or the Saffron family) took much more militantly communal posture on this issue. It distributed pamphlets throughout India showing a Hindu couple with two children and a Muslim man with four wives and host of children with the legend that 'we five our twenty five'. Also, after conversion of a few Dalit families to Islam in Meenakshipuram (Tamilnadu) in 1981, the VHP launched an aggressive movement against conversion to Islam as currently it is attacking Christians for conversion.

All this greatly communalised the situation in the country and communal riots increased both in numbers and intensity. The Muslims naturally began to feel highly insecure and thought their Islamic identity is in danger. Secularism, needless to say, has been a great source of strength for minorities in India, particularly the Muslims. If secularism comes under attack, the minorities feel quite insecure. The militant attack by the Saffron family on Nehruvian secularism and the VHP campaign against conversion and myth of multiplying population of the Muslims not only weakened Indian secularism but made the Muslims feel politically suffocated. It was under these circumstances that the Supreme Court delivered what has come to be known as "the Shah Bano judgement" regarding the maintenance of a Muslim divorcee.

The judgement upheld Shah Bano's contention under the secular law that she was entitled to maintenance for life and not for only the *'idda* (waiting period before re-marriage after the divorce which is three months) period. This judgement delivered in 1985 was thought to be another attack on Islam and Muslim identity in India. The Muslim leadership across the political parties and sectarian divide unitedly opposed the Supreme Court judgement and launched an aggressive movement to reverse it. This added to already aggravated communal situation and went a long way to further intensify hostility between two communities.

It was under these circumstances that the BJP launched a new agitation: to demolish the Babri Masjid and construct a Ramjanambhoomi temple in its place. The BJP maintained – though without much justification – that Babar, the Mughal ruler, after whom the mosque in Ayodhya was named, had demolished the Ramjanambhoomi temple and constructed the mosque. So now that the Hindus were in political command, had right to demolish the mosque and reconstruct the temple dedicated to Ram and take historical revenge. This too greatly appealed to the Hindu middle classes and the BJP, which had a narrow political base among the upper caste Hindus earlier began to expand it among the middle and even backward caste Hindus in the name of Ram.

The Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi agitation was not only historically unjustified, it launched a frontal attack on Indian secularism. The Muslims began to fear that it is beginning of the end of secularism in India and that the Sangh Parivar would demolish all historical mosques one after the other and that Constitutional guarantees are quite hollow. The Sangh Parivar had prepared a list of 300 such mosques and this was enough to frighten Muslims. Muslims were furthermore perturbed by the fact that the ruling Congress Government headed by Rajiv Gandhi could do nothing to stop the tide of Hindu communalism. Not only this Rajiv opened the lock over the Babri Masjid and allowed the Hindus to worship Lord Ram's idol planted there in 1948 by some RSS enthusiasts. This aggressive Ramjanambhoomi movement resulted in a series of communal riots in various parts of India in which hundreds of innocent lives were lost most of whom were Muslims. The 1987 riots in Meerut and 1989 riots in Bhagalpur sent shock waves throughout India making Muslims feel terribly insecure.

The Babri Masjid was also demolished by *karsevaks* (voluntary workers) of the Sangh Parivar on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 when Narsimha Rao was the Congress Prime Minister of India. Many secular Hindus also felt that it was a terrible tragedy and it was not only destruction of a mosque through political hooliganism but also a terrible blow to Indian secularism. The demolition of Babri Masjid was followed by riots in Bombay, Surat, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Delhi and several other places. Communal holocaust, as if, swept throughout the country. The Bombay riots of 1992 and 1993 were mainly organised by Shiv Sena, a regional fascistic and communal outfit led by Bal Thackeray who cried for the blood of Muslims. The Bombay riots in particular had international repercussions. They tarnished the secular image of India.

### *Post-Babri Situation*

Though as a result of Ramjanambhoomi movement the BJP gained tremendous political ground and ultimately succeeded in capturing political power as a major coalition partner, the communal situation eased in the post-Babri demolition period. The decade of eighties was the most dangerous communal decade in post-independence period. It witnessed the most aggressive form of communalism after the partition of the country. The Sangh Parivar went all out during this period to expand its political base by misusing religious and communal issues one after the other.

However, once it came to power at the Centre at the head of coalition it began to downplay communal issues. It wanted to maintain law and order situation under control and also wanted to give a message to Muslims that they will be safe only if the BJP is in power. It even promised to Muslims a 'riot-free' India in its election manifesto of 1999 if it comes to power. Some politicians who made an alliance with the BJP even argued that to ensure riot-free India one should keep BJP in power and hence these otherwise secular parties legitimised their alliance with it.

However, it would be naïf to think that BJP can become 'secular' if it is voted to power. BJP had been provoking communal hatred in order to get Hindu votes

but as a ruling party obviously it cannot risk provoking communal violence. It will tarnish its political image. As a ruling party it has to ensure communal peace. But communal peace or absence of communal violence should not be mistaken for communal harmony. To spread communal feelings is the very ideological basis of Sangh Parivar. If communalism and communal ideology remains alive communal violence can be incited whenever needed. The BJP itself is not indulging in communal propaganda. The other members of the Saffron family – RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal – fill this void. Of late the Christian community has come under attack for conversions.

The BJP for the time being is going soft on Muslims. It is even following Mrs. Gandhi's policies of early eighties in reverse. Mrs. Indira Gandhi who traditionally depended on minority votes tried to switch over to the Hindu votes to compensate for its loss of popularity among the Muslims. The BJP who is witnessing loss of popularity among the Hindus is now appealing to Muslims to come closer to it and repose confidence in it. The wooing of Muslims by the BJP thus can be compared with the wooing of Hindus by Mrs. Gandhi. These are political games which the politicians play to come to power. People of this or that community are used as vote-banks and object of rather than subject of politics.

Democracy should be an effective tool for empowerment of people but it is rather used for empowering politicians at the cost of the people. The Congress always used Muslims as vote-bank. The Congress in its long rule hardly did anything to solve acute problems of Muslims. Muslims in India are very poor and backward. Their main problems are economic and educational. But the ruling parties did nothing substantial in these fields. Only promises were made. The literacy rate among Muslims tends to be around 35 % and among Muslim women it is even more depressing – not more than 18 %. Their share in political power and in government jobs is also very dismal. Though the Muslim population is more than 12 % (according to 1991 census) and may touch 15 % level in 2001 census, number of M.P.s (members of parliament) is usually around 5 %. In state assemblies also it is no different.

Even at the lowest level of government jobs – class three and class four jobs their share does not go beyond 6 to 7 % and at the level of higher administrative positions like the IAS it is no more than 3-4 %. It is true it is difficult to find qualified Muslims for various jobs and the Muslim leaders also have done near to nothing to disseminate education among the Muslim masses. But Union and State Governments have also done nothing to redeem the situation. They make all promises at the time of elections but except repeating these promises during next elections hardly anything happens. The Muslim grievances are quite justified. They hardly have any share in power as the largest minority in India. The share, if any, is woefully inadequate.

### *Conclusion*

Thousands of Muslims not only participated in freedom struggle in India and made great sacrifices but also vigorously opposed creation of Pakistan. They dreamt of secular India hoping for creation of just society where they will be not

only able to follow their religion but also share power on equitable basis. However, things did not go that way. Though Jawaharlal Nehru was committed to justice to minorities in independent India other Congress leaders were not. The majority in the Congress did not share Nehru's commitment. Also, creation of Pakistan marred to an extent, the future of Muslims in India. It created powerful prejudices in the minds of Hindus and Indian Muslims were seen as more loyal to Pakistan than to India and they generalised few such instances to reinforce the conclusion which they already had drawn.

The Muslims also did not draw up proper strategy for their own advancement in secular India. Their leaders, as pointed out before, cared more for religion and identity-related problems than the education and economic progress-related ones. These leaders always looked to the past then to future. They negotiated deals with political parties – mainly the Congress – to preserve their past heritage than to build future for the Muslim masses. Now it is dawning on Muslims that apart from preserving their Islamic identity they also have to carve out their niche in democratic secular India. Though still the emphasis is on building *madrassas* but more and more secular educational institutions are also coming up. More and more Muslims are realising that girl education is also very important for their progress. A new middle class is also slowly coming into existence which is increasingly championing the cause of modern education. Pressures are also building up from below for certain necessary changes in the status of women, particularly certain necessary changes in the *shari'a* law as it operates in India.

Though still there is mass poverty among the Muslims, particularly among the lower caste Muslims, they have turned the corner and many of them are striving for upward mobility. However, they have far to go and many powerful obstacles to overcome. It is certainly convoluted way to forge ahead. Even the BJP has discovered that anti-Muslim tirade cannot yield more results and is negotiating a new political space which is likely to have some place for Muslims though it is not easy for it to do this. Its ideological mentor RSS may not allow it to do this. Much will depend on the response of its Hindu voters to this new orientation of the moderate section of the BJP leadership. It will be tested in coming elections particularly in U.P.

Whether the BJP forges ahead with its new Muslim policy or not the Muslims have to sink or swim in the Indian political ocean and from all available signs it appears Muslim masses have decided to swim even if the ocean is choppy. If right now the future of Muslims is not bright it is not dismal either. Given little more wisdom and pragmatic approach Muslims can succeed in shaping their future in democratic India even if its secularism is undulating.