BOOK REVIEW


During the past decade, the Indian Muslims' attitude towards the forces of secularism has been studied at various levels by Indians, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and others; notable among them being Mujeeb, 'Abid Husain, Fayyaz, Tayabji, Ziyad-ul-Hassan Faruqi, S.E. Hasnain, Sayyid Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, A.B. Shah, and Karandikar. The present work by a sensitive, young Muslim intellectual who combines in himself both traditional Islamic (Nadwa) and Western (McGill) training, helps to bring into focus some of the issues raised by the earlier writers, evaluates the reasons preferred by them in respect of Muslim “apathy” towards secularization of traditional life-patterns, and attempts to get at the root of the problem. In this it represents the most recent attempt at Muslim self-statement and a valuable contribution to the growing literature on the subject.

While social, economic and political factors may contribute towards their apathy, the author finds their conception of Islam to be “the main reason of their resistance to secularization” (p. 1), especially since “the Muslim community in secular India is more concerned with its religious identity than is usually realized by others” (p. 2). He refers to the semantic confusion caused by the translation into Urdu of the term, “secularism”, as lā dintyat or ghair mazhabiyyat which carry with them derogatory, anti-religious connotations. This had fed “the tradition-bound Muslim community” to take secularism as an “anti-religious force”, and hence to become apathetic to social change sought to be affected in name of secularism. Thus the vagueness and ambiguity that have characterized the use of the term has a good deal to do with the Muslims’ attitude towards it.

While they would have little to do with the social philosophy of secularism, they welcome the establishment of a secular state in India since it ensures religious neutrality or non-interference on the part of the state. The Indian authoritative spokesmen from Radhakrishnan and Gajendragadkar (the jurist) downwards have defined secularism (in the context of Indian constitution) in terms of “the universality of spiritual values which may be attained in a variety of ways” or the entitlement of “all religions practised in India... to equal freedom and protection (p. 7).

During the freedom struggle period, the nationalist ‘ulama’ had often invoked the Medina Mu‘adalah (contract) between the Prophet and the Jews to justify and legitimize their coalescing with the Hindus, although the analogy was forced and far fetched since decisive and final authority in seventh century Medina lay with the Prophet while in twentieth century India it lies with the numerically superior Hindus. Despite this critical flaw, the Senapati ‘Ulama’-Hind leaders used the same argument during the drafting of the Indian constitution to pledge and justify Muslim support to the establishment of a secular state. This legitimization of the secular state (on the basis of a
precedent in Islamic history) made it acceptable while "secularism as a doctrine is believed to be incompatible with Islam" (p. 15).

The tragedy of Indian Muslims is that the ‘ulama’ whose "considerable influence" through the madrassah (religious education) and fatwa (legal opinion) institutions over Muslim public opinion, make them opinion leaders and opinion makers in the Muslim society, are hardly in a position to resolve the dilemma and ambivalence the Indian Muslims have subjected themselves to in accepting the secular state while rejecting the social philosophy underlying secularism. The nature and curricula of madrassah (religious education) which graduate the recipients into religious leadership (‘ulama’) roles, hardly prepare them for leadership in mundane matters. Thus, in interpreting Muslim law (fiqh) the ‘ulama’ tend to depend entirely and unquestioningly “on mediaeval precedents for deciding a modern case”. Even while discussing intricate problems of finance and meteorology - such as insurance, government loans with interest, and visibility of moon for the celebration ‘Id-ul-Fitr - the specialists in the subjects are not consulted, and opinions (fatwahs) are given on the basis of analogy from mediaeval precedents.

The controversy concerning the reform of Muslim personal law has divided the Muslims into three groups—Fundamentalists, Moderates and Radicals—who are antagonistic to each other. The fundamentalists base their case on the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom since they claim Muslim personal law to be a part of their religion. The modernists cite the example of Muslim countries including Pakistan for the reform of the "archaic civil code", but counsel caution and creation of favourable opinion among the Muslim community before launching on reform. The radicals brush aside the religious sensibilities of the Muslims on the issue, calls for the enactment of a uniform civil code equally applicable to all inhabitants, irrespective of their religious affiliations, and feel that once this is done the Muslim community would acquiesce in it.

The author opts for the second course since while he recognizes the crying need for reform he feels that without the ‘ulama’s approval the Muslims, at least an overwhelming section of them, could not be persuaded to abide themselves by a civil code enacted by a parliament whose membership is overwhelmingly Hindu. He also cautions ‘ulama’ to pay heed to the restiveness of the youth, the dissatisfaction of even those receiving the traditional madrassah education, and the gap between them and the new generation of madrassah graduates (who go in for modern education after graduating from madrasah) and take some concrete steps towards fashioning a new social order for Indian Muslims. Otherwise, he warns, the leadership role would as crue, if only by sheer default, to the new generation of Madrassah graduates whose familiarity with both the traditional and modern learning put them in a favourable position to assume such a role.

In its attempt to delineate and define Muslim attitude to (Indian) secularism, the present work represents an extension of ‘Abid Husain (The Destiny of Indian Muslims)’ and Ziyā-ul-Hasan Fāruqi’s theses and arguments, and, in some respects, a rejoinder to Karandikar’s strident Islam in India’s Transition to Modernity (1968).

The chief merit of the present work is that while others have for the most part traced the Muslim apathy (to secularism) to political, economic and socio-cultural factors, it analyses Muslim “objections” from the religious viewpoint. In doing this, it adds a new dimension to the ongoing discussion on the subject.
However, the role of the political, economic and socio-cultural factors influencing Muslim attitude can by no means be underrated. For, so long as secularism in India is identified with Hinduism, and so long as Muslims are called upon to merge their religious and cultural identity in the engulfing, all encompassing sea of Hindudom, euphemistically termed as the "mainstream" of Indian life, the Muslims are bound to remain indifferent or apathetic to secularism.

Actually, one of the prime causes of Muslim apathy—which the author hints at by implication, but does not explicate — is the failure of the majority community itself to be informed and guided by a truly secular spirit in its over all attitude towards things non-Hindu. This point has been discussed at some length by the present reviewer in his Indian Secularism: A Case Study of the Muslim Minority (1970).

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