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ON RIOT-FREE INDIA

Asghar Ali Engineer

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I was invited by Jnana Prabodhini, an organization affiliated to RSS in Pune to speak on the Communal Violence Bill which is proposed to be tabled in Parliament sometimes in near future. Of course I did not know the background of this organization and since we have undertaken to talk about the bill in various places to remove misunderstandings against it, I immediately accepted the invitation. Later on my friend from Pune Mr. Anwar Rajan and social activist told me that it is RSS affiliated but you must come and speak. It was sound advice.

I went and spoke on the bill before a group of some 200 people including their top leaders and students. Jnana Probhodini is a huge organization which trains students, teachers and those who appear from various competitive examinations like IAS, IPS or entrance organizations etc. Thousands of candidates benefit from these trainings. It is true they have huge resources but Muslims should also make similar efforts though on smaller scale raising resources from within the community as well as taking help from government schemes.

I spoke candidly on the bill to remove misunderstandings about it in the BJP and RSS groups. They feel it is anti-Hindu bill meant to harass Hindus and as many dalits use untouchability law against upper caste Hindus this bill will be used by Muslims against Hindus. After my presentation there were host of questions and many points were raised. As Gujarat like riots had not taken place before this bill become necessary.

I narrated to them history of communal riots in post-independence India since Jabalpur riots of 1961 and told them in most of these riots guilty were generally not punished and no responsibility was fixed as to who engineered these riots. I also told them that I have personally investigated most of these riots in which more than 35 thousand innocent people were killed and found that with few exceptions administration and police were biased. Not only that I told them how in Hashimpura, Meerut in 1987 the PAC Commandant Tripathi and his cohorts pulled out 54 people from their houses, all between 20 to 25 years old, shot them dead in cold blood and threw their bodies into Hindon canal two of which survived to tell the tale. But not one of them has been so far punished.

But in all these riots state governments were not directly involved nor it played any role in instigating riots. But it was for the first time in Gujarat that the state government was directly involved in instigating the riots. And entire administration and police force, willingly or unwillingly, was involved in aiding and abetting these riots (with few honourable exceptions). Mr. Narendra Modi, as some VHP activists claimed in a sting operation done by *Tehelka* gave protection to them.

It was in this background that this bill became necessary. There are three objectives of this bill: first, to take preventive measures in time to stop communal violence breaking out; second, if communal violence breaks out to fix responsibility on the actors concerned and get them punished through due process of law and thirdly to fix proper compensation for the dead and fix recompense for properties destroyed.

Today this is all arbitrarily done. It is entirely dependent on Chief Minister how much he sanctions. In some cases only one or two lakhs are given for those who died and in some cases it may be 5 lakhs. Mr. Modi gave 5 lakhs to those who died in Sabarmati train fire and only two lakhs for those who dies in subsequent communal riots. It was blatant discrimination. And Modi government offered as little as Rs. 500 for houses destroyed. This Bill fixes compensation minimum at 15 lakhs for the dead and proposes that it will increase with price index. Similarly it takes care of relief and rehabilitation to be decided by Central or State authority comprising government as well as civil society representative with proper minority representation.

A long discussion followed and numbers of questions were raised saying the Bill is heavily biased against Hindus and in favour of Muslims. I tried to satisfy their doubts and said it is wrong to say it is against Hindus. In fact the Bill is directed against those who perpetrate violence (be they Hindus or Muslims or any other group for that matter) and for the first time this Bill will try to fix responsibility for perpetrators of violence in an unbiased manner through proper representation of minorities in the Central or state authority. Thus how can it be said to be anti-Hindu then? It is anti- all those who perpetrate or provoke violence.

However, all I can say that I gave answers to all their questions which were aplenty but cannot claim to have changed their views as after all they belonged to the RSS affiliated organization. Besides them there were many others too – Muslims as well as non-Muslims who were interested in the debate.

However, what followed after the lunch was of more interest to me. The organizers had requested me to spare two hours after lunch for discussion with a smaller group of people and I had consented. There were some 30 people in this group and idea was to discuss how one could ensure riot-free India. Mr. Arvind Bal a prominent member of Jnana Prabodhini, started discussion with few proposals which I found non-controversial.

One of his proposal related to cultural activities undertaken together like drama, musical performances and the like both Hindus and Muslims participating together. Two, to celebrate national festivals like 15th August and 26th January together. Thirdly, to ensure that in every housing society 5 to 10 percent Muslims be given accommodation so that there is better interaction between Hindus and Muslims

He also proposed that secularism requires that we undertake criticism of religion and religious practices as Hamid Dalwai did. He felt this is necessary to ensure consolidation of secularism. I responded by saying that I welcome the proposals made by my friend Arvind Bal except the one about criticism of orthodoxy like Hamid Dalwai did. Orthodoxy has nothing to do with communalism. Jinnah was quite liberal and even non-believer and yet he demanded Pakistan whereas Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, President Jami'at-ul-'Ulama'-i-Hind was very orthodox and yet he opposed partition and justified united democratic secular India. We have to accept orthodoxy in a democratic spirit as everyone has right to practice religion the way one wants to and in true democratic spirit one has to accept the other as the other is and one cannot dictate to other how other should be. It would lead to intolerance and conflict.

However, it does not mean that one should accept orthodoxy and narrow mindedness. No certainly not but one has to struggle against it through persuasive means and through wisdom

and proper strategy. One should also not worship reason though reason is very valuable gift of nature, Reason is a tool, very important tool but not goal.

To ensure riot-free India most important tool is education system. Today our education system is value-neutral and competitive and perpetuates casteism and communalism. It does not produce critical but conforming mind. It distorts history and perpetuates mandir-masjid controversy. We teach Aurangzeb but never Dara Shikoh who was such a profound scholar of both Islam and Hinduism.

We still teach fight between Shivaji and Afzal Khan and project Shivaji as anti-Muslim and Aurangzeb as anti-Hindu. It is total distortion of truth. Shivaji killed Afzal Khan not because he was Muslim but because he was political rival and when he realized that he has killed him fearing he (Afzalkhan) would kill him he gave a large plot of land to build his *mazar* (mausoleum) and one can prove this through land records of the government.

One should stop teaching such distorted history and there is much in history which proves Hindu-Muslim unity and mutual harmonious living. This is not the way to build a nation. Our country is so great, so diverse and so multi-cultural that only way to build nation is to emphasise harmonious living, inclusive living and in everything we should not go on speaking as Hindus and Muslims but also as Indian nationals, if India is a nation. In everything if we go on speaking only as Hindus and Muslims, it means we are not speaking India as a nation, we are not feeling proud of being India, Yes, there are areas in which we are also Hindus and Muslims but let us keep these two areas apart. These two areas should be co-centric, not cross-cutting.

There are many things which we have to discuss including whether Islam and Hinduism are mutually conflicting or have areas of commonality. Whether religions clash or our egos and our politics do. Sufi saints found much that is common between the two religions but all this requires much discussion and we can meet again for such discussions. As I have to rush back to Mumbai hope we will meet again to continue the talk in this spirit.

Centre for Study of Society and Secularism
Mumbai.
E-mail: csss@mtnl.net.in