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PILGRIMAGE FOR PEACE – FROM AYODHYA TO AJMER

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PILGRIMAGE FOR PEACE – FROM AYODHYA TO AJMER

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer



Does peace march make any difference, cynics may ask? After all what do you gain as communal forces thrive as much after march as before? Well, it is true, but only from one perspective. Also, gains cannot be measured in material terms though at times peace marches have proved successful in concrete terms also. We took out peace march in the midst of communal frenzy on 26th January 1993 in Mumbai. Police had also warned us that you might be attacked and we cannot take

guarantee for your safety. We said thank you, we don't need your protection. It was indeed a great experience as people came forward and welcomed us with showers of flower petals and deafening sound of clapping. The march had salutary effect on the situation and communal violence died down soon. We also marched for peace in October 1990 from Azad Maidan to Thane and people welcomed us enthusiastically at several places. We were singing and marching.

There are marches by hate mongers also. The communal forces organized *yatra* for *karseva* and demolished Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992. The peace loving forces, however, organized peace pilgrimage Aman Yatra, Karvan-e-Aman from Ayodhya to Ajmer from 6th of December to 12th December 2009. The initiative for this *yatra* was taken by the Mahant of one of the Ram Mandirs in Ayodhya Shri Yugal Kishore Shashtri and was sponsored by Asha Parivar of Sandip Pande, Centre for Study of Society and Secularism and Ayodhya Ki Awaz (an organization for communal harmony in Ayodhya).

Shri Yugal Kishore Shashtri has made peace his mission and all peace loving forces have come forward to support him in his mission. When he phoned me for support and sponsorship, I readily agreed and promised him to join the *yatra* at some point. Sandip Pande was present in Lucknow. His further engagements did not permit him to remain with the *yatra* in its further march. In all about 25 persons from U.P., M.P., Kerala, Gujarat and Rajasthan carried on the march.

The peace pilgrimage was planned from Ayodhya and was to end in Ajmer for symbolic reasons. Ayodhya is, on one hand, a Hindu holy city as well as a city of composite culture. In Ayodhya there are religious places of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Jains. It is as much city of temples as city of Sufi mausoleums and mosques. Historically it has had large Muslim population. Some Muslims believe two prophets Hazrat Shish and Hazrat Nuh are buried there. The Naugazi qabar (a very long shaped grave) is said to be of Hazrat Nuh, the 2nd major prophet in Qur'an.



Ajmer is a Muslim holy city where there is mausoleum of famous sufi saint of Indian subcontinent Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti. But Ajmer is also a city of composite culture as there are holy places belonging to Sikhs, Hindus (Pushkar) and Parsis. Even otherwise the Dargah of Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti is visited by members of all religious communities, not only Muslims.

The Karvan-e-Aman could not start from Ayodhya as 6th

December the administration feared law and order situation might develop so our peace pilgrims started individually from there and decided to enter Ayodhya on return in the form of procession and have function there. In Lucknow three functions were held – candle march in which some 500 peace loving citizens participated, a seminar of peace in the press club and ghazal singing for peace by Srinivas, a noted ghazal singer. Among participants were Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others.

On 8th March the peace marchers were flagged off and reached Kanpur where there were four functions. Sikhs, Kayastha Samaj and Muslims separately organized these functions and garlanded the marchers. Among these marchers there were about 12 school children from Kerala along with their teacher Zainab. These children used to sing a very moving song *Ishq na Hindu, na Muslim, ishq na Sikh, na Bodh na jain, Ishq na roza na puja*. It moved everyone who heard it.

These school children were very conscious of environmental problem and refused to drink tea in plastic cups or in plastic plates. This has become common culture in many places in India. These children educated them in environmental disaster, if we do not change our habits. They also made some participants give up tobacco chewing. This shows if we educate our children in values they can grow to be very responsible citizens. However, our education system emphasizes values less and less and money mindedness more and more.

From Kanpur the peace pilgrims proceeded towards Kannauj, Mainpuri, Agra and Bharatpur, Jaipur and finally Ajmer. Everywhere people showed great deal of enthusiasm, they joined the march and raised slogans for peace and religious harmony. Apart from NGOs and activists

prominent citizens joined the march in every town irrespective of caste and creed. Among peace marchers throughout were also priests from Kabir Panth and Ravidas Panth.

In Bharatpur which was rocked by communal violence in 1947 Muslims showed great enthusiasm in welcoming the peace marchers. They were made to stay in the Mosque itself and while speakers were speaking it was time for *Namaz* (prayer) and so speakers wanted to stop in respect for Muslim prayer. However, the Muslim insisted that let seminar go on as it is also a form of worship. It moved all the peace marcher.



From Bharatpur they reached Jaipur at about 11 in the morning on 11th December. Many prominent citizens of Jaipur and Sarvodaya workers welcomed them with flowers. We then marched to the Information Centre where Kavita Srivastav, a human rights activist had made arrangements for speeches. Before speeches a street play was also staged on the theme. Among the speakers were Mohammad Salim Engineer of Jamat-e-Islami, Yugal Kishor

Shashtri and myself.

After the lunch a symposium was organized on Justice Libarhan commission in Information centre itself. The Deputy Director, having given permission went back and said you cannot hold discussion on a political document. All participants denounced such arbitrary decision on the part of bureaucracy and press also criticized it. Then the symposium was held in Press Club. It was very well attended. Kavita conducted the programme and I and Mohd. Salim Engineer were main speakers along with Prof. Mohammad Hasan.

We went to Ajmer next day morning and reached there by 12 noon. We were received by students and teachers of Sophia College where all of us were garlanded and flower petals were showered in abundance. Short speeches were made by Yugal Kishor and myself and media people mobbed us for few bites. We then proceeded towards the Dargah. Near the Dargah few Khuddam (Keepers of Dargah) welcomed us and until we reached Dargah flower petals were showered and we were led in procession. In Ajmer we were also joined by a delegation of Bohra Youth (Reformist Bohras) under the leadership of Prof. Zainab Bano.

On the way The Gurdwara people welcomed us with flowers and peace slogans. All of us were garlanded. We further marched towards the Dargah until we reached Dargah's entrance. It was very moving scene indeed. Prof. Liyaqat Ali whom I had requested for reception in Dargah was there along with all khuddam and the chief of them to welcome us. They did *dastarbandi* (tying

pagdi around us) which is highest honor given to any visitor to Dargah which is reserved for special visitors.

Ptof. Liyaqat Ali fulfilled his promise and all peace marchers were overwhelmed by the kind of reception given in Dargah Sharif. Meanwhile Aruna Roy, the noted activist for human rights and information act also joined us before we entered Dargah. Her joining peace march had its own significance. We all went with the chador over our heads and offered on the grave of Khwaja Gharibnawaz. Hundreds of people joined us. It was indeed a scene to be seen. Hundreds of Hindu women, more than Muslim women, were present. This is the attraction of Khwajaji. We were all given *tabarruk* (Prasad) and a short qawwali (devotional song) was arranged.

After the function at the Dargah we were served lunch and Prof. Anant Bhatnagar of PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties) arranged reception on behalf of citizens of Ajmer and a symposium on peace. Prof. Bhatnagar conducted the programme and Shri D.L.Tripathi President PUCL presided and among the speakers were Dr.Zainab Bano, Aruna Roy, Myself Liyaqat Ali and Yugal Kishor Shashtri. Among the participants were Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs. It was indeed an inter-religious gathering.

The peace marchers then proceeded to Ayodhya to have programme there which could not be held in the beginning. They were first welcomed at Faizabad by members of Buddhist leaders Girishkumar and others of that community and then on 14th December a candle march was held in Ayodhya which began from Gandhiji's statue and ended at Tulsidasji's Samadhi.

The way peace marchers were received throughout the route made it obvious that common people are for peace and harmony and not for conflict and blood shedding in the name of religion, it is only unscrupulous politicians who grossly misuse religion to make us fight for grabbing our votes and coming to power. I strongly feel such *yatras* for direct contact to people should be more frequently organized. *Rath yatras* are not only monopoly of communal forces. 📖

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