

When Secularism Becomes Schism

By VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

Dear members of my
extended family,

OVER the past month, I've been corresponding with you in an attempt to view from your perspective the Gujarat developments, as well as the issue of minority-majority rights which has once again become the talking point in households like ours. Indeed, many of my friends have families that echo your feelings.

Your case is broadly as follows. One, in Hindu-majority India, secularism has become a tool to justify the wrongs done by the minorities:

Islamic terrorism is glossed over, while Muslim obscurantism is encouraged, often by the state, as in the Shah Bano case. As a result, Muslims obsessively cling to tradition, refuse to modernise and almost never condemn atrocities committed by fellow Muslims. Worse, most of them harbour trans-national loyalties. Two, the pseudo-secularist media indulges the minorities almost to the point of being anti-Hindu. It dismissed the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits and the burning alive of Hindus in Godhra, but was outraged by the retaliatory attacks on Muslims.

Unfortunately, my efforts to tackle these points have elicited the same response. At the humdrum level: But Muslims marry four times, they breed to outnumber us, they are zealous converts, they identify with Pakistan. At a more sophisticated level: Minority appeasement by the secularists has delivered the soft Hindu middle-class to the Hindutva crowd.

Before I go further, I would draw your attention to the October 31, 1992 issue of India Today, which ran a riveting cover story on the changes being forced in the Muslim community by its youth. Titled 'Young Muslims: Forging a New Identity', the story captured the aspirations of a generation for whom Pakistan held no meaning, that wanted to chart a path far away from the clergy. The young people it profiled were not khandani mussalman, but from middle-

class homes. Like Sameena Usmani, an engineering student at Aligarh Muslim University, who proudly posed in her riding breeches. Like Uzma, who challenged the maulanas to "stop the change" that had set in. Like Ayesha Shabnam, daughter of an illiterate housekeeper, who taught biology at the Humdard institute. Like Mohammad Yaseen, reader at AMU, who bristled at the mullahs: "The biggest disservice ever done by the mullahs was to oppose the Shah Bano judgment".

The story further spoke of Muslim ulema conducting mass literacy drives and criss-crossing the country, highlighting the social evils that had crept into Muslim society. It spotted the beginnings of a movement against practices like triple talaq and jahez (dowry). It quoted Babri Masjid Action Committee leader, Jawed Habeeb, as vouching for the safety of Muslims in secular India.

Two months later, there was another cover story on Muslims. This time in Sunday magazine. The title was, 'Indian Muslims: A time of grief, insecurity and doubt'.

The accompanying photograph was of a frightened skull-cap wearing Muslim. What happened between the two cover stories was a momentous event. The demolition of the Babri masjid on December 6, 1992.

Could it be that this outright attack on their religion had driven back the modernisation process that had started in the community? While travelling in UP recently, I stayed one night with the family of a Maulvi. The Maulvi's daughter had married into a family in Ahmedabad. Oh, how proud she was of Ahmedabad: It was modern, and it allowed conservative Muslim girls like her the choice of combining regular school with madrassa education.

My heart sinks at the thought of what Sameena, Uzma, Ayesha and Yaseen would say today. I wonder if the Maulvi's daughter will still be proud of Ahmedabad. There are hundreds of other modern Muslims, now forced into ghettos. Mr Bandoowala's heart-rending story has been told. But there is M H Jowhar, management professional, visiting faculty at IIM-Ahmedabad and founder of the Society for the Promotion of Rational Thinking. Mr Jowhar, who was proudly secular and who took on the fundamentalist forces, today seeks safety and solace within his own wounded community. Then there are the Muslims of Godhra, not those who burnt coach 6 of Sabarmati Express, but those who condemned the outrage, even apologised on behalf of their

community (source: Jyoti Punwani). But the local Gujarati press refused to publish their statements. Pakistan never mattered to these Muslims. But if today some of them should think of it as an option, can we blame them? Talking of trans-national loyalties, how would you describe the thousands of American-Indians who last year welcomed Atal Behari Vajpayee to cries of: Desh ka neta kaisa ho? Atal Behari jaisa ho? Which nation, pray, were they talking about? Are you confident that the anti-immigrant mood that is currently sweeping Europe, will not one day target our overseas relatives? Don't the NRIs cling to tradition and custom? Should you not recognise this as a special need of all minority groups, whether they are the NRIs, the African-Americans, Indian Muslims or the Kashmiri Pandits? The Pandits certainly deserve better, both from the media and the BJP government. But yes, I wouldn't say that since they were once the ruling class, it is right for them to suffer today.

I should and I have always condemned terrorism. But last week, I watched a peculiar development on TV. The clip showed perfectly respectable Tamils attending a pro-Prabhakaran meeting in Chennai. Now, Prabhakaran is a proclaimed terrorist whose LTTE is banned by the US and India. Prabhakaran killed Rajiv Gandhi, who held a constitutional office. Can you imagine the consequences if Prabhakaran had assassinated a former American president? By now, our American family members would have gone through several rounds of racial profiling. Had Prabhakaran been Muslim, the Indian government would have arrested you and me under POTA. And yet, the Tamils openly felicitate him without any of us coming to the slightest harm. Is terrorism by Tamils okay?

I can go on. You are wrong about the four wives. Of all Indian communities, polygamy is lowest among Muslims. They are also almost invisible on the job market. The appeasement was of the mullahs, just as today the appeasement is of the VHP (three of the accused in the Babri case are ministers). By the way, have you ever wondered at the ease with which Mr Karunanidhi flaunts his three wives in public? Equally, have you wondered at the predominance of Hindu symbolism in Indian public life? The lighting of diyas, the breaking of coconuts. Finally, I wish you would react as angrily when the media buries dowry deaths on page 13 and ignores the

public stripping of Dalit women, not to mention young
lovers hanged to death by village panchayats because one of
them was Dalit. Maybe we should turn some
of the anger inward?

Yours Vidya