"The days have grown more difficult but I haven’t lost hope"

Zafar Agha

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In this January 8, 1993 photograph, the Rapid Action Force is seen guarding the area in Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid stood before it was demolished by Hindu 'kar sevaks' on December 6, 1992. File Photo: Shankar Chakravarty

"For the first time in my life I felt I was a Muslim, a defeated and humiliated Muslim. It was not the India of my dreams and my beliefs. I grew up in a highly cosmopolitan family where Diwali and Holi were as much my festivals as Eid or any other Muslim festival was. But very soon I recovered from the shock firmly believing that India could never become a Hindu Pakistan," writes Zafar Agha, Editor-in-Chief of the Urdu daily, Quami Awaz.
It has been a rapid, downhill slide for Indian Muslims since December 6, 1992, the day the Babri Masjid was pulled down by a Hindu mob gathered in Ayodhya to build a Ram temple there. I distinctly remember the day; the event is still etched in memory. It was unbelievable, unacceptable and un-Indian.

I was then working with *India Today* and was covering political developments around the Babri Masjid-Ram temple controversy. Those were politically frenzied times. India was in the grip of the Mandal-Mandir madness. Vishwanath Pratap Singh had introduced a 27 per cent job quota for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as recommended by the (Bindeshwari Prasad) Mandal Commission. The Backward-Forward caste gulf was widening sharply, especially in the Hindi speaking States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav were successfully consolidating the OBCs to create their own political base.

It was quite evident that the Hindu upper caste establishment felt upset and threatened by the rise of the OBCs. Mandal had the potential to dismantle the ancient Indian caste hierarchy, leading to power slipping from the grip of the upper castes, especially in the Indo-Gangetic plains where the Hindu faith evolved.

This, in turn, meant dire social, political as well as religious ramifications for both Hindu society and the faith. It stood to reason that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), would not let this pass. The Sangh entered the scene and entered it in a way it had never done before. There was a divide within Hindu society on caste lines. This needed to be bridged soon so that the rupture did not widen irretrievably. What could be done to bridge this gap?

A clever element of ‘Muslim-the-Hindu-enemy’ was brought into the frame to achieve Hindu unity across caste divides. (In time to come this would become a finely-honed strategy). What could have been better than reviving the Ram versus Allah controversy that had roiled Ayodhya in and after 1949, when Ram Lala appeared suddenly under the central dome of the Babri Masjid, but had died down as the years wore on?

Soon after V.P. Singh introduced the Mandal quota, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) revived the Ram card, in what came to be known as Mandal vs kamandal. It was not only a political move. The idea was to involve and rouse the entire Hindu society to bring about a pan caste unity against the ‘Muslim enemy’. In order to unify and co-opt the OBCs into the Hindu order, it was necessary to make them believe that the followers of Allah were out to crush the devotees of Ram.
Enter the All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee (AIBMAC) out of the blue as if on someone’s cue. Unheard of names like Azam Khan, Javed Habeeb, Zafaryab Jilani, and Ahmed Bukhari of the Jama Masjid in Delhi turned overnight into champions of the Muslim faith and wellbeing. They held huge Muslim rallies in defence of the Babri mosque with emotional Muslims renting the air with Allah ho Akbar and declaring that they would lay down their lives in defence of house of Allah.

Now stepped in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) responding to the AIBMAC with Hindu rallies and declarations of Mandir wahin banayenge—the VHP said it would not allow anything but a Ram temple at the Babri Masjid site which it claimed, was the birth place of Bhagwan Ram. It was the turn of Jai Shri Ram now to respond to Allah ho Akbar.

**A pot-boiler from the Sangh factories**

It was a first-class political potboiler from the Sangh factories. Even as sensible Indians watched in disbelief, their country’s social fabric was torn asunder and differences around faith were deliberately stoked. Hindus were united around the Ram temple; the Muslim enemy was out in the open opposing the Ram temple. Now a pan-Hindu group emerging over and above the caste divide was ready to take on the historic Babar Ki Aulad, the Muslim. The increasing divide prepared the ground for Lal Krishna Advani to march to Ayodhya in the garb of Ram, bow and arrow in hand, as if the Lord himself had emerged to avenge the humiliation of Hindus.

Well, it was a brilliantly crafted social and political strategy. But it was also the beginning of a new India of RSS dreams wherein the Muslim had been transformed into the ‘other’, the ‘Hindu enemy’. It was an ideal situation for Hindutva ideologues who had always looked at India from the prism of Hindu-Muslim divide.

But it was not acceptable to me. Not just because I was a Muslim. But essentially because I was born and brought up in a highly cosmopolitan ethos where Ram was as much my cultural heritage as he was the religious heritage of the Hindus. We had rubbed shoulders with our Hindu friends watching the Ram Lila. I remember my own father escorting me to watch ‘Bhagwan Ram ki swari’ on Vijaya Dashmi day.

I plainly refused to believe that Hindus could be fanatics like Pakistanis. I remember the heated political discussions at India Today editorial meetings wherein I stuck my neck out and wagered that the mosque would never be pulled down. I firmly believed that tolerant Hindus
could never do it. But I was proved wrong. On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was pulled down. I remember tears rolling down my cheeks as I watched the mosque domes crashing down amidst chants of *Jai Shri Ram.*

For the first time in my life I felt I was a Muslim, a defeated and humiliated Muslim. It was not the India of my dreams and my beliefs. I grew up in a highly cosmopolitan family where Diwali and Holi were as much my festivals as Eid or any other Muslim festival was. But very soon I recovered from the shock firmly believing that India could never become a Hindu Pakistan. Twenty-five years have passed since the mosque was demolished. India is not yet a theocratic state like Pakistan. But it increasingly resembles Pakistan with cow vigilantes, acting like Pakistani non-state actors, *Sipah e Sahaba,* terrorising the Muslim minority with mob lynching.

**A disturbing power play that cannot last too long**

The Babri mosque is history. Yet the RSS-led Hindu establishment is trapped in its own game. It is still scared of the Lalus, the Mulayams and the Mayawatis. As it plays the Muslim-the-Hindu-enemy’ game, its tone has become shriller and shriller, which has marred India’s image as a modern and emerging global power.

The basic game is still the same that was played out during the early days of the Mandal-Mandir controversy. A threatened Hindu social establishment under the RSS is leading the charge to paper over caste divisions with the spectre of the Muslim as enemy and an existential threat. India is increasingly looking like a Hindu Pakistan, a threat that our founding fathers managed to roll back in 1947 despite the communal madness of the post-partition days.

This power play not just disturbs the established order but generates massive collateral damage too. Mandal politics hugely disturbed the post-Independent caste order. Its consequence was the rise of Hindutva politics with collateral damage of India losing its liberal ethos and Indian Muslims being pushed to the level of second class citizens.

But it cannot last too long. India is still not a Hindu Pakistan. Hindu society has gone through a certain level of renaissance. Its huge middle class has vested interest in preserving modernity. It cannot permanently bear being pushed to religious bigotry at the expense of its own success. Liberal and modern Hindus will assert themselves sooner or later. And, therein lies the hope for Indian Muslims who are being defended by none other than the secular Hindus. After all, ‘Not-In-My-Name’ was no Muslim sponsored campaign.
These are certainly terrible times for Indian Muslims. But there is still light at the end of the dark tunnel.

At this point though this politics of ‘Muslim-the-Hindu enemy’ looks unending. It is not only leaving Indian Muslims frustrated and with a feeling that they are second class citizens, but it is also tragically transforming India into a semi-theocratic state.

Reference:


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