**Land grab dressed as nationalism**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2020-12-29

THE Modi government has proposed the setting up of a new waqf board for Jammu and Kashmir.

Muslim waqf boards, or trusts, are rich in land, and land is in heavy demand by Indian corporates. The tycoon who cobbled support for Narendra Modi`s rise as prime minister himself bought waqf land in Mumbai for a pittance to build a multistoried home considered by many to be an aesthetic eyesore.

On the other side of the bargain, the bodies of fabled Muslim actors and actresses, musicians and singers Madhubala, Naushad and Mohammed Rafi among them were removed from their resting places to create room for newer arrivals, such is the pressure on waqf land.

The land where Babri Masjid had stood belonged to a waqf. Now, the land belonging to Kashmiri Muslims appears to be in the cross hairs of corporate conquests of fertile farmlands, virgin forests, of rivers and mountains. Kashmir is rich in all these.

This was how colonialism expanded in India.

From a wider lens, both colonialism (British traders) and today`s nationalism (Indian traders) are/ were similar in their greed for land with both asserting claim to what belonged to others, one by flaunting the national flag, the other with the help of the gunboat.

Nationalism curiously also reminds one of the house servants of the Iranian elite. The rich Iranians would nurture this habit of leaving, say, a cooked whole chicken wrapped in cellophane in the kitchen garbage so that the cleaner in the morning would admire the master`s af fluence. The cleaner and the master were both proud Persians.

Closer home, in the name of the nation`s progress, movie actor Shahrukh Khan has been advocating online school curriculum with a special app he claims has all the answers to a schoolgoer`s queries, mainly targeting students who are not able to leave their home because of the virus. The poorer majority who inevitably have little if any access to electricity leave alone a laptop, that too one with a costly app supported by a smart guide like Khan, can smack their lips in celebration of the new India that excludes them. Nationalism is akin to the Stockholm syndrome, with the oppressed loving the oppressor.

It`s a fact that nationalism is class-driven.

Gandhiji stopped Indian peasants from going onthe warpath several times, once by calling off a civil disobedience movement because the peasants burnt down a British police station. He dispatched Nehru to Rae Bareli to rein in restive peasants fighting British-backed zamindars. Gandhi once got off the train in Ayodhya to chide peasants for being ready for class violence. Nehru and Gandhi became nationalist icons in popular reckoning and the peasants the spoilers, not different from the way today`s protesting farmers are vilified daily as traitors by TV anchors loyal to the rulers in New Delhi.

With Switzerland`s ageing population therewould be no Swiss left to run their country, I needlessly ribbed a Swiss journalist once. `Who cares?` was the tart reply, her tone closely resembling the message of the 19th-century Urdu poem Banjaranamah, a celebration of the gypsy worldview, a close variation of essential Buddhist thought.

`Not an inch of our sacred land will be conceded,` proclaimed the Indian soldier not long ago to a melee of very proud Indian tourists at the Nathu La border with China. His Chinese counterpart seemed accustomed to the earnest gush of nationalism from across the barbed wire, which he too must have vented occasionally but probably without the need to remove his smile.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi projected himself as an opponent of expansionism he obliquely accused China of pursuing. Modi`s fellow rightwing nationalist, a former chief minister of Maharashtra, however, was sanguine the other day that he would soon make Karachi part of India, staying on course with the RSS idea of Akhand Bharat un-quartered India that goes beyond Gilgit-Baltistan in its expansive quest, east andwest.

Be that as it may, the Nathu La pass bordering Tibet was part of the autonomous kingdom of Sikkim before Indira Gandhi grabbed it in 1975 just before declaring the emergency. Her successor Morarji Desai apologised for it.

Her father Jawaharlal Nehru sent the army to take Goa from the Portuguese who had been in occupation of the coastal enclave since 16 years before the first Mughal ruler rode into Delhi. The Portuguese represented colonial power, and Nehru the nationalist end of the stick for Goans. Like colonialism, nationalism concocts its own history.

Consider the fact that the Portuguese brought green chillies to India and Indians have deluded themselves into believing it was integral to ancient Indian kitchens. Those who live in the belief that the spicy nihari or gorma are Muslim or `Mughlai`, therefore foreign, need only look at the Uzbeks, predominantly of Mongol or Mughal extraction. There`s no concept of hot pepper, certainly not in the national dish, the pilaf, which consists of bland horsemeat sausages to garnish the beef and rice dish. Indians corrupted it into pulao todaywith hormone-injected chicken, mostly as they did Uzbek samsa, which became samosa.

Allama Iqbal wrote a popular nationalist poem in praise of India but the British knighted him.

Iqbal`s poem to Lenin was overlooked, and the descriptionof colonialismasaninventionof Satan`s capitalist conquests wasmissed. Came Sahir Ludhianvi from the leftist corner and turned Iqbal`s gushing patriotism on its head. `I am its nightingale and India is my garden,` said Iqbal.

Sahir, writing in post-independence India noted the land grab his country had become. `Jitni bhi buildingein theen, sethon ne baant li hain, footpath Bambai ke hain aashiyan hamara.` (Capitalists have cornered every building in Bombay. Lesser ones live on footpaths.) The ongoing farmers` siege of Delhi is of a piece with their heroic struggles against colonialism and now they`re challenging an equally exploitative class of state-backed businessmen whoseclass interest is dressed as nationalism. The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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