**If a horse befriends the grass**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2021-03-09

THERE`s talk of peace between India and Pakistan, which should be welcomed with a tight embrace by both sides and by the world at large. If true, the move will be nothing short of a somersault for hard liners on both sides.

Not long ago, right-wing nationalists had daubed with dark paint the face of my peace activist friend Sudheendra Kulkarni as he hosted a welcome for Pakistan`s former foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in Mumbai. The Gandhian in Kulkarni refused to surrender. Now, a statement a detailed joint statement, in fact on a new ceasefire along the LoC by the Indian and Pakistani militaries has spurred Mr Kulkarni to pen another passionate appeal to the two and their foreign friends: Do not squander the opportunity. He cited Jinnah and Gandhi to press the point.

`Both India and Pakistan are my country, Kulkarni cited Gandhi as saying. At his prayer meeting four days before Hindu fanatics killed him, he affirmed: `[T]hough geographically and politically India is divided in two, at heart we shall be friends and brothers helping and respecting one another and be one for the outside world.` Gandhi`s assassins hated him for this.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah also, who Kulkarni describes as Gandhi`s `fellow Kathiawadi and Father of the Pakistani nation`, desired good-neighbourly relations with India. First US ambassador to Pakistan Paul Alling asked Jinnah about IndiaPakistan relations he wished to see. `An association similar to that between the US and Canada,` said Jinnah. Could Kulkarni`s appeal excite India`s ruling party, which harbours worshippers of Gandhi`s assassin? How will extremists in Pakistan, who regard Jinnah with similar hostility, respond? An inherently tricky question in this happy prospect of peace comes from an Urdu aphorism: if the horse befriends the grass, what would it eat? The allusion here is to Hindutva. The doctrine is busy dismantling every secular and liberal structure that shores up Indian democracy. On the other side, Pakistan`s anti-India extremists have a lot to lose from peace. If Hindutva makes peace with Pakistan what would become of its raison d`être mobilising public opinion for a Hindu rashtra by a toxic targeting of Muslims as a domestic policy and per-petual hostility with Pakistan as foreign policy? The late BJP ideologue Arun Jaitley spelled out in confidence to US diplomats the two ideological essentials in the policy mix of Hindutva. Thanks to Julian Assange`s selfless work we know what the ingredients are. Manmohan Singh`s 10-year engagement for peace with Pakistan was hurting the BJP in its vote-rich north Indian constituency.

The hint to Jaitley`s diplomat friends flowered into confirmed fact in the Modi era.

The other ideological (and necessarily cynical) position was about the north-eastern states, where expulsionofMuslims accusedof beingBangladeshis would continue to be Hindutva`s winning mantra.

It was not stated how BJP would handle the adverse fallout with Dhaka, but the citizenship act has reaf-firmed the truth of the strategy.

Other natural questions flow from the prospect of India`s improved relations with Pakistan. Is it linked with the Biden administration`s quandary in Afghanistan and Iran, both bordering Pakistan? Could it be possible that there`s peace with Pakistan and unabated hostility with China, which sees itself as Pakistan`s `all-weather friend`? It`s unlikely that India`s much-touted two-front battle plan would become a single military front scenario from any peace initiative with Pakistan. All things considered, the thought makes some very limited sense but in a roundabout Hindutva way. If China can somehow replace Pakistan as the dominant ogre for India, without necessarily beating the war drums, which could be costly, it would serve the interest of a new domestic policy taking shape.

Sullen ties with China would also be in keeping with the mood in Washington.

So what could be the new domestic strategy? If the straws in the wind are an indication, the BJP`snarrative is shifting from communal Hindu-Muslim binary to one targeting secularism and its liberal and leftist votaries as the more urgent threat.

Saturday`s Indian Express says that the Uttar Pradesh chief minister, a virulent Hindutva ideologue, now sees the biggest challenge to India coming from secularism, evidently a new Hindutva formula, given the fact that its favourite whipping boy has mostly been India`s Muslims. He made another astounding declaration, according to the paper. The chief minister `urged people not to lose the harmonious spirit of the nation by being involved in petty communal disputes`. Petty communal disputes! That is new. The chief minister instead warned `those misguiding people for their own profit and betraying the country.` They will not be spared.

Seen in the backdrop of the near destruction of the BJP`s communal card triggered by the farmers game-changing agitation, Adityanath`s fulminations make sense. The unending agitation, which shows no signs of relenting on its tough demands is of a piece with old mass movements when Indian governments were identified as `Tata-Birla ki sarkar`, reference to two main tycoons of the time.

Today, the farmers have put a sharp focus on Mr Modi`s two close businessmen allies, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani. This has pinched the government hard. And the pain has absolutely nothing to do with the vote-rich communal binary, now losing steam. The main prop that launched Mr Modi as prime minister in 2014 the Hindu-Muslim violence in Muzaffarnagar comprised the Hindu farmers of western Uttar Pradesh. They have joined secular protests swirling in the country.

Adityanath was evidently parroting the new focus of the government`s ire. Among the few journalists and media outfits standing their ground is the Caravan magazine, with The Wire news portal not far behind. Both have published accounts of a new strategy formulated by a group of cabinet ministers last year to `neutralise` those who set `false narratives` against the government. The horse will not starve. If it`s not grass then some other fodder will be readied.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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