

Secularism: myth and reality

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By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

THE Indian prime minister, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, is known to be a poet and a humanist who, until recently, was regarded as a force for moderation in the extremist BJP. This side of his personality was especially noticeable in his musings at the start of the year 2001. Writing from a holiday resort in South India, he signalled a softening of the stance adopted by India in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict of 1999. Striking a statesman-like note in his reflections, he admitted the existence of a problem over Kashmir, and wrote about his quest for an innovative solution.

There were no musings at the start of 2002, since the global situation had been transformed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US. Though Mr Vajpayee had planned to resume the dialogue initiated at Agra, during the UN General Assembly session in September, the 9/11 events that shifted the world's focus onto terrorism were seen in India as a golden opportunity to put the heat on Pakistan. As India concentrated its forces along the border with Pakistan following the December 13 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament, Mr Vajpayee saw no need to philosophize when arm-twisting of Pakistan was going on for alleged sponsorship of terror. The year 2002 saw Mr Vajpayee's moderate image dissolve as hardliners in the ruling party took command.

At the start of 2003, he has again made public his musings, this time from his holiday retreat in Goa, but, predictably, he has struck a different note altogether. Barely weeks after BJP's election victory in Gujarat, with the president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad declaring that secularism had been discredited and buried, Mr Vajpayee has accused Pakistan of having fomented communalism. He tells Pakistan to "forget" Kashmir, which is a symbol of Indian secularism. He has even sought to defend Hindutva, calling it liberal and liberating, that "brooks no ill-will, hatred or violence among different communities".

With international relations radically changed by Bush's doctrine of pre-emption against any state challenging its pre-eminence as the champion of anti-terrorism, India feels free to frame its own rules and set its own agenda. Just as the extremist branches of the Sangh parivar proclaim their intention of using the communalist approach to win future elections, Mr Vajpayee insists that it is Pakistan that rejects the reality of "secular India". Kashmir is claimed to be an integral part of India, and Pakistan blamed for maintaining a permanent state of confrontation with that country.

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By the mid-twenties, the Hindu-Muslim joint front collapsed, as a result of an upsurge of religious sentiments among the Hindus. This period, roughly between 1925 and 1930, saw a number of developments that raised serious concerns among the Muslims about their future. The Hindu revivalists launched two movements that affected the Muslims directly. One was Shuddhi, a movement to reconvert ethnic Indians, who had converted over several centuries of Muslim and British rule to Islam or Christianity, to Hinduism.

The other was Sanghathan, a militant movement to re-establish Hindu cultural superiority. Another major development was the Nehru Report, prepared in response to the Simon Commission in 1929. The Congress, which enjoyed a dominant position in the political field, called for the abolition of separate electorates, a hard-won concession that had provided some measure of reassurance to the Muslim minority in British India.

These were the developments that led Allama Iqbal to call for a separate homeland for the Muslims in his Allahabad address in 1930, while presiding over the Muslim League session. Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah became so disenchanted with the

Hindu religious leaders. They complained that the BJP government was not showing enough interest in the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. He was reported to have assured them that he was a life-long Karsevak, but was handicapped by the fact that the BJP lacked its own majority in the Indian parliament.

Moderate Hindu leaders and human rights activists have been critical of the Hindutva agenda of the extremist groups which currently appear to have the upper hand, as evident from their strategy in Gujarat. Narendra Modi, the chief minister of that state, was deeply involved in a conspiracy to arouse communal passions against the Muslims. The Godhra incident of February 2001, in which Muslims were accused of setting fire to a train carrying Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya, resulting in 58 of them being burnt to death, was proved to be false. A technical inquiry has established that the fire resulted from an internal mishap in the train and was not caused from outside. The whole episode was deliberately created to arouse a violent reaction among the Hindus, who then proceeded to attack Muslim areas and businesses with the active connivance of the state authorities.

In the aftermath of the worst anti-Muslim riots in India since the killings that accompanied the demolition of the Babri Masjid, two contrary tendencies were in evidence. The BJP leadership tried to reassure their coalition partners that the demand for the enforcement of the policy of Hindutva, that would extinguish the cultural identity of the minorities, was confined to the extremist Hindu elements.

However, moderate Indian intellectuals were pointing out that the Hindutva agenda lay at the core of the BJP's long-term strategy. Muchkund Dubey, a former foreign secretary of India, wrote in the

daily *Hindu* on March 20, 2002, that there was "complete synergy and identity of purpose between the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, the RSS, the BJP and its leaders in the central government" on plans to enforce Hindutva. He warned that "the 140 million minorities simply will not accept a subservient status. They will fight hard to remain equal citizens and will not allow India to be turned into a Hindu Rashtra".

The disenchantment felt by the Hindutva crowd with the reluctance of the Vajpayee government to go all out to enforce the concept was manifest from the statements of such leaders as Dattopant Thengadi, leader of the labour wing of the RSS, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, in April last year. With the passage of time, Mr Vajpayee has responded to this impulse, arising out of his life-long adherence to the RSS creed.

The success of the pro-Hindutva strategy has been demonstrated in Gujarat, where anti-Muslim feeling was first fanned, and then exploited, together with a hate-Pakistan approach, to win a two-thirds majority for the BJP. With elections ahead in

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political outlook around that time that he left India and settled in Britain. He was persuaded to return by Allama Iqbal and others. The Congress formed governments in eleven provinces following elections in 1937, which proceeded to pass legislation that reflected a Hindu agenda, without any regard for Muslim sensitivities or rights. This was the background against which the movement for Pakistan was launched three years later.

Coming to more recent times, the BJP has articulated Hindu extremist aspirations that were adopted by the Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925, with the goal of turning India into a Hindu Rashtra. Top leaders of the BJP are Karsevaks, (devotees of the RSS), who are committed to the goal of making Hindu culture and traditions the dominant creed in India. It was a Hindu fanatic belonging to the RSS who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

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Mr Vajpayee would like the world to believe that Pakistan is responsible for introducing communalism in the subcontinent, whereas India has impeccable secular credentials. A survey of the history of politics in South Asia during the 20th century proves that his view does not conform to facts. Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah started his political career in the second decade of that century as the "Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity". The Fourteen-Point agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League in 1914 is a testimony to his role, and the fact remains that both communities agitated jointly against British colonial rule after the end of the First World War. The Muslims launched the Khilafat Movement while the Congress under Mahatma Gandhi was pursuing the struggle for greater autonomy.

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Though Mr Advani is facing charges for his role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, his extremist line has prevailed within the councils of the ruling party after 9/11, as a result of which targeting the Muslims in becoming common. Mr Vajpayee himself appears to tailor his public utterances to suit his audiences and does not appear to have strong convictions.

In September 2000, when he had gone to New York for the Millennium Summit of the UN, he was invited to address a gathering of

cent Indian then strategy in Gujarat. Narendra Modi, the chief minister of that state, was deeply involved in a conspiracy to arouse communal passions against the Muslims. The Godhra incident of February 2001, in which Muslims were accused of setting fire to a train carrying Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya, resulting in 58 of them being burnt to death, was proved to be false. A technical inquiry has established that the fire resulted from an internal mishap in the train and was not caused from outside. The whole episode was deliberately created to arouse a violent reaction among the Hindus, who then proceeded to attack Muslim areas and businesses with the active connivance of the state authorities.

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Taking into account the experience of the Gujarat elections, that have partly halted the ruling party's declining fortunes, many prominent leaders of the Hindu parties included in the BJP have said openly that the same strategy of arousing anti-Muslim sentiments and anti-Pakistan fears would be pursued in the coming elections. This will be the reality on the ground. However, the myth of secularism will also be exploited, when needed, to protect India's democratic credentials, as the principle finds mention in the Indian constitution, regardless of its total neglect in practice.