

Letter from New Delhi

Pakistan & Indian Muslims

By Kuldip Nayar

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IN his introduction to a book on partition, leading historian Dr V.N. Datta has recalled how "the fundamental question was of the status of Muslims in India." Undoubtedly, that was in the mind of Quaid-i-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah when he realized that the British rule would not last long. The two-nation theory and the demand for Pakistan were the necessary corollary.

The partition is 57 years old now. What the rulers of Pakistan and the breakaway Bangladesh have to ask themselves is how far their policies have contributed to the betterment of the "status" of Muslims in India. The main sacrifice was theirs and they suffered the most.

Any land when divided on the basis of religion has to face the fallout like estrangement between communities. The creators of Pakistan would have known this because it was they who initiated the appeal in the name of religion. But what did they do to attend to the "status" of Muslims in India is the question. It was in the scheme of partition that the number of minorities in both countries would be large.

Some excesses against them were expected. But none anticipated the ethnic cleansing which took place in both Punjabs. Nor did anyone expect that the administration in both the countries would be mixed up in the killing and looting. For Indian Muslims, the nightmare is not over.

Jinnah probably realized what they would go through. He tried to retrieve the situation by announcing after the demand for Pakistan was conceded that the people on both sides were Pakistanis or Indians, not Muslims and Hindus in the eye of the state. Politics would

Gujarat halted the process but the manner in which the secular elements, the media and the judiciary tore the state machinery and its politics into pieces has encouraged them. The fact that even after losing power at the centre, the BJP has not gone back to Hindutva indicates that communal parties also have developed vested interest in the joint electorate.

With the Congress in power and the left watching it, there is every possibility that the status of Muslims in India would improve. The community may begin to play as important a role in the polity as, for example, the Sikhs do. Again, much will depend on Pakistan and Bangladesh. The atmosphere of goodwill that has come to prevail in the region has helped Muslims assert their entity in India. One, the contemptuous remark that they are "Pakistanis" has more or less gone. Two, there is a growing realization in India that it can make economic gains only as a homogeneous society, without division on a communal basis.

India's vision of economic union with Pakistan and Bangladesh as its members can come true only when there is an equal participation of people — Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians — in the region. Recent signals from Islamabad are, however, not encouraging. The Indian delegation and the media parties have returned with the impression that the Pakistan government is beginning to drag its feet on improving relations with India. A timeframe for composite dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad has been suggested.

Kashmir is brought in directly or indirectly at every forum. No doubt, President General Pervez Musharraf has said that he would wait for a "reasonable time" to see some "concrete outcome on

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not be mixed with religion. He even promised more.

But the so-called custodians of Pakistan did not allow his words to be broadcast over the radio lest what they had in mind should get jeopardized. They wanted to play the role of an adversary to India and create further cleavage between Muslims and Hindus to justify the creation of Pakistan.

Jinnah had overestimated the power of his words. Fanatics did not want to give up religion as the basis of nationhood. In that they found their entity and the basis for propaganda. To them, progressive Islam was an anathema. The founder of Pakistan was thus reduced to an instrument — just a means to an end, not the end itself.

In any case, the hatred in the name of religion had seeped so deep that both Hindus and Muslims in many parts of India and Pakistan jumped at one another's throat as soon as the British left. More than one million were killed and 20 million were uprooted from their hearths and homes.

Muslims living in India, although assured of a secular polity, went through innumerable sufferings. They would have been still worse off but for the intervention of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the top Congress leaders. They tried to keep Hindu communal elements at bay. Gandhi even sacrificed his life while doing so.

The Pakistan rulers should not have at least sabotaged the efforts to establish a secular polity in India. It guaranteed the future of Muslims. Pakistan had, in fact, an obligation that the beleaguered Indian Muslims would not be harassed by its action.

But what did the policies of their rulers sum up? Treating India as an enemy and trying to disintegrate it has made little sense. Whatever the Pakistan rulers did to hurt India affected nearly 120 million Muslims living in the country. They were doubly punished, both by the policies of Pakistan and by the distrust of most Hindus.

Once I told a Pakistani ruler that the more intractable attitude Islamabad adopted, the most pernicious effect was on the Indian Muslims. He shrugged his shoulders and said: "This was the price the Indian Muslims would have to pay for the integrity of Pakistan." It is a strange argument but the Pakistan's rulers still believe that in the heart of heart the Indian Muslims supported Pakistan. Muslims in India, on the other hand, are stepping out into light after decades of darkness.

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Kashmir" to emerge. But he continues to hold the gun. The problem, which has eluded solution for the last 50 years, cannot have a timetable. It would very much depend on how soon people on both sides build trust in one another and how soon the Kashmiris accept a status short of independence.

Strangely, Islamabad has not yet demolished the terrorists' training centres. Even America said the other day that the network of terrorists is more or less intact in Pakistan. Terrorists in Kashmir have still their supply line — and the guidance structure — in Pakistan. Even the resolution on terrorism passed at the Saarc foreign ministers' conference was at the behest of Washington. Musharraf had no choice.

In Bangladesh, where there are many more Hindus than in Pakistan, fundamentalism is increasing day by day. It is taking the shape of terrorism which is as much terrifying the Bangladeshi Muslims as the Hindus. Being a weak government, Dhaka can neither handle its own terrorists nor the ones who have made it a place for their operation against India.

Dhaka has reportedly promised to turn a new leaf in its relations with New Delhi. The Khaleda Zia government is reaching out to Hindus as well. If Islamabad also continues to push the confidence-building measures, a new era of understanding may usher in the region.

This will, ultimately, help the minorities. Economic ties know no differences. Nor can bias stay when there is an easy access of people to one another's country. Both things when implemented may provide answer to the question that bothered Jinnah: the future of Muslims in India.

The writer is a leading columnist based in New Delhi.