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SECTARIAN IDENTITIES OF MUSLIMS:" a house divided"

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Religious exclusivism was the sole basis to the concept of Muslims as a separate nation, which divided the Indian sub-continent. But the question of separate identity of Muslims in post partition India is still an unresolved issue. In fact the so-called identity crisis of the followers of Islam continues to be a major source of irritation for them in this country. Despite the ground reality of sectarian divisions in the community that sincerely guards its respective identities, the Muslim intellectuals look the other way whenever the question of the separate identity of their co-religionists is aggressively raised by Islamic fundamentalists. Sectarian feuds in the community prove that Muslims like other major religious groups are not a homogenous community.

Sectarian divisions in Muslim community:

After the death of Prophet Muhammad fight for the question of his successor divided the Islamic community in two sects - Shia and Sunni, which gradually multiplied into numerous sub-sects with fragmented doctrine. In fact the Prophet had himself prophesied that "My Nation (Ummat) would be divided into seventy-three sects, and every one of these sects would go to hell except one" (A Social History of Islamic India by Mohammad Yasin, Second Edition 1974, Page 64). Answering the question about the one that would be his true follower he further said, "those who tread on the path adopted by me and after me my companions proceed on that" (Ibid.). Now the followers of each and every sect claim to be the true followers of the Prophet and they fight among themselves for establishing their respective claim.

The schism in Islam centres round the question of succession to the position of temporal and spiritual heads of Islam following the death of the Prophet. The rift was on succession and was made for grabbing political power and not spiritual/ideological ground.

Islam was initially divided between Shia and Sunni sects. Those, who regarded Hazrat Ali (Cousin, Son-in-law and associate of Prophet Mohammad) as the first legitimate successor of the Prophet after his death, were later known as Shias. The rest who were orthodox followers to the tradition and practices (Hadith and Sunnah) of the Prophet and elected the first three consecutive successors namely Abu Bakr, Umar and Usman as his (Prophet) successors were known as Sunnis. In absence of any specific reference in Quran or explicit direction by the Prophet for the selection of his successor, his orthodox followers devised a procedure of common agreement. They however, elected Abu Bakra as first Khalifa without taking the supporters of Hazrat Ali into confidence.

The Shias regarded Hazrat Ali and his eleven direct descendants as the rightful guides and legitimate successors of the Prophet and had full faith in their Imam and Khilafat (Spiritual and temporal head of Islam). They still regard these Imams at par with the status of the Prophet. They denounced the first three Khalifas as usurpers of Khilafat but remained devoted to the fourth Khalifa Hazrat Ali and his direct descendants whom they call Imams. The religious heads of Shias trace their heritage from Prophet Mohammad and his descendants. They accept them as divinely appointed successors to the Prophet and reject any elected post for Khalifa. They also reject all the traditions and practices (Hadith and Sunnah) of the Prophet and early Islam which were not in conformity with the contents of Quran.

The Shias give equal importance to the teachings of the Prophet and his twelve direct descendants. For them the first three Khalifas were politically motivated and denied Ali of his rightful claim.. Shias gradually assumed the form of a sect during the period when Ali took over as the fourth Khalifa. After the 'martyrdom' of Ali and his two sons Hasan and Hussain in the battle of Karbala Shia sect had a tremendous growth. Following are the twelve Imams of Shias:

Hajarat Ali

Hasan, the eldest son of Ali

Hussain, the second son of Ali

Ali, the eldest son of Hussain

Mohammad Bakra, son of Ali

Jaffar Sadiq, son of Mohammad Bakra

Ismail, son of Jaffar

Ali Raza, son of Musa, the second son of Jaffar

Abu jaffa Mohammad, son of Ali Raza

Ali Askari, son of Abu Jaffar Mohammad

Hasan, son of Ali Askari

Mohammad Mahdi, son of Hasan.(Shias believe that Mahdi is still living and is expected to appear as rescuer of the Muslim world.

In the feud for succession a number of companions of the Prophet had to meet violent deaths. " The intense persecution of sects (Shias) by Sunni rulers, who treated them as a race of heretics that were worse than infidels even selling Shias like beasts in the market place as slaves, is recorded by historians: and innumerable instances bear witness that the unity claimed has never been realised" (The Shias of India by John Norman Hollisten, second edition 1979, page 1).

Shias believe that all the above descendents of the Prophet are Imams and mahadis (the rightly guided one who will come on the last day to save Muslims)) who had mysteriously disappeared and would reappear at the appropriate moment to lead the Muslim world to their everlasting glory. Different sub- sects among the Shias however refer to the specific Imam as mahdi. Some of the prominent sub-sects among Shia Muslims, who show specific reverence to Ismail, the sixth Imam from the direct descendents of the Prophet are also known as Ismailis, who are further subdivided between Bohras and Khojas in India.

Ismaili Khojas "regarded Ali as tenth incarnation of Vishnu, paid the 'zakat' (Islamic alms tax) to Agha Khan, the unrevealed Imam, and instead of the Quran, read a manual prepared by one of their Pirs(saints), Sadruddin" (The Indian Muslims by M. Mujeeb, 1985, page 12-13). Agha Khan is a title applied to the Imam of Nizari Ismaili subset of Shias.

Bohra Muslims are mostly of Hindu origin. Ismaili missionaries converted them to Islam. As a separate group within Ismaili sub-sect of Shias, the Bohras "uphold the claim of Al-Mustali to succeed his brother Al-Mustansir in the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. Al-Mustali had opposed his brother Nizar, whose adherents are represented in India by the Khojas" (Encyclopedia of Islam, 1960, page 1254).

The Bohras and Khojas, who are mainly concentrated in Gujarat are having further divisions in several groups because of their well-structured separate priestly hierarchy, which are as under:

Dawoodi Bohras

Sulemani Bohras

Alvi Bohras

Atba-e- Malak (Vakil Group)

Ismaili (Aga Khan Khojas

Insa Asali Khojas

All the above referred to sub-sects of Shia Muslims are tightly controlled by their respective priesthood. Like Pope, who retains all the powers to control Roman Catholic Christians, the Bohara and Khojas are under strict control of their respective priestly hierarchy. All the groups, who are mostly businessmen maintain their separate identity and follow the directive of their priests in all the socio-religious matters.

Contrary to the claim of the Shias, the Sunnis recognise the first four khalifas namely Abu Bakra, Umar, Usman and Hazrat Ali as the rightful successors of the Prophet and describe them as elected representatives to the office of Caliphate. They acknowledge them as the temporal and spiritual heads of Islam and follow the Hadith (Tradition of Prophet and Khalifas) and Sunnah (Practice) purporting to come from Quran as well as other sources. They also differ with Shias on the concept of Imam whom they consider only as a leader during congregated Islamic prayer. They believe that Allah's representative would appear on the day of Qayamat (Doomsday) to lead the Muslims.

The widening breach between the Shias and the Sunnis led to the formation of different ideological doctrines, which became a major source of confrontation within the community. The Sunnis do show reverence to Ali and his son Hussain but strongly oppose their elevation to the status at par with the Prophet. Enraged on this stand of Shias they often ascribe them as Kafirs (Infidels). The Shias on the other hand take such accusation of Sunnis as insult to Ali and Hussain. This centuries old religious divergence permanently divided the Muslim society, which sometimes resulted into violent quarrel.

Shias and Sunnis also differ over interpretation of certain verses of Quran. In 1988 both of them residing in Gilgit (Pakistan) quarreled over the start of the fasting month of Ramzan. The Shias started the fast one day before the Sunnis, who condemned it in abusive languages. The violence on this issue resulted into fatal casualty approaching 800 (Muslim Diversity by Leif Manger, 1999, Page58).

Advent of Moghul Empire in India

With the downfall of Moghul Empire the Sunni Muslims of India generated a debate whether India was Dar-ul- Islam or Dar-ul-Harb. Accordingly they took keen interest in Ottoman Caliphate and campaigned for the revival of Islam in the era of Prophet and his successive Khalifas. The Shias however, had no interest in the movement launched by the Sunnis. This indifferent attitude of Shias often resulted in fight between the two sects. The violent conflict between Shias and Sunnis often seen at Lucknow is worse than a communal riot between Hindus and the Muslims.

Almost all the Muslim invaders in India were Sunnis, though some of their soldiers also belonged to Shia sect. During Mogul period Sufi saints played an active role in conversion of natives to Islam throughout north India but with the laxity of Emperor Akbar's court inviting representatives of all the religions as well as Shias a conflict in interpretation of Islam started. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhind, who was known as Mujaddid (renewer of Islam) emerged as a first reformer to purge Islamic faith from any external influence. He tried to rejuvenate Sunni Islam in face of Akbar's liberal gesture to other religions. "The theological reforms articulated by Shaikh Ahmad were taken beyond their logical limits by the increasingly militant anti Hinduism of the emperors Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb" (The Ahmadiyah Movement by Spencer Lavan, 1974, page 3).

Decline of Mogul Empire after the death of Aurangzeb was viewed by the Sunni clerics as a danger signal for Islam. Since then, they made

constant efforts for revival of Islamic glory in the sub-continent, which centred round to the re-establishment of the Muslim rule. Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703-1762), a deeply frustrated Sunni of Sufi order invited Ahmad Shah Abdali (also known as Durrani) in 1760 to fight against the Marathas for saving the Muslims from Hindu domination. His efforts to unite the Indian Muslims against the Hindus sowed the seed of Muslim separatism, which gave birth to Muslim orthodoxy.

Frustrated with the downfall of Mogul Empire, Saiyyad Ahmad Shahid (1786-1831) a disciple of Waliullah's son responded to the tradition of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah and led the holy warriors of Islam to wage jihad against the Sikh kingdom of Punjab in the battle of Balkot in May 1831. He was killed in the battle but the Sunni Islamists projected him as martyr for the cause of Islam. His death was a severe blow to the sagging morale of the Sunni Muslims.

Failure of Sepoy Mutiny against the British in 1857 in which Islamic theologians who had enjoyed honourable status during Muslim rule were directly or indirectly involved - was another severe blow to the Muslim orthodoxy. They therefore, believed that return to Prophet era was the only answer to their problem. Accordingly they launched movements for Islamic revivalism under the patronage of the feudal Muslims, who were interested more for sharing political power than spiritual elevation of their community. The movements were basically against the domination of non-Muslims particularly the Hindus in administration for whom the British regime was only a change of master. Noted historian "R.C.Majumdar was unflinching in his conviction that India's history as a slave nation began seven centuries before the East India Company's troops won the battle of Plassey -we only changed our master in 1757" (Pioneer dated June 26, 2004).

In post- Sepoy Mutiny era when the Muslim leadership in Indian sub-continent lost their hope of re-establishing the lost Muslim rule, there was a spurt in the Islamic reform movements under the leadership of Sunni clerics and intellectuals with the sole motive to re-establish the Muslim domination in the sub-continent. All these movements also emerged as various sub-sects of Sunni Muslims. Prominent among them are as under:

Deobandi - Mawlana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-77) set up an Arabic madrasa in May 1866 at Deoband, which was raised to the status of 'Darul - Ulum in 1867(Abode of Islamic learning). It was in response to the traditions of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, Maulana Wahhab of Soudi Arabia, Shah Waliullah, and Saiyyad Ahmad Shahid. Over the years this radical Islamic institution spread a net work of madrasas under its administrative and ideological guidance all over India and it is now the biggest Islamic institution in the country.

The followers of Deoband School of Islam were known as Deobandis who are totally against any external influence on Islam. With a lead taken by Deoband and initiative of Maulana Abd al Bari of the Farangi Mahall the first formal organisation of Ulama known as Jami'at-ul-Ulama-i-Hind (JUH) was founded at Lucknow in March 1919. Its avowed objective was "to guide the followers of Islam in political and non-political matters from religious point of view". Maulana Abu'l Kalam Azad, Maulana Abd'al Majid Bada'uni, Maulana Daud Ghaznavi, Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, and Maulana Hafizal Rahman (Partners in Freedom -and True Muslims by Peter Hardy, page 31), Maulana Kifaytullah, Maulana Mohammad Ali, Maulana Mahmud Hasan, Maulana Saayyid Hussain Madani and several other contemporary

Ulama were among its other leaders.

Aligarhi - Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) scion of a Mogul family was "acutely sensitive to the ending of Mogul dominance". Believing that the British would continue to rule India for generations his main objective was to win them over in favour of the Muslims for which he founded Indo Oriental Muslim school (1875), which was upgraded to Anglo Muhammadan Oriental College in 1881 and to Aligarh Muslim University in 1920. His main idea was to impart modern education to the Muslims so that they could revive their political and social domination. But Sunni Islamists of Deoband opposed his tradition as they were critically against the British system of education. Later, Aligarh developed as a movement which produced a new middle class in Muslim society that gave birth to Pakistan movement.

Ahl-i-Hadith(the followers of Prophetic tradition) - The growing influence of Arya Samaj and Christianity after the advent of British rule, the puritan and military zeal of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid who was killed (1831) in his battle against the Sikhs of Punjab inspired a section of his hard core followers, who held extreme views to return to the Prophet era. They founded a sub-sect of Sunni Muslims known as Ahl-i-Hadith sometimes in mid 1880s. Influenced with the writings of Nawab Siddiq Hasan Khan (d.1902) its followers firmly believed in religious reform through Islamic conservatism and insisted on the unquestioned authority of Hadith and thereby closed the possibility of unity in Muslim community. They profess the normative customs identified with the Sunnah (tradition of the Prophet). With its emergence" from jihad-oriented Wahhabi movement the Ahl-e-Hadith had eschewed its past, disclaiming name Wahhabi" (The Ahmadiyah Movement by Spencer Lavan, 1974, page12). Mawlawi Abu Sayed Mohammed Hussain of Batala in Gurdaspur district of Punjab was their main spokesperson. His Treatise on Jihad (Lahore 1887) against Ahmadiyah sect of Muslims as well as against the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist movement worked as a catalyst to aggravate the communal environment in the country.

Ahl-i -Hadith appeared as a distinct sub-sect of Sunni Muslims in Indian sub-continent with zealous efforts of its followers to purify the religious life of Muslims. They do not bound themselves by obedience to the first four Khalifas recognised by the Sunnis and are free to seek " guidance from the authentic traditions, which together with the Quran are in their view the only worthy guide for true Muslims" (Encyclopaedia of Islam, Lieden, 1960, Vol. I, Page 259). With separate mosques and seminaries, they put more emphasis on promotion to the study of Hadith.

Nadvi - Nadwatul-Uluma is another Islamic institution, which was initially set up at Kanpur in 1893 but was eventually shifted to Lucknow in 1898. Like Deoband, Nadwa also draws inspiration from Maulana Wahhab and Shah Waliullah of 18th century for resuscitation of classical Islam. But contrary to Deoband's complete obsession against the idea of Aligarh movement in promoting modernity among the Muslims, Nadwa's avowed objective was to bring a middle path between classical Islam and modernity. Islamic zealots like Muhammad Ali Mongiri, Ashraf Ali Thanwi and Mahmud-ul-Hasan felt the need of preparing a group of Ulama conversant with the conditions and events of the contemporary world and to counter both the pro-British attitude of Aligarh movement as well as the challenge of western education. This institution was in fact intended to be an updated version of Deoband. The choice of the name Nadwa got inspiration from a hall in Mecca, where nobles used to assemble to deliberate.

Barelavi - Dar-ul-Ulum Manzar Islam, which was founded by Ahmed Reza at Bareilly in 1904 is also a prominent Islamic institutions in India. Its followers known as Barelwis are spread all over India and also in Punjab province of Pakistan. They represent " the most ignorant and morbid section of Muslim community. Its founder, an Islamic scholar of repute was strongly opposed to Deoband movement for its aversion to saint-worship and other Islamic celebrations of Sufi cult which they accepted as Islamic traditions. In 1903, he even issued fatwa against the founding members of Deoband for their opposition to celebrations of Islamic customs like birth anniversary of Prophet and tomb worships of Sufi saints. Ahmed Reza had also opposed Khilafat movement and owned allegiance to Muslim League during Freedom Movement. The main characteristics of Barelwis due to which they clash with Deobandis are as under:
Barelwis believe in a hierarchy in Islam from Prophet to the numerous Sufi saints and peers.
They believe in celebrating the anniversaries of saints, commemorating the martyrdom of Prophet's grandson Hussain and other religious customs.

They institutionalised the birth anniversary of Prophet.

Contrary to the activist fundamentalist groups like Deoband, Nadwa and Farang Mahall, Barelwis are relatively tolerant and do not bother to oppose modern education.

Tablighi - Frustrated with the failure of Khilafat movement Maulana Ilyas (1885-1944) founded Tabligh Jama'at (Congregation for religious propaganda) around 1927 (Encyclopaedia of Islam - Leiden) with its headquarter at Nizamuddin Delhi. With its conviction that any country under non-Muslim rules was 'Dar-ul-Harb', it also joined other Islamic radicalists in obstructing common Muslims to integrate in the social and cultural mainstream of India.

Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) - Mawlana Maududi a radical Islamist of twentieth century founded JEI in August 1941 in an assembly of 75 of his supporters at Lahore. He launched it as a movement for return to Islam and its revitalization both as a religion and political force. His political objective was to create a truly Islamic society, which would ultimately overthrow all the Godless system and establish Hukumat-e-Ilahia (Kingdom of God) and Muslim dominance in Indian sub-continent. He did not believe in any form of government except the government prescribed by Islam. Establishment of Islamic theocracy all over the world in general and dominance of Muslims in Indian

subcontinent in particular were the core objectives of the JEI.

Memons (Halali Memons and Kutchi Memons) - As far as historical origin of Memons is concerned it is a debatable issue but the most popular view is that a Sufi saint Pir Yusufuddin converted the Lohana community of Sindh to Islam in first half of fifteenth century. Later they migrated to different parts of Gujarat and settled in Kutch and Kathiawar regions following their social boycott by the fellow Hindus of Sindh. In course of their migration they were divided in several groups and those, who settled in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat state are known as Halali Memons, whereas those settled in Kutch areas are called Kutchi Memons. Both of them belong to the mainstream Sunni Muslim community but they maintain their independent social, cultural, linguistic and regional identity. They prefer to marry within their own group. They follow the Sunni doctrine of Islam on religious issues but are culturally closer to the Boharas and Khojas, who belong to the Ismaili sub-sect of Shia Muslims. Basically, they are more devoted to their business than religious radicalism of fellow Sunni Muslims. "Memons are supposed to be so devoted to business that there is a saying among them which sounds: Memon viyanhe Makke tabaser same takke (Memon, even if he goes to Mecca, his attention would remain on weighing and selling)" (Muslim Communities of Gujarat by Asghar Ali Engineer, 1989, page 44).

Apart from Shia and Sunni division, a third sect of Muslims known as Ahmadiyah is also a major source of sectarian feud in Islamic community. "The shias and Ahmadis are the two sects which have basic differences with Muslims and are a constant source of internecine trouble and discord " (Islam in the sub-continent by Mashrul Hasan, 2002, Page 82).

Ahmadiyah (Qadiyani) - Mirza Gulam Ahmad (1839-1908) of Village Qadiyan (in Gurdaspur district of Punjab) founded an independent religious movement among the Muslims of Punjab as a defender of Islam against the growing influence of Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj and Christianity in the closing decades of nineteenth century. The sect is also known as Qadiyani. His teachings, which countered the anti-Prophet and anti-Islam arguments of these organisations attracted a sizeable number of Muslims in Punjab. In 1880's he declared himself as a Promised Messiah and the mahdi, began giving prophecies and also claimed that he had received revelations. "In 1882 Ahmad claimed to have received divine commands appointing him a Mujjadid or renewer of the faith" (The Ahmadiyah Movement by Spencer Lavan, 1974, page 36).

Mirza Gulam Ahmad faced bitter and violent opposition from Muslim orthodoxy for his divine claim, as they do not accept anyone except the Prophet to His status. Even his contemporary Mawlawi Abu Sayed Mohammed Hussain of Batala (in Gurdaspur district of Punjab), the main spokesperson of Ahl-i-Hadith, who had agreed with the concept of jihad formulated by by Mirza Gulam Ahmad opposed him tooth and nail along with other Sunni orthodoxy. After the death of Mirza, his followers emerged as an independent Muslim community and elected Mawlawi Nur-al-Din as Khalifa of the new sect.

All these sub-sects of Sunni Muslims claimed as real defenders of Islam and their respective Ulema sought to assert more traditional position in guiding the members of their community. Despite all the sectarian violence the unity seen among the Muslims is only against the

political domination of the Hindus, which has nothing to do with the so-called identity crisis of the community.

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