

## Majoritarianism vs Minoritarianism\*

Hindu-Muslim Relations in Post-Independence India

*In this essay I focus almost exclusively on Majoritarianism and Minoritarianism as it is reflected in Hindu-Muslim relations in India. The continuing conflicts between these two communities threaten to jeopardize the entire society and seriously endanger our otherwise resilient democracy. This is not to suggest that this is the only form of ethnic conflict India needs to confront. However, I believe that if we can find a workable solution to Hindu-Muslim relations in India, we would find it easier to deal with all our other ethnic problems.*

For thousands of years, aside from limited and brief exceptions such as in Periclean Athens, the idea that the State needed to demonstrate support of a majority of its people to claim legitimacy of its rule in society would seem so ridiculous that no one would ever suggest it. Use of majorities in decision-making probably arose historically out of the need for deciding on special issues in small elite groups such as the Senate of Rome or the Council in Venice. These elite bodies had stringent rules for determining qualifications for membership, including aristocratic birth. The idea of 'majority' thus had emerged in the context of decision-making within a homogenous group, as a mode of clinching persistent differences in a group of individuals of more or less equal status and similar backgrounds. The preferred mode was,

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however, to reach a consensus rather than to force a 'division of votes' that would divide the group into identifiable subgroups as a 'majority' and a 'minority' 'we' and 'they'.

The assembly of armed male citizens, that might have been one of the progenitors of later political institutions, made important choices in many societies at crisis points. However, to be effective they would usually have to come to something close to a consensus on an issue that would have been chewed over and carefully prepared long before it was put to them. Then they would ordinarily shout 'hurrah' as their betters asked of them, or display such vehement opposition as to frighten leaders who were afraid of their rising up and taking direct and immediate action against their rulers if their wishes were not heard. In urban areas, even as late as in medieval Rome, it was amazing how often vehement rejection by the ordinary people of Rome could and would overturn rulers as powerful as the Pope and force them to flee the city, even during a period when Papal power could humble many of the mightiest monarchs of Europe.

In traditional micro-societies seeking consensus rather than divisions, leaders who could display patience and conciliatory or manipulative capacities to elicit consensus, or something as close to it as possible, were the most prized lot. A decision by majority would not be useful, since the participation and agreement of significant minorities was essential to keep the community from internal conflicts that could seriously affect their viability and even their survival.

It would probably have seemed impossible to pre-modern peoples that a majority drawn from an amalgam of warriors, shamans, priests, women, farmers, slaves, craftsmen, lineage family members, recent settlers and landless serfs, debtors, and all the other categories, some crosscutting, into which people were divided, could have conceptual or political significance. It would seem more logical that different groups or individuals would make decisions about different matters using different rules, and that on almost all matters majorities, even within the family, would be irrelevant. Decisions would not be made by society on a territory-wide basis as often as on a sectoral and status basis (for more dispersed areas for the ruling status groups and on a very local level for the ordinary folk).

Most decisions were made on the basis of custom. Custom, though a most powerful force, was not always so decisive as it might look to someone on the inside of a mainly pre-literate society where selective recollection could smooth over many awkward problems. For custom was

interpretatively used; in effect lending itself to different interpretations and uses. Here, also, consensus, rather than division, was a preferred mode of overcoming differences. Nevertheless, even powerful rulers who wished to be seen as legitimate hesitated before overturning custom.

Few could have realized that over the millennia the model for majority rule by the people of a society would evolve out of the assemblies of representatives of the most powerful estates (status groupings) in the society. At these meetings both religious and secular decisions were made establishing doctrine, legitimating the rule of a religious or secular monarch or dynasty, and considering the ruler's requests for funds.

However, as more powerful states arose in next two hundred years, some rulers saw that in order to compete with other growing political powers it was becoming more and more vital to mobilize as much as possible of the large relatively passive general population under their control, to get the rural and urban folk to participate actively in the development of the polity under the direction of their rulers. At first ordinary people's participation was seen primarily as a device useful, among other things, for raising the proportion of population taken into the army through the practice of some form of conscription. Later it was considered advantageous to national or ruler power to widen participation in assemblies and to reduce the limitations on eligibility for entry into these assemblies.

These representative assemblies took over the rules used in elite assemblies, and by adding additional precedents evolved, as a consequence of their own ever-increasing experience, further developed rules of procedure for deciding issues brought before them. One of the most useful decision-making rules was to decide issues on the basis of a single vote per representative. Some issues required more than a majority for approval. But as time went by more and more issues began to be decided based on majorities, and sometimes even on pluralities among those voting on an issue. However, at almost all times the system worked more effectively when the issues brought before these assemblies for decision were not such as necessitated abrupt major adjustments in the power relations within the society, or that endangered important components of the political body. The notion of counting the votes of eligible individuals in deciding who these representatives to the assemblies were to be slowly became accepted, and limitations on eligibility to vote for these representatives decreased in many states.

However, in today's world, rule by majority vote of all adults—males and females, poor and rich—has come to be considered the hallmark of democracy. The western nations, which first developed present-day democracies, are seen as role models for building democracy in the rest of the world. The idea of rule by majority vote became distorted in the twentieth century, the pre-eminent age of nationalism, as it almost deified head counting, and thus tended to move towards majoritarianism—that is, almost total control over the fate of the minority by the majority. In some countries, census counts became an instrument for a group to claim supremacy through attempting to demonstrate it is a majority in a particular area. This has escalated ethnic tensions to unprecedented levels of conflict and bloody slaughters.

If we look around the world today we find that the original idea of democracy by majority vote is working well only in those societies that have:

- (i) either small, homogeneous populations where there is a broad consensus regarding the basic organizational principles of that society as, for example, in Sweden and Denmark; or
- (ii) some multicultural, multi-ethnic populations where over long periods of time the common acceptance of certain workable political rules of decision-making have more or less allowed for their evolution into functioning polities (e.g., Switzerland, Canada, USA).

But even in the most well functioning western democracies a certain equilibrium between the majority and minority populations has been arrived at by setting definite limits to minority rights. To begin with the ethnicity principle has been secularized whereby minorities are assured rights of political participation and of sharing public resources but the right of political separation is not on the agenda at all. The minorities in these societies are now being given special spaces for cultural expression and identity assertion in the context of highly homogenized societies but not the right to challenge or veto the basic principles of governance such as questioning individual freedom or seeking parallel governance by subjugating individual members of their group in ways that conflict with their citizenship rights. In other words, they can live as distinct communities but do not have the right to declare themselves as separate nationalities. Since their right to life, to liberty and freedom to pursue occupations is guaranteed by the nation-state, minorities in these democracies are not permitted the right to challenge the nation-state itself.

Even so, it is important to note that Europe began to have a stable political context in which to have majority rule on just a few mutually agreed upon areas of political functioning only after tens of millions of Europeans were killed in total wars or were exterminated or were forced to migrate. Democracies of European settlers such as those in the US, Canada and Australia, were built only after the indigenous populations were either wiped out or confined to reservations and peripheral areas.

And now that Europe is once again forced to confront non-European peoples on its soil who were originally asked to come to provide temporary 'guest workers' as cheap labour, there is a fresh resurgence of violent forms of racism. The breakout of a genocidal conflict in the former Yugoslavia after the collapse of communism and the ethnic conflicts that have broken out in other areas of Eastern Europe show that most parts of Europe have not learned even yet how to evolve genuine democracies within a framework of ethnic diversity.

#### THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

By contrast, '...India is a striking example of a state maintaining a reasonable democracy despite its plural structure and profound internal dissension.' ('The Diverse Modes of Conflict-Regulation in Deeply Divided Societies', in Anthony D. Smith (ed.) *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, E.J. Brill, New York, p. 44.) But much of our political mess has arisen out of our uncritical acceptance of many of the continental European national ideologies that make the mechanical equivalency of ethnic and national identities the keystone of nation building and head courts of ethnic majorities a license to carry out all sorts of genocidal acts.

Thus, while the principle of majority vote may have proved facilitative in areas where there has been basic agreement about the ruling principles of state functioning, it has created disastrous consequences when it is applied to making fundamental choices regarding the character and guiding principles of the nation-state, especially regarding the critical choice of who is to have what rights and who is not to have certain rights. Significant populations of many countries have been 'constitutionally' disenfranchised, expelled, annihilated, or sub-humanized by the application of this 'democratic' principle.

In the twentieth century it became more and more vital to belong in some sense to one or the other of the nation-states that have divided

up the whole world, leaving no significant areas out of its all-encompassing system, leaving no security for those not under the protection of one or the other of these powers. And the 'nations' to whom all the states belong are implicitly, but inevitably, articulated permanent and fixed ethnic 'majorities'. Nationalist ideologies in these newly growing or forming states failed to distinguish clearly between the use of majority votes as a decision-making rule on subordinate issues within a society that had achieved over time a degree of general agreement on principles, and majority rule as a device to decide survival issues in a society where some of its subgroups had not come to an agreement about guiding principles, basic ground rules, or what is up for reconsideration and what should continue to be decided by previous customs or agreements.

In our modern age of nationalism we have thus come to confuse a simplified and primitive notion of majority vote with the deadly notion of majority rule based not on decisions on issues but rather on 'objective' characteristics of a majority of individuals in the nation, such as skin colour, language, cultural traits, ancestry, religion, and other markers that have little to do with issues the people living in a territory need to decide among themselves. This has allowed a large-scale political mobilization of populations around these characteristics producing almost permanent categories of 'majority' and 'minorities' with certain leaders claiming that they both represent and control these as undifferentiated entities, constituting primary units of the polity as a whole. At least this is how the majority-minority concept seems to have developed in India over the years as a criterion of separation and division of population rather than a principle of decision-making. This peculiar patterning of difference in our polity emerged with the formation of the colonial state. As in so many other aspects of the development of our national consciousness, British administrative devices contributed to the way it was shaped. They created an awareness of there being one overriding majority-minority division, that between the Muslims and the Hindus, from the very early censuses, starting in the late nineteenth century. As Van der Veer puts it:

'This is not to say that there was no division of Hindu and Muslim communities in the precolonial period. There was: the division was not a colonial invention. But to count these communities and to have leaders represent them was a colonial novelty, and it was fundamental to the emergence of religious nationalism.' (Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, pp. 19-20).

He goes on to point out 'the odd effect of the census was that it simultaneously cut the society up into infinitesimal units and yet created a huge 'Hindu majority,' together with several 'minorities,' of which the most significant was the Muslim (Ibid., p. 26).

The notion that an arbitrarily defined internal majority could claim sovereign rights over parts of the newly emerging and yet undefined nation-state where they were in a majority led to the disastrous Partition in 1947. The breakaway of Pakistan was justified on the ground that the sole spokesman for a majority of those resident in certain provinces could claim sovereignty for those who had been born into the same faith. This sovereignty, in turn, was supposed to give him the right to push out from their homes many millions of people merely because they were not of the same faith despite the fact that the two communities had lived together for centuries sharing common territory, languages and culture.

Manto's powerful story *Toba Tek Singh* describes the bewilderment of the 'mad' hero who resists being forcibly moved to a new state of which he is a 'national' while he has no right to live where his family had lived for centuries. He finally collapses on the imaginary line called the 'Indo-Pakistan border.' This ending brings out the tragedy and the absurdity behind the notion of carving out nation-states on the basis of a politically manipulated majority vote.

The dominant political leadership of India was determined not to go the way of Pakistan and identify the state with any particular religion; they publicly committed themselves instead to maintaining a secular state within which religious minorities would have the same rights and responsibilities as citizens. Several additional measures were included that were aimed at protecting the sensibilities of religious minorities against certain violations of their internal customs and religious practices. But, despite all this, Muslim relations with Hindus and Sikhs in India have come to be very heavily influenced by the continuing volatile relations between the two states that have resulted in numerous Indo-Pakistan conflicts since 1947.

#### THE LIMITS OF HINDU MAJORITARIANISM

Hindu-Muslim relations in post-Independence India are increasingly becoming hostage to a similar ideology to the one that provided the political legitimacy for the breakaway of the Muslim majority areas in 1947. This ideology is now used by the Sangh Parivar combine to

consolidate the Hindus into a large vote bank so that they can gain power. They claim that because there are more Hindus than there are any other religious groupings in post-Partition India, they therefore ought to have the right to do what was done in Pakistan, namely implement a policy of the majority ethnic domination over the polity as a whole, and in the process, establish a complete equivalence between the ethnic majority and the nation. After coming to power at the Centre, in 1999, important BJP leaders changed considerably on this issue and made significant moves towards building bridges, not only with the Muslim community in India but also with the peoples and government of Pakistan.

The task of extremist Hindu nationalists who wish to follow the Jinnah path is made unachievable because in actual fact, India is a country of minorities. The term Hindu encompasses many crosscutting identities. No one is merely a Hindu. To be a Hindu you have to belong to one of the many sects or groups—Shaivite, Vaishnavite, Arya Samaji, Sanatani, Radhasami, Ramani, Satnami. The list is endless. Furthermore, you have to be a member of a particular *jati* in order to qualify as a Hindu-Brahmin, Kayastha, Rajput, Jat, Vokkaliga, Lingayat, Julaha, Mahar, Yadav, Kumi, Musahar, Reddy, Kamma. The list is still more endless. At the *jati* level, there are only two all-India communities within the Hindu fold—the Brahmins and the Vishwakarnas. Like all others they too are as much rooted in their linguistic and regional identity as they are in their *jati* or caste identity. For instance, it is not enough to say you are a Brahmin. For all operative purposes it matters as much whether you are a Kashmiri Brahmin, Punjabi, Tamil or Gujarati Brahmin. If you take into account all these functional identities, the idea of a monolithic Hindu majority becomes absurd. These identities are functional not only at the ritual, cultural level, not just in deciding marriage alliances but also political alliances and voting behaviour. This is precisely why attempts by the Sangh Parivar to unite the Hindu community into a solid monolith have proved not just slippery but led to a powerful backlash of caste assertion.

In fact, at one level Sangh Parivar politics is achieving the very opposite of what they intended to accomplish. The more they insist on Hindus being 'one' the more their political ambition for hegemony is challenged by a variety of leaders of the lower and peasant castes. It has led to their political isolation because this 'majority making' is

interpreted by others not just as an anti-Muslim enterprise but also an attempt to strengthen the hegemony of upper castes.

There are indeed serious limitations on the construction of a Hindu political majority. This is an important reason that parties of religious nationalists remain nervous and confused, and find themselves unable to push their agenda as far and as fast as they would like. In certain ways the Sangh Parivar leadership perceive themselves not as the representatives of the overwhelming majority their rhetoric would indicate, but rather as a besieged political minority trying to consolidate a recalcitrant vote bank of an incredibly heterogeneous group of ethnic and religious identities into a united vote bank. At some more fundamental level these leaders recognize that Hindus can only be a 'conditional majority': that is, only if various communities that come within the Hindu fold are willing to submerge their other identities to facilitate the Sangh Parivar's aspiration of homogenizing the almost unhomogenizable Hindu communities. They are also nervous about the fact that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who together constitute 20 per cent of the population have proved soft targets for conversion to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Even without conversion they have very little stake in upholding 'Hindu unity' under an upper caste leadership.

In fact these self-proclaimed leaders of a Hindu majority find it difficult to maintain their hegemony even among those castes who see themselves as firmly within the Hindu fold but are unwilling to incorporate themselves politically in the Hindutva movement of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar. For all the efforts of the BJP leaders, their use of the concept of Hindutva to rally support among the rural peasant castes has had very limited appeal. Leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav, and the leaders of the numerous regional and caste-based parties, all of whom have a widespread regional support base among a variety of peasant castes, diminish the likelihood that the Sangh Parivar will be able to unify all Hindus under their banner. Linguistic and regional diversity among the Hindus acts as another serious check on the majoritarian aspirations of the Sangh Parivar. These internal doubts about the feasibility of uniting all Hindus into a single community under their leadership makes them paranoid and drives their perception of Muslims as a community with a monolithic solidarity.

The failure of the Sangh Parivar to construct and communicate a

meaningful political programme to unite the Hindus makes them appear as attempting to mobilize large segments of the Hindu communities on one single issue—anti-Muslim sentiment. By presenting Muslims as an untrustworthy anti-national community who are acting as a cohesive and united power threatening the security of the Hindu majority, the Sangh Parivar can portray itself as the vehicle for uniting a divided Hindu community in its own defence. Paradoxically, however, every effort the Sangh Parivar makes to unite all Hindus in its 'hate Muslim' campaign also results in promoting greater unity in a disparate Muslim community than has ever existed heretofore. It prods Muslims into forging a single-issue political programme and strategy to defeat the BJP and its anti-Muslim confederates.

In reality, Muslims are far from being a monolithic community. Muslims of Kerala, for instance, share much more in common with Malayali Hindus than they do with Muslims of Rajasthan. The caste system is pretty much intact within the Muslims—the Qureshis, the Gujjars, the Jats among Muslim peasants, the Kasais, Ansaris and various other occupational groups reflect a great deal of cultural diversity. However, the anti-Muslim thrust of Sangh Parivar politics is ironically ending up unifying the Muslims on select issues far more than it has unified the Hindus.

Thus, the political polarization in actual terms works out to be not so much Hindus versus Muslims but the BJP versus the Muslims, with the BJP trying to project itself as the sole representative and most legitimate voice of all Hindus, despite their failure to gather all major groupings under their banner, and the Muslims willing to put their weight in favour of whoever is capable of defeating the BJP.

In my interviews in Meerut during the 1993 election campaign, a recurring theme in the responses of Muslims—men, women and children alike—was the all-out opposition to the BJP as the promoters of anti-Muslim rioting. I quote from one such typical interview with one Sarfaraz Alan; who lives in one of the outlying villages of Meerut but comes to work in the city everyday:

'No matter how good the BJP candidate, we cannot ever support him under any circumstances because the party is really bad. The main problem we have with the BJP is that even if there is a minor scuffle or quarrel between little kids, they all gang up and make a big fuss out of it. For instance, the neighbourhood in which I live has always been peaceful. It has no history of Hindu-Muslim fights.

Even during the 1987 riots not a single policeman was required to be posted there because the Hindus and the Muslims have such good relations with each other. But in 1991, during the *rathyatra* days, young BJP kids got into a minor fight with some Muslim kids while playing cricket. This was all in fun. But in no time the entire lot of BJP leaders descended on our neighbourhood and created so much tension that we began to fear the administration might have to call in the army. They are forever looking for opportunities to convert even kid's fights into a communal clash.'

Interestingly, this same man, Sarfaraz Alan, also told me that, even though for him the personal honesty of the candidate was an important criterion in deciding who to vote for, and even though he and other Muslims recognized that the local BJP candidate for that particular election was not a corrupt man, there was no possibility they would vote for him, simply because he belonged to the BJP. And the BJP did indeed lose this seat primarily because Muslims ended up voting more as a bloc while the Hindu votes could not be similarly consolidated, despite the organizational finesse of the BJP and the relatively clean image of their candidate.<sup>1</sup>

In each constituency that I was able to monitor, Muslims appeared to wait as long as possible during the campaign to pick out the candidate who showed the best potential to defeat the BJP and did not have a track record of fomenting communal hatred-whatever his other limitations-and vote for him *en bloc* so as to forestall as much as possible the victory of those candidates who saw communal riots as a political opportunity. The careful calculations of this single issue minority played an important role in preventing the BJP from coming to power in UP in the 1993 election and marginalized the Congress party altogether.

The failure of the BJP and its political allies to unite the Hindu castes and linguistic groups into a political community is not only due to their inability to cope with the diversity among Hindus, but also to their failure to evolve a meaningful and comprehensive political programme. For instance, none of the BJP supporters I interviewed could explain why they considered the BJP pro-Hindu even while that was its most important qualification in the eyes of its supporters. The following conversation with a young man in his twenties is typical of

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<sup>1</sup>Author interview during 1993 elections in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh.

many others. He proudly admitted to being an enthusiastic supporter of the BJP 'because they are very forthright and do not mince words.' The most he could tell me was that 'They speak of Hindu *hita* because they want us to unite against the Muslims.' How will that increase Hindu welfare? He had no answer.

The BJP is aware of the vagueness of its societal goals. This vagueness keeps the party desperately looking for issues that have the potential of becoming emotive symbols—Ram Mandir yesterday, the Idgah Maidan in Hubli or the Bhojshala in Bhopal another day.<sup>2</sup> It is a party always itching for a fight with the Muslims but also perpetually nervous because it can never be sure that it has picked issues that will not antagonize in some unforeseen way some parts of its own constructed constituency as has happened in various assembly elections since the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Thus, the rich and vibrant diversity within Hindu society is one of the most important factors that makes it impossible for Hindus to be brought together for murderous purposes on a very large scale for long periods of time as, for instance, Germans could be united for the purpose of exterminating the Jews. The brazen demolition of one mosque, something of relatively minor significance when compared to genocide, produced widespread dismay and rejection among large sections of the Hindu community, whereas the Nazis' campaigns against the Jews in Europe did not produce any comparable condemnation of the Nazis in Europe while they were proceeding through the early stages of carrying out their deadly project. The internal diversity of the Hindu community is its best guarantee against politicians with Hitlerian ambitions and against deadly forms of majoritarianism. This is what explains the compulsion of the BJP to give up many of its divisive agendas and move towards a consensual polity, if it has to be in power. The Indian voter has made it very clear that they do not trust it to hold power on their own and that they need the restraining influence of their coalition partners, most of whom represent constituencies that do not endorse the anti-Muslim thrust of *Hindutvavadis*. This perhaps explains why post 1999 Advani has transformed himself from being just a leader of *Hindutvavad* to being a national leader who is working to build bridges with elements

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<sup>2</sup>Author interview during 1993 election in Meerut.

of the Muslim community in India, including those like the Hurriyat who have pursued secessionist politics.<sup>3</sup>

#### REASONS FOR SANGH PARIVAR'S WIDENING APPEAL

Yet there is no denying that in recent years the Sangh Parivar has had a remarkable degree of success in consolidating a large vote bank among the Hindus who are beginning to assert majoritarian tendencies in an unprecedented way, especially towards the Muslims. In fact, this is the only issue on which a large section of the Hindus are capable of thinking and behaving like a monolith and lose their sense of balance and proportion. However, the success of the Sangh Parivar derives from their appealing to very deep-seated fears, resentments, and anxieties of the Hindu community that go beyond the narrow electoral success or setbacks of the BJP and allied outfits and find echoes among Hindus across the political spectrum from the Congress to the Communist Party cadres, Janata Dal rank and file and even the educated among the Dalits.

A peculiar feature of the Hindu community in India vis-à-vis the Muslims in particular is that despite being a preponderant majority of 80 per cent with Muslims constituting 12 per cent of the population, the educated Hindus have actually developed phobias and fears characteristic of minorities. Many 'secularists', attribute it mainly to the machinations of the Sangh Parivar, and underplay the depth of this sentiment among the general population. It is important to recognize the factors that give rise to these fears rather than be dismissive about them.

After Independence the Muslims left behind in India were largely poor and illiterate, and urban Muslims were largely confined to ghettos. However, the wary Hindu majority in the North remained fearful of Muslim minoritarianism because of the pattern of issues the post-Independence Muslim leadership chose to highlight for uniting Muslims, as well as the manner in which this Muslim leadership has tried to join all Muslims into a mindless monolith keeping the memories of Partition alive.

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<sup>3</sup>There has been a steady change in BJP's attitude, at least at the national level ever since Vajpayee assumed Prime Ministership of India with the BJP in power at the Centre as a leading partner of the NDA alliance. However, the severe drubbing the BJP got in the 2004 elections was in part due to the shameful handling of the Gujarat riots by the central government.

The modern, educated Hindus have internalized a deep sense of inferiority complex and insecurity over the fact that small armies of invaders were able to conquer large parts of the Indian subcontinent with relative ease starting with Mahmud Ghazni and Mohammad Ghauri in the 11th and 12th centuries. Even though the Mughals who came later, settled down here and adopted this country as their own, unlike previous invaders and subsequent British rulers, most Hindus see their history as one of more than a thousand-year-long subjugation to alien rulers. At the same time they are taught to believe that theirs was one of the great ancient civilizations. Why then were they so powerless to face foreign invaders? Colonial historians have been successful in convincing most educated Indians that their political defeat was due to theirs being an internally divided society on the basis of caste, region, religion, sect, language and so on, whereas the invaders came from relatively more cohesive societies which gave them a common sense of purpose. This has made most educated Hindus come to perceive religious and cultural diversity among the Hindus as the prime source of their 'weakness' even while they themselves are unable to overcome their own multilayered ethnic identities. They have also been told that the tolerance inherent in the polytheistic, non-Semitic faiths leads to their inability to unite and resist foreign aggression. So many among the educated have come to associate tolerance with 'weakness'. The Hindus have thus by and large not only lost the confidence and habit to rule but are prone to believing that they could be conquered and enslaved again by the Muslims or any other determined foreign power. The presence of some hostile and some powerful Muslim countries all around India makes it easy to feed their fantasy and fears of another round of subjugation. In this context, even the continuing large inflow of illegal Bangladeshi migrants many of who come as destitutes in search of menial forms of livelihood, gets to be interpreted as part of a well-planned Islamic invasion. Many Hindus have come to seriously believe that the Muslims plan to render Hindus into a minority by a combination of over-breeding, illegal migration, and invasion from neighbouring Islamic countries. The demographic changes in some of the border areas are being viewed with great anxiety. (See for example, *Religious Demography of India* by A.P. Joshi, M.D Srinivas, J.K Bajaj, Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai, 2003.)

In this context, when a leader like Shahabuddin insists on calling the magazine he edits *Muslim India* rather than *Indian Muslims* or even *Muslim Indians* people begin to have phobias that the hidden agenda

behind Muslim politics is to Islamicize India in alliance with the surrounding Muslim nations. Or, at the very least it is a statement of separation like the Partition. That only strengthens the votaries of a 'Hindu India', even though Shahabuddin himself denies this interpretation.

Moreover, when they see that in all the Muslim countries, not just Pakistan and Bangladesh, minorities live very vulnerable lives as third class citizens and have to accept many restraints the majority imposes on them, they feel Hindus are being 'weak' in not being able to impose their writ on the Muslim minority. In this scenario the Gandhian, Nehruvian, and the supposedly secularist approach in handling Hindu-Muslim equations are seen as betrayals of the Hindu interests. They have come to believe that their leaders helplessly succumbed to the Partition of the country because they were not as firm and determined as the Muslim leadership. That a minority could succeed in forcing its will on the majority in such a cataclysmic way has left a very deep scar among some Hindus.

Very few understand that leaders like Gandhi opposed ethnic cleansing in India not only on moral grounds but also because their notions of self-interest were enlightened. Mahatma Gandhi took the stand he did against Hindu nationalist movements in part because he saw the evil behind the notion of majoritarianism. He also refused to accept the idea that Muslims were a separate nationality. He insisted that they were one among many diverse communities of the subcontinent who had for centuries before the coming of the age of nationalism co-existed with various Hindu communities, evolving workable norms of mutual accommodation through a process of give and take. And history has proved that Gandhi was more right than Jinnah.

Muslim nationalism may have succeeded in creating Pakistan, based on the majority rule principle, but Pakistan in turn came to be challenged by Bangladeshi nationalism based on the same rule but on account of linguistic and cultural differences, despite their religion being common. Even after the breakaway of Bangladesh, Pakistan remains faced with acute internal dissensions on account of Sindhi, Baluchi, Pakhtooni, Mchajir, and Punjabi assertions of their right to separate national identities based on their being ethnic majorities in certain areas, even though all are Muslim.

If we accept the logic that, within the territory of the nation-state, every majority has unlimited rights to subjugate, eliminate or push out as a minority one after the other all the heterogeneous amalgam of

peoples that make up the Indian nation-state, we will likely be forced to live through an unending series of tragedy after tragedy of ethnic cleansing, murderous riots, and political chaos.

#### CONFLICTING NATIONALISMS, NOT A RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

The Hindu-Muslim conflict whether in Kashmir or in the rest of India is not a religious or theological conflict between two contrary religions, as is often assumed but a conflict between two differing and opposing versions of nationalism.

To quote Balraj Puri: 'For the Hindus, the difference between Hinduism and Indian nationalism, Indian history and Hindu mythology, national and mythical heroes is altogether blurred. In fact, Indian mythology became the basis for Indian nationalism. Hinduism in fact, is a religionized version of nationalism because the Hindu mind turned revivalist in response to the Western onslaught.' For instance, Swami Dayanand, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and Tilak turned towards the Vedas, the Gita, and the Ramayana to seek intellectual sustenance for their nationalism. They all attempted in various ways to go back to the 'roots' of our civilization. However, these 'roots' were discovered for the Hindus by British administrators and Orientalist scholars.

The Hindus were never governed by Shastric or Vedic tenets in their day-to-day living. It was the British who revived these 'scriptures' for the Hindus and convinced them that these ancient texts defined their civilization and provided a framework of do's and don'ts. Modern Hindus can't distinguish between the secular and the religious because there is no well defined religious boundary or scriptural authority to demarcate the two realms. By contrast, the Muslims can more easily draw a line between the two realms even while they are more prone to theocratic politics. Jinnah seldom quoted the Quran to press his claims for Muslim nationalism but Gandhi did imagine that there would be adequate safeguards for Muslims in his *Ramrajya* if they could have recitations from the *Quran* and *Gita* in the same prayer meeting.

The choice of Hindu 'national' heroes shows this confusion clearly. For instance, Shivaji and Maharana Pratap were at one time idolised as regional heroes who fought for their respective kingdom. However, they have slowly been transformed into national heroes who fought against 'foreign domination'. Ram who is a mythological figure, has been formally adopted by the Sangh Parivar as a national hero.

The success of the Sangh Parivar on the Ram Mandir issue lies in precisely this fusion. It is not presented as a fight between two religious communities over a religious monument but as a fight between nationalist and anti-nationalist forces. A foreign invader, Babar, is alleged to have destroyed the Ram Mandir, believed to be the birthplace of Ram, who they project as a national hero, not a Hindu religious figure. In this scenario, Babri Masjid becomes a symbol of national humiliation at the hands of a foreigner. Thus, all those Muslims who sought to defend the mosque as a symbol of their religious identity came to be projected as anti-nationalist.

The Sangh Parivar's demand that in order to prove their patriotism, Muslim communities should accept the arbitrarily chosen figures of Hindu mythology as not only common national heroes but put national loyalty above religious commitment, makes for a stalemate. For Muslims this is theoretically not possible, even though in day-to-day living and in actual politics various ethnic identities do come to play a more overwhelming role than their religious identity. For Muslims, the *Quran* is a symbol of their distinct identity within India; it also links them to a pan-national identity. Most Hindus have no problem in respecting the *Quran* as a religious text. But they probably are concerned with the way it apparently unites Muslims across national borders, and especially how it ties Indian Muslims with those of Pakistan.

The Hindu counterpart of the *Quran* is not the *Ramayana* or the *Gita* because these texts do not command universal allegiance among the Hindus. Therefore, many Hindus would project the national flag and the Constitution of India as their most sacred symbols, *Bharat Mata* as their most sacred deity, and *Vande Mataram* or the National Anthem as their most sacred hymns. The Muslim insistence on having separate personal laws thus becomes a 'proof' of their disloyalty to the nation-state because many Hindus see them as going against the Constitution and creating their own separate universe. This also explains why a Congress Muslim leader, Salman Khurshid, could easily become a celebrated hero for the Sangh Parivar simply because he defended India's standpoint with ability and conviction in the United Nations when Pakistan challenged India's right to Kashmir and pressed for a plebiscite. In their eyes, by that one act he proved himself a loyal son of *Bharat Mata*, no matter what their other political differences are with him.

## LOYALTY TESTS AND DRAMATIC SWINGS IN MOOD

The issues that are picked up by the *Hindutvavadis* are all proxies set out as traps to test the 'nationalist' credentials of the Muslims. The Sangh Parivar's insistence on building a Ram Mandir at the site of the demolished Masjid, their insistence on imposing a common civil code on the Muslims or wanting to hoist the national flag at a disputed Idgah Maidan in Hubli or reclaim the Bhojshala in Bhopal are all symbolic of the majority community's desire to subject Muslims to a loyalty test to prove that they are not 'anti-national'.

It is the same with the recurring irritant in Hindu-Muslim relations over occasional celebration by some Muslims if Pakistan wins a cricket match against India. Many of us have argued in defence of Muslims pointing to how Indians in Britain often behave likewise and rejoice when India wins a match against England, even though they may be British citizens. But it is not convincing to most Hindus beyond a point because it confirms their fears about Muslims being pro-Pakistan and, therefore, by definition anti-Indian. As trivial and phony as these issues seem to be, they have become major irritants in Hindu-Muslim relations even while they take attention away from some more genuine irritants and grievances of the two communities.

The Kashmiri Muslim demand for secession in recent years further deepened this anxiety and fear that Muslims are inherently disloyal to India and will not hesitate to break it up further, pushing Hindus out of territories in which they are a majority. However, the much-discredited Farooq Abdullah overnight became a national hero when, after leading his party to victory in the last elections to the Kashmir assembly, he declared that Jammu & Kashmir would stay an integral part of India and that he would take on and marginalize all those leaders who were playing pro-Pakistani politics. But within no time he became a hated man because he failed to give a sense of belonging to Kashmiri Hindus who were driven out of their own home state following targeted attacks by Islamic *jihadis*. Similarly, Mufti Mohammad Syed was seen as a threat to the Indian nation when as Home Minister in the V.P. Singh government, he allowed four arrested terrorists to be released in return for the release of his abducted daughter. However the same man quickly won the confidence and respect of educated Hindus and the entire spectrum of political leadership of India, including *Hindutvavadis* after his assuming the Chief Minister's office in October 2002 because he made genuine and

concrete gestures to restore people's faith in Indian democracy and is effectively combating the secessionist movement in Kashmir.

A moving example of a dramatic swing in Hindu-Muslim relations was narrated to me by several people in Meerut (a city with a long history of communal rift) after the Kargil war that led to a new high in anti-Pak feelings, which easily translate into anti-Muslim sentiments in India. The first few bodies of Kargil martyrs that came to Meerut were those of Hindu soldiers. With a view to whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria, some Hindu nationalists decided to take the dead bodies in a procession through the city. When they reached the Muslim majority areas, they began raising provocative slogans like: *Musalmaan, Musalmaan, Pakistan ya Kabristan*. (Muslims belong either to Pakistan or graveyard). They expected the Muslim youth to react with anger, shout counter slogans or throw stones at the procession.

However, they were completely stumped to see that as their procession passed through the Muslim neighbourhoods, people in thousands stood in the balconies and verandahs of their homes and shops showering flower petals on the dead bodies of Kargil war heroes. To top it all, they were greeted with slogans like: '*Hindustan Zindabad, Hindu-Muslim Ekta Zindabad*' and some anti-Pakistan slogans.' This totally disarmed even the diehard among *Hindutvavadis*. They not only joined the Muslims in shouting slogans of Hindu-Muslim unity, but also when the bodies of Muslim soldiers killed in the Kargil war began coming to Meerut, members of the Sangh Parivar are reported to have assumed an active role in the processions taken out to honour Muslim war heroes of Kargil. I was told by members of both communities that the astute handling of the situation by experienced Muslim leaders in Meerut led to an unprecedented show of warmth and solidarity between the Hindus and Muslims in the otherwise communally charged city.

#### ONENESS VERSUS SEPARATENESS AS THE HALLMARK OF IDENTITY

In most parts of the world, the majority's insistence on the 'otherness' of the minority and their own 'superiority' sours majority-minority relations. In India, the situation is the reverse. Here the problem is created by the insistence of the Hindu intellectuals that the Muslims are not really different from Hindus, that the term Hindu includes all the people of Hindustan and is not a religious marker. They bolster this argument by pointing out that an overwhelming majority of Muslims

are converts from various Hindu sects and that the term Hindu was used to denote people living in the land of the Sindhu River.

Muslims fear this assimilative tendency of Hinduism perhaps more than its aggressive attacks. The thrust of twentieth century Muslim politics has been to stress the separate identity of the Muslim community and differences between Islamic and Hindu civilization and culture. Their political demands are not simply for equal rights on the basis of common citizenship. An essential component is the recognition of their separate identity and concessions or special rights based on that separateness.

Muslim politics moved through distinct phases depending on the emphasis the leadership placed on both separateness and commonality. It started with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan describing the Hindus and Muslims as the 'two eyes of Bharat Mata'. From there it moved on to recognition of certain power imbalances between the two but within the framework of a sibling relationship—the two being compared to the elder and younger brother. It required the genius of Iqbal and Jinnah to convince themselves and their followers that 'the two eyes of Bharat Mata' were actually two distinct, separate and irreconcilable nationalities and, therefore, requiring a partition of the country so that each could claim a separate territory as homeland.

Iqbal, the leading brain behind the idea of Pakistan, had in his early years composed many a beautiful verse to the composite culture of Hindustan. His famous poem, '*Sare jahan se acchha Hindustan hamara/hum bulbulein hain iski, yeh gulsitan hamara,*' evokes the sentimental image of both Hindus and Muslims singing joyously together as bulbuls and belonging to the same *gulsitan* (garden). However, he outgrew and rejected Indian nationalism after he returned from Europe in 1908 and became obsessed with safeguarding and strengthening Muslim solidarity because he felt they were a 'distinct' cultural community. His demand for Pakistan was based on the headcounting majoritarian principle that he imbibed from Europe. He advised Jinnah to 'ignore Muslims of minority provinces and concentrate on the North West' where Muslims were in a majority.<sup>4</sup>

Jinnah developed the idea of Pakistan in such a muddle-headed

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<sup>4</sup>Letters to Quade-e-Azam Mohd Ali Jinnah, *Ruh-I-Makatib Iqbal*, Mohd Abdullh Qureshi, Iqbal Academy, p. 638. Lahore. Quoted in Balraj Furi, 'Azad and Iqbal: A Comparative Study', *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol XXXI, No. 10, 9 March, 1996, p. 592.

political direction because he was faced with a practical limitation. In the Muslim majority provinces of the North-West, he found hardly any support for the idea of Pakistan because his phobias about Hindu domination did not evoke much response since Muslims felt they could wield power and hold their own through the democratic process. In the Muslim majority areas it was the Hindus who lived under the cultural hegemony of the Muslims. However, in the Muslim minority provinces, notably among the educated Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, Jinnah found a responsive chord to his campaign that in Independent India, Muslims would end up having to live under Hindu domination.

As opposed to the majoritarian vision of Iqbal, Jinnah's was a minoritarian campaign whereby he was not willing to settle for safeguards for the minority within the framework of democracy. If the one person-one vote principle was applied, the Hindus would be, at the all-India level, at a permanent advantage on account of being the majority community. Therefore, he came up with the bizarre idea of Pakistan as a homeland for all Muslims. His success in mobilizing Muslim masses at a critical point of time in favour of the demand for Partition was not a triumph of religious appeal over secular politics, as is often believed, but because he could convince them that he alone could safeguard their economic, political, and cultural interests and protect the Muslim community from the assimilative tendencies and domination of both the Congress Party as well as Hindu culture.

#### EMPHASIS ON SEPARATENESS

The emphasis on separateness, and on irreconcilable differences kept growing as the Hindu leadership responded with emphasis on the essential oneness of the two. For instance, the more Gandhi harped on his Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* theme, the more he used the Ram-Rahim approach of the *Bhakti-Sufi* tradition to bring the two communities together, the shriller became Jinnah's insistence on Muslims being irreconcilably different from the Hindus. The more Gandhi worked to include Muslims in the Congress, the more hysterical Jinnah became about claiming that he was the sole spokesman and his Muslim League the sole representative of all Indian Muslims and that no Hindu could claim to represent or include the political interests of the Muslims. It is noteworthy that this insistence on radical separateness and the idea of partition originated with Iqbal and Jinnah, both of whom were products of Western education, more British than the British. Both

their families were recent converts to Islam. Iqbal, in fact, boasted of his Brahmin ancestry and Kashmiri origin. Jinnah's Gujarati family had also taken to Islam only a generation ago.

By contrast Maulana Azad, who stood steadfast in his commitment to India, was born in Mecca where he spent his childhood in a very orthodox Muslim family. He traced his ancestry to Maulana Jamaluddin who refused to sign the infallibility decree of Akbar. He was often hailed as 'Imam-ul-Hind'. Even after the Partition, Azad remained firm in his commitment to Indian nationalism while remaining an orthodox Muslim to the end of his days. He carried a large number of Muslim *ulema* with him whereas the non religious Muslim leadership and the Western-educated elite among the Muslims came to be more enamoured with Jinnah and Iqbal. Thus, the theory of Muslim separateness does not owe its inspiration as much to Islamic history, tradition or faith requirements of the Muslim community, as it does to the idea of national ethnic identity as it developed in Europe and came to play an important role in shaping the aspirations of many Western educated Muslims.

#### GANDHI'S *BHAI-BHAI* APPROACH FAILS TO WORK

There were indeed serious flaws in the Gandhian approach to Hindu-Muslim relations. Mahatma Gandhi tried to forge Hindu-Muslim unity by:

- (i) Insisting on the oneness of all religions. His Ram-Rahim approach was drawn from the *Bhakti-Sufi* tradition;
- (ii) Insisting on the shared common heritage and bonds of co-living;
- (iii) Expecting Hindus to play the role of indulgent, large-hearted elder brothers willing to make unilateral gestures of generosity towards their Muslim 'younger brothers'.

While Gandhi made numerous attempts to placate Jinnah through moral appeals and by unilaterally offering him the prime ministership of free India, he did not try to arrive at a political settlement by working out a concrete formula for power sharing among the Hindus and the Muslims. Nor did he confront Jinnah with the logic of his own demand for Partition. He stayed rooted in the Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* world-view and expected the Hindus to play the patronizing role of a generous elder brother dealing with a rather difficult younger brother. This patronizing attitude became a major irritant for leaders whose goal was to acquire power. It continues to be an irritant in

India-Pakistan relations even today. The Muslim elite of Pakistan feel that Indians treat them like errant brothers who will one day realize the 'mistake' they made in demanding the break-up of India.<sup>5</sup>

As the failure of the *bhai-bhai* approach became obvious, Gandhi and other Congress leaders moved from one pendulum swing to another—from 'partition over my dead body' and total refusal to make that the basis of negotiations to spinelessly accepting the Partition as a *fait accompli* when the Muslim League leadership forced the transfer of population. It is this image of a hapless Hindu majority meekly accepting the will of the minority with millions being forcibly uprooted from their homes that has given the Hindus a deep sense of fear of the supposed power of the Muslims and mistrust of secular Hindu leadership. The memories of small armies of Muslim invaders coming and building their empires in India along with the Muslim minority forcing its wishes down the unwilling throats of the Hindu majority adds to the sinister image of the Muslim community in the minds of even educated Hindus.

#### LIMITS TO MUSLIM MINORITARIANISM

Just as there are serious limitations in the emergence of Hindu majoritarianism in India despite the desperate attempts by the Sangh Parivar, there are equally serious limits to the growth of Muslim minoritarianism in India after the Partition. I define minoritarianism as the tendency of a minority to want an unconditional veto on all issues it considers important. The minority does not just demand reasonable safeguards before agreeing to a deal, they also demand more than parity in the settlement for themselves; in the process they lose the positive aspects of democracy based on majority vote, while undermining some of the major incentives among the majority community for making a compact. Jinnah represented that trend.

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<sup>5</sup>Even while Pakistanis resent the 'big brotherly' attitude of Indians, they themselves slip into the same sentimental mode no less easily. For example, a big trade delegation from Pakistan that came to India in 2003, concluded their negotiations with a press conference in which they advised that 'as an elder brother' Indians should be more generous in making concessions to Pakistani business interests!

Jinnah's political rise as the sole spokesman, which resulted in the Partition of India, was a symptom of the failure of the nationalist politicians to work out a satisfactory arrangement for guaranteeing basic security and cultural protections for both Muslims and Hindus within the framework of a nation-state whose powers could be appropriately circumscribed by both formal written agreements and personal commitments. Jinnah could not stomach the idea of accepting a secondary status as sole spokesman merely because Muslims were a minority within India on an all-India basis. For some years he tried extracting a deal from the Congress whereby Muslim leaders could have a permanent veto on matters he defined as of major significance despite their being in the minority. When this deal was rejected he began to play for larger stakes, threatening to partition the country and seek an independent state for Muslim-majority provinces.

However, after the Partition Muslims are economically too vulnerable and politically too dispersed (except in a few constituencies) and numerically a poor match for the Hindus to get away with demanding that they have an unconditional veto on all issues considered important by their community leaders. Yet the Jinnah legacy continues to haunt post-Independence Muslim politics and has influenced many of its important leaders, making Muslims appear as a very difficult and unreasonable minority in the eyes of many Hindus. This, despite the fact that at the level of everyday living, the two communities show a remarkable capacity to make mutual adjustments and work out functional norms for co-living as long as political parties and politicians of the two communities are out of the picture.

Just as the Hindu majority is rather confused about its goals and weightage and therefore prone to jingoism, the Muslims too are very confused about their aims, especially with relationship to Indian democracy because of their peculiar history, their present position in Indian society as also due to the inclinations of their leadership.

Unlike the Hindu majority who see their history in terms of having to adjust to an endless stream of foreign conquests, living under alien rulers, adapting to their culture, language and social norms, many among the Muslim minority, especially the elites, relate to their past in terms of glorious conquests and setting up of huge empires. Their memories of being part of the ruling race are kept alive because monuments and historical records of this period of history are relatively better known and preserved whereas the history of India prior to Muslim conquests and rule is far more hazy in the minds of

most people. Many Muslims associate their religion with victories and conquests, with the powerful sweep of Islam in the wake of those conquests. Even in today's world, many Indian Muslims see themselves as part of a worldwide wealthy Muslim community with Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and now even Malaysia and Indonesia, exercising a great pull for their aspirations.

Indian Muslims are mostly considered converts from the supposedly lower caste groups of Indian society. Therefore, many Hindus have a casteist prejudice against the Muslims but they cover it up saying that the Muslims who converted betrayed their *dharma*.

Modernization and tremendous advancement in communication technology has brought greater awareness of the Muslim communities outside India and thus makes it that much harder for Indian Muslims to accept a 'second-class status' in India, especially for the Muslim elite. Their aspirations of a good life are linked to migrating to one of the wealthy Muslim countries because India offers relatively few opportunities for advancement for Muslims today. The Gulf connection has also brought in its wake a new fervour for the Middle Eastern version of Islam. The flow of Gulf money for mosques and other Islamic institutions has strengthened the fundamentalists among the Muslim leadership who are trying to wean the Muslims away from the Indic Islam towards a more Middle Eastern version of the faith, removing from it practices which built close cultural bonds with the neighbouring Hindus. Even the Urdu they advocate is heavily Arabized. Having internalized the stereotype that Muslims are a brave martial community whereas the Hindus are mealy mouthed cowards, Muslims do frequently behave like aggressive bullies contrary to the behaviour of most minorities the world over. In recent decades, due to widespread unemployment, poverty and poor education many young Muslims have taken to crime as a way of life. They are quick to pick fights and retaliate violently, leading to riotous situations even over flimsy conflicts. Most important of all, the emergence of powerful underworld Muslim dons as 'cult figures' who have been using their economic and political clout for supporting terrorist operations in India strengthens the worst of negative stereotypes prevalent among influential sections of Hindus.

The fact that the desperation of the riot-ravaged Muslim communities occasionally finds expression in some lending legitimacy to such 'cult figures' makes for increased mistrust. The fascination for the outlaw as a hero is a worldwide phenomenon among communities

that feel endangered—rightly or wrongly. But many Hindus have come to believe that they alone are endangered.

After the Partition, the Muslim leadership in India felt so rudderless that it quietly latched onto the Congress party, expecting it to provide the Muslims protection and security. As long as there were credible leaders like Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Maulana Azad representing the Muslims in the Congress, it gave the community hope and confidence. These leaders could also act as an effective communication bridge with the Hindu community because the latter respected them no less for their leading role in the freedom movement and for standing steadfastly against the Partition. The inspiring speech of Maulana Azad at the Delhi Muslim Convention on 4 November, 1947, calling upon the Indian Muslims 'to take the pledge that this country is ours, that we belong to it and that fundamental decisions of its destiny will remain incomplete till we participate in them' provided a beacon of light not only to the demoralized Muslims but acted as balm on the hurt Hindu psyche. (Quoted in Balraj Puri, 'Indian Muslims Since Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 October 1993). However, after the death of these tall figures and the estrangement with Sheikh Abdullah, the Congress party did not let any credible leaders emerge among the Muslims in order to keep them a captive vote bank. Nehru in his lifetime ensured that there were no serious Hindu-Muslim riots so that memories of Partition could slowly fade away. After his death, Muslims were kept tied to the apron strings of the Congress as a vote bank in the most cynical fashion by encouraging them to get addicted to crumb gathering in the name of special concessions to the community. The Nehruvian brand of secularism misled the Muslim community into believing that as long as they had a certain clout with the government and the latter mouthed secular slogans, their interests were safe. Just as Jinnah had bargained on the British government providing for the safety of the Muslims against the Hindus, post-Independence Muslim leadership focused exclusively on extracting 'concessions' from the government (mostly phoney ones at that) while allowing themselves to be continually estranged from the Hindu majority and other communities.

The Congress party encouraged this estrangement in order to cultivate them as a vote bank too frightened to look elsewhere. After they were thoroughly disappointed with the Congress party they latched on to the Janata Dal Samajwadi party bandwagon. However, these parties are acting not much differently than the Congress party in

giving token concessions to Muslim vote banks in ways that further estrange them from the Hindus. For example, among the first measures of V.P. Singh's Janata Dal government was to declare Prophet Mohammad's birthday a holiday. His party refused to consider steps like disbanding a paramilitary force like the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) with its alleged track record of anti-Muslim massacres. The Janata Dal's choice of 'history-shelter' Muslim leaders for allocating election tickets or the 'secular' Laloo Yadav's dependence on some Muslim mafia dons shows that they too are not interested in promoting genuine and responsible leadership among the Muslims.

Dubious concessions, such as the enactment of the Muslim Women's Protection Act, and the banning of Salman Rushdie's book have strengthened the stereotype of Muslims as an intolerant community that is supposedly being papered by the 'pseudo-secular' politics of the Congress Party. Many Hindus have today seriously begun to feel that Muslims have an unfair advantage over them, and will cite instances such as the Congress forcibly imposing personal law reform on the Hindus much against the wishes of the majority but succumbing to the pressure of Muslim leaders and letting them continue with their personal laws. The hysterical manner in which Muslim leaders responded to the Shah Bano judgement and insisted that a patently unconstitutional law be passed to put Muslim community laws altogether out of the purview of the civil laws of the land, making Muslim women among the most discriminated-against women in India in terms of family laws, makes Hindus fear that Muslims want to be treated as 'above the laws of the land'.

The excessive emphasis the leaders have placed on their special rights as Muslims, even while consistently failing to claim many of their more important rights as citizens, has contributed a great deal to the growing divide between the two communities. Riot after riot, the Muslim leadership has focussed its ire on the government for failure to provide it protection, making demands such as proportional representation of Muslims in the police force, but has paid scant attention to the growing communication gap between the Muslim community and the rest of the people, so that its demands, such as proportional representation, get to be viewed with mistrust and hostility.

Just as the Sangh Parivar ideology poses a great danger to the well-being of the Hindus because of their wanting to destroy the internal heterogeneity of the Hindu community, the Muslim leadership's attempts to make the equally heterogeneous Muslim communities of

India behave like a mindless monolith poses a great danger to the well-being of the Muslims themselves as well as to the rest of society. The short-sighted politics of the Congress party, especially after Indira Gandhi's rise to power, has played a very important role in encouraging the irresponsible among Muslim leaders to gain ascendancy and the increasing appeal of the Sangh Parivar. The cynical manner in which the Congress leadership cultivated Muslims as a vote bank through controlling some of those Muslim leaders who were willing to barter away their community's interests for personal crubs has left the Muslim community rudderless and consequently easy to manipulate.

Muslim politicians who do not want to act as spokesmen just for other Muslims and have tried to take responsible and thoughtful positions on various issues have been systematically bypassed by the Congress party in favour of the more discurantist leaders. At the time of the Shah Bano controversy, for instance, certain prominent leaders within the Congress opposed the Muslim Women's Protection Bill. Nevertheless the party yielded to pressures from the Shahi Imam, Shahabuddin, and leaders of the Muslim League, thereby making it seem as if these were more genuine Muslim leaders than those who were in favour of reforming discriminatory aspects of Muslim law. Similarly, the deliberate sidelining of men like M.J. Akbar (who had given a decisive electoral defeat to Shahabuddin without using communal rhetoric to win the Muslim vote) while simultaneously giving excessive importance to leaders of the Muslim League who mostly draw a blank even in Muslim-dominated constituencies creates the mistaken impression that it is the latter who represent the true sentiments of the Muslims.

In their attempt to become the sole spokesmen for the Muslim community, many leaders have tended to articulate the grievances of the community in an exclusivist and minoritarianist way. This is one reason they tend to evoke nearly hysterical responses from the Hindus, who fear further partitions of the country if the Muslims are allowed to have greater influence on national politics. Many Hindus have become concerned that the Muslim minority will veto everything that the majority wants to do. Consequently, these Hindus fear the Muslim vote and see an urgent need to 'put the Muslims in their place.'

Similarly, the manner in which the demand for recognition for Urdu is being framed is likely to produce backlashes of the Bangalore variety when an innocuous ten-minute news bulletin in Urdu became the excuse for widespread anti-Muslim riots. Urdu can only be legitimately

promoted as one of the languages of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and of some sections of Hyderabad. Instead, Muslim leaders project it as the language of the all-India Muslim community, and attempt to get all of Indian Muslims to use it as an identity marker when there is no basis for it in most of the Southern, Eastern, and Western states of India, or for that matter even in Kashmir.

The matter is made more complicated by the fact that some Muslim leaders are not very tolerant of dissenting voices within the community and some have even gotten into the habit of issuing Khomeini-like *fatwas* as happened in the case of Mushirul Hasan. He was beaten up and banned entry into Jamia Millia despite being its pro-Vice-Chancellor simply because he did not think banning Rushdie's book was appropriate. Similarly, the aggression and violent indignation over the Salman Rushdie book, getting it banned in India even before any Islamic country learned of it, created the stereotype of an aggressively intolerant community. This strengthens and legitimizes the voices of intolerance within the Hindu community and weakens the position of those who wish to see the Muslims enjoy secure citizenship rights in India.

The rise of Taliban and Al-Qaeda like forces practicing very murderous forms of politics in the name of Islam has given greater legitimacy to the prejudice against Muslims and their negative stereotyping as a violent and aggressive community that imposes very obscurantist beliefs and social norms through terror and oppression. Now that even Western nations led by the US are seen as battling Islamic fundamentalism (as in Afghanistan) through strong arm methods, including war, many educated Hindus have come to believe that India's interests lie in joining the Western powers 'against' the Islamic world.

The overall effect of such minoritarian politics is to strengthen majoritarian tendencies even further, giving undue legitimacy to the politics of exclusion being propagated by outfits like the the Bajrang Dal. The only redeeming feature is that after the restoration of democracy in Jammu and Kashmir, the national level BJP leaders, especially Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, seem to have decided that their battle against Pakistan supported *jehadi* terror will be more effective, if they succeed in winning the confidence of Indian Muslims, including those in Kashmir. Therefore, after the Gujarat riots and its negative international fall out, they tried hard to keep the VHP-Bajrang Dal leadership under some checks and control. However, their

failure to take against Narendra Modi, who is popularly believed to be the main instigator of anti-muslim riots in Gujarat look the sheen away from their position initiatives and played a significant role in the defeat of the NDA in 2004.

#### CHECK ON MINORITARIANISM

However, minoritarianism of the Muslims is kept in check for the same reason that defines the limit of Hindu majoritarianism. The Muslims are not a monolith. Like the Hindus, the Muslims of the sub-continent have a great deal of internal diversity based on language, region, class, occupational category and even caste. As long as they feel secure about their secular interests, it is not easy for their leaders to unify them into a monolithic community for even limited political purposes. In recent decades, election after election has demonstrated that, despite all the talk about a unified Muslim vote bank, their vote is as influenced by regional and other considerations as that of the Hindu majority except in phases when they have been under attack as happened after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. But then too they got consolidated as an anti-BJP vote and anti-Congress block, voting for whoever seemed most capable of defeating these two. As soon as they feel a measure of security, their internal diversity begins to assert itself. Once again I cite from the Meerut example because, as a riot-prone city, it gives one important glimpses into the working of the Muslim mind. In the 1993 assembly election, they helped the Janata Dal candidate, Haji Akhlaq, win with a comfortable margin as Muslims of all shades and hues (social and political) decided to vote for him, as he alone seemed to be able to take on the BJP and defeat it (the top priority then). By 1996, the communal divide had healed considerably and with even the BJP communicating its desire to make peace, a section of the Muslim community ended up voting the BJP, helping Lakshmi Kant Vajpayi to win the Meerut seat even though the Hindus were not any more as enamoured with the BJP as they were in 1993. The swing in the Muslim vote was influenced by the following factors:

- (i) Muslims began to feel relatively secure and, therefore, not so desperate for 'protection' from their own;
- (ii) After the elections, the traditional rivalry and conflict between the Ansaris and Qureshis the two dominant groups among the Muslims in Meerut reappeared because of the alleged anti-social behaviour of Haji Akhlaq's family and followers. Haji Akhlaq

had succeeded in getting the Ansari vote in 1993 using the anti-BJP sentiment as a unifier. But by 1996, the occupational and caste rivalries resurfaced and ensured that most Ansaris did not vote for the Hagi.

- (iii) Some educated Muslims felt distanced on account of their prejudice against the Kasi community considered *jahil* (uneducated) and began to respond well to the friendly overtures of the BJP on account of them representing a 'more educated and cultured class of people.'
- (iv) Lacklustre performance of alternatives to the Congress and the BJP (including Janata Dal and the Samajwadi party) as ruling parties on all other issues except their commitment to protecting the Muslim minority from riots apparently helped tilt a section of the Muslim vote in favour of the BJP;
- (v) Their assessment that if the BJP became beholden to them for votes, that party may develop a real stake in allowing the Muslims a sense of security and not use riots as a method of consolidating Hindu votes;
- (vi) Lakshmi Kant Vajpayi proved exceptional in that he served his constituency well even after losing the election and demonstrated that he would be sensitive to the grievances of Muslims and act in a relatively non-partisan manner.

However, in the rest of UP, the BJP did not manage a similar swing in its favour and Muslims seem to have voted depending on the ground-level realities in each constituency, contributing to a hung assembly. Thus the Muslim community's one-point programme of the early 1990s of defeating the BJP at whatever cost seemed to have lost its urgency even in a communally polarized city like Meerut. By contrast, at about the same time, Muslim electoral behaviour in Mumbai was dramatically different even in the 1993 election. There they decided that it was the Congress party that needed an electoral sub for taking their vote for granted. Therefore, they ended up voting the BJP-Shiv Sena combine, which alone seemed capable of defeating the Congress. With the Shiv Sena realising what was required to win the elections and come out of the shadow of the Congress party, they along with the BJP made a peace offering to the Muslims. As a result a section of Muslim leaders are believed to have worked out a deal with the Sena-BJP leadership that the 1991 variety of riots would not be repeated in the city. Since on this one issue the combine seems to

have kept its word, the Muslim vote did not revert back to the Congress even in the 1996 election.

Today, many more Muslims realize that their minoritarian politics strengthens the forces of majoritarianism, which endangers their very being because those claiming to speak on behalf of majorities try and capture state power and can make the enforcement machinery of the state serve their own majoritarian purposes, by fair means or foul. For instance, even before the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh, the party, along with the RSS, is reported to have inducted a lot of their committed cadres into the PAC in order to organize this force as an instrument for carrying out anti-Muslim pogroms in the name of maintaining law and order during riots. The PAC has acquired a notorious reputation on this count and its role during the riots has been blatantly partisan with PAC jawans playing a lead role in murderous attacks on Muslim *bastis*. (Ashgar Ali Engineer (ed.), *Communal Riots in Post independence India*, Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1984). Similarly, during the 1992-93 Mumbai riots it became obvious that the Shiv Sena had allegedly infiltrated the police force on a large scale and succeeded in using the Mumbai police for that period as its private army. This was made especially easy since most Congressmen were apparently in alliance with the Shiv Sena in fomenting anti-Muslim violence in the city. The Congressmen in power have often used the police and paramilitary forces for wreaking vengeance on minorities who oppose them, as happened during the anti-Sikh riots in November 1984 in North India. This may have emboldened BJP leaders like Narendra Modi to do the same when they came to power in different states. The anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat carried forward the terrible example set by the anti-Sikh massacre in Delhi and the many massacres of Muslims in North India during Congress rule in the 1980s.

Today, Muslims seem ready to break away from the clutches of those leaders who pursue the minoritarian brand of politics because they seem to have realized that in the long run it works against their overall interests by producing a backlash among the majority community and estranges them from the Hindu community at large. They understand that the kind of clout Jinnah acquired in pre-Independence India is out of question in post-1947 India. Therefore, the community is actually pressurizing its leaders to play a more responsible role so that the Hindus as a community do not move towards majoritarian politics.

## THE APPARENT LET DOWN BY THE CONGRESS

In the post-Independence years Nehru became a hero of the Muslim communities because they saw him as keeping the Hindu chauvinist organizations who wanted to implement the Jinnah formula of majoritarian rule in India at bay. The Congress party won the support of Muslims in election after election as long as Muslims continued to feel that Congress leaders like Nehru remained committed to protecting them from major outbreaks of religious riots, as well as to respecting their cultural and religious sensibilities. In addition, Nehru encouraged a certain amount of participation of nationalist Muslims in positions with high visibility in the central and northern state governments.

However, these Congress party deals were worked out on rather arbitrary considerations and were limited to positions at high levels; these same accommodationist principles did not percolate down to the level of everyday life for ordinary Muslims. In general, in the politically important and relatively more advanced sectors of the society and economy Muslims have lived under the burden of a great deal of mistrust. They are often discriminated against in jobs and housing and have been ghettoized more than ever before.

Thus, in post-Partition India, the question of majority-minority relations never got seriously addressed, nor were there any clear rules laid out for determining what Muslims could count on as their legitimate due. Instead, Muslim political leaders ended up being forced to petition each time in the hope of receiving occasional favours for cooperating with the dominant political and administrative forces in the new nation. The ease with which Nehru was able to electorally marginalize parties like the Jan Sangh and the Hindu Mahasabha made him overlook the fact that substantial sections of the Hindu community, especially the educated groups and those who were victims of Partition, had not fully reached any new way of coming to terms with living within the same polity with their Muslim neighbours, especially in the North, where the trauma of Partition remained severe.

Many Hindus could not understand why millions of Muslims were continuing to stay on in India even after the Muslim League claimed that Muslims are a separate nationality and on that basis had driven out millions of Hindus from Muslim majority areas. This question never got explained adequately in political terms. The appeal was always at the level of pious, goody-goody slogans: 'Hindu Muslim *bhai-bhai*' even after the *khaidara* of the centuries-old bonds had been

effectively destroyed by the Partition in large parts of India.

In fact, Muslims became a deeply mistrusted minority not just at the level of ordinary people but even among the slogan-givers. Nehru's treatment of Sheikh Abdullah shows that Nehru himself was as prone to mistrusting even close Muslim friends and colleagues if he thought or suspected that they harboured pro-Pakistani sentiments. The same Sheikh Abdullah, who was a close personal friend of Nehru and who played a crucial role in bringing about the accession of J&K to the Indian Union at a time when the Hindu Maharaja was unwilling to merge the state with India while Pakistan was trying to occupy it by force, was imprisoned by Nehru for the better part of his later life on suspicion of harboring with Pakistan and for allegedly trying to veer the state towards secession. Muslim leaders even today are expected to prove their loyalty to India by being more anti-Pakistan than Hindus themselves.

But the real damage to Hindu-Muslim relations occurred after Indira Gandhi assumed leadership. Repeated use of the trump card of nationalist rhetoric to put down democratic demands during Indira Gandhi's regime resulted in the Congress party veering more and more towards chauvinist nationalism. This was especially true in dealings with movements in border regions such as Kashmir, Nagaland, and Punjab, where a majority of the population is not Hindu and their demands could easily be targeted as being anti-Indian. As the nationalism of the Congress party got increasingly divorced from social justice and democracy and came to rely more and more on 'nation in danger' gimmicks, it has provided tremendous legitimacy to the chauvinist nationalism of the Sangh Parivar whose politics rely on cultivating a siege mentality among the Hindus.

#### THE FAILURE OF 'SECULARIST' POLITICS

The Nehruvian approach at its idealistic best attempted to solve the problem by detaching ethno-religious identities on the assumption that if the state professed neutrality in religious matters, but left space for religious and cultural identity assertion by the minorities, in the political and public realm a whole new generation of 'modern' citizens would emerge rising above religious divides, united by secular nationalism. Hindus and Muslims were thus expected to become 'Indians' first and foremost, with other identities playing an increasingly small role in public affairs.

There were many flaws in this framework. But the tragic form that Hindu-Muslim relations have assumed in recent decades (as the

example of the Gujarat massacre in 2002 and similar riots in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates) is largely due to the gap between the pious platitudes mouthed by the post-Independence political leadership and the cynical political games it actually played. Even in Gujarat, Congress workers are alleged to have actively participated in the killing of Muslims hand in hand with members of Sangh Parivar. So also during Bombay riots of 1993, Hindu Nationalist cadres apparently got full cooperation from Congress workers in attacking Muslims. The Congress professed belief in separating religion from politics but in actual fact it has apparently injected party politics into several religious institutions in its bid to become politically hegemonic. This includes attempts to unseat control of the gurdwara network in Punjab from the Akali party, and its takeover of Waqf Boards and its moves to convert the Imams into employees of the government by offering them monthly salaries, all with an eye perhaps to use these religious functionaries as vote mobilizers for the party during elections. Many prominent Hindu temples like the shrine of Vaishnodevi, the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, the shrine at Tinupati have been taken over directly by the government and run by bureaucrats and their nominees. This goes against its oft-repeated claim to be the leading secular force in India.

It is the same story with the supposed autonomy of minority-controlled educational and cultural institutions. To an extent, there has been subversion of the whole idea of minorities having the freedom to run their own institutions by making them dependent on government grants. Be it the Aligarh Muslim University or the Urdu Academy in Delhi, they all survive on government patronage. From there it is a small step toward assuming control over appointments and other administrative functions whether it be done directly through legislation as in the case of Aligarh Muslim University or through other bureaucratic strings that come with government grants. Thus it is not religion intruding into the political sphere which is causing communal tensions in India but the takeover of religious spaces and minority institutions by political parties for secular ends which has pitched different religious communities into hostility and conflict.

#### RAM-RAHIM APPROACH AND REVIVAL OF FAILED FORMULA

Ironically, the failure of Nehruvian secularism in creating harmonious relations between the Hindus and the Muslims is bringing about a revival of the Gandhian *bhai-bhai* approach to sorting out Hindu-

Muslim relations, even though Gandhi's Ram-Rahim approach was a tragic failure. Even the Marxists who used to call Gandhi derogatory names and condemned the religious overtones in his politics, among other things, have taken to organizing festivals of *Sufi-Bhakti* songs to combat the Hindu-Muslim divide following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Similarly an important thrust of the BJP-RSS campaign is that the Muslims ought not to consider themselves different from the Hindus. Late RSS leader K.R. Malkani's thesis, for all his anti-Muslim prejudice, essentially argues that the Hindus and Muslims were inseparable till the British came and divided them. RSS leader Sudarshan takes this view to its logical conclusion by asserting that Indian Muslims and Christians (unlike Parsis and Bahais who came from outside) cannot be considered different from the Hindus and ought not to be treated as minorities because they are all of local origin and were converted from various Hindu sects.

It is time we recognized that this emphasis on 'oneness' cannot be the basis of solving the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Even to the extent that Gandhi succeeded in his life-long endeavour to forge emotional and political unity among the Hindus and Muslims, we would do well to remember that the *Bhakti-Sufi* approach works only if those who preach it are genuinely inspired by the love of humanity emanating from their love of God—rather than by political considerations, as is the case with today's politicians who use this issue to expand their own base among the Muslim 'vote bank'. Gandhi could inspire millions of Hindus and Muslims to resist divisive politics because his life was his message and he sacrificed his all, including his very life for this cause. For him it was an article of faith, not a political convenience or tactic, as it is for many of today's secularists.

The Ram-Rahim approach historically evolved in the process of resolving theological conflicts between Islam and Hindu faiths in medieval times. It is not appropriate for solving political conflicts today. We have wasted too much time insisting on oneness. However, when a group has come to a point when its primary urge is recognition of its 'separate' identity with a view to demanding a share in political and economic power as a distinct cultural entity, emphasis on oneness can only act as an irritant. In fact, the more similarities there are between two groups, the more their emotional bonding, the more violent is the assertion for a separate identity when differences arise over sharing of power and resources, as the recent experience of ethnic genocide in Eastern Europe shows. Failure of a polity to provide

a legitimate space for identity assertion of various types along with well worked-out norms of power sharing between different groups can lead to deadly breakdown of the social compact and a civil war type situation, or give rise to strong secessionist movements as has already happened in many regions of India. The Hindu-Sikh conflict of the 1980s and early 1990s provides a good example of how over-insistence on 'oneness' on the one hand and absence of institutions for conflict resolution can tear asunder even those who were actually inseparable.

#### FALLOUT OF OVER EMPHASIS ON 'ONENESS'

Till a few decades ago, Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs were indeed indistinguishable in most respects, especially since keeping a beard and long hair was not an integral part of Sikh identity as it has come to be in recent decades. The Sikhs, in fact, projected themselves as brave defenders of the Hindu faith from the onslaughts of Muslim rulers. The first assertion of their identity came in response to the gratuitous attack by the overzealous Hindu reformer, Swami Dayanand, who responded to Christian proselytization of Hindus by introducing *Shuddhi* campaigns to reconvert and purify not just the Christian converts but also those who had converted to Islam or become Sikhs. He also attacked the Sikh gurus emulating the Christian missionary attacks on the Hindu religion. The more the Arya Samajis argued that Sikhs were essentially 'impure' or 'corrupted' Hindus and tried to bring them back into the Hindu fold, the more vehemently the Sikh leadership responded with counter-tracts such as '*Hum Hindu Nahin Hain* (We are not Hindus)'. The Singh Sabha worked to consolidate this sentiment of Sikhs being distinct from the Hindus, claiming to purify Sikhs of Hindu influences, even though in many Punjabi families it was common to find one son given to the *guru* and another remaining Hindu. Many Punjabis prayed in gurudwaras and considered those institutions as their own at the turn of the century.

The next major wave of Sikh assertion came in the 1950s with the demand for 'Punjabi Suba.' The Sikhs made a case that they were being discriminated against as a linguistic group since the principle of carving out states around linguistic boundaries was not applied to Punjabi-speaking regions. Therefore, they demanded a separate state for Punjabi speaking people. In most other parts of the country, linguistic reorganization of states strengthened regional identities, which proved an effective safety valve for ethnic identities. In Punjab, the Arya Samaj

influence had weakened the regional, linguistic identity of the urban educated Hindus who began to identify more with Hindi and with 'nationalist' politics as against regional politics. This left the field open for the Akalis to imagine themselves as the sole guardians of Punjab and the Punjabi language. The Punjabi Hindus, egged on by the Congress and Jan Sangh, felt threatened by the Akali demand for Punjabi Suba for if the Hindu majority areas of Himachal and Haryana (which were till then part of Punjab) were cut off that would reduce the Punjabi Hindus to a permanent minority in Punjab. Therefore, to contain the Sikhs, they went as far as disowning their own linguistic identity and declaring Hindi as their mother tongue because they felt the Punjabi Suba would result in a Sikh majority state. The Akali party, being gurdwara-based, could not provide space for the political aspirations of non-Sikhs and, therefore, could not mobilize them in favour of a regional, linguistic demand. The result was that the Sikhs got a truncated state of Punjab with several Punjabi speaking areas going to Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. In the process, the Hindu community too has been permanently marginalized in Punjab politics despite being nearly 40 per cent of the population.

Therefore, the Hindus began to look more and more towards 'national' parties like the Jan Sangh (now BJP) and the Congress to safeguard their political interests. This has further eroded the regional identity of Punjabi Hindus, who are easy prey to chauvinist nationalism, because they suffered greatly during the Partition. Yet, for the purpose of power sharing, the BJP (Jan Sangh) representing the Hindus and Akalis representing the Sikhs ran effective coalition governments in Punjab in the 1960s. In its bid to capture power in Punjab, the Congress party successfully smashed this coalition not just by dismissing state governments but also by instigating Hindu-Sikh estrangement. In response to the repeated dismissal of duly elected state governments by the Centre, the Akalis launched a movement in the early 1970s demanding a reorganization of Centre-State relations and providing for decentralization of political and economic power. This was an assertion of their regional identity as Punjabis. They were articulating the economic interests of Jat farmers who constituted their political base. The Jat peasantry provided the thrust for decentralization because since the 1960s the central government began to force the Punjab peasantry to sell its wheat at artificially depressed government-controlled prices by imposing draconian restrictions on the movement or sale of foodgrains to curb private trade. The freedom to

trade across Punjab's borders, including the export of farm produce was the key demand of the EKV movement as well as in the Anandpur Sahib resolution of the Akali party. This demand served the economic interests of the Hindu trading class as well because government procurement drives were accompanied by ban on private trade and all manner of restrictions on inter-district and inter-state movement of grain. The Hindus of Punjab not only undermined their economic interests as a trading community but also their regional identity as Punjabis and opposed the demand for regional autonomy because they felt the Akali party would gain more political power in Punjab. The inability of the gurdwara-based Akali party to carry along the Hindus who constitute 40 per cent of the Punjab population in their struggle for the much-needed decentralization of power made it easy for Mrs Gandhi to dub the whole movement as 'communal' and 'anti-national'. She could then easily take the path of repression in dealing with the Punjab peasantry and Akali Party culminating in Operation Blue Star.

Punjabi Hindus who have held the Granth Sahib and the Golden Temple in high reverence ended up supporting and legitimizing the desecration of the Golden Temple because by then the Congress party had succeeded in convincing large sections among the Hindus that the Akali movement was anti-Hindu. The assassination of Mrs Gandhi by her two Sikh guards was also interpreted in communal terms rather than seen for what it was—an anti-Congress wave among the Sikhs. Consequently, when Congress supporters and leaders in apparent connivance with the police allegedly massacred thousands of Sikhs, most Hindus justified this criminality on the ground that Sikhs needed to be 'taught a lesson'. This caused an unprecedented schism between the Hindus and Sikhs all over the country.

Sikh militants pushed the movement for decentralization of power in the direction of a demand for Khalistan with the help of the Congress, which had propped up Bhindranwale to destroy the influence of the Sant Longwal's Akali Dal. Even though it was well known that Bhindranwale began as a Congress Party agent, many Sikhs began to identify with his demand for Khalistan after the Sikhs got targeted as a community following Operation Blue Star. They began to declare themselves to be a separate *qum* or nation, in the same way that some Muslim leaders came to do in the 1930s and the 1940s, leading to the disastrous Partition in 1947. Fortunately, ever since coalition governments started being formed at the Centre with the help of regional parties leading to far greater devolution of power to the

states, the Khalistani movement has died a natural death.

#### COMMUNITIES VERSUS NATIONALITIES

Communal differences or conflicts can be easily resolved by the communities concerned at the local level on the basis of their several shared interests as co-habitants of a common region. However, the moment one or the other community decides to purify itself and declares itself as a separate nationality, their interests appear almost irreconcilable and the conflict assumes the shape of a civil war. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the Jan Sangh, the party representing urban Hindu interests, had no difficulty in forming coalition governments with the Akali party, their political, religious, and other differences notwithstanding. But the moment a section of the Sikhs began purifying the Sikh religion of Hindu influences, and declared Sikhs to be a separate nationality, Hindus even of Punjab, not to speak of distantly situated ones, became willing to condone the worst atrocities against the Sikhs, even though culturally and ethnically the Sikhs are inseparable from the Punjabi Hindus. Similarly, militant Khalistanis felt no compunction about selectively killing Hindus in order to force them to move out of Punjab so that Punjab would become a Sikh state.

As long as the Sikh urge for identity came in the form of asserting regional identity with linguistic, economic, political dimensions included in it, it had the potential of uniting them with Punjabi Hindus. But once this urge seeks majoritarian assertion—that is, demand for a Sikh homeland, it became a recipe for ethnic cleansing. Similarly, Hindus harmed their own interests by disowning their regional, linguistic identity in their attempt to feel part of an all-India Hindu majority rather than accept the role of a substantial minority in Punjab working out concrete arrangements for power sharing with fellow Sikhs.

If the Sikhs, who have historically played the role of defenders of Hinduism and despite being a minority at an all-India level displayed the natural confidence and assertiveness typical of self-assured majorities, could begin to feel a persecuted minority and declare themselves as being inherently different from the Hindus, we need to understand that old historical ties and *khaichara* can easily break down if new consensual compacts are not arrived at for power sharing within the framework of electoral democracy.

The logic of majoritarianism, of identifying a group by certain

objective characteristics, and then claiming the right to drive them out of the area because they are a hated minority is inherently arbitrary. It can easily move its focus from group to group depending on the advantages the leaders of the majority perceive will come from such an act, balanced against the perceived risk of undertaking such a campaign. For instance, during the terrorist campaign in Punjab, absence of turban and beard became a marker for targeting Hindus even though these are recent symbols of Sikh identity. Similarly, during the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 in North India, anyone with a turban or beard became a target of murderous attack. The demand for Khalistan had come from a section of the Jat Sikh peasantry of Punjab but most of those killed in Delhi were non-Jat urban Sikhs, many of them lower castes such as Labhanas from areas other than Punjab. They had no interest in Punjab politics but got targeted simply because of some external markers and because they were vulnerable as a minority in Delhi. Thus majoritarianism has an inevitable tendency towards fascism and ethnic cleansing just as minoritarianism can lead to endless splits and secessions.

#### DEMAND FOR PLEBISCITE IN KASHMIR

The enormous bloodshed caused by the secessionist movement in Jammu & Kashmir provides yet another example of how deadly can be the logic of majoritarianism. The section of Kashmiri Muslims who have been fighting for secession to Pakistan base their claim on the premise that as a Muslim majority state J&K should necessarily have become part of Pakistan. They call it 'the unfinished agenda of the Partition.' They joined the Pakistani rulers in using the rhetoric of democracy and 'people's right to self determination' as a stick to beat India with, even though Pakistan itself has never been serious about holding the plebiscite on the terms and conditions agreed upon in 1948.

The promised plebiscite was to be held in both Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) as well as in the areas that voluntarily opted to be with the Indian Union. Interestingly, Pakistan studiously avoids talking of plebiscite in POK and has done its best to confine the issue of plebiscite only to the Kashmir Valley where the Muslims are a preponderant numerical majority. There is hardly ever a mention of plebiscite by Pakistani politicians in Jammu or Ladakh regions of J&K where Hindus and Buddhists constitute numerical majorities in the respective regions.

An essential pre-condition set by the UN resolution for holding a plebiscite was that Pakistan should withdraw its army and armed civilian invaders from parts of Kashmir it had illegally occupied. However, total withdrawal of the Army from POK has always been seen as a high-risk game that the military establishment of Pakistan was never willing to play. This is not to deny that even Jawaharlal Nehru lost the nerve to honour his commitment to hold a plebiscite because another secession by Muslims would have emboldened the hitherto marginalized militant Hindu organizations to demand that the Partition be carried to its logical conclusion by driving all the Muslims out of India in much the same way that the Pakistanis carried out a near total ousting of Hindus and Sikhs in the newly created Islamic Republic. Thus both India and Pakistan, for their own different reasons, let the issue of plebiscite be buried for nearly three decades until a series of allegedly rigged elections in the state led to massive resentment in the Valley.

Nevertheless, even at the height of estrangement of Kashmiri Muslims from the Indian government, pro-Pakistani sentiment has remained confined to a minority, even in the Valley, while it is negligible among the Muslims of the Jammu and Ladakh regions. Even those among Kashmiri Muslims who are determinedly 'anti-India' demand *azadi* or independence for not only the Kashmir that once opted to be with India but also for Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK). It is noteworthy that even when Kashmiri Muslims boycotted elections, alleging fraud and manipulation, the economically mobile segments of the people showed which side they align themselves with for their own economic self-interest. Those who needed guns went over to Pakistan. However, all those Kashmiri Muslims engaged in business shifted their base from Kashmir to cities in the heartland of India such as Delhi and Bombay. Thus they could be said to have voted with their feet. Their choice clearly demonstrated that they saw at least their economic interest better protected in the heartland of India than in Pakistan. And yet there is no denying that a large section of population are deeply estranged by the many acts of commission and omission of the Government of India and feel badly let down that the promise of plebiscite which would have respected their right to 'self-determination' was never honoured.

When the average Kashmiri Muslim demands that the Kashmiri people be given the promised right to self-determination, he or she sees it primarily as a way to win *azadi* for Kashmir, rather than be forced to

opt for either Pakistan or India. However, the terms set for a plebiscite in 1948 do not make this third choice available. As per that covenant, people can only opt for either India or Pakistan. At that time, if the Maharaja of J&K had opted for Pakistan or India, they were likely to have passively gone along with him, as did people of other states. When Sheikh Abdullah made the tilt in favour of India, Kashmiri Muslims went along with him. Today, citizens insist on their sovereignty and want the right to decide Kashmir's future. They have become far more important as political players and stakeholders. Over the years Kashmiris have opened up many new options. For example, the Simla Accord between Mrs Gandhi and Bhutto committed the two sides to treat Kashmir as a bilateral problem and move towards accepting the present Line of Control (LOC) as the international border. This was at that time widely welcomed by the people of Kashmir. The National Conference, which even in its battered condition won 28 out of 87 seats and got 29 per cent of the vote share and still commands the status of the single largest party in J&K after the October 2002 election, has publicly committed itself to this position.

Similarly, there has been a consistent demand from a section of the Kashmiris for the last decade and a half that the border between POK and J&K be made porous to allow for a natural process of social integration of the two Kashmiris, uniting divided families, de-escalating tension as necessary steps towards preparing for a plebiscite. All these new options being put on the agenda by the Kashmiri people themselves cannot be dismissed in favour of the old plebiscite formula, which becomes irrelevant because it was put in deep freeze and allowed to ossify, whereas the political situation at the ground level became more and more dynamic and open ended.

#### PLEBISCITE VS ELECTION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PEOPLE'S WILL

Those who insist on a plebiscite as the definite way to determine the will of Kashmiri people forget that there is more than one democratic method, and some more democratic than a plebiscite, of ascertaining people's will. Election is one of them. The very fact that the people of Kashmir have enthusiastically participated in at least four elections after 1947 and disowned or boycotted only a few, shows that they did take elections as an instrument of self assertion seriously.

As Elie Kedourie in his discussion of plebiscites points out: 'There is really nothing conclusive about plebiscites except that a certain

population subject to conflicting propaganda or pressures or inducements voted on a given day in one manner and not in another. The result, if accepted once and for all, has the same element of arbitrariness as any other, which may come about by reason of conquest or bargaining'. (*Nationalism*, Blackwell, 1993 p. 126)

Kedourie also argues that: 'If plebiscites are justified by the same reason as elections, why should plebiscites not be held regularly like elections, and why should a population not be able to change its allegiance periodically, as it is able to change its government?' (*Ibid* p.126)'

To illustrate the point: if a plebiscite were held now not just in Indian-held Kashmir but in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, as well as in other parts of India and Pakistan on the issue of Partition, the results might be very different from the political boundaries that emerged from the Partition of 1947.

We have yet to develop political systems, which provide for effective mechanisms for broad based participation of the people in decision-making without the use of a one-dimensional majority vote as the single decisive criterion in decision-making on particular issues. But at the same time we must recognise the limitations of the use of the principle of majority rule when its leaders disregard minority rights that must be clearly stated and carefully observed if we seek to create acceptable, just and stable polities. Too often political leaders identify their self-defined majority not as a temporary group that has decided to vote together on a particular issue, but rather as an unfettered and unchallengeable permanent rule maker for all.

In unstable societies with deep divisions and little agreement about basic principles there must be implicit or explicit agreement on what issues may be amenable to being decided by majority vote and what issues require limitations on the will of the majority and its representatives over certain basic human rights of the minorities. These need to be sorted out on some other basis than majority rule. For instance, voting on how much society should be spending on health, education or transportation should under ordinary circumstances be handled through the rule of the majority by voting. However, we should not entertain the possibility of a majority of any kind assuming the right to exterminate the minority groups, or to confine them to prisons or reserved areas, or to disenfranchise them, through the instrument of a majority vote.

A plebiscite is not the best instrument of democracy because the decision of a plebiscite is irreversible whereas in elections the voters can

change their choice and verdict with every round of elections. Whether the Chief Minister of J&K is from the National Conference or the Congress party does not have the same kind of bearing on people's lives, as the decision about whether J&K becomes part of India or Pakistan. For example, many of those who voted for the National Conference in 1951 turned against it in subsequent elections. Likewise, many of those who boycotted the 1996 elections, at the call of secessionist leaders, snubbed the very same leaders in the 2002 elections by turning out to vote despite great risk to their lives. Elections involve less fundamental issues and allow people to respond to new options, choices and issues thrown up by a polity at different points of time. In some elections, the majority vote in the Jammu region went to the BJP, while at other times the Congress managed to win a majority vote in its favour. The victory of the BJP or Congress involves relatively small shifts in the state's politics because both the parties have to operate under the framework laid down by the Indian Constitution and Indian jurisprudence.

However, a vote in favour of Pakistan or *azadi* for J&K drawn through a plebiscite means even those citizens who did not opt for either of those two choices have to end up living under a radically different dispensation—to be ruled the way that Pakistan is ruled. Therefore, a plebiscite must operate within a democratic framework that maintains strong and significant safeguards against the tyranny of the majority on the minority. It should, as far as possible, be carried out when tempers are not running high and when people are in a position to carefully weigh the pros and cons of their decision. A hallmark of democracy is how well it safeguards the rights of its minorities. Therefore, important safeguards must be built in and enforced before any plebiscite is held in J&K keeping in view all the varied choices and options which different sections of Kashmiri opinion have articulated in varied ways—ranging from democratic politics to support for a certain kind of military and rejection of the imported variety.

Broadly speaking, even if we do not take account of the opinion and desires of the diverse communities that inhabit the state of J&K and take into account only the inclinations of Kashmiri Muslims, there are currently three main streams of opinion among the Muslims of the Valley:

(1) A small fringe led by the likes of Geelani and leaders of the Hizbul Mujaheddin who would like to secede. (2) A somewhat larger section among Kashmiri Muslims who want *azadi* or independence

from both India and Pakistan and reunification of the two divided parts of Kashmir. (3) The most substantial section of opinion is in favour of greater regional autonomy within the Indian Union. The followers of the People's Democratic party, the National Conference, the Congress party and a host of other national parties, like the Janata Dal and the Communist parties are in varying degrees supporters of greater devolution of powers and rejuvenation of democratic institutions in the State.

It is noteworthy that the percentage of those who opt for any one of these three choices is very fluid. Some of those who were strongly 'pro-India' through the 1950s and 1960s turned 'anti-India' during the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the secessionist leaders of today have fought and some even won elections to the J&K assembly. Similarly, many who looked over the border for a saviour during the 1990s have been disillusioned and turned back to Indian democracy and several of them even took part in the October 2002 election. While a substantial number might vote for independence for Kashmir today because there are many who still feel estranged by repeated assaults on their citizenship rights, many more are likely to opt for greater autonomy within the Indian Union after the major breakthroughs made by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's PDP in restoring people's faith in democracy by providing more responsive governance. The Central Government's recent peace initiatives and willingness to have a genuine dialogue with almost all estranged sections of Kashmiri opinion, including Pro-Pakistani groups, have considerably reduced the support base of the secessionist leaders. This loss of appeal for secession is likely to grow, especially considering that pro *azadi* leaders of Kashmir have never taken the trouble to spell out the exact contours and content of *azadi*. Moreover, the cataclysmic changes in the international scenario after the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by America has also made Kashmiri Muslims realize that the politics of *jehadi* and separatist leaders is full of dangers since they counted over much on American and Pakistani support to achieve their political ends.

*Azadi* is no doubt a very powerful and emotive slogan but it has remained precisely that: a mere slogan. Whenever I have personally tried to engage even some of the Hurriyat leaders to spell out their political vision in a concrete way or asked them to explain what is it that they would do differently if they actually got *azadi*, I have been met either with silence or with evasive replies like: 'We will figure that out once we get *azadi*.'

This is very similar to how Jinnah kept building a frenzied movement in favour of Pakistan, without spelling out even in vague outline what it would actually entail (Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, 1994). For example, under the *azadi* dispensation, what will be the fate of the Kashmiri Pandits who have been forced out of the Valley with many still living in the refugee camps of Jammu because life became too dangerous for them in Kashmir? What about the nearly 70 per cent Hindu and Sikh population of Jammu region who will not hear of secession from India or for that matter the Muslims among the Gujjars, Punjabis and diverse other ethnic communities of the Jammu region who do not share the aspirations of their coreligionists in the Valley? What about the right to self-determination of the 52 per cent Buddhists of Ladakh who have often demanded that their part of J&K be made into a Union territory because they resent the domination of Kashmiri Muslims over the politics of the state? Many Ladakhi Muslims too would rather go along with their Buddhist counterparts rather than make common cause with Kashmiri Muslims. The Mufti Mohammad Sayeed government has been able to assuage the sentiments of Ladakh and Jammu regions by giving them an effective share in power. However, before PDP's 'healing touch' policy of bridging divides between the various estranged groups of J&K began, the Ladakhis were as keen to break away from Srinagar as are the Hurriyat leaders to snap ties with India.

According to the 1981 census of J&K (the religious and language statistics of 2001 are not yet available and there was no census in 1991), the population of Kashmir valley was 52 per cent of the total population of J&K. Out of it 10 percent people do not speak Kashmiri and 5 percent are non-Muslims. Though the Kashmiri speaking Muslims of the Valley are in many respects the most important single community of the state, they are overall a minority. In fact J&K is a classic land of minorities.

However, the pro-secessionist leadership has so far shown no sensitivity towards the rights and aspirations of all these regional groups and minorities. If theirs is indeed a movement of regional independence, why then are non-Kashmiri Muslims and non-Muslim Kashmiris not being included in their vision of an independent Kashmir? The people of both these regions have felt as aggrieved against the domination of Srinagar in the state's polity as does Srinagar against New Delhi and have by and large stayed aloof from the secessionist movement.

Just as a plebiscite that only offers two choices to the people of J&K—join India or join Pakistan—is altogether meaningless in a context where an overwhelming majority of those seeking self-determination want the third option of *azadi*, so also a plebiscite which ignores the security concerns and political aspirations of a very substantial proportion of people of the state simply because they are at a numerical disadvantage, is a mockery of the very concept of self-determination. Therefore, today's situation demands re-framing the terms of a plebiscite or referendum to make it meet the essential requirements of democracy by giving the minorities an important voice in the decision because it affects each person's very survival.

The civilized world cannot allow repetition of the murderous solution of 1947. The Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 proved to be a political disaster, not just because it divided people on the basis of religion, but because it also forced through terror and violence millions of panic stricken people to abandon their homes and hearths, neighbourhoods and all they owned. Pakistan came into existence via mass murder and ethnic cleansing.

If we accept the logic that, within the territory of each arbitrarily carved out nation-state, every ethnic majority of its region is entitled to unlimited rights to subjugate, eliminate or push out a minority, we will be pushed to tragedy after tragedy of ethnic cleansing, murderous riots, and political chaos.

#### NEW PLEBISCITE DEAL

Despite the principled reservations regarding the jurisdiction and value of plebiscites, I would still argue that the only way for India to get out of the current stalemate on this issue is to actively work toward a carefully redefined plebiscite on the following lines: The New Plebiscite Deal should require the winning of at least a two third majority rather than a simple majority vote, as is required in ordinary elections, since a plebiscite involves a permanent and momentous decision with serious consequences for every single person living in that State.

In order to settle the issue once and for all, we should demand that both India and Pakistan prepare for a genuine three-phase referendum. However, a first necessary step would be to initiate serious discussion, public debate, and participative consultations regarding what range of choices should become available to the people through a referendum. The exercise should be concluded within a specified time frame, of about two years.

The unit for plebiscite would have to consist of the entire state of J&K (including Jammu and Ladakh) that is presently within the Indian Union as well all of the POK. It is likely that at least the following four options would emerge out of the two-year process of public hearings and dialogue:

1. *Azadi* or Independence from both Pakistan and India for the entire and unified state of J & K.
2. Secession of Indian Kashmir to Pakistan.
3. Secession of POK to India with that region joining the existing territory of J&K as part of the Indian Union.
4. Both India and Pakistan agreeing to accept the existing Line of Control (LOC) as the permanent international border between the two countries.

A likely scenario is that even if a referendum were to be held tomorrow around these four choices, a substantial number of Kashmiri Muslims would opt for *azadi* even if they were not clear about the exact implications and content of this choice. An equal number are likely to vote in favour of India. However, no more than 5 to 10 per cent would vote for Pakistan as their first choice. But if a referendum is held in the Valley about a decade from now, after two or three successful free and fair elections and meaningful devolution of powers to the state, the proportion of those opting in favour of India would shoot up and those in favour of *azadi* or secession from India will go down, while Pakistan is not likely to improve its tally. Thus, Pakistan is likely to lose its claim to Kashmir in the first round itself. However, if the Indian government fails to deliver genuine autonomy and continues with its ham-handed ways, it could lose whatever little moral and political legitimacy it has today for resisting secession.

In the second phase, the international community should offer to the Kashmiri leaders who stand for an independent Kashmir that they will facilitate J&K's secession from India under the following conditions:

1. The decision for secession be endorsed by a two-third vote of the Muslim population of the State and at least 51 per cent vote among the Hindus and Buddhists of J&K.
2. The rest of those who are not yet won over to the cause of secession will need to be given concrete assurance through the United Nations that their rights as a dissenting minority will be firmly protected and an effective formula for power sharing with minorities will be evolved under the new dispensation of 'Azad Kashmir'.

- 3 The UN would retain the right to intervene in case the guarantees given to minority communities are not honoured. Thus, an independent Kashmir, if it ever came into existence would have to agree to limited and conditional sovereignty vis a vis the UN with regard to the rights of minorities and institutionalizing democracy. This would include a provision that if the UN monitors find that the promises made at the time of *azadi* have not been respected the UN would have the right to enforce a new democratic mandate in the state. The Kashmiri Muslims are not likely to have problems with the enhanced role of the UN because they have been vociferously demanding the active involvement of the UN in the affairs of Kashmir.

Other necessary steps involved in the plebiscite would be as follows:

- (1) India and Pakistan would withdraw their respective armies from both sides of Kashmir for five years at the end of which a plebiscite would be held under UN auspices.

- (2) Both sides should allow free access of people across the Line of Control during the plebiscite campaigning, including the right to campaign and propagate their view point through television, cinema and other media, provided no hate speech or violence is used in the process.

Minus the above mentioned safeguards, it is likely that a Muslim dominated independent Kashmir might simply exterminate or drive out the non-Muslim population of the J&K State as happened in Pakistan where the few thousand surviving Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians live under terror facing brutal forms of discrimination in every walk of life. Therefore, pre-emptive measures are needed right at the start of the plebiscite process to place firm limits on what the winners of the plebiscite can do and not do in the area of human, democratic, and citizenship rights. The international community is not likely to object to these safeguards for minorities since a key litmus test of a democracy is what institutional mechanisms exist for the protection of the interests of minorities. These arrangements proposed for Kashmir would set a healthy new precedent for working out democratic solutions for minority-majority relations and an effective formula for power sharing which might well become a model for many other countries where ethnic minorities find themselves trapped in similar vulnerabilities.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITS OF MAJORITY RULE

All this is not to deny that there are many advantages to the rule of the majority principle in votes on many issues in clearly defined political structures. We have yet to develop political systems which provide for broad-based participation of the people in decision-making without the use of majority vote in decision-making on many issues.

But at the same time we must recognize the limitations of the use of the principle of majority rule when its leaders neglect to consider the ground rules that must be clarified and observed in order to move toward the creation of a better ordered, more humane and stable polity. Too often these leaders identify their majority not as a temporary group that has decided to vote together on a particular issue, but rather as a majority with unlimited rights on the territory of the nation-state. Such leaders try to get their majority group to delude themselves into believing that a people who share certain 'objective' characteristics must have identical views on all important political issues.

In multi-ethnic societies there must be implicit and explicit agreement on issues that will only be decided through broad based consensus rather than majority vote and what issues can be determined through the ballot with the majority carrying the day. For instance, it is fine to allow a political party which secures a majority vote to form the government because governments can be changed every five years. But any changes in the country's Constitution which defines the rights of various groups cannot be done through a simple majority vote. Similarly, a majority decision to confine or disenfranchise a portion of the population or confine it to reserved ghettos should be out of order. The minorities in such a case need to have an important voice in the decision if democracy is to be meaningful because it affects their very survival.

The only effective way to counter the majoritarian and minoritarian tendencies to go out of hand is to pre-empt the emergence of monolithic identities involving deadly 'purifying and cleansing' campaigns by various communities. For instance, it is only when political leaders try to insist that all Hindus or all Muslims have an identical set of interests—no matter whether they are from Kerala or Maharashtra, whether peasants or artisans, Urdu-speaking or Tamil-speaking, rich or poor, Sunni or Shia, Qureshis or Ansaris, lower caste or higher caste—that they can be pitched against each other as permanently hostile monoliths. But as long as Muslim and Hindu peasants can come together to safeguard their interests as farmers, core

together as Gujaratis or Kashmiris to assert their linguistic or regional identity or acknowledge bonds of commonality on account of their being from the same village or neighbourhood, they cannot easily be pitched against each other as hostile warring groups on an all-India basis by letting their religious identity overwhelm all other identities.

#### WORKABLE POWER SHARING ARRANGEMENTS

The simmering conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims are essentially due to our failure to work out decent workable norms for power sharing between the majority and minorities. All over the world, majorities tend to turn tyrannical in the absence of decent procedures for resolving conflicts. So far we have relied only on pious sermons on communal harmony, on appealing to their common heritage and bonds, on the oneness of all religions and the virtue of religious tolerance. The Hindu-Muslim *bhai-bhai* approach has long outlived its utility not only because the modern economy and politics has in basic ways destroyed the old *bhaichara* bonds but also because modern states demand a new kind of pact. A workable pact would be one in which, no matter which party comes to power, the basic ground rules remain the same and are implemented with a measure of integrity on both sides.

For example, in Malaysia, after going through prolonged instability and riots against the Chinese minority, the majority Muslim leadership has worked out a deal with the Chinese minority, including their prosperous business leaders, whereby the Chinese are allowed to do business and provided security from violence or confiscation of property; in return the Chinese keep away from involvement with Malaysian power politics, including the distribution of government largesse and offices. This compact may not put citizenship rights of the two communities at par but has major advantages for averting ethnic pogroms as long as the terms are mutually acceptable and lead to a more stable society.

Similarly, as long as the dominant Christian group and the various Muslim and other groups in Lebanon worked according to the norms established in their pre-World War II political pact about power sharing in the offices of the State, Lebanon was a thriving city with a world class economy. However, it exploded into unimaginable violence as soon as the deal broke down due to the perception among Muslim groups that they had through population growth become a majority, though they were formerly a minority within Lebanon.

In India we do not need to have such unfair pacts between different communities because of some inherent advantages of our society. Given India's heterogeneity, it is actually a country of numerous minorities and not exactly a Hindu majority country as some politicians would like us to believe. For example, Hindus are a minority in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Mizoram and Nagaland. Muslims are a minority everywhere but in Kashmir. The Sikhs are a minority everywhere but in Punjab. The Christians are a tiny minority everywhere but in Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. The list doesn't stop there. Yadavs as a caste may be a majority in certain rural pockets of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but an overall minority in the state. Jat Sikhs may be a majority in Punjab villages but are a minority in most Punjab cities, and if Mazhabi Sikhs and other non-Jat Sikhs of Punjab were added to the non-Jat figures, Jat Sikhs would be a minority even within Punjab. Kannadigas living in Tamil Nadu, Gujaratis in Maharashtra, and Marwaris in Calcutta are minorities outside their own states.

If India has escaped going the way of Hitler's Germany or becoming another Yugoslavia, even though some politicians are trying hard to take that route, it is because India's heterogeneity makes it far more difficult for Hitlerian attempts to unify all the people at the same time for a murderous purpose. Our rich civilization's diversity is our best guarantee against a tyrannical dictatorship. If we allow politicians to destroy it, it would amount to destroying the very soul of India. Excessive homogenization of meaningful group identities in favour of an all-powerful national state requiring sacrifices from all and benefits only to a small elite will inevitably promote more civil strife, as has happened in the erstwhile communist bloc. Chanting the *mantra* of national unity will have no effect if the nation-state is viewed as incapable of providing security of life for diverse groups and citizens.

Given that most communities in India are a minority in some places but a majority elsewhere, it is in everyone's interest to work out some agreements; not to do so is in no one's interest. This essentially means defining workable principles for power sharing that apply to every group consistently in areas where a mechanical use of majority rule would make minorities feel marginalized or endangered—be it the Hindu minority in Kashmir or Punjab, the Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, the Christians in Kerala or the Brahmins in Tamil Nadu.

However, a precondition for such a strategy is that people feel safe from physical and other attacks affecting their survival—that is to say

that the government machinery actually works to ensure physical safety and security on an equal basis to all citizens and, more important, does not get used by one community as a weapon against the others. People should not feel their only recourse for attaining personal security of life, limb and property is to join in their community's gangs or to seek protection of shady politicians and mafia dons.<sup>6</sup>

Unless we succeed in making the law and order machinery behave lawfully so that individuals do not have to gang up as groups and groups do not have to seek the protection of mafias, we will continue to have more and more violence, on one pretext or another.

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<sup>6</sup>Note: This essay was written in the mid 1997 before the BJP came to power and began to distance itself from some of the core issues of the Sangh Parivar ideology. While the main substance of the essay remains the same, I revised the essay in before this publication of the book and included changes at appropriate points to indicate the changes in BJP politics on the issue of minority rights.