

**Try to Understand the
Problems and Sentiments
of
Indian Muslims**

A Pre-requisite for Peaceful Co-existence

BY

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**ALL-INDIA SOLIDARITY FORUM
LUCKNOW**

Try to Understand the Problems and Sentiments of Indian Muslims

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A Pre-requisite for Peaceful Co-existence

Need for a Dialogue

Friends, I welcome all of you who have taken the trouble of coming here on my behalf as well as on behalf of the organisers of this gathering. We have a number of conferences, seminars, conventions and social and political meetings almost every day and press conferences are held from time to time for specific purposes. All such gatherings are convened either to let others know or to explain a certain point of view, but you have been invited here today for a frank, heart to heart talk on matters of mutual interest in order to understand each other and to create conditions of mutual trust and respect. My intention is that it should be a dialogue as if between the members of a family where the commitment to "togetherness" is always persistent. If the purpose of this dialogue is kept in view by all of us, I am sure it would lead us towards fruitful results. It is with this intention that you have been invited here.

Lamentable Ignorance and its disastrous results

Friends, Hindus and Muslims have been living in this country for a thousand years. In every city, town and village

they are not only next door neighbours, but they are also colleagues and partners in business and trades, schools and offices. They have jointly participated for a hundred years in the movement launched for the liberation of the country from foreign yoke, and are comrades in different political and social organisations ; in the railways and buses they can be seen travelling together ; but, it is an incomprehensible mystery that they are not even as much acquainted with each other's religious beliefs, customs, traditions and culture as the people belonging to different lands usually are. What do they know of each other is more often a jumble of hearsay and misconceived notions, prejudices and misconceptions. Naturally, such a distorted angle of vision, aided and abetted by the malice and prejudice of sectarian propaganda gimmick and distorted text-books of history is bound to produce a perverse and grotesque picture of the other community. The careless glance which even men of culture and learning are sometimes condescend to cast on the basic tenets and beliefs, manners and morals of the other community serves only to confirm their ignorance if not the prejudice harboured by the misguided fanatics. Not unoften the opinions expressed by fairly educated persons about the faith and customs of the other community have to be dismissed with a smile. This impression gained by the writer of these lines is always confirmed by conversation with the people from different walks of life whom he often comes across in the buses and trains during the journeys frequently undertaken by him.

But this is not a matter to be laughed away ; it is serious enough to eat one's heart out. We have been living together for hundreds of years but we are still so ignorant of each other. The responsibility for this state of affairs does not lie on any particular community ; it devolves on both, and, particularly, on those who claim to be religious and social workers, patriots and politicians. It is they who have not made sincere efforts to diffuse correct and unbiased information about the two communities ; whatever effort they did make in the past was

inadequate or half-hearted.

It has now been accepted on all hands that co-operation, peace and amity between different peoples cannot be brought about without a true understanding of each other's religion and culture : every group, sect, or community comprising the nation has of necessity to know the beliefs, customs, traditions, observances and taboos of the others. One has to understand what are the dominant traits or the cultural pattern of another community ; what are its social, spiritual and moral values and beliefs and tenets which it holds dearer than its life and progeny ; what it needs for a contented and peaceful existence ; and what are the inner streaks of its mind and heart, temperament and disposition which have to be taken into consideration for any purposeful dialogue with it. These are the pre-requisites for peaceful co-existence of a multi-cultural society anywhere in the world.

These things, by all manner and means, assume a greater importance for a country which has always taken pride in the charming variety of its creeds and cultures and always upheld the principle of LIVE AND LET LIVE. There is a general tendency nowadays to acquire knowledge about the religions and philosophies, cultures and customs, languages and literatures, habits and hobbies of the people living in far-off lands : universities offer special courses of study on these subjects ; cultural delegations are exchanged and students and teachers are encouraged to visit foreign countries ; but the two communities living in the same land for centuries have remained ignorant of each other as the people living in two different countries.

The situation obtaining in this regard is equally harmful to the Muslims as well as to the Hindus and, in the final analysis, to the country and humanity at large. A deep gulf of prejudice and suspicion divides the two major communities ; misunderstanding, distrust and malice embitter their relations ; friendliness, sympathy and genuine understanding, tolerance and respect for the creed and culture of the other is decreasing

day by day. The country obviously suffers in consequence. In these circumstances the minorities, specially the Muslims, consider it the aim of their constant efforts to protect and preserve their religion, culture and language. Their redoubtable capabilities which have left indelible imprints of valuable achievements in almost every field from philosophy and mysticism to architecture and fine arts and from governance of the country to the common weal of the people—are not being directed to the extent they should have been for the reconstruction and development of the country. Speaking in psychological terms they need a reassurance that they are not being misunderstood, are relied upon and respected by the sister communities. They should be made to realise that no veils of distrust intervene between them and the majority community and they are not looked down upon with suspicion or hatred or with a feeling of estrangement. Such a sense of security can only be produced by an awareness that the sister communities with whom they have been living as next door neighbours for a thousand years know them adequately, their merits and their failings, their past and present, their creed and culture, customs and observances and rites and festivals. Both have to know each other since they are destined to live together as neighbours and fellow citizens.

Some fundamental characteristics of the Muslims

Now I will seek your permission to enumerate a few distinguishing characteristics of the Muslims which are of primary importance and which would also be helpful in appreciating and solving every problem pertaining to them.

A singular feature of Islam

The first and foremost feature of the entire Muslim community, including Indian Muslims, is that the primary basis of its existence as a religious community rests on a well-defined, distinct and immutable creed and divinely ordained canon (*shariah*). Like other prevalent systems of faith and worship

Islam too is a religion, but the restricted connotation of the word hardly expresses the true nature of Islam and furthermore, causes it to be misunderstood if only owing to general usage of the word for all the faiths indiscriminately. It is for this reason that instead of deriving its name from any race, clan, country or founder of the religion, it calls itself man's self-surrender (*Islam*) to God. Adherents of other religions are named after their founders, races or countries as, for example, Jews are also known as Judaist and Bani Israel. Judah was one of the sons of Prophet Jacob and Israel was the name of Prophet Jacob. Christians draw their name from Jesus Christ. Zoroastrians, known as Parsees in India, get their name from the founder of their religion, Zoroaster or Zarathustra. The same is the case with the Buddhists, named after Gautam Buddha, and so is the case with almost every other religion.¹

The Quran, religious treatises, historical books and literary compositions of Muslims refer them as *Muslimoon* or *Ummat-i-Muslimah*, and they are still known throughout the world as *Muslims*, a word derived from Islam which is indicative of their 'surrender' to God and acceptance of certain defined principles, ideas, values and criteria for guidance and leading their lives in a certain way. Despite their ardent love and attachment to the holy Prophet of Islam the Muslims have never agreed to their being called as Mohammedans. It was during the British rule that for the first time they were nick-

1. There are certain religions, for example, Christianity which had owing to the impact of a repressive and totalitarian state in its formative stage, accepted the view best expressed in the biblical adage; "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." This has limited the sphere of religion to a few purely religious beliefs and practices and rituals. The concept of religion in Islam is much wider covering both the relationship between God and man as well as that between man and man. The word religion does not convey the much wider sense of *Din* (The way) as Islam prefers to use for religion.

named as Mohammedans and their religious law as the Mohammedan Law. But the Muslims protested against the name given to them by their erstwhile rulers and insisted on being known as Muslims. Certain institutions which had been named as Mohammedan College or Mohammedan Educational Conference during the early phase of the British rule in India had to be changed later on under the pressure of Muslim public opinion.¹

This sensitivity of the Muslim might appear as of trivial importance to certain persons, yet it indicates that the form of faith is as important from the Muslim view-point as the content itself. Their creed and religious law assume a special importance in their social outlook and cultural ethos and these cannot be dispensed with in consideration of anything pertaining to their laws, individual and social behaviour and their place in the national life.

Conservation of Religious Identity

A natural consequence of the well-defined creed as well as deep attachment to the religious way of life as the means for attaining bliss in this life and the next is that the Muslims deem it a duty incumbent on them to protect and conserve their Islamic identity through religious education and training of their future generations. Irrespective of the time and place where they may be living, they cannot brook any interference in this process. "Believers, guard yourselves and your kindred against the fire," is the Qurānic commandment for the Muslims while the directive given by the Prophet of Islam says, "Each of you is responsible for his dependents and those placed under his charge".

Muslims consider it essential under all circumstances and in every country they live to protect their religion and

1. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Anglo-Oriental Mohammedan College and the famous Mohammedan Educational Conference of Aligarh subsequently substituted 'Muslim' for the word 'Mohammedan.'

culture and to transmit these to their future generations. Any restriction imposed on their freedom to do so is bound to create an impression that they are not free and respectable citizens of the country.

Absence of freedom to conserve their religion and culture is bound to make them feel suffocated and choked. This will make them lose their identity: a people faceless like the fishes in the sea. Given the total dependence of Muslims on the Islamic vision of life, one may add, the absence of religious freedom is much more excruciating to the Muslims than to the followers of any other religion.

It would be relevant to add here that the Indian Muslims are fully aware of the contents and demands of a secular state. They have accepted secular character of the country without any reservation and consider it as the best suited form of government for a country with such a variety of religions, languages and cultures. They do not want the government to take any responsibility for the religious education of their children, but they also deem it necessary that no impediments, legal or administrative, should be placed in the way of their own voluntary efforts to provide religious instruction and guidance to their own children and the State-run-institutions should not educate their children in creeds and customs of other religions which run counter to their own beliefs in the unity of God and prophethood.

The thing held dear by Muslims, next to their religion, is their language which is the greatest depository of their religion and culture. I am referring here to Urdu whose suppression will create a generation gap among them. No section of our people conscious of its rich cultural heritage can allow it. Nowadays one need not burn libraries or destroy the books: all that is needed is to change the script to sever the relationship of any people with its past, its culture and its religion. All the religious book in that language will become inaccessible to the people. Muslims require facilities to study Urdu, they are striving for it and want their

just and legitimate rights in this regard to be restored to them. It is not necessary to dwell further on this subject here as a number of organisations are striving for it.

Importance of Muslim Personal Law

It is noteworthy that the entire corpus of Muslim Personal Law, excepting a few customs and conventions adopted by Muslims under the impact of feudal system and retained by the British in the then Mohammedan Law, is essentially based on the Quran while its details have been worked out in the light of the Prophet's traditions and principles of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Some of this law has either been explicitly stated in the Quran itself or has been acted upon by the Muslims continuously since the Prophet's time. There has always been such a consensus of Muslim scholars on certain laws that anybody rejecting them would not be deemed as a Muslim. Changing times may require some minor variations in the application of these laws, but any amendment or change in them is out of question. No Muslim country or its elected legislature has any right to make any change in these laws. If any such attempt has been made anywhere it is no less than an interference in religion which will have to be given up sooner or later under the pressure of Muslim public opinion. What is important to understand is that apart from the explicit statements of the Quran and the *hadith*, which are stable and permanent and need no change, the *shariah* has laid down broad principles to cater for newly-emerging situations. Muslim scholars and legists (having ability and competence to exercise reason and judgement to determine the rules of *shariah*) have always made efforts to find new solutions to the changed human situations. The process has continued in every period of Islamic history with the result that the Muslims have come to possess perhaps the largest collection of works on jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and juristic opinions (*fatawa*) which have accumulated over the centuries.

Love of the Prophet

An intense attachment of the Muslims to the Prophet of Islam is another distinguishing feature of their life. The Prophet is not simply a messenger of God or a venerable personage but something more than that : a tender feeling of heart-felt love and respect for the Prophet is what a Muslim treasures more than anything else.

At the same time, the Muslims have been expressly asked to desist from exaggerated adulation and deification of the holy Prophet as was done by the followers of certain earlier Prophets. A tradition of the holy Prophet says ; 'Do not extol me beyond my limits nor entertain exaggerated notions about me like the Christians who unduly magnified their Prophet. Call me, if you have to, as the slave and apostle of God.'

But, in spite of the restraining effect of moderation preached by Islam in praising the Prophet, the heart-felt love and the deep attachment the Muslims have for him is unparalleled and unsurpassed of the affection felt by the followers of any other religion for their prophet or the founder of their faith. It can rightly be claimed that the Muslims revere and love the Prophet more than own lives, their children and parents and are ever willing to sacrifice their all to guard his honour. The sensitiveness of the Muslims in this regard has been demonstrated on innumerable occasions and can still call forth supreme sacrifice from them. They cannot simply suffer the slightest disparagement of their beloved Prophet in any shape or form. Even today the Prophet's name, his honour, his city, his sayings and his teachings in short, everything connected with him, can arouse the tenderest feelings of love and fervour of devotion for him.

The attachment of the Indian Muslims to the holy Prophet has been second to none even in the world of Islam. There may be historical and psychological causes for it which can be analysed by the critics of arts and literature, religion and mysticism and the psychologists, but it need be mentioned

here that some of the best eulogiums and biographies of the Prophet of Islam have been written in Urdu which have been rendered into Arabic and other languages spoken by the Muslims of other countries.

Attachment to the Quran

The same is the case with the Quran also. It is not regarded simply as a collection of morals and tales of wisdom to be acted upon when found convenient. It is believed to be a literal revelation from God, preserved word by word, for the guidance of humanity. It has suffered no interpolation, not even of a comma or a fullstop. Muslims have been commanded to handle the holy Book reverently and perform ablution before reciting it. One can find in India, as in other Muslim countries, hundreds of thousand Muslims who have committed the entire Quran to their memory. During the month of *Ramadhan*, the entire Quran is recited during night prayers in almost every mosque in Muslim localities.

Wholehearted co-operation of any section of the nation, including Muslims, requires a sense of security in them and an atmosphere of peace and amity. This will depend on the care taken to respect the religious beliefs and customs of such people and not doing anything that hurts its susceptibilities. The values and personages held dear by all sections of the people need therefore to be accorded proper deference for even such minor matters can cause greatest harm to the national interests. Even this is not enough. patriotism, truthfulness and good neighbourly relations between different communities demand that if any section of the nation genuinely feels discriminated or is striving for a just cause, the sister communities should raise their voice in its favour.

Approach of Mahatma Gandhi

One can find this realism, wisdom and maturity of thought in Mahatma Gandhi's wholehearted support to the Khilafat Movement during 1919-20 which helped to further the cause

of India's liberation from foreign yoke in an unprecedented manner. I shall quote here an excerpt from Mahatma Gandhi's *Autobiography* before analysing the impact of Khilafat Movement on the later course of struggle for India's independence.

"The Congress inquiry into Dyerism in the Punjab had just commenced, when I received a letter of invitation to be present at a Joint Conference of Hindus and Musalmans that was to meet at Delhi to deliberate on the Khilafat question. Among the signatories to it were the late Hakim Ajmal Khan Saheb and Mr. Asaf Ali. The late Swami Shraddhaanandji, it was stated, would be attending and, if I remember aright, he was to be the vice-president of the conference, which so far as I can recollect, was to be held in November of that year. The conference was to deliberate on the situation arising out of the Khilafat betrayal, and on the question as to whether the Hindus and Musalmans should take any part in the peace celebrations. The letter of invitation went on to say, among other things that not only the Khilafat question but the question of cow protection as well would be discussed at the conference, and it would, therefore, afford a golden opportunity for a settlement of the cow question. I did not like this reference to the cow question. In my letter in reply to the invitation, therefore, whilst promising to do my best to attend, I suggested that the two questions should not be mixed up together or considered in the spirit of a bargain, but should be decided on their merits and treated separately.

"With these thoughts filling my mind, I went to the conference. It was a very well attended gathering, though it did not present the spectacle of later gatherings that were attended by tens of thousands. I discussed the question referred to with the late Swami Shrad-dhanandji, who was present at the conference. He

appreciated my argument and left it to me to place it before the late Hakim Saheb. Before the conference I contended that, if the Khilafat question had a just and legitimate basis, as I believed it had, and if the Government had really committed gross injustice, the Hindus were bound to stand by the Musalmans in their demand for the redress of the Khilafat wrong. It would ill become them to bring in the cow question in this connection, or to use the occasion to make terms with the Musalmans just as it would ill become the Musalmans to offer to stop cow slaughter as a price for the Hindu's support on the Khilafat question. But it would be another matter and quite graceful, and rather reflect great credit on them, if the Musalmans of their own free will stopped the cow slaughter out of regard for the religious sentiments of the Hindus, and from a sense of duty towards them as neighbours and children of the same soil."¹

What were the perceptions of Mahatma Gandhi himself about the Khilafat Movement, Indulal Yajnik has cited Gandhi's writings from the 'Young India' in his *Gandhi as I Know Him*

"Briefly put the claim is that the Turk should retain European Turkey subject to full guarantees for the protection of non-Muslim races under the Turkish Empire, and that the Sultan should control the holy places of Islam, and should have suzerainty over 'Jazirat-ul-Arab', i. e., Arabia as defined by the Muslim savants, subject to self-governing rights being given to the Arabs if they so desired."²

"It was not for me" he writes, "to enter into the absolute merits of the question providing there was nothing

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1. Gandhi, M. K., *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmadabad, 1945, pp. 586-87.
 2. Indulal K. Yajnik, *Gandhi as I Know Him*, Delhi, 1943, p. 129

immoral in their (Mohammedans) demands
I found that the Muslim demand about the Khilafat was not only not against the ethical principle, but that the British Prime Minister had admitted the justice of the Muslim demands. I felt, therefore, bound to render all the help I could in securing the due fulfilment of the Prime Minister's pledge."¹

Indulal Yajnik adds : "Such was the slender reasoning on which Mr Gandhi felt compelled to pledge his support to the Khilafat demand, even before the movement assumed the great importance that it did subsequently."

A well known nationalist Muslim Qazi Mohammed Adil Abbasi has written a history of the Khilafat Movement under the name of *Tahrik-i-Khilafat*. Describing the involvement of Mahatma Gandhi in this Movement he writes :

"Gandhiji was always on the move, touring the length and breadth of the country. His sincerity and sympathy for the cause of Muslims soon made him an undisputed leader of the Indian Muslims"²

The second session of the Khilafat Conference was held at Delhi on 24th November, 1919 under the chairmanship of Molvi Fazlul Haq. Qazi Mohammad Adil Abbasi has cited the report of the conference appearing in the papers on the next day.

".....Thereafter Gandhiji addressed the conference. Explaining the importance of Khilafat he laid stress on Hindu-Muslim unity and said : 'If the Muslims feel hurt the Hindus share their suffering.' Gandhiji appealed for contributions to the Khilafat Committee and himself gave a token contribution of one paisa. It was auctioned and purchased by Seth Chotani for Rs. 501. Rs. 1000 was collected on the spot and

1. Indulal K. Yajnik, *Gandhi as I Know Him*, Delhi, 1943, p. 59.

2. Qazi Mohammad Adil Abbasi, *Tahrik-i-Khilafat*, Taraqqi Urdu Board, Delhi, p. 144.

promises were made for another sum of Rs. 1,500."¹

Mahatma Gandhi wrote in the *Young India* of April 1924, as related by Qazi Mohammad Adil Abbasi : "It is the Khilafat Movement which has roused the nation from its deep slumber. I will never let it go to sleep again."²

He further says :

"One longs to see again the grand spectacle of Hindu—Muslim unity of those days. The call for freedom of the country and chasing out the alien rulers was taken to heart so enthusiastically that the entire country overflowed with ill-clad, bare-footed and bare-headed volunteers. People left their jobs and vocations. Only three slogans were there—*Allah-o-Akbar*, *Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai* and *Maulana Mohammad Ali Ki Jai*—which were raised jointly by the Hindus and Muslims. Students left their schools and colleges. It was like a river flowing majestically. No trace of ill-will, and hatred was left anywhere."³

It was Gandhiji's maturity of thought, realism and broad-mindedness which united the two communities—something never attained earlier so completely, nor afterwards—and generated a new life in the country for attaining freedom from the foreign rule.

Unintelligible Narrow Outlook

Now I may invite your attention to another approach which is opposite to that of Gandhiji. It has given rise to the existing controversy still being debated in the meetings, conferences, seminars and newspapers. Perhaps the question is being discussed nowadays in every home. This state of affairs arose out of the judgment given by the Supreme Court in the case of Shah Bano on 23rd April, 1985. The Hon'ble Chief

1. Qazi Mohammad Adil Abbasi, *Tahrik-i-Khilafat*, Taraqqi Urdu Board Delhi, p. 146.

2. *Ibid.* p. 271.

3. *Ibid.* pp. 271-272

Justice Chandrachud delivered the judgement which made a divorced Muslim woman eligible to get maintenance from her ex-husband till her re-marriage or so long as she remained alive in case she did not remarry. The judgement was based on the interpretation of a Quranic term *mata'* which had been rendered by certain English translators of the Quran as 'maintenance' owing to their lack of proficiency in Arabic language. The judgement also alleged that Islam did not accord a proper and just place to woman and hence the law had to step in for the protection of her rights.

Implications of this judgement and the observations made in it produced a country-wide resentment among the Indian Muslims. It would be no exaggeration to claim that no other issue had given rise to such a wave of indignation among the Muslims since the time of Khilafat Movement. After a long time all the Muslims sects and schools of thought were united. Mammoth gatherings were held to protest against the Supreme Court's decision from Srinagar to Kanya Kumari and from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. Muslims flocked in hundreds of thousands to attend these meetings which showed their attachment to their faith as well as their readiness to undergo any sacrifice for its sake.

I will refer only to the meeting held in my home-town Rai Bareli on 9th February, 1986. It was organised by a few youngmen none of whom could lay a claim to political or religious leadership of the community. It is a small town but the number of those who attended the meeting was not less than a lakh of persons according to the most modest estimate. People came to attend this gathering from far off rural areas. If one lakh persons can come together in a small town, you can imagine the number of persons attending these meetings in bigger cities.

There were three reasons for resentment against the Supreme Court's decision.

1. First, the judgement opened the door for interference in the Personal Law of the Muslims which is a part and

parcel of their religion. Had Muslims kept quiet on it other parts of the Personal Law derived from the Quran and the *Sunnah* would have been endangered. It would have curbed their right to profess and practice their religion freely as guaranteed by the Constitution of India, and damaged their religious and cultural identity. This was a position unbearable for the Muslims. They would feel like a fish out of water.

2. Another cause of the resentment was that Muslims genuinely believed that the *shariah* allowed greater protection to a divorced woman than provided by the Supreme Court's judgement. The critics of the proposed Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill are in favour of the Supreme Court judgement which throws the responsibility of maintaining a destitute divorced woman only on her ex-husband. Now if the ex-husband is himself destitute or dies, the divorced woman would have nobody to support her, while the proposed Bill makes all the blood relations responsible to maintain such a woman. If there is nobody who can support her, she would be entitled to get a maintenance from the Waqf Board.

It would, however, be worthwhile to keep in mind the moral and psychological aspects of the matter. Is it reasonable or consistent with the self-respect of a woman to be dependent on her ex-husband who has divorced her and turned her out, than to lean upon her blood relations, who have a natural instinct to love and care for her and can also inherit from her? It is not necessary to go into further details of the matter here, for several persons have dwelt on it at length in their speeches and writings. In his speech in the Lok Sabha the Prime Minister has already referred to the beneficial aspects of the proposed legislation.

3. The third reason why Muslims feel agitated rests on a matter of principle upheld by reason and norms of justice. Their struggle is not only for the protection of their own faith and law, but is also meant to delimit the authority entitled to expound authoritatively the issues pertaining to any religion or school of thought, or for that matter, all other arts and sciences. Is it possible for anyone to speak on any subject he likes with the same authority as an expert on that particular subject? Were this principle to be accepted, would it not open the gates of intellectual anarchy? The question is whether those who are experts of the Quran and the *sunnah* and Islamic jurisprudence or the English educated judges, not conversant even with the language of the Quran, have the right to interpret and expound the *shariah* with the help of second hand information gained through translations. The immediate cause of agitation among the Muslims was the constructions put by the Hon'ble Chief Justice on such Quranic terms as *mata'*, *muta'*, *nafaqa* etc. He ventured to do so merely on the basis of a few English translations of the Quran and a cursory study of a few legal tracts. Were this to be accepted as sufficient for interpreting religious laws and customs, it would jeopardize the religious order, customs, laws and even the ritual practices of every faith. In a meeting held at Sultanpur which was attended by lakhs of persons I had warned that this line of thought forboded danger for all other creeds and religions. The followers of other religions in India should be grateful to Muslims who were first to sense this threat to all the creeds. I told them that the Quran made this a duty incumbent on Muslims. I also told my audience that although I am a member of several academic and legal bodies in the Arab countries, I

would be the first to reject an interpretation of Hindu religious terminology by an Arab scholar if it was different from that by a Hindu expert on the subject.

Apart from these reasons, the issue concerns a very small portion of the Muslim community. Their number is extremely small. The incidence of divorce among Muslims is sometimes exaggerated by certain persons but it is actually lower in comparison to others. Anyway, there have always been divorces but these were never made an issue of national importance. The divorcees have been living with their relations, parents, sisters and brother or with their sons and daughters with whom they have found protection, love and affection. In one of my Press Conference held at Madras on 10th November, 1985. I asked the press correspondents whether any one of them had seen any number of Muslim divorced women begging in the streets or dying of hunger. Nobody was able to give a reply in affirmative.

The proposed legislation is, after all, meant for Muslims only. It is not going to be applied to the women belonging to any other faith nor is there any reason for anybody to feel frightened. Yet the issue was blown up and a campaign was launched against the Muslims specially by the English and Hindi Press. Muslims were branded as fundamentalists and reactionaries. After the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill was placed on the table of Parliament on 21st February, 1986, such a hue and cry was raised as if India had been attacked or some impending danger was looming large over the horizon. It is true that those who were opposed to the Bill had a right to register their dissent, but the turmoil and frenzy of opposition clearly lacked all sense of proportion and was also against practical wisdom.

Now compare it with the mature and wise approach of Mahatma Gandhi. The matter then concerned Muslims alone and it was not related to any issue within the borders of India. It was a problem that had arisen in Turkey, thousand of miles away from the country. Now, in the present case wisdom

demanded that if the majority community, its leaders and the press could not support the Muslims, they should have at least remained neutral and kept quiet since none of the provisions of Muslim Personal Law in any way affected their family and community life or their own personal laws. This was necessary for creating mutual confidence and promoting communal harmony. In any case, the majority community has its own problems to solve. Thousands of newly wedded brides are being burnt alive or killed. If the press reports are to be believed, one woman is being burnt on an average every day in Delhi alone¹. According to a recent UNI report the Director of Parivar Seva Sanstha Mrs. Sudha Tiwari said: About 6.6 lakh women died every year because of criminal abortions by quacks.²

Muslims fear or rather they are certain that if the alimony (the quantum of which will go on increasing with the rise in prices and standard of living) to the divorcees is made compulsory till her re-marriage (which is not necessary in every case) or death, unscrupulous persons among the Muslims will start doing away with their unwanted wives in the same way as others are doing. This is inevitable and all those who are insisting on alimony will reach the same conclusion if they will give thought to the matter dispassionately.

I am sorry that I had to dwell on a matter concerning Muslims alone in such detail. But it was necessary to do so for a correct understanding of the problem as well as inviting attention to the more urgent need of pooling our energies for the service of the country and humanity at large, instead of wasting it on an imaginary issue.

The Safest Course for the Country.

The truth is that the safest way for making the country strong and self-reliant in order to enable it to take its rightful place in the comity of nations lies in the course recommen-

1. *Qaumi Awaz*, Delhi, 10th June, 1984.

2. *Times of India*, Lucknow, 6th April, 1986.

ded by our revered leaders like Jawahar Lal Nehru, Maulana Azad and their colleagues. It is the way of secularism, democracy and Hindu-Muslim unity. It might be a path long and difficult, but any other course which may appear to be easy and temporarily gainful will ultimately prove ruinous for the country. Such a course will bring up problems that would prove insoluble.

Dangers Facing the Country.

Now, as a student of religion, history and morals I want to invite your attention to a few urgent problems faced by the country (which may be avoided by the politicians). These are extremely perilous and need our prior attention. One of these is the increasing proclivity to violence and disregard for human life, property and dignity in all sections of our society. We see it erupting time and again in the shape of communal disturbances and caste turmoils when entire families or even localities are made the target of most inhuman destruction. The same tendency to take recourse to violence is evident in the burning and killing of women for the sake of dowry.

All those who believe in any religion will not find it difficult to understand that the Compassionate and Merciful God, who is even more kind and loving to every man than his own mother, would not be pleased with these acts of wanton destruction. He will not allow this state of affairs to continue for long. He will not allow a society and the country to be prosperous no matter what efforts are made in other fields of life, if such things are allowed to continue unabated. Even those who do not have faith in any religion would at least agree that many a strong and thriving empires and civilizations have been annihilated because of tyranny and oppression. This is a problem which needs to be solved by a campaign even more widespread and vigorous than those launched during elections and stringent measures need be taken to efface this tendency of violence from the body-politic of India.

The second danger facing the country is communalism which always tends to promote violence. No latitude should be allowed in this matter even if it may appear convenient to gain certain immediate ends, for this will lead to an explosive situation extremely harmful to the country. Mahatma Gandhi had clearly perceived that communalism and the attendant violence will first alienate the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, and then promote racial, linguistic and regional prejudices and differences between castes and classes within the same community. It is a fire that will eat up those who will start it after consuming others.

The current wave of aggressive revivalism, one-sided criticism and persistent demands from another community to give up its cultural and religious identity, revival of the dead past and efforts to change the landscape that has existed and also been accepted by all sections of our society for hundreds of years, does not augur well for the country.¹ Whatever has happened in the past, whether good or bad, is a thing of the past. Is it necessary to go back to the distant past and begin re-enacting our history once again? This will create difficulties and problems for which the country has neither time nor energy to grapple with. All the energies of our administration and intellectuals will be spent up in solving these problems while they are required for the reconstruction and development of the country. This is a chasm that can be easily plugged at present but it might not be possible to do so tomorrow with the greatest of effort. No political gain or fear of antagonising anybody need stand in the way of taking a course dictated by overall interest of the country.

A Principled Course of Action

I would take your leave to refer to a shining example of

1. As it is evident from the recent incident of converting the Babri Mosque into a temple at Ayodhya merely on the basis of cooked up traditions disproved by a number of Muslim and non-Muslim historians. There is no evidence whatsoever that Baber ever converted a temple into a mosque.

this course of action once taken by Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru. With the election of Babu Purshottam Das Tandon as President of the Congress in 1950, it was feared that the communal elements in it would succeed in substituting Hindu revivalism for the policy of secularism and Hindu-Muslim unity adopted by the Congress under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and Maulana Azad. It was expected that Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru will have to abide by the official policy chalked out by the Congress President but he refused to do so. What he said on this occasion at Nasik on 21st September, 1950, constitutes a landmark in the history of India.

"I am not a democrat if it means to bow before the opinion held by a crowd. I would not do anything which I believe to be incorrect even though the people want me to accept it. It is possible that in such a situation I might leave the Congress and fight as an individual for my own views."

"Sometimes I am told that the people do not accept a certain thing or that the opinion of the majority must prevail. These are in fact pleas taken by the cowards. If democracy means bowing to the crowd, then to hell with such a democracy. Wherever such a tendency raises its head I will fight against it. People can ask me to resign from ministership and I would abide by it. But if the Congressmen want that we should say a good-bye to our policies and principles for the sake of getting a few more votes, then the Congress would die. I do not require such a lifeless Congress."¹

The third danger that requires urgent attention of all of us is the mounting corruption in moral and administrative spheres. At least I have not come across such a situation earlier. Kindly do not try to justify it by official reports and the

1. *Qaumi Awaz*. Lucknow.

developmental efforts. Look to the common man, and ask him about his experience with the railways, offices, telephones, police stations, hospitals and similar other matters. He will tell you that greasing the palm of officials is a common practice and money is key to every problem. One who has money can get out of jail, involve an innocent person in criminal proceedings, can get a favourable decision from a law court and even purchase documents essential for the security of the country. Edibles and medicines are being adulterated and sometimes it becomes difficult even to get medical aid and life-saving drugs. Often there is no limit to such hard-heartedness. Bribery is making the public exchequer suffer a loss of crores of rupees every day.

Excessive love of wealth and absence of awe for God lie at the root of all these ills for they sap the springs of human sympathy, fidelity to one's country and the will to make sacrifice for a noble cause. The country is no doubt making progress in the fields of industrialisation, literacy etc. but there is also a downward trend in a more important sphere of national life. The masses are dissatisfied and, shameful though it is, they are sometimes nostalgic about the pre-Independence days when the administration was efficient, trains kept the time schedule, hospitals provided medical facilities to the poor, students studied seriously to pass the examinations and appointments and promotions were made on the basis of merit. All these are now things of the past.

A Friendly Complaint to the Press

Friends, I have not invited you to a conventional political press conference but to an informal gathering, for a frank exchange of views. All of us happen to be boarding the same boat or we are like members of the same family who are expected to express their grievances frankly. I, therefore, seek your indulgence to express my worries and uneasiness before you.

Nobody is more aware than you of the pivotal role played

by the press in promoting harmony between different communities or provoking some controversy and bitterness between different sections of the same community. I had the honour to address a conference of Editors and Press correspondents held a few years back at Lucknow. I then recited a verse by a Persian poet with a little alteration. The poet had said : "Beneath thy feet are a thousand lives" ; but I had substituted "pen" for "feet" to impress upon them the grave responsibility of the Press. I do not mean to say that you should cease walking, or slow your speed, but for God's sake you ought to be extremely cautious. In another Press Conference I had convened on 0th November, 1985 at Madras to explain my view-point on Muslim Personal Law, I had said that I expected the Press to act like a photographic camera which produces a faithful picture whether the object photographed is beautiful or ugly. The basic responsibility of the Press is to report the events faithfully and correctly, convey the feelings and complaints of different sections of the people, their protest meetings and processions and give an accurate estimate of the participants so that the people may be able to derive their own conclusions. I will go further and say that even if the hippies or the people suffering from any contagious disease gather somewhere in large numbers, it should be accurately reported by the Press so that social workers and organisations working in the field of social welfare may come forward to solve the problem likely to endanger the moral and social health of the society. Several examples can be found in the history of nations when a strong and prosperous country or society could not survive simply because it failed to solve or remained indifferent to certain unhealthy trends arising within it.

Friends, you are completely at liberty to express your likes and dislikes, approve or oppose anything, Nobody can take away this right from you but it is not correct to act as a partisan in reporting the events, aspirations and fears, problems and demands of any particular section of our society.

Muslims who form the largest minority in the country feel that their meetings and processions to air their views and grievances or even their cultural gatherings are not correctly reported in the press. Nobody can feel the pulse of this great minority, their uneasiness or the intensity of their feelings on certain issues from the reports appearing in our national press. This is not only unjust to the Muslim community but also harmful to the nation and the administration. Keeping them in dark means that they would fail to take appropriate and timely action to meet even their just grievances. If such matters are allowed to drift in this manner, would they not become insoluble at a certain stage ?

I would like to give here a few of my own experiences to illustrate this point. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board came into existence at Bombay on December 27-29, 1972. This was followed by a public meeting at the Y.M.C.A. Ground in Madanpura which was attended by at least one lakh persons according to the most conservative estimate. The same day late Mr. Hamid Dalwai took out a procession hardly consisting of a few dozen persons to protest against the stand taken by the Muslim Personal Law Board. The Muslims were naturally furious who heckled the processionists. The next day's newspapers carried reports giving an impression that the public meeting organised by the Muslim Personal Law Board was something insignificant while the procession taken out by late Mr. Hamid Dalwai was enthusiastically supported by the Muslims. The harmful effect of such incorrect reporting trying to mislead the administration as well as intellectuals and masses of the sister communities are too evident to be stated here.

My other experience relates to a comparatively recent time. The Muslim Personal Law Board held its annual conference at Calcutta on April 6 & 7, 1985. On the evening of the 7th April, a public meeting was held at Shahid Minar Maidan which was attended by at least half a million people. I had addressed the meeting and can testify that it was a

mammoth gathering. While I was leaving for Asansol the next day I purchased all the English dailies available at Howrah Railway Station. None of them had reported the meeting except one paper which said that 'hundreds of Muslims' attended the meeting. Now you have to judge yourself whether this type of reporting will be helpful to government or the realistic minded people among the majority community in assessing the true feelings of the Muslims on an issue so crucial to them. I am not given to exaggeration but I can tell you that these are but two of the hundreds of such examples that can be cited to show this trend.

We had this bitter experience in connexion with the present issue of Muslim Personal Law. The reports, features and articles published in English and Hindi press showed a one-way traffic. It was difficult to find the view-point of those favouring the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill in any newspaper since almost all of them prominently displayed the views of the majority community or an insignificant section of the Muslims. Nobody within the country or abroad who goes through these papers can fathom the uneasiness felt by eight or ten crore Muslims and the unanimity of view among all sects and sections of Muslims on this particular issue which cannot be disregarded by any patriotic and responsible citizen of the country. Let me now conclude this dialogue with the couplet of a poet belonging to this very city where we have assembled today. I mean Mirza Ghalib who said in one of his couplets ;

Ghalib, excuse me for the bitterness of my tone,
For I feel a bit more heart-ache today.

Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi