

MUSLIMS IN INDIA

“If democracy meant freedom and dissent, then Muslims should be as much free to exercise that right . . .”

Dr. M. A. J. Faridi speaking to *IMPACT*

In 1947, when India and Pakistan achieved freedom, Dr. Mohammad Abdul Jalil Faridi was not in politics; he was practising medicine in Lucknow. Perhaps politics did not need him; there were already enough on the political bandwagon.

To Muslims in India, the vast majority of them, the Pakistan dream had come to mean a panacea. It was going to be an Islamic homeland and not only the subcontinent, the whole world was going to be a better place, automatically. The All India Muslim League, to which they had so passionately clung to, and which had now become Pakistan's ruling party was not sure as to its role in an independent and preponderantly Hindu India. Jinnah vaguely felt that Muslims may cease to be Muslims and Hindus cease to be Hindus in the political sense. Abul Kalam Azad, one of the very few leading Muslims who opposed Pakistan, held high hopes of Indian secularism. He had been the President of the Indian National Congress, senior in Politics to Nehru, and then a Minister of Education. He advised the Muslim Leaguers to dissolve the League. Their rights, he assured were safe. Azad persuaded the pro-Congress Jamiat-ul-ulema to renounce politics and function purely as a social organisation. The Muslim League in India was, however, not formally disbanded (the Indian Union Muslim League still continues to function in South India), it was simply abandoned by its leadership. Many withdrew from politics, some literally fled to Pakistan, others joined the Indian National Congress and became nationalists overnight. Indian Muslims had achieved a singular unity under the Muslim League and now all of a sudden they found themselves in a state of total chaos and disorganisation.

Soon after independence, the socialist block in the Congress got disenchanted with Nehru's aristocratic socialism, and formed the Praja Socialist Party—the People's Socialist Party. The Praja Socialists appeared genuinely secular and socialist and Dr. Faridi felt this pointed the way to India's multi-cultural and multi-religious polity. He joined the PSP. Did the experience work?

“For 12 years I was the leader of the PSP in the State Assembly in UP. Whenever I said anything about the problems faced by Muslims, the whole Party backed me, but they had no power, they had power only to abuse the government. But the day PSP came to power in the SVD coalition no one bothered about those problems. So I left the Praja Socialist Party. I told them that whenever a question came up which affected Muslims and you are in a position to help, you don't, because you fear you may lose Hindu votes. They would say, in private, Faridi you are quite right. We will try to rectify this and do that, but at the back of their mind was the Hindu majority which they dare not displease.

On coming out of the Praja Socialist Party, Dr. Faridi organised the Muslim Majlis which is active in the North Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. With the experience of the All India Muslim League being so fresh, it is perhaps too much to expect the Indian Muslims reaching just yet for a national organisation. Having lived in isolation and disorganisation for a quarter of a century, it would need a great deal of togetherness and self-sacrifice, on the part of the provincial leaders and organisations to unite into a single organisation. At present, a co-ordinating and consultative platform is provided by the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat (All India Muslim Consultative Council) which consists of the Muslim League, Muslim Majlis, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat-ul-ulema etc. Dr. Faridi is the Secretary of this Consultative Council.

Still, there are a number of Muslims in the now splintered socialist party, in both the ruling and the opposition Congress and the various Communist factions. So why do Muslims insist on having separate organisations of their own?

“Firstly, as you have my own experience, this has not worked. The truly nationalist among the Muslims have always been defeated by the majority communalism . . . One State Minister came to me after his defeat in 1967 and said 'believe me Faridi, the Muslim legislators in our Party never present their case with such vehemence and conviction as you do'.

“He was right, the problem is that if they do that they are labelled as Communalists and would not be given a party ticket next time. When the Aligarh Muslim University bill was being discussed in the Congress Assembly Party, someone mentioned Muslim rights etc., Mrs. Gandhi remarked: ‘we do not talk about communal matters, here’.

“About three months back there was a very nice editorial in *Hindustan Times*. It was the main editorial and it said that now that Congress has won by such a big majority and this victory is entirely due to a solid Muslim support it is time that the promises made to them are fulfilled, but at the same time it advised the Muslims to give up pressure tactics. I wrote to Verghese, the editor and he was kind enough to publish it. But suppose, I wrote, despite her promises and in spite of your advice, Mrs. Gandhi does not fulfil her promise would you suggest an alternative? You ask us to give up our organisation and merge within the national stream. We are prepared to do that, but when they do not give us our rights, what are we to do except to exercise our democratic rights?

“How can you face organised opposition, even deep-seated hostility, from a position of disorganisation or disunity. In India, the Sikhs have got the Akali Dal. DMK represents non-Brahmins in the South. You have Christian parties also in South India. So why take exception to Muslims organising themselves for their constitutional rights? Naturally Mrs. Gandhi did not regard Muslim League as communal when she made an alliance with it in Kerala. So like others we too want to retain our identity as Muslims, our heritage, our values, our language and our mode of life.

But India is a secular State?

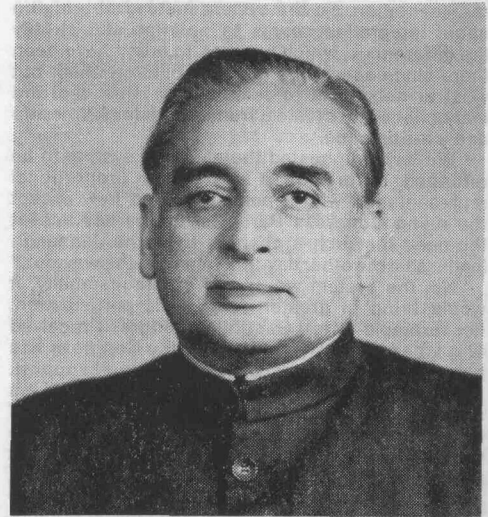
“Yes, but secular does not mean anti-religion. It is secular in the sense that the State has no religion. It does not mean that its citizens should cease to have any religion. No one claims that. In my view, only a government can be secular, an individual cannot be secular. You cannot expect Faridi to be secular. He can be an atheist, but he can't be secular; it would not mean anything. Governments are based on ideology which can be secular or non-secular but to say that in a secular State, the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians, the Parsis cannot live as their religion asks them to live is ridiculous. Even our constitution and our leaders do not attribute such a meaning to secularism, that all these religions should be abolished.”

What they say simply means that one can be a Hindu, a Muslim or a Christian in his private life, they don't mind it. But why bring it in politics, why bring it in education?

“You forget that in India we have a unique problem which does not exist anywhere else in the world. I mean the caste system . . .”

That has been abolished?

“Yes, but the untouchables are there, the backward classes are there, as far as the social and



Dr M. A. J. Faridi

economic realities are concerned. No one denies that nepotism exists in India, so a Kayasth would favour a Kayasth, a Brahmin would favour a Brahmin and so on and believe it or not even now the presidents and secretaries of all political parties are Brahmins. Whether it is Communist, or Communist-Marxist or Jansangh or Congress or BKD, it is either Madholimaya or Joshi or Dange or Namboodripad or Mrs. Indira Gandhi, or Sharma, they all are Brahmins.

“The Upper-castes—Brahmins, Chatri and Vaishya constitute no more than 5 per cent of the total Indian population, but they hold 90 per cent of wealth and command total political power. This has been so since hundreds of years. Even during the Muslim rule, the executive power was held by the Brahmins and the Rajputs; they were ministers and army commanders. Mr. Shyam Sundar, a sheduled-caste leader said that we never had Islamic rule in India. Had it been so there would have been no untouchables, they would have achieved liberation. We have stayed untouchable, he said, because Muslims did not behave as Muslims. That is the greatest blot on Muslim history in India. Secularism in India, has, therefore, much to do with the caste system and not because there are Muslims etc. in the country. There is no other way of proclaiming legal equality between the various castes, sub-castes etc.”

Indian secularism is now 25 years old and how does it sum up? Is Communalism on the way out? Has there emerged something like one Indian nation?

“I think the problem is not truly religious. Much of it arises from the caste-orientation of the Indian society, our electoral system, and the system of education.

“In India, we have elections of one kind or another going on all through the year, village councils, municipalities, State and Central Assemblies, bye-elections, mid-term elections and so on. All these elections are held on the basis of a simple majority vote. In this situation every caste or religious group tries to send its own candidate. Since there are not many constituencies where a

## Muslims in India . . . . . interview with Dr. Faridi

caste or a group has an over-whelming majority this leads to tensions and violent conflicts. Thus the system keeps one reminding that he belongs to this caste or that, and once elected a candidate tries to see that his caste is rewarded, so that he may be re-elected.

"The representation is democratic only in the sense that it has been achieved through a majority vote but it is essentially caste-oriented. Those who fail to win, develop a definite feeling of non-representation. So the system instead of bringing about integration serves to polarise and stratify the differences, which one has to admit have been there since ages. One cannot obliterate them but what is needed is to remove the injustices and inequalities and create a frame-work for fellowship and co-existence.

"We have suggested the electoral system to be reformed to provide a system of proportional representation with a party list. And now except the ruling Congress Party, all the parties accept the need for such a change. Even the Jansangh leader said the other day that this was the way out."

"No, the system would not create instability, it would bring in greater democratic participation. For example Mrs. Gandhi's Congress received 42% votes but 72% seats. In UP the Congress has been ruling with only 36 per cent electoral support. Is it a democratic situation? A person lost his security deposit, that is he got less than 1/6th of the votes polled, but still won the election. There were 13 candidates and the votes split up in that fashion. Such instances are many.

"Now comes in Communalism. The *Hindustan Times*, commented that Faridi has started preaching communal representation, but it has nothing to do with that. Here in a multi-member constituency you submit a list and ask people to vote for the whole list, i.e., for the party and not for the individual. How can this be communalism. The system is prevalent in 35 countries, it is mostly the Commonwealth countries which have a single majority system. The failure of the single majority system in India can also be seen in the number of election petitions, legal disputes and violent clashes that come up after every election. So, far from being communal, proportional representation would in fact promote a true national integration."

Meanwhile, what do you propose to do about the never-ending cycle of anti-Muslim riots or communal riots, as you call them?

"Yes, it is a serious problem and we have made some suggestions to the government. A good development has been that whenever there is a riot we investigate. We send our Assembly members and workers including people from the Hindu community. Only last month there was a riot in Azamgarh. Our people were at the scene when the whole thing was fresh. They go to police, see people who may possibly be in prison, estimate damage to life and property, meet the persons affected and try to pin-point the real cause of the trouble. This makes it difficult for things to be swept under the carpet. Within a week or so a factual and objective report is available. These reports are published, at least in UP, and sometimes the government would receive our report earlier than from its own authorities. It does have an effect, at least in pinching some conscience. In Azamgarh, for instance, it were not the Hindus who had rioted against the Muslims, it was the police, and the authorities wanted to give it a communal colour. We cannot do more, but this helps to reassure the Muslims that they are not entirely neglected and helpless."

Yet looking at statistics one finds that the number of anti-Muslim riots has not shown a downward trend?

"Yes it may be so, but still we did not have a repetition of the scale of Ahmadabad and Jabalpur. The local authorities should at least know that as soon as there is a riot in a town, the local magistrates and police officers would be transferred or suspended from service. This is not

being done. Sometimes those who have been guilty or inefficient, instead of being punished, have been promoted.

"The problem of riots is closely linked with the question of Muslim representation in the services particularly in the police and the executive services. If a district also has Muslim officers, riots will not take place. So far riots have taken place mainly in those areas where there are no Muslim officers either in the police or in the executive. In such a situation, Muslims find it difficult even to lodge a complaint or have their case registered.

"Our problem is economic too, of employment, of jobs, of opportunities in trade and industry, in business and professions . . ."

But in a situation of underdevelopment which is there in India, it is not Muslims alone who suffer from economic deprivation. Others too . . .

"We are receiving far more than our share in deprivation. True our deprivation is not exclusive but it is of a special kind."

The Constitution guarantees equal opportunities to all and it could simply be that they are not suitable and they are not taken?

"Do you mean to say that they are not even physically fit for the job of a police constable where all you want is 32-inch chest and two inch expansion? Muslim representation in the police is about 4 per cent. But even if we accept that, the problem still remains there.

"I told the Prime Minister that if a mother comes to me and says that my youngest son has reached secondary stage while the eldest is still in primary school, so there must be something wrong with the eldest one. Doctor, can you find the reason, can you do something?—So it is not enough to say that they are not fit. Last month, the result of Indian Administrative Service examinations was announced and there were only two Muslims in the whole lot. This represents the situation. Before independence Muslim competed well and had a reasonable representation, so what has happened now?

"If one part of the society remain backward there must be something seriously wrong somewhere, possibly with the society. You simply cannot ignore that. May be they are not coming in the services because not many are taking part in the competitive examinations. Firstly because many did not have an equal educational opportunity and secondly those who had, felt that no matter how hard they tried they were not likely to be taken. So you have a vicious circle which starts with school education.

"I told the Prime Minister to appoint a Commission which should investigate why Muslims continue to suffer under representation in education, in services and in economic and social institutions. I said if the government could appoint a Commission to inquire into the grievances of the Hindu minority in Kashmir or the Telegus in Andhra, why can't this be done for the Muslims in India?

"This brings me to education. The Muslim University at Aligarh\* was created by the Muslims, through funds raised largely from among themselves in order to preserve and promote their culture and their values. This is not communal, this is what our Constitution guarantees and Mrs. Gandhi's election manifesto promised to restore. Muslims have a right to run and guide its affairs. We don't exclude Hindus. There have always been Hindu students and staff in the University. But it is the question of character and control which in fact has been taken away. India is a democratic State, but the affairs of the University are proposed to be run by a nominated Vice-Chancellor. I understand that a bill has been introduced in the Parliament in New Delhi. I do not know what it contains but I hope Mrs. Gandhi would see to it that her election pledge to Muslims is fulfilled.

"In pre-university education, the problem mainly revolves around the position of the Urdu language and the textbooks. The problem, I

suppose, is generally more acute in the North than in the South. Urdu is not an exclusive Muslim language, though as far as Muslims are concerned, in the subcontinent Urdu has become the repository of their culture, their traditions and their religion. But in spite of a constitutional guarantee, Urdu has been virtually pushed out as far as the official agencies are concerned. At the primary level, facilities for its teaching are promised but denied. At the secondary level, one has the right to study and write his answers in his mother tongue, provided he applies for and obtains a prior permission from the education board. By the time such permission would arrive half the term would be over.

"The position with regard to textbooks is all the more unfortunate. Muslim children are made to study Hindu mythology and their own religion and their heroes are devalued. One history book spoke about a Muslim King, who it said oppressed the Hindus and that was the reason for the hostility between Hindus and Muslims. I mentioned this in a meeting of the National Integration Council. Mr. Malkani, editor of the Jansangh weekly, *Organiser*, said, how can you stop teaching history. I said, firstly this is not correct history but my point relates to this being advanced to justify a continuation of enmity. Everyone agreed, but then education is a State subject and unless the State governments see their constitutional obligations, things would continue in the present fashion. We have lost our two generations to this system of education. We say, this is fraught with danger not for the Muslims alone, but also for our society as a whole."

There is an impression that there is nothing like a Muslim problem, Muslims themselves are a problem?

"Well, one may put it as he likes but, if our desire to stay as a Muslim is a problem then what can one say to that."

No it relates more to their attitude to problems outside India, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem, Pakistan, Bangladesh and by implication their loyalty to India?

"Let me take this question of loyalty first. Do you know that in the three wars we had (two with Pakistan), Muslims were in the forefront. One can refer to the number of awards and references won by them. This is in spite of the fact that they do not enjoy adequate representation in the armed forces. One cannot cite a single Muslim who has spied against India; they have come from the majority community, even from the rank of the Congress party. As for our spiritual relationship with the Muslim world, it is natural and principled. It was so even under the British rule. The Roman Catholics go to Vatican and Budhists from all over the world come to Gaya in India. Is there anything wrong about it?

"The division of the subcontinent has also split families. So many families are divided between the two countries and whatever relationship is there, is only a family relationship. That too is erratic and restricted. On political issues, Muslim attitudes have never been counter to India's national interests. Take the Bangladesh issue for example. Some saw it as being in conflict with India's avowed policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of another State. They felt it was against India's own and long-term interests, while others enthusiastically joined the liberation cause. None supported the misconduct of the Pakistani rulers. If democracy meant freedom and dissent, Muslims should be as much free to exercise that right as those who advocate alliance or opposition to one or the other super power."

What of the future?

"Challenging no doubt, but it is promising. It is not so dark . . ."

You say not so dark . . . ?

"Many people think that there is no future for Muslims in India, but I think they only have to assert their destiny. That is, if they assert, the key word is *if not so*."

\* See "Aligarh, a question of Character" page 4.