

The First Saifuddin Kitchlew Lecture

Indian Muslims: Crisis, Confrontation and Challenges

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Chair: Prof. Shri Prakash, Director, Academy of Third World Studies

I am grateful to Sanjoy, my friend and colleague of many years, for inviting me to deliver the first Saifuddin Kitchlew Lecture and to the Vice Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia, to my friend Najeeb Jung, and to Prof. Shri Prakash, the chair of this event.

I would like to share some thoughts with this distinguished audience.

This theme is going to be one of most important issues of the coming decades for modern India. If we cannot find a resolution to the angst of 15% of the population, it will certainly impact on India's national growth. Simply put: India's growth is incomplete if 15% of Indians are left behind. Subaltern India needs governance solutions, and those will not come unless we understand the origins and roots of the crisis, which lie in the 19th century.

Let us take as our starting point our understanding of history. What did the great Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee mean when he proclaimed, in a lecture at Calcutta University, that Bengalis do not have a history. He said that even the Oriyas have a history, but Bengalis did not. What was he referring to? He was at one level talking about the elimination of Bengalis from political power and defining a that sense of loss, since the arrival of the Turco-Afghan Ghorids in Bengal. But there was another, subtler message; he was unwilling to include the Muslim Nawabs of Bengal as fellow Bengalis, although this class, across different dynasties, had been in power for centuries and had assimilated into the culture and language. Therefore, the defeat of the last independent Bengal Nawab, Siraj ud Daullah, in 1757, is treated as the year of liberation, and the Bengali Hindu has something to be thankful to Robert Clive and the British for. He welcomes European colonization as the knight in shining armour saving Bengal from barbarian Muslims. Many influential Bengali intellectuals of the 19th century

removed Muslims from the history of Bengal, or banished them to an image of rapine cruelty. The British were only too happy to offer rewards to this comprador element.

Let us move to 1919 and Saifuddin Kitchlew and his comrades. In a sense 1919, which saw Jallianwalla Bagh and the non-cooperative movement, mark the beginning of the modern history of India. A Hindu, a Sikh and a Muslim helped to organize that meeting at Jallianwalla at which such a brutal massacre took place.

This takes us back to a parallel question, which must be answered because of the unintended consequences of the national freedom struggle, the partition of India.

Pakistan begins its history in 711, the year an Arab invasion fleet landed on the shores of Sindh. For 300 years, the Arab advance was held up by feudal Rajput states on an axis from Gujarat to Peshawar. This line was broken by the Ghaznis, and since the time of Mahmud till the rise of the Sikh empire of Maharajah Ranjit Singh the land from Ravi to Indus and beyond became what might be called Muslim political space. The decline of Muslim power in the north reached a nadir in 1803 when the British entered Delhi and made the Mughal emperor their prisoner.

In 1803, Shah Aziz of Delhi declared a fatwa that India had become Darul Harb, or a house of war. That fatwa for a jihad was a call to fight against the British, not against Hindus. It was a call to rise up against an oppressive, foreign, colonial yoke. And between 1798 which saw the battle of Serengapatnam and Tipu Sultan's death, and 1803, you see a growing, rising consensus among the Indian Muslims, a syndrome that combines an exaggerated fear of the future with an exaggerated pride in the past.

Then comes the role of Saeed Ahmed Barelvi – as his name suggests, he was from Bareilly or what is now Rae Bareli. He propagated the first people's war in India. Barelvi was inspired by Shah Waliullah and Shah Aziz, who had developed a specific theory about the decline of Indian Muslims, and offered a recipe for renewal. Barelvi went on Haj for two years and picked up further ideas from the philosophy of Abdul Wahab, whose followers had created a major insurrection in Arabia. Barelvi made Balakot, in North West Frontier, his capital in his war against the Sikhs because Punjab, a traditional Muslim space had been lost to the Sikhs. Balakot is now a headquarter of the Pakistani Taliban.

This parallel provokes a question which demands an answer: when did the Muslims become a minority? Minorities and majorities are not a configurations of

numbers, but about empowerment. In 1803, Muslims saw themselves as disempowered.

Ideas, as we all know, travel very slowly through time. The war for Muslim space began against Sikhs but extended to the British after they conquered Punjab.

Sir William Hunter's REPORT OF THE INDIAN EDUCATION COMMISSION¹, handed in to the Government of India in 1884, makes interesting reading. The Hunter Commission's focus was to explain The British fought hard on the battlefield, but they realized they needed a "soft" solution as well. One result was that the benefits of British education politics in India had not seeped down to Muslims.

Hunter embarked on a wide-ranging exercise in gathering evidence from indigenous, European and missionary stakeholders in 1882. "The hearings were conducted in the major cities across India and they lasted for two weeks in each province. A lengthy set of questions was asked of each witness and cross-examination by commissioners was permitted. Many petitions and memorials were also presented to the commissioners. This process represented the most thorough and possibly the most genuine attempt by the British in the nineteenth century to understand the failings of European education on the subcontinent.

"The hearings in each province were meticulously recorded, bound and published. The separate final Hunter report of 640 pages, which draws together the information of the provincial reports, is reproduced on this site. The hand of the raj archivist is evident in the way the report is organised. The summary 'history' of education in each province before 1882 is mostly the European story and British constructs regarding caste and language pervade the report. But the information concerning indigenous schooling in Chapter 3, the complex institutional structure of government schooling in subsequent chapters and the relationship of this schooling system with outside bodies and government instrumentalities is detailed and rich."

A comparison with the Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee Report on the status of minority education could make an interesting case study. The Hunter Report essentially two forms of empowerment, Educational Empowerment and Political empowerment.

Significant steps follow in quick succession in the realm of education: the first Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental School is established in 1876. Simultaneously, the idea of political empowerment begins to find support in the fray, leading eventually to the Partition of Bengal; the Lt. Gov. of Bengal promised Bengali Muslims power equivalent to what they had enjoyed during Mughal rule. Muslims are told in 1906 by the Viceroy's Secretary Dunlop Smith to prepare a memo seeking separate electorates. From a clutch of "leading" figures this emerges as the Muslim League.

There was one phase in which politics of communal separation was reversed: during the 1919-1922 Khilafat Movement. Muslims called it a Jihad, but agreed to Gandhi's condition, to keep it non-violent. But when, in 1922, Gandhi called off the movement, Indian Muslims were confused, suspicious and angry. Even Saifuddin Kitchlew, one of the early leaders of Khilafat, grew so disillusioned that he distanced himself from Punjab. That was the strength of Muslim feeling prevailing at the time. In fact, Kitchlew made some remarks about Gandhi and the Congress that would be difficult to repeat here.

Rage is very powerful. Indian Muslims moved away from Gandhi. But it took, a while before they moved towards the Muslim League.

If you build a political construct based on fear of the future and pride in the past, then what is the geography you give to fear? Because fear needs a geography. The "elections" of 1937 and 1946 as elections were a limited expression of will, for only 11 percent of Indians voted.

Jinnah was a brilliant lawyer. When he discovered in 1937, that fear had become a weak argument, he changed the story. The evocative power of Islam came into play. Hindus were demonized, as cunning, evil, inhuman. He shifted the argument from Muslims in danger to Islam in danger.

Sadly, fear remains a constant in Muslim politics even after 1947, although its context has changed of course. But some things are beginning to change.

What is happening in Bengal and Bihar is generating hope. I said at a public meeting in Bengal about four years ago. that the age of 'Soft Secularism' was over.

If a community votes out of fear, then it will get fear. You cannot expect development. The Bengal government has now declared 10 per cent reservations for Muslims; the Marxist government has done some homework. It has clearly

defined the backwardness and removed the creamy layer from the purview of reservations. But reservations will be implemented only if the government is sincere and has strong will.

Muslims in Bihar support, to a significant extent, Nitish Kumar because, despite his alliance, he has involved Muslims in the overall process of economic growth. I hope this flowers into something substantial.

This meant that secularism had to mean much more than life-security, or no-riots; it had to include job-security. Muslims had to become an integral part of the 'Rising India' story.
