

TO BE OR NOT TO BE A MINORITY?

LADIES & GENTLEMEN! WHEN I WAS MUSTERING MY THOUGHTS I WENT BACK TO THE HISTORICAL ASPECT OF MINORITIES. THERE ARE THREE BROAD DIVISIONS:-

(A) PEOPLE WHO WERE IN MINORITY FROM THE BEGINNING (SIKHS, JEWS, PARSEES, CHRISTIANS)

- (i) THESE PEOPLE WERE EASILY INTEGRATED AND ASSIMILATED.
- (ii) THEY WORKED HARD AND PROSPERED.
- (iii) THEY EMERGED AS THE ELITE. (INDIAN DOCTORS, ENGINEERS AND IT SPECIALISTS IN USA).

(B) PEOPLE IN A MAJORITY AND SUBSEQUENTLY REDUCED TO A MINORITY (ORIGINAL TRIBAL RACES, AMERICAS, ABORIGINES IN AUSTRALIA, MAORIS IN NEW ZEALAND)

- (i) THESE WERE RUTHLESSLY DECIMATED.
- (ii) THEY NOW ARE SHOW PIECES AND LEAD A PATHETIC EXISTENCE ENTERTAINING TOURISTS OR RUNNING GAMBLING CASINOS.

(C) PEOPLE AFFECTED BY INVERSION OF POWER (SPAIN CORDOBA, CONSTANTINOPLE-ISTANBUL)

- (i) THESE PEOPLE BEAR THE CROSS FOR PERCEIVED INJUSTICES PERPETRATED BY THEIR ANCESTORS.
- (ii) SUBJECTED TO MASS EXTERMINATION/CONVERSIONS (INQUISITION IN SPAIN)

INDIAN MUSLIMS ARE IN THE THIRD CATEGORY BUT THEY DID NOT HAVE TO FACE ANY INQUISITION PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF INCLUSIVE AND NON VIOLENT NATURE OF THE MAJORITY. ATTEMPTS TO RESORT TO PROGRAMS WERE THWARTED BY WILL OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE AND THE ARMED FORCES.

I'M RATHER PERPLEXED TO ADDRESS THIS GATHERING AS A MEMBER OF A MINORITY COMMUNITY. COMING, AS I DO, FROM A COMMUNITY OF 200 MILLION STRONG POPULATION, I OFTEN WONDER IF THE MUSLIMS OF INDIA BY ANY STANDARD OF GOOD SENSE CAN BE DUBBED AS A MINORITY. FOR THE LAST 65 YEARS OR SO, A STRANGE NUMERICAL

IDENTITY HAS BEEN THROWN UPON US AS WE ARE MADE TO BELIEVE, THAT WE BELONG TO A MINORITY GROUP HENCE OUR NATURAL ROLE IS TO BE ON THE MARGIN. WE CANNOT CLAIM FOR OURSELVES ANY ROLE ON THE CENTRAL STAGE OF NATION BUILDING. YET DESPITE THIS BASELESS INDOCTRINATION ABOUT OUR SUPPOSED SMALLNESS, MANY, AMONGST US, HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN NATION-BUILDING, AND SOME OF THEM EVEN ROSE TO IMPORTANT POSITIONS IN GOVERNMENTS, IN SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY, IN ACADEMICS AND EVEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP. BUT THEY ALL HAVE BEEN INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS STORIES. AS A COMMUNITY WE HAVE BEEN ON A CONTINUOUS DECLINE. SO MUCH SO THAT THE SACHAR COMMITTEE REPORT DECLARED US AMONG THE MOST BACKWARD AND THE MUSLIM HOUSEHOLD INCOME WAS FOUND THE LEAST EVEN AMONG THE MOST DOWNTRODDEN COMMUNITIES. AND ALL THIS HAPPENED TO US RIGHT UNDER THE SECULAR LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM THAT ENSURES PROTECTION OF MINORITY RIGHTS. ISN'T IT THEN THAT THERE IS SOMETHING INHERENTLY WRONG AT THE WAY WE CONCEIVE MINORITY RIGHTS AND THE WAY WE ENSURE EQUAL, AND IN SOME CASES, EVEN SPECIAL RIGHTS TO OUR MINORITY CITIZENS?

DEAR FRIENDS!

TODAY, INDIAN MUSLIMS ARE IN A DILEMMA. IF THEY INSIST ON THEIR MINORITY-NESS, THEY WILL ALLOW THEMSELVES TO BE ENGULFED, TO BE CONTENT WITH A POSITION UNDESERVING OF THEIR NUMERICAL STRENGTH, TO BE ROBBED OF ANY CENTRAL ROLE IN NATION BUILDING. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THEY MUSTER COURAGE TO BREAK THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHELL OF THEIR MINORITY-NESS AND DEMAND FOR THEMSELVES A PROACTIVE ROLE AS THE SECOND LARGEST MAJORITY, THEY FEAR THEY WOULD LOSE WHATEVER LITTLE CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS THEY ENJOY AS A HAPLESS MINORITY. AS A CUSTODIAN OF INDIAN MUSLIMS' PRIME SEAT OF LEARNING, I HAVE BEEN PERSONALLY UNDERGOING THIS DILEMMA. IF I VOCIFEROUSLY CALL FOR RESTORATION OF AMU MINORITY CHARACTER, IT IS NOT BECAUSE I WANT TO KEEP THE ENTIRE UMMAH WITHIN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHELL OF MINORITY-NESS, BUT I DO SO BECAUSE I STRONGLY FEEL THAT STRIPPING THE UNIVERSITY OF ITS UNIQUE INDO-ISLAMIC IDENTITY, AND ITS MINORITY CHARACTER WILL TANTAMOUNT TO A NATIONAL LOSS. TRADITIONALLY, ALIGARH HAS BEEN AN INTELLECTUAL POWERHOUSE FOR INDIAN MUSLIMS; IMPARTING MODERN EDUCATION, PRODUCING FORWARD LOOKING MUSLIMS. AND SINCE WE DO NOT HAVE MANY ALIGARHS, IT IS IN OUR BEST NATIONAL INTEREST TO PRESERVE AND STRENGTHEN THIS GREAT SEAT OF FORWARD LOOKING MUSLIM THINKING. WE AT ALIGARH WANT TO RESTORE MINORITY CHARACTER FOR AMU AND AT THE SAME TIME WANT TO PLAY A PROACTIVE ROLE IN NATION BUILDING. AND THIS

CAN ONLY HAPPEN IF OUR POLICY MAKERS REALISE THAT MERE MINORITY SAFEGUARDS HAVE NOT DONE ANY GOOD TO THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY, THEIR GRAPHS HAVE BEEN ON A DECLINE AND THEREFORE OUR APPROACH TO THE MUSLIM ISSUES MUST CHANGE BOTH IN THE PERCEPTION OF MUSLIM MALAISE AND THEIR PROPOSED SOLUTIONS. INVITING THE MUSLIMS TO THE CENTRE STAGE OF NATIONAL LIFE WOULD REQUIRE RECOGNIZING THEM AS THE SECOND LARGEST MAJORITY. THIS ALONE CAN BREAK THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHELL THAT THE MUSLIM INDIANS HAVE BEEN SO COMFORTABLY LIVING IN. AND FOR ALLOWING THIS TO HAPPEN AND TO BRING AN ENTIRE NATION OUT OF PRESERVATION MODE, WE NEED TO ENSURE THEM MORE THAN THE BARE MINORITY RIGHTS. I CALL IT A MINORITY RIGHTS PLUS PHENOMENON WHICH I BELIEVE WOULD ENCOURAGE MUSLIMS TO BE PROUDLY PART OF NATIONAL MAINSTREAM WITHOUT FEAR OF LOSING THEIR UNIQUE INDO-ISLAMIC CHARACTER.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY WHERE SANE VOICES ARE OFTEN LOST IN HATEFUL NOISES AND WHERE FACTS ARE OBFUSCATED BY CONTINUOUS BOMBARDMENTS OF VISUAL STEREOTYPES. IF A FALSE HOOD IS SUSTAINED PEOPLE WILL ULTIMATELY BELIEVE IT AS THE TRUTH. UNFORTUNATELY, WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY INFESTED WITH HATEMONGERS WHERE OUR MINORITY-NESS, OR MUSLIMNESS IS SUBJECT TO A PERPETUAL DEHUMANIZATION. WHEN THERE IS A TERRORIST ATTACK IN THE COUNTRY, THE MEDIA IS ALWAYS QUICK TO FLASH MUSLIM SOUNDING NAMES AS THE POSSIBLE CULPRITS. THIS SO CALLED "DEMONIZATION" OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY HAS BEEN NURTURED BY THE INDIAN CINEMA WHERE ALL CROOKS, SMUGGLERS AND TERRORISTS WEAR BEARDS AND CARRY MUSLIM NAMES. THE INDIAN CINEMA IS A GREAT MEDIUM FOR AFFECTING PUBLIC OPINION AND DEPICTING ONLY MUSLIMS IN A BAD LIGHT IS UNFAIR. YOU ALL WOULD AGREE WITH ME THAT EVERY COMMUNITY HAS ITS SHARE OF BLACK SHEEP. THIS CRIMINAL NATURE OF MEDIA TRIAL OF MUSLIMS HAS AFFECTED THE WAY OTHER COMMUNITIES VIEW THEIR MUSLIM NEIGHBOURS TO THE POINT OF FEELING INSECURE HAVING THEM WITHIN THEIR MIDST. THIS HAS LED TO THE CREATION OF MUSLIM "GHETTOS" THAT HAVE FURTHER WIDENED THE GULF AND CREATED A DEEP SENSE OF INSECURITY AMONG EDUCATED MUSLIM YOUTH. IT HAS DEHUMANISED THEM. ONCE YOU STRIP US OF OUR HUMANITY, OF OUR INHERENT GOODNESS AS HUMAN BEING, IT BECOMES EASY TO LOOK AT THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY AS A BUNCH OF POTENTIAL CRIMINALS. FOR SOME MUSLIM YOUTH, ACCUSED AND IMPRISONED, WITH INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE, IT TAKES LONG YEARS OF LEGAL BATTLE TO PROVE THEIR INNOCENCE. THIS DEHUMANIZATION OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY MUST STOP IMMEDIATELY. REMEMBER! HATRED IS A

SICKNESS. NO FORWARD LOOKING HEALTHY SOCIETY CAN AFFORD IT. AND NOT CERTAINLY AT THIS CRUCIAL POINT IN OUR HISTORY WHEN INDIA IS ASPIRING FOR A GLOBAL LEADERSHIP ROLE. MAKE NO MISTAKE! HATRED IS LIKE BLACK SMOKE THAT NOT ONLY SUFFOCATES, IT EVEN SCREENS OUT SOME BASIC REALITIES OTHERWISE SO IMPORTANT TO BUILD MAN TO MAN RELATIONS. WHILE MINORITY RIGHTS HAVE FAILED IN EMPOWERING US AS A RESPECTABLE COMMUNITY, THOSE WHO DEHUMANISE US HAVE TAKEN THESE VERY CONSTITUTIONAL PROMISES AS AFFRONT TO THEIR MAJORITY RIGHTS. THEY LOOK AT IT AS AN APPEASEMENT POLICY THUS PROJECTING US AS A FIFTH COLUMN, AN UNNECESSARY BURDEN ON THE INDIAN NATION.

SHOULD MUSLIMS THEN FORSAKE THEIR MINORITY NESS AND BREAK THE SHELL? A SIMPLE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NOT EASY GIVEN THE COMPLEX SITUATION THAT TODAY WE MUSLIM INDIANS FIND OURSELVES IN. TO ELABORATE THIS POINT, AGAIN, I TAKE THE CASE OF ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY, AN ISSUE THAT I AM MOST FAMILIAR WITH.

IT IS A COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY WAS INITIALLY FOUNDED AS MUHAMMADAN ANGLO-ORIENTAL COLLEGE IN 1877 AND BLOSSOMED INTO A FULL-FLEDGED UNIVERSITY IN 1920. THE UNIVERSITY, AS IT WAS PROMULGATED BY THE UNIVERSITY ACT XL OF 1920, HAD INCORPORATED THE COLLEGE AND ITS SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS. AND WHILE DISSOLVING THE FOUNDING INSTITUTIONS, THE ACT CLEARLY STATED THAT 'ALL PROPERTIES, MOVABLE AND IMMOVABLE, AND ALL RIGHTS, POWERS AND PRIVILEGES OF THE SAID SOCIETIES AND ALL PROPERTIES, MOVABLE AND IMMOVABLE AND ALL RIGHTS, POWERS AND PRIVILEGES OF THE MUSLIM UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION COMMITTEE SHALL BE TRANSFERRED TO AND VEST IN THE UNIVERSITY AND SHALL BE APPLIED TO THE OBJECTS AND PURPOSES FOR WHICH THE UNIVERSITY IS INCORPORATED.'

YET DESPITE THIS UNAMBIGUOUS DECLARATION ABOUT THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THIS GREAT INSTITUTION, INDEPENDENT INDIA WITNESSED STRIPPING ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY OF ITS ISLAMIC IDENTITY. MUSLIMS HAD TO RESORT TO A NATIONWIDE PROTEST. AFTER YEARS OF STREET PROTESTS, A PARTIAL RESTORATION OF THE MINORITY CHARACTER WAS ENACTED BY THE PARLIAMENT IN 1981. BUT AGAIN A COURT RULING IN 2005 DECLARED THAT THE UNIVERSITY WAS ESTABLISHED BY AN ACT OF PARLIAMENT AND HENCE NOT BY MUSLIMS. QUITE STRANGE LOGIC. BUT THIS IS HOW MINORITIES ARE SUPPOSED TO MAKE PROGRESS IN OUR DEMOCRACY. IT

REMINDS ME OF MALCOM X WHO ONCE SAID: "IF YOU STICK A KNIFE NINE INCHES INTO MY BACK AND PULL IT OUT THREE INCHES, THAT IS NOT PROGRESS. EVEN IF YOU PULL IT ALL THE WAY OUT, THAT IS NOT PROGRESS. PROGRESS IS HEALING THE WOUND." THE STORY OF MINORITY RIGHTS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA IS LIKE PULLING THE KNIFE OUT, AND MIND YOU, THEY HAVE YET TO PULL IT OUT, ALL THE WAY.

BROTHERS & SISTERS!

WHY DO WE IGNORE THE FACT THAT DESPITE DIFFERENCES IN OUR SOCIAL MORES, FOOD HABITS AND SOME TIMES DRESS, WE ALL ARE INDIANS. GOD HAS DESTINED FOR US THAT WE SHARE THIS GREAT LAND, BREATHE THE SAME AIR AND DRINK THE SAME WATER. IT IS IN OUR COMMON INTEREST TO PRESERVE AND IMPROVE UPON WHAT NATURE HAS BESTOWED ON US. WE SHARE A COMMON DESTINY; IT IS LIKE BEING ON A LIFE BOAT. IF THE BOAT SINKS WE ALL ARE DOOMED TO PERISH. A PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS INDIA IS IN EVERYBODY'S INTEREST. AS FOR US MUSLIMS, IT IS OUR RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION TO WORK TOWARDS THIS NOBLE END. THAT IS THE REASON ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY IS A SECULAR INSTITUTION AND ENCOURAGING ITS STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS THE SECURITY OF THEIR COUNTRY BY JOINING THE ARMED FORCES.

IT IS ABOUT TIME THAT INSTEAD OF LOOKING AT EACH OTHER AS MEMBERS OF A MINORITY OR MAJORITY COMMUNITY, OR AN EXPONENT OF THIS RELIGION OR THAT SECT, WE LOOK AT EACH OTHER AS FELLOW HUMANS. THE ENTIRE HUMAN RACE, THE PROPHET TOLD US, BELONGS TO THE FAMILY OF ONE GOD (الخلق عيال الله). NO MATTER WHAT LANGUAGE WE SPEAK AND WHAT RELIGION WE ADHERE TO. IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT, LOOKING AT EACH OTHER AS FELLOW HUMANS, OR MEMBERS OF THE SAME DIVINE FAMILY, ENABLES US TO REALISE THAT MOST OF US IN NORTH INDIA SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE, OR VARIOUS SHADES OF IT. CALL IT URDU, HINDI OR HINDUSTANI. BUT THE MOMENT WE START LOOKING FROM A MINORITY-MAJORITY PRISM, OUR PERCEPTION CHANGES. WE THEN RESORT TO DECEPTION AND MACHINATIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, THE URDU LANGUAGE WHICH ORIGINATED IN THE INDO GANGETIC PLAINS AND IS THE LANGUAGE OF FILM AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY HAS BEEN GIVEN A RELIGIOUS TAG. SUCH A PROJECTION HAVE BEEN A SOURCE OF CONTINUOUS DISCORD. AS FOR US MUSLIMS, WE ARE PROUD OF BOTH OUR ISLAMIC IDENTITY AND OUR INDIANNESS. WE HAVE CARVED A UNIQUE CULTURAL BLEND OF ISLAM FOR OURSELVES; WE CALL IT INDO-ISLAMIC. THAT IS WHY WE FEEL EQUALLY AT HOME IN ARABIC AND DEVNAGRI SCRIPTS.

IF INDIA AS A NATION HAS TO MOVE FORWARD AND RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES OF 21ST CENTURY, WE MUST SHUN THIS OUTDATED DIVISIVE THINKING AND RESPECT EACH OTHER AS FELLOW HUMANS.

WE NEED TO BRIDGE THE INTER-RELIGIOUS GAP AND PROMOTE BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM THROUGH DIALOGUE BY NGOS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS - NOT POLITICIANS. REMEMBER DURING THE EMERGENCY PERIOD RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF ALL COMMUNITIES WERE IN PRISON TOGETHER. THEY TALKED TO EACH OTHER AND THERE WAS INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING.

WE NEED TO PROVIDE CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR DALIT MUSLIMS AND DALIT CHRISTIANS THE WAY IT HAS BEEN PROVIDED TO DALIT SIKHS AND DALIT BUDHHISTS.

WE MUSLIM DON'T NEED WHAT THEY CALL MINORITY APPEASEMENT. INDIA NEEDS A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ITS APPROACH TO MUSLIM ISSUES. PLEASE DON'T LOOK AT US AS A MINORITY, LOOK AT US AS FELLOW HUMANS DESERVING ALL THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES THAT YOU CLAIM FOR YOURSELF. I WOULD ADVISE MY MUSLIM BRETHREN TO:

- (A) BE TRUE TO THEIR SALT.
- (B) DON'T WEAR RELIGION ON YOUR SLEEVE. LET IT BE YOUR PRIVATE BUSINESS.
- (C) DISCOURAGE GHETTOIZATION.
- (D) REMEMBER THAT DEMANDS FOR RESERVATIONS HAVE INHERENT DANGER OF MAJORITY BACK LASH.
- (E) THE WAY FORWARD IS THROUGH EDUCATION. THIS BREAKS THE BARRIERS OF DISCRIMINATION. AN EMPLOYER WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO GIVE PREFERENCE TO THE BETTER EDUCATED AND QUALIFIED.

I WOULD ALSO SAY TO MY HINDU BRETHREN:

- (A) NO CITIZEN, FAIRLY TREATED, CAN EVER BE AN TINATIONAL.
- (B) ANY CITIZEN, UNFAIRLY TREATED OR VICTIMIZED WOULD HAVE NO STAKE IN COUNTRY AND COULD BE SOURCE OF POTENTIAL TROUBLE.
- (C) MUSLIM REPRESENTATION IN GOVERNMENT SERVICES SHOULD NOT BE MERE TOKENISM. AN EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION WILL GREATLY HELP IN BUILDING THE MOSAIC OF CULTURES WHICH OUR COUNTRY REPRESENTS.

BEHOLD! WE ARE LIVING IN AN ERA WHEN GLOBAL POWER IS SHIFTING TOWARDS THE EAST. A RESURGENT INDIA CANNOT AFFORD THAT ITS SECOND LARGEST COMMUNITY OF 200 MILLION MUSLIMS LIVE IN ISOLATION, ON THE MARGIN. MY MESSAGE TODAY IS LOUD AND CLEAR. MUSLIMS OF INDIA NEED MORE THAN BARE MINORITY RIGHTS. MERELY KEEPING THE MUSLIMS IN PRESERVATION MODE IS NEITHER IN THE INTEREST OF THE COUNTRY NOR CAN IT ENSURE A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR THE COMMUNITY. WE NEED, AND PROBABLY DESERVE, MUCH MORE. WE NEED AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO NATION BUILDING AS INDIA'S SECOND LARGEST MAJORITY. NOTHING LESS, NOTHING MORE. MAY GOOD SENSE PREVAIL AND MAY ALLAH BESTOW PEACE AND PROSPERITY TO OUR GREAT NATION. AMEN! JAI HIND.

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