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UNRAVELLING THE RIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE*

K Shivarama Karanth

If birth and death are a mystery to man, so is the infinite variety of creation. The former provokes him to ask why he is born and why he dies; in other words, what the purpose of life is; the latter pushes him into a contemplation of the purpose of the world. It is natural for a person to think about his life. It is also well within the power to form a view of how he should go through the span allotted to him. But if in the same breath he also embarks upon an investigation of the end and aim of the transactions of the whole universe, it is rather daring of him. Would he be able to fathom the secrets of the large world with the same ease with which he can understand matters impinging directly upon his life? Yet a surprisingly large number of people spend their time trying to unravel the purpose of the world. Quite a few think that such a quest is the sole justification of their life. But we should recognise that the second proposition does not necessarily flow from the first.

Before we go deeper into the question, let us try to find out whether a person has it in his powers totally to unravel the riddle of the universe. To answer the question, we have first to see whether the affairs of the universe run according to any predetermined plan. Is it not the individual's duty to have a measure of himself and of the limitations of his own abilities? It is not always easy for a man to know the depth of his own mind. In order to do it successfully, he would have to lay aside his ego, his preconceptions, prejudices, and ideological predilections.

Even after doing so, it will take a long time for him to acquire the intellectual abilities to understand the life of the universe, many aspects of which are beyond the reach of human imagination. It is difficult for ordinary people, for example, to grasp the fact that the earth is a mere speck of dust in the immense collection of stars, suns and celestial bodies which is the universe, and that the human species is but one of the many myriad species that inhabit this tiny globe called Earth, that even this species is divided into different races and peoples who have grown up under varying circumstances and built up their distinctive cultures and civilisations, that an individual's mind, character and attitude towards life are the result of how he interacts with all this vast environment. How can the man who seeks to understand the purpose of life presume that life is composed exclusively of human beings or that the humans are the only species who have a claim on life? Human beings form only a part of the numerous species which inhabit this space. There are many other species which exist but which he does not know of as yet. It is so foolhardy of him to think that he has the power to form a comprehensive picture of all of life and its purpose.

* From K Shivarama Karanth's book, *Life the Only Light*, translated by HY Sharada Prasad, SBS Publishers Distributors, Bangalore.

EDITORIAL

FAKING INTOLERANCE FOR POLITICS AND PUBLICITY



Genuine intolerance mostly arises from ignorance and bigotry but, howsoever deplorable, at least it is genuine. These days the temptations offered by divisive politics, a sensation-hungry media and a permissive system of public interest litigation are encouraging an increasing number of people to take to the streets or courts over trivial issues - supposedly hurting religious or nationalist sentiments - to gain personal publicity or political mileage. In recent times there has been an alarming increase in the number of such cases.

Artists, like MF Husain, have been vilified; writers like Taslima Nasreen and James Laine have been attacked; actors, such as Khushboo, have been sued for expressing their views. Film-makers like Aamir Khan and Gowarikar have been subjected to bans and boycotts. In a very recent case, arrest warrants were issued against Richard Gere and Shilpa Shetty for what some people alleged was an improper hug. Every year, there are threats of violence to prevent the celebration of St Valentine's Day.

Fortunately, Richard Gere's case has had the effect of provoking the Supreme Court into coming out strongly against frivolous complaints of this kind. "Filing of such frivolous complaints and issuance of arrest warrants on such complaints bring a bad name to the Indian judiciary", said a Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India. Justice Katju of the Supreme Court says: "these days unfortunately some people seem to be perpetually on a short fuse, and are willing to protest, often violently, about anything under the sun on the ground that a book or painting or film etc has hurt the sentiments of their community. These are dangerous tendencies and must be curbed with an iron hand. We are one nation and must respect each other and should have tolerance."

So those upholding tolerance, civil liberties and secularism now have to deal with two types of enemies: the genuine bigoted and aggressive ignoramus, and his counterfeit, the clever opportunist who cynically exploits democratic freedoms to gain personal publicity or political advantage. For the first type, education is basically the answer. As a former Attorney General of India says: "The crucial point is that tolerance cannot be legislated nor can it be enforced by judgments. .. Education has a vital role to play in this connection. Indeed the highest result of education is tolerance."

For the second type, a number of weaknesses in society and governa

nance need to be addressed. Our main weaknesses seem to be : public apathy in the face of outrages against freedom of expression, support (tacit or otherwise) from political factions for motivated agitations, the tendency - especially of the lower courts - to countenance frivolous complaints and proneness of the media to resort to sensational reporting.

Public apathy is perhaps the most distressing of these as it implicates us all - and especially the intelligentsia. Taslima Nasreen's anguished cry fell on deaf ears and she eventually had to leave the country : "This is also the land where I have had to suffer and pay the price for my most deeply held and fundamental convictions, where not a single political party of any persuasion has spoken out in my favour, where no non-governmental organisation, women's rights or human rights group has stood by me or condemned the vicious attacks launched upon me. This is an India I have never before known."

The case involving James Laine, whose book, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, led to gross acts of vandalism against the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, was no different. As Laine noted in his piece in The Los Angeles Times (12 January 2004): "The vast majority of Indians are appalled at what happened in Pune. And yet no one has stepped forward to defend my book and no one has called for it to be distributed again."

The role of political parties has mostly been self-serving, Given the compulsions of vote-bank politics, the question of a principled opposition to acts of bigotry and intolerance does not even seem to arise.

As far as the lawcourts are concerned, changes are already visible in the handling of frivolous litigation. The imposition of deterrent fines for irresponsible litigation is bound to have a salutary effect.

The role of the media is somewhat ambivalent. It has a natural commitment to freedom of expression but, in its pursuit of sensational news it gives wide publicity to the antics of goons and bigots who attack freedom of speech - and wide publicity is what they are after in any case. Obviously, there can be no question of curbs on the freedom of the media; and in a commercially competitive situation self-regulation becomes a difficult proposition. It would be unrealistic to expect any significant change. As elsewhere in the world, ours is becoming a jaded society relentlessly pursuing entertainment and sensation. For the media the most profitable course of action, in the words of TS Eliot, is to: "Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled/ With pungent sauces, multiply variety/ In a wilderness of mirrors."

Vir Narain

GANDHI, RELIGION AND INDIAN NATIONALISM*

Ram Puniyani

The Gandhi anniversary this year 2007 has been very special. With UN declaring 2nd October as the International Day for Non-Violence, with the renewed interest in Gandhi all over the globe one needs to revisit the Father of Indian Nation and his yeomen contribution in the articulation of the concepts of non-violence and nationalism in Indian context. At another level his own unique definitions and practice of religion and definition of God as truth and non-violence have their own matchless place in the history of human thought.

Even before coming to India, the Mahatma had sharpened his philosophy and political methods. When he returned from South Africa, India was in the grip of religiosity and broad masses were part of the churning process due to the on going social changes. Broadly they were not yet major part of freedom movement. Gandhi on one hand had the exposure to liberal British political system and on the other had experienced the repressive South African regime, which was practicing apartheid. In India the social changes were slow to come by. The elite through different political formations dominated political process at that point of time. We had Indian National Congress, mainly espousing Indian nationalism, where the elite were the main participants. In Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, the landlords and princes were the core participants, later they were joined in by those few who came from the background of modern education. They were not from the landed gentry but they did develop political ideologies suiting the interests of feudal classes. Gandhi's decision, to launch non-cooperation movement, and to involve broad layers of society, alienated some of elites from within Congress. Those from communal organizations were not concerned about freedom movement anyway. Some from the Congress left in due course of time to join the communal formations. Gandhi was firm on the involvement of whole nation in the process of national movement.

This ensured that our freedom movement would emerge as the biggest mass movement not only of India but any time in the World. This had the participation of people of all the religions, castes and of both the genders. This movement was also to define the contours of Indian constitution while laying the path to freedom from British colonialism. His major opponents were in Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, which later were joined in by the RSS. These formations were reflecting the interests of landed gentry and upheld the birth based caste and gender hierarchies. He faced the tough task of taking all the sections of society along to the path of Independence of the nation. In this, those on the side of secularism and democracy had some differ-

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ences with him, but their common point of acceptance was the values of democracy and secularism. His differences with Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh are highlighted by sections of society to the limit of exaggeration. They deliberately overlook that the grounds of agreement on major fields of political terrain did exist and were and are crucial in understanding the diverse paths towards modern India. The Poona Pact with Ambedkar did deprive the dalits of separate electorate, but it also kept them in the fold of emerging India. The separate electorate to Muslims did in a way led to the foundation of Pakistan.

He did not make efforts to save the life of Bhagat Singh who was given the death penalty by the colonial powers. Here he was sticking to his principles of non-violence, which for him was the central credo of value system.

His differences with Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha and RSS were more on the fundamental issues. These political formations were for Religion based nationalism, Muslim and Hindu. Subtly they were also upholders of birth based caste and gender hierarchy. These were the differences, which were used by the British to partition India. His central place in the freedom movement and his espousing the cause of all did get hostile reaction from Muslim communalism and Hindu communalism both. These formations projected him to be against their religion, while his opposition was not to religions but to the politics in the name of religion. Nothing could be more contradictory in the approach to religion, than the approach of communalists and Gandhi. The communalists, both Muslim and Hindu, used the religious identity of their religion, by-passing the issues related to values and social reform. They used it to exclude the 'other', while Gandhi on the other hand saw religion mainly as a moral force, a set of values, which should guide the individual in her/his life. He hardly talked of identity and his religion was innovatively inclusive of the other.

While Muslim League talked of Islamic Nation, Pakistan, and Hindu Mahasabha/RSS talked of Hindu nation, Gandhi talked of secular India, articulating the aspirations of majority of the country. He wanted religion to be a private matter for the individual, "In India, for whose fashioning I have worked all my life, every man enjoys equality of status, whatever his religion is. The state is bound to be wholly secular", and, "religion is not the test of nationality but is a personal matter between man and God, and," religion is a personal affair of each individual, it must not be mixed up with politics or

national affairs". It is clear that while communalists saw religion as the dividing institution, Gandhi in his unique way, more in continuation with Bhakti and Sufi traditions saw religion as the ground which united people, "I consider myself as good a Muslim as I am a Hindu and for that matter, I regard myself as equally good a Christian or a Parsi. This quote of his has to be seen along with his two other more often cited quotes," "For me, politics bereft of religion is absolute dirt, ever to be shunned", and "politics divorced from religion is like a corpse, fit only to be burnt." (all quotes from Gandhi and Communal Problems, CSSS, 1994 pg 6). This again is so exceptional in its innovation in understanding. Here by religion he meant its morality aspects not just the ones related to external identity.

While he had differences from Ambedkar, he took up the cause of untouchables in his own way. Ambedkar hammered his point in an uncompromising way and Gandhi did his all to take the eradication of untouchability far and wide. As secularization process had not gone far in the country which was/is in the grip of religiosity, he realized that policies and values laced in the language of religion will reach the people in an effective way. His contribution in the eradication of this evil of untouchability cannot be underestimated. His use of the word Harijan for the untouchables was again in tune with his language, which he devised to communicate with the masses. It was not that he wanted to humiliate them by using a separate derogatory term for them. It was to lift them up in the popular perception

At the same time Ambedkar correctly rebelled against the rigid chains of prevalent Brahminic Hinduism, Gandhi wanted to take along the majority of social sections towards the process of reform. At this point the Hindu communalists were talking of values of Manusmriti, we are already having the best of social laws in this book, they claimed. There are also incidents when people like Savarkar also worked for temple entry for untouchables, but such moves are mere exceptions. His impact on the process to improve the condition of women reached all over, at a time when the communalists were putting all obstacles for women coming out for education and to participate in social life. It is no surprise that we do not see women's participation in the communal organization while National movement led by Gandhi has huge participation by women, and there are illustrious women who led by example in the fold of national movement. The divide between Gandhi and communalists, both Hindu and Muslim, was not merely for the political goals; it ran deeper, to the way of looking at society. It was about the approach to the social and human values.

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MY SITUATION

Tasleema Nasreen

NSS Honorary Associate TASLIMA NASREEN has been under incredible pressure from Islamic activists for many years now. They don't like what she writes and they are determined to punish her. Exiled from her native Bangladesh by death threats, she thought she had found a safe haven in India. But even there, the fanatics are pursuing her, and for her own safety she has been removed to a safe house, where she is a virtual prisoner. She has recently been hospitalised, but is now back in her enforced isolation. Here she explains her situation.

Where am I? I am certain no one will believe me if I say I have no answer to this apparently straightforward question, but the truth is I just do not know. And if I were to be asked how I am, I would again answer: I don't know. I am like the living dead: benumbed; robbed of the pleasure of existence and experience; unable to move beyond the claustrophobic confines of my room. Day and night, night and day. Yes, this is how I have been surviving.

This nightmare did not begin when I was suddenly bundled out of Calcutta – it has been going on for a while. It is like a slow and lingering death, like sipping delicately from a cupful of slow-acting poison that is gradually killing all my faculties. This is a conspiracy to murder my essence, my being, once so courageous, so brave, so dynamic, so playful. I realise what is going on around me but am utterly helpless, despite my best efforts, to wage a battle on my own behalf. I am merely a disembodied voice. Those who once stood by me have disappeared into the darkness.

I ask myself: what heinous crime have I committed? What sort of life is this where I can neither cross my own threshold nor know the joys of human company? What crime have I committed that I have to spend my life hidden away, relegated to the shadows? For what crimes am I being punished by this society, this land? I wrote of my beliefs and my convictions. I used words, not violence, to express my ideas. I did not take recourse to pelting stones or bloodshed to make my point. Yet, I am considered a criminal. I am being persecuted because it was felt that the right of others to express their opinions was more legitimate than mine.

Does India not realise how immense the suffering must be for an individual to renounce her most deeply-held beliefs? How humiliated, frightened, and insecure I must have been to allow my words to be censored. If I had not agreed to the grotesque bowdlerisation of my writings by those who insisted on it, I would have been hounded and pursued till I dropped dead. Their politics, their faith, their barbarism, and their diabolical purposes are all intent on

sucking the lifeblood out of me, because the truths I write are so difficult for them to stomach. How can I—a powerless and unprotected individual—battle brute force? What have I to offer but love and compassion? In the way that they used hatred to rip out my words, I would like to use compassion and love to rip the hatred out of them. Certainly, I am enough of a realist to acknowledge that strife, hatred, cruelty and barbarism are integral elements of the human condition. This will not change; and how can an insignificant creature like me change all this? If I were to be eradicated or exterminated, it would not matter one whit to the world at large. I know all this. Yet, I had imagined Bengal would be different. I had thought the madness of her people was temporary. I had thought that the Bengal I loved so passionately would never forsake me. She did.

Exiled from Bangladesh, I wandered around the world for many years like a lost orphan. The moment I was given shelter in West Bengal, it felt as though all those years of numbing tiredness just melted away. I was able to resume a normal life in a beloved and familiar land. So long as I survive, I will carry within me the vistas of Bengal, her sunshine, her wet earth, her very essence. The same Bengal whose sanctuary I once walked many blood-soaked miles to reach has now turned its back upon me. I am a Bengali within and without; I live, breathe, and dream in Bengali. I find it hard to believe that I am no longer wanted in Bengal.

I am a guest in this land, I must be careful of what I say. I must do nothing that violates the code of hospitality. I did not come here to hurt anyone's sentiments or feelings. Wounded and hurt in my own country, I suffered slights and injuries in many lands before I reached India, where I knew I would be hurt yet again. For this is, after all, a democratic and secular land where the politics of the votebank imply that being secular is equated with being pro-Muslim fundamentalist. I do not wish to believe all this. I do not wish to hear all this. Yet, all around me I read, hear, and see evidence of this. I sometimes wish I could be like those mythical monkeys, oblivious to all the evil that is going on around me. Death who visits me in many forms now feels like a friend. I feel like talking to him, unburdening myself to him. I have no one else to speak to, no one else to whom I can unburden myself.

I have lost my beloved Bengal. No child torn from its mother's breast could have suffered as much as I did during that painful parting. Once again, I have lost the mother from whose womb I was born. The pain is no less than the day I lost my biological mother. My mother had always wanted me to return home. That was something I could not do. After settling down in Calcutta, I was able to tell my mother, who by then was a memory within me, that I had indeed returned home. How did it matter which side of an artificial divide I was on? Now, I do not have the courage to tell my mother that I have been unceremoni

ously expelled by those who had once given me shelter, that my life now is that of a nomad. My sensitive mother would be shattered if I were to tell her all this. Instead, I have now taken to convincing myself that I must have transgressed somewhere, committed some grievous error. Why else would I be in such a situation? Is daring to utter the truth a terrible sin in this era of falsehood and deceit? Is it because I am a woman?

I know I have not been condemned by the masses. If their opinion had been sought, I am certain the majority would have wanted me to stay on in Bengal. But when has a democracy reflected the voice of the masses? A democracy is run by those who hold the reins of power, who do exactly what they think fit. An insignificant individual, I must now live life on my own terms and write about what I believe in and hold dear. It is not my desire to harm, malign, or deceive. I do not lie. I try not to be offensive. I am but a simple writer who neither knows nor understands the dynamics of politics. The way in which I was turned into a political pawn, however, and treated at the hands of base politicians, beggars belief. For what end, you may well ask. A few measly votes. The force of fundamentalism, which I have opposed and fought for many years, has only been strengthened by my defeat.

This is my beloved India, where I have been living and writing on secular humanism, human rights and emancipation of women. This is also the land where I have had to suffer and pay the price for my most deeply held and fundamental convictions, where not a single political party of any persuasion has spoken out in my favour, where no non-governmental organisation, women's rights or human rights group has stood by me or condemned the vicious attacks launched upon me. This is an India I have never before known. Yes, it is true that individuals in a scattered, unorganised manner are fighting for my cause, and journalists, writers, and intellectuals have spoken out in my favour, even if they have never read a word I have written. Yet, I am grateful for their opinions and support.

Wherever individuals gather in groups, they seem to lose their power to speak out. Frankly, this facet of the new India terrifies me. Then again, is this a new India, or is it the true face of the nation? I do not know. Since my earliest childhood I have regarded India as a great land and a fearless nation. The land of my dreams: enlightened, strong, progressive, and tolerant. I want to be proud of that India. I will die a happy person the day I know India has forsaken darkness for light, bigotry for tolerance. I await that day. I do not know whether I will survive, but India and what she stands for has to survive.

Source: NSS Newline 8 Feb 2008



THE SECULAR ROAD TO HELL

Ramananda Sengupta

Secularism.

I have always wondered how such a seemingly innocuous word has turned into such a politically loaded noun in India. By definition, the word essentially means separating religion from matters of state. 'We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens,' goes the first line of the Preamble to our Constitution.

But hold on a second. The original framers of our constitution did not put the word Secular there. It was added by the Indira Gandhi government during the Emergency, through the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976, along with 58 other changes. The word 'Socialist' too was added, while 'Unity of the nation' was changed to 'unity and integrity of the nation.' Perhaps, just perhaps, it was well intentioned. But the road to Hell, they say, is paved with good intentions.

Also read: 'Secular' Muslims want Taslima back in Kolkata | Temple demolitions: Why is our govt mum?

After having inserted the word, however, the 'secular' Congress Party blocked all subsequent attempts to officially define it. And that has been the bane of our polity - and our nation - since then. Because without a clear definition, secularism means nothing. Or rather, it means different things to different people. For politicians, it means liberty to play vote bank games based on religion. In the same way that VP Singh, the 10th Prime Minister of India, brutally and callously divided the nation along caste lines for political mileage in 1990. For religious leaders, it means liberty to exploit politicians for their own petty gains, in return for assuring them the vote of 'their people.' For the common man, it means confusion, chaos and often violence spawned by the viciously divisive 'Us and Them' philosophy promoted by our religious and political leaders.

Attempts were even made recently – on the basis of something called the High Level Committee for Preparation of Report on Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India, better known as Rajinder Sachar Commission Report — to introduce this division among the most secular institutions in the country, the Indian Army. Thankfully, the Army would have none of it.

But we haven't heard the last of that yet; because reservation for minorities is seen as a sure way to get their vote.

This divide and rule policy that our politicians practice ensures that We the People of India, as the framers of our constitution so grandly described us, cannot agree even on things that are obviously good for us all. Like secularism as the dictionary defines it.

Instead, even as we proudly tout our so-called secular credentials, successive governments have clearly used religion for political gain.

But how can we be a secular state when we have separate laws based on religion?

How can we be a secular state when the government selectively funds pilgrimages and religious institutions?

How can we be a secular state when the government allows schools and colleges to have quotas based on religion, and actually tries to extend that to the corporate sector and even to the armed forces?

How can we be a secular state when politicians campaign on purely religious platforms, and win?

And most importantly, how can we be a secular state without clearly defining what it means?

Yes, we are certainly better off than some of our neighbours, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, and perhaps even Nepal, till recently known as the only Hindu kingdom.

Pakistan and Bangladesh (and a host of nations in the Persian Gulf and Africa) proudly declare Islam as their state religion, and make no pretence about being secular.

Who killed 254 Hindus in Gujarat? ‘Let us all salute Narendra Modi’ Pakistan was born because Indian Muslims — egged on by the devious departing British — demanded a separate state for themselves. And despite separating from Pakistan in 1971, Islam is the state religion of Bangladesh too. Which explains why the non-Muslim population in both these nations is rapidly dwindling.

Our politicians, however, in order to prove that we are secular, and of course, in order to garner our votes, have gone to the other extreme, taking steps which can easily — and in most cases correctly — be construed as “minority appeasement.”

Things have reached such a pass that whoever uses that last phrase is immediately branded as 'anti-secular' and a right wing bigot. Things have reached such a pass that some years ago, some Muslim men prevented firemen from rescuing a woman from a burning Kolkata tenement, saying it would be against their religion to let an unknown male touch her. The woman burned to death. Instead of booking the men for murder, as any 'secular' state would have, however, the West Bengal government grandly declared that they would induct women fire fighters to assist in such cases.

This peculiar brand of secularism trumped free speech, also enshrined in our Constitution, when it came to Taslima Nasreen, a rather insipid but feisty writer who invoked the wrath of the mighty Maulanas of our Islamic neighbour, Bangladesh.

Her crime? To attest that "If any religion allows the persecution of the people of different faiths, if any religion keeps women in slavery, if any religion keeps people in ignorance, then I can't accept that religion."

Taslima fled, and finally landed on Secular India's shores. But not to be outdone, our very own Maulanas too started baying for her head. And we all know what happened since: Goodbye free speech. Hello secularism.

Many many moons ago, I came across an old school friend of mine whose family owns a large, upmarket tailoring shop in Kolkata. He was going to get married, he told me; for the third time. "My Maulana has told us that being a democracy, we can turn India into a Muslim country purely on the basis of votes. And we will. Perhaps not today. But someday, our children will rule, for sure. Nothing can stop us," he said matter of factly, before going on to explain how that would be a wonderful thing, where the rule of God and the rule of the land would be synchronised. A land where everyone could live without fear, and so on. At that time, I had laughed out loud, saying that he obviously had not paid attention during our classes on "civics", where we had learnt all about "unity in diversity" and the unflinchingly Secular ethos of our nation. Today, I flinch when the word is mentioned. Secularism should be made of sterner stuff.

Source: NSS Newslines, 8th February 2008

The author is the Chief Editor of Sify.com.

The views expressed in the article are of the author's and not of Sify.com.

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ISLAM VS HUMAN RIGHTS

Roy Brown

In August 1990, the 56 member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) adopted The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam [1]. In this document all rights are seen as derived from God, and Article 24 states that: “All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic Shari’ah”. The preamble states that “no one as a matter of principle has the right to suspend them in whole or in part or violate or ignore them in as much as they are binding divine commandments”.

At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Iran, supported by several other Islamic states, pressed for the acceptance of the Cairo Declaration as an alternative to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UDHR). They partly achieved their objective in 1997 when, without discussion or debate in the General Assembly, the Cairo Declaration was included by the UN in A Compilation of International Instruments issued by High Commission for Human Rights.

Not an alternative?

Fast forward to Human Rights Day, 10 December 2007. Ambassador Masood Khan, addressing the Human Rights Council on behalf of the Islamic States, spoke glowingly of the Universal Declaration, noting the contribution to its creation made by many Muslim countries. But he then went on to claim that the Cairo Declaration “is not an alternative, competing worldview on human rights. It complements the Universal Declaration as it addresses religious and cultural specificity of the Muslim countries”.

Not an alternative? Even a cursory reading of the Cairo Declaration shows just how widely its definition of human rights differs from those of the UDHR. No “complementary” document (the word implies adding to, not subtracting from) should restrict the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Yet this is precisely what the Cairo Declaration does. Under Shari’a law a woman has no personal autonomy. A woman’s word or the word of a non-Muslim counts as half that of a Muslim man; and they are valued as half that of a Muslim man. No woman is considered an autonomous individual but needs a guardian—her father, husband, son or another male relative— and may not make autonomous decisions. Freedom of religion is limited to freedom to become and remain a Muslim. Apostasy and any actions or statements considered blasphemous are harshly punished, in some states by death.

Ann Elizabeth Meyer in her classic analysis of Islam and human rights² describes the declaration as not so much a statement of human rights as a statement of man’s responsibilities towards God. According to Meyer (p66): “International law does not accept that fundamental human rights may be

restricted – much less permanently curtailed – by reference to the requirements of any particular religion. International law does not provide any warrant for depriving Muslims of human rights by according primacy to Islamic criteria.” In the same speech to the Human Rights Council, Ambassador Khan said that “The OIC was considering the establishment of an independent permanent body to promote human rights in accordance with the provisions of the Cairo Declaration”, and he referred to a decision taken by the May 2007 Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers to work on an Islamic Charter of Human Rights, a Convention of Women’s Rights in Islam and an Islamic Covenant against Racial Discrimination. Not an alternative? Then why propose them?

Our attempted rebuttal

It was disappointing that no delegation was prepared to challenge the absurdity of Pakistan’s claim. IHEU in collaboration with one other NGO attempted to do so in the interactive dialogue the following day but our intervention was ruled “out of order” and our text stricken from the record.

Unwilling to let the matter rest, we joined the World Union for Progressive Judaism in writing to Louise Arbour, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, requesting a legal ruling as to whether the proposed charter based on The Cairo Declaration would conflict with the Universal Declaration.

The elimination of discrimination based on religion or belief

In September 2007 the European Union had attempted to introduce a resolution in the Human Rights Council on the elimination of discrimination based on religion or belief, but its introduction was deferred until December in an attempt by the sponsors to obtain the support of the OIC. Despite quite intensive negotiations, however, it became clear that no agreement would be possible. On December 14, the Pakistani delegate, again speaking for the OIC, said that differences remained on five important issues, inter alia: respect for all religions and beliefs, and respect for national laws and religious norms about the right to change one’s religion. “Hence, we dissociate ourselves from operative paragraph 9(a) because of its phrase ‘including the right to change one’s religion or belief’”. Yet this right is clearly enshrined in Article 18 of the UDHR to which all but one of the Islamic states are signatories.

In the event none of the states objecting to the resolution actually voted against it – thereby maintaining the myth of their support for universal human rights. What they did do however was abstain, safe in the knowledge that in order to be adopted any resolution requires a majority of member states to vote in favour, and their abstentions were therefore equivalent to votes against the resolution. Despite this opposition the resolution was carried by 29 votes to 0, with 18 abstentions.

Defamation of Religion

On 18 December 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution “Combating Defamation of Religions” by 108 votes to 51 with 25 abstentions. Similar resolutions have been adopted for the past seven years by the old Commission for Human Rights and by the new Council. This is the first time, however, that such a resolution had been passed by the General Assembly. The resolution expresses “deep concern about the negative stereotyping of religions and manifestations of intolerance and discrimination in matters of religion or belief”. But the only religion mentioned by name is Islam. The resolution also notes with deep concern, “the intensification of the campaign to defame religions and the ethnic and religious profiling of Muslim minorities in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September 2001”. It emphasises that whilst everyone has the right to freedom of expression, this should be exercised with responsibility – and may therefore be subject to limitations, inter alia “for respect for religions and beliefs”.

The Western delegations stood firm, however, in their opposition to this resolution. The Portuguese delegate, speaking for the EU, explained clearly why: “The European Union does not see the concept of ‘defamation of religions’ as a valid one in a human rights discourse. From a human rights perspective, members of religious or belief communities should not be viewed as parts of homogenous entities. International human rights law protects primarily individuals in the exercise of their freedom of religion or belief, rather than the religions as such.”

Notwithstanding these objections, those opposing the resolution found themselves on the losing side of a two-to-one majority in favour. The implications of this resolution for freedom to criticise religious laws and practices are obvious. Armed with UN approval for their actions, states may now legislate against any show of disrespect for religion, however they may choose to define “disrespect”.

The Islamic states see human rights exclusively in Islamic terms, and by sheer weight of numbers this view is becoming dominant within the UN system. The implications for the universality of human rights are ominous.

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IHEU has responded to claims that the “Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam” is “not an alternative” to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but “complementary” to it. In a written statement to the UN Human Rights Council, IHEU opposed any resolution that seeks to limit the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Roy Brown is IHEU representative at UN, Geneva, and former President of IHEU.

WHY AM I AN ATHEIST?

Pushpa M Bhargava

Here are the ten reasons that have left me with no other choice than to be an atheist.

1. There seems to be no place for God in our evolution. Most scientists agree that our Universe began with a “Big Bang” about 13 billion years ago. We have no way of knowing now exactly what happened at the exact moment of the Big Bang but we do know what happened from a tiny fraction of a second later. The laws of physics came into existence, then later the elements. All this led to astronomical evolution – the formation of the stars and galaxies, and black holes. Then atoms of elements came together to form molecules – chemical evolution. Even some complex molecules such as occur on our planet were formed in interstellar space; we find them in meteorites and comet tails. We can produce many of these chemicals in the laboratory under conditions that probably obtained on earth soon after it was formed some 4.5 billion years ago. We have fossils of likely life forms that go back to at least 3.5 if not 3.8 billion years. Thus the very first life on our planet – the first living cell that satisfied the criteria of life as we know it today – must have arisen from the products of chemical evolution on our planet as it cooled down sometime between 3.5 and 4.0 billion years ago. ***Once we have the primitive cell, there is no difficulty in understanding how biological evolution gave us the variety that we find in the living species around us. Where is God in this scenario?***

2. I have no problem in assuming that God was responsible for the Big Bang but after that it seems he must have died or lost total control, because everything soon afterwards followed the laws of science. So as a rational human being I have greater faith in these laws than in God since we are surely controlled by these laws today. There is not a shred of evidence to say that our universe is controlled by anything other than the laws of science.

3. How did God come in? Through our fear of the unknown. As our fear has diminished with our increasing knowledge, there has been less reason to believe in God. Today, we have reached a stage in our understanding of natural phenomena, including life, that we need no longer fear the unknown. We can say with confidence that where we do not have the answers, the answers will be found within the framework of science, if not today, then tomorrow.

4. Belief in God implies belief that man is special, something apart from the rest of the natural world. But man is not that special. He is a product of evolution from lower forms of life which, in turn, evolved from even lower forms, eventually taking us back to primitive micro-organisms which themselves must have originally been formed from non-living chemicals. Genetically speaking, we are 99 percent chimpanzee. The lowliest of bacteria make their chemical

constituents exactly the same way we do, and most of these constituents are common to all forms of life. Every living system has nucleic acids, proteins, lipids and carbohydrates. Nucleic acids are made of three simple chemical entities: a basic compound which may be a purine or a pyrimidine, a sugar which may be ribose or deoxyribose, and phosphate. Every living organism, from the lowly bacterium, *E.coli*, to the mighty elephant, including man, makes its pyrimidines in exactly the same way, using the same set of chemical reactions within the living organism.

Therefore, if man is not unique, and all life evolved from non-living materials, where is the need to put man in a special category as a special creation of God?

5. Belief in God implies belief that God put man on Earth pre-formed, as stated in the Bible for example. But in light of what I have stated above, this is clearly not true. Man has been around for less than 2 million years, and all who are living in the world anywhere today are, probably, the progeny of a single woman (but not a single man!) who lived in Africa just about 200 000 years ago.

6. Those who believe in God, believe that God has a grand design. There is not a shred of proof in favour of this belief. In fact, all the evidence is against it. This is well argued in the book, *Chance and Necessity*, by the Nobel prize-winning French scientist, Jacques Monod. In this book, Monod presents incontrovertible arguments in support of the view that there is no design in the universe or in evolution.

7. Belief in God kills one's initiative. If you believe that you can pass an examination by going to the Hindu temple of Lord Venkateshwara in the South Indian town of Tirupati and promising that you will sacrifice your hair to it (a common Hindu practice) if you pass the examination, there is no reason for you to study. If you believe that everything that is going to happen to you is pre-ordained, why make an effort to do something different from what may come your way without any effort? I believe that my destiny is in my hands and depends on the initiatives that I take. I simply don't need God or his blessings or his help. I just prefer to depend on myself. I think it has paid rich dividends.

8. The practice of religion is highly dependent on the clergy and their role. I believe that clergy of all religions are guilty of seven deadly sins:

- (i) They survive on misinterpretation of the teachings of the founders of their religion or its other respected leaders.
- (ii) It was clergy that invented miracles and attributed them to the founders of the great religions.
- (iii) The clergy invented the concept of "divinity" which implies that one's life is totally controlled by what the "divine power" has ordained – while it is the

clergy alone that can help you change the course of your destiny.
(iv) One of the paramount duties of the clergy everywhere has been first to discover or invent a legend and then present it as history.
(v) From the time of Galileo and Giordano Bruno until today's America – where the President supports the teaching of creationism in schools – we see the clergy attempting to replace evidence and truth by belief and myth.
(vi) The clergy and their followers have always been the greatest promoters of war and conflict. Examples are the Crusades, the religious conflicts in Ireland and Central Europe, and the problem between India and Pakistan. The clergy impart feelings of superiority to their followers and then subtly convert such feelings into belief in the right to govern the inferior "other".
(vii) The clergy keep their followers bound to laws that often have no basis in reason, Humanism or human rights.

9. I am willing to accept, as a matter of freedom of belief, a personalised view of God, which implies a direct personal relationship between the believer and his or her god. What I find difficult to accept is the institutionalisation of this belief involving clergy. This is tantamount to the imposition of unreason on people; it contradicts the value of evidence. Such an institutionalised belief in evidence-less faith is bound to lead to irrational decisions in every sphere of life, private or public.

10. There are enormous contradictions between science and religion. There is no compatibility whatsoever between science on the one hand and the dogma that defines each religion on the other. Science is irretrievably entwined with every aspect of our existence. We cannot escape believing in science and its product – technology, without which today's existence would hardly be possible. It is not widely understood that belief in science implies rejection of religious dogma – of which the existence of God is an important component. Science denies the existence of the supernatural: be it miracles, extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance, or psycho-kinesis. None of these phenomena have ever been unequivocally proven to exist. Whenever evidence has been presented in favour of any one of them, it has been invariably shown to be flawed. Religion is based on revelation – something which cannot be tested or repeated. Science has no place for revelation. The scientific method is based on reason and logic, and every scientific truth is testable and verifiable, and does not depend on the whims and fancies of individuals. Science allows one to make testable predictions. If these predictions turn out not to be true, the theory or law on which the predictions were based must be reviewed. Science, therefore, often progresses by disproving. This is simply not true of religion. The scientific method has a built-in corrective. There are no correctives in religion. Science is dynamic; it evolves and progresses by modification of what has existed earlier. By contrast, religion is static and cannot be modified. When a belief is modified in science, people give up the previous belief. By contrast, when a new religion emerges, it does not replace earlier religions. Science always looks into the fut-

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ure and the unsolved problems are always the most inspiring. The inspiration for those who are religious and believe in God comes from the past. One of the most important attributes of science is the right that it gives every one to question, while prescribing the conditions under which the questioning may be done, so that one excludes trivial questioning which has no basis. Religion has no place for questioning its premises which often have no rational, or even ethical or moral basis.

A scientist can say without any feeling of guilt or shame, “I don’t know.” Religious leaders would not be leaders if they did not claim to know everything and have answers to every question. There is only one science in the world. Science is, therefore, truly international. On the other hand, one of the great problems we have in India is that we have many religions which are often at war with one another. One way in which we often glorify religion is that it gives us values. The identity of a religion is not based on its values – which are common to all religions; it is based on the irrational, unscientific and unproven components of its dogma. The common values that all religions preach are indeed the values that science generates.

A question that is often asked is, “What about free will?” Indeed this was the question that racked the minds of some of the leading intellectuals of the last century, till Francis Crick gave a possible explanation in his book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*. There are indeed many unanswered questions and unsolved problems in science. That is what makes science exciting. For example, we don’t understand the basis of memory. However, we do know that whenever solutions are found they will be compatible with science. And when they are found, they will probably give rise to more questions! The problems that humanity faces, such as poverty, deprivation and conflict, concern every citizen of the world. What is important is to recognize that the only way to solve these problems is to adopt a scientific approach, taking facts into account. That is where we have failed. And that is where the role of those who believe in science and in reason becomes important. Truth is often one but lies can be any number. I believe in the power of truth to which science is committed – but religion is not. And I believe that a small number of people committed to truth, to Humanism, to science and to rationality can bring about a major change in the way that we live and function – a change that can be the starting point of the evolution of a peaceful world, characterized by equity, full opportunity for expressing the creative abilities of all, and abrogation of all conflicts.



Dr. P M Bhargava was the Vice-Chairman of the Knowledge Commission of the Govt of India. He is a Life Member of the Indian Humanist Union. Reprinted from the International Humanist News, February, 2008

FEMALE FOETICIDE IN INDIA

Zoya Zaidi

Probably the day Homo Erectus became Homo Sapiens, the male must have realized he was physically stronger than a female, may be they fought tooth and nail to begin with, till the woman realized that it is no use trying to win over the man physically and gave in, the man must have gloated that day in triumph at subjugating the female; he is still gloating! He must have begun to assert himself very early in the history of mankind; he is still asserting. A woman must have started to 'give in' centuries ago; she is still 'giving in'. A woman must have started to suffer from the day she developed the gift of feelings and of emotions; she is still suffering. Man has come a long way: He has become 'civilized', but his instinct to dominate over the weaker sex has remained, in fact it has turned into an obsession, a need, with time; With 'civilization' the tools of oppression have become more 'civilized' too, more and more sophisticated, cultivated, advanced and techno savvy; In fact the whole process of advancement of society can be traced in the process of suppression of women.

It must have started with the need to possess -land, property, women- and gain control over (land, property, women), it was free for all to begin with: whoever was powerful got the maximum property, land, and then women may be, to serve him, provide 'comfort' to him, provide 'satisfaction' to him... With property must have come the need to control and manage people, the need to rule, and with the need to rule the desire to have power, with power the show of power, and what better way could there be to show power than the display of property. Property must have become a tool of 'show of strength'. With of strength comes the need to assert strength. To bully the weak, do dispossess them of their little power to become more powerful. With power and property greed must have taken root. Not satisfied with what he already had, Man must have wanted more. With the craving to have more, first petty squabbles with neighbours, then bigger conflicts with far off territories, then alliances with neighbouring territories must have started.

With growth of property, the instinct to bully must have grown resulting in unprovoked assaults. Attacks on weaker and smaller territories must have started, this must have led to wars of first smaller then big scale. The need to maintain an army must have arrived. That must have led to importance of being stronger of the two sexes, the importance of being a man. With wars the importance of women must have decreased, and the power to possess them must have increased. The beast in man must have resurfaced when he must have subjugated a territory, he must have looted and possessed (read raped) women; not satisfied with just that, he must have brought them over along with him and forcefully kept them and used them, to 'satisfy' his needs, his sexual greed. This must have led to enslaving of women and slowly to counting of a woman as a spoil

of war, as a part of won-over property, as slaves, as a commodity, as a 'thing' to be possessed and used at will.

So, slowly a woman was reduced to a slave, a thing, a 'possession', rather than a human being. Like all the rules of governance, rules regarding women and their conduct (read the determination of how much would be their limits, of how much they could be 'allowed' to do) must have been laid down. A whole campaign aimed at the subjugation of women must have started. And slowly and gradually a woman must have been relegated to a secondary status. She must have become a property of the physically powerful man. Over the years her physical weakness must have been exploited to make her psychologically weak as well. Gradually over many years a girl must have been indoctrinated to feel inferior, not only physically but psychologically, intellectually and mentally as well. She must have been deprived of property rights- either at the very onset or laying down of rules or later deprived of her earlier enjoyed rights. With that it must have become easier to boss over her, manipulate her, use her, oppress and suppress her and finally dispossess her completely. Losing all rights she must have lost the power, or made to give up the power of decision-making. Losing that she must have become a toy at the hands of man which he can make sport of as he pleases. Being relegated to the rank of a commodity she must have become a means of trading in commodities and getting more property. Commodities, which he can exchange (e.g. by marriage alliance), keep or reject at will, get rid of when not required, either by abandoning or later on by even killing.

Each time a man must have gone further in repressing a woman, he must have taken steps to justify his action, to appease his conscience and mollify others in the society. After depriving her of all power and property, man slowly and gradually must have started taking her as burden to be looked after and spent time and money on. This must have led her to becoming undesirable. While on the other hand in order to carry on possessing things and property even after death, the need of an heir, a son must have increased. Now when giving off (giving off!) their daughters in marriage, the groom's people must have demanded that the father also provide for the daughter's maintenance, since she was a financial 'burden'. This must have led to the dowry system. As dowry system must have taken root, the daughter must have come to be looked upon as something ("something"!) to be disposed off, and in doing so, even pay for being disposed off, pretty heavily. So, a girl became a potential financial drain on a man. Somewhere down the line it must have become a matter of prestige too, the more the dower the richer and higher in status of its giver. So, paying beyond means must have stepped in as a matter of honour, a show-off. This must have slowly led to girl hatred First it must have been a girl or two killed on the sly, then man must have become bolder and bolder still. Female infanticide must have become an accepted norm, practiced first discreetly,

then blatantly. With the laws coming up against female infanticide, they must have again gone back to doing it secretly on the sly. And then they discovered technology, and a boon came into being; and with it the corruption...like the discovery of atom bomb: once it came into being there was no stopping it...And now we have Ultrasound for determining Sex of the Foetus, a simple and noninvasive technique. The slogan (of Ultrasound Sex-determination Centres) is: "Spend five hundred rupees now save five lakhs later" (meaning thereby: get a female foetus aborted now, to later save dowry money).

It is a matter of grave concern that today in India we are discussing a thing like "Female Foeticide". This term in itself envelopes myriads of meanings: It smacks of the fact that a) A girl is killed before she is born; b) That sex of a foetus is determined to be that of a female; c) It points to the fact that there is Technology privy to this heinous crime; d) There are doctors involved in first determining the sex of the baby, then carrying out abortion; e) There is crime involved in violating not one but many laws: the Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) 1994 Act, the Section 307 IPC (of attempt to murder) along with crime of abetment of murder etc.

It speaks of a whole system gone corrupt; a whole society involved in conspiracy against women, against destruction of half the population of society, at the hands of monstrous practices becoming more and more rampant in a society fast losing its secular, social, and humanistic fabric. In today's materialistic world a woman is fast being relegated to the rank of a commodity she has become a means of trading in commodities and getting more property, marriage has become more of a business alliance than a sacred bond between two people.

Amniocentesis first started in India in 1974 as a part of a sample survey conducted at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, to detect foetal abnormalities. These tests were later stopped by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), but their value had leaked out by then and 1979 saw the first sex determination clinic opening in Amritsar, Punjab. Even though the women organizations across the country took up cudgels to put a stop to this new menace, but in face of the MTP (Medical Termination of Pregnancy) Act, they were helpless. This is because the amniocentesis test was claimed to be used for detection of foetal abnormalities, which were permitted by the MTP Act. According to the MTP Act, if any abnormality is detected between 12 to 18 weeks of gestational period in the foetus, an abortion can be legally carried out up to 20 weeks of pregnancy.

In the absence of any law, all the central government could do was to issue circulars prior to 1985, banning the misuse of medical technology for sex determination in all government institutions. This however, led to the mushroom-

ing of private clinics all over the country. In 1986, the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection (FASDSP), a social action group in Mumbai, initiated a campaign. Succumbing to public pressure, the Maharashtra government enacted the Maharashtra Regulation of Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1988, the first anti sex determination drive in the country. This was followed by a similar Act being introduced in Punjab in May 1994. Both these were however repealed by the enactment of a central legislation, that is, The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 28 September 1994. This banned sex determination tests all over the country. The Act carries a three-year imprisonment sentence and an Rs10, 000 fine for offenders. The implementation of this act initially faced problems as monitoring agencies had to be identified at all levels. It was therefore only in 1997 when the responsibility was delegated, that actual implementation of the act began. Despite this, there is still a social complacency among all sections of society, which needs to be addressed. Since the advent of Ultrasound and detection technique of determination of sex of the foetus came into being, 10 million female Foetuses have been aborted in India, according to a study conducted recently in India, the first systematic study on female Foeticide by an Indo-Canadian team. A shocking picture emerges-every year, about 50,000 unborn girls-one in every 25-are aborted. As a result of which the number of girls has actually gone down drastically in India.

In 1997 UNPFA report "India Towards Population and Development Goals", estimates that 48 million women were 'missing' from India's population. The report states "If the sex ratio of 1036 females per 1000 males observed in some states of Kerala in 1991 had prevailed in the whole country, the number of would be 455 million instead of the 407 million (in the 1991 census).). Thus, here is a case of between 32 to 48 million missing females in the Indian society as of 1991 that needs to be explained." The 1991 censuses is only indicative of this disturbing trend when elsewhere in the world women outnumber men by 3 to 5 percent. There are 95 to 97 males to 100 females in Europe. The ratio is even less, 88 males to 100 females, in Russia, mainly due to casualties of World War II. According to the UNICEF, 40 to 50 million girls have gone missing from the Indian population since 1901 as a result of systematic gender discrimination in India. As per consensus 2001, the child ratio in Punjab is 793 girls to 1000 boys. This is the lowest child ratio in the country (the average being 927 girls to 1000 boy) and as compared to 1991 consensus it shows a decline of 82 points. As is evident from the above-mentioned figures, the situation is getting from bad to worse. So, much so that today India tops the list as far as illegal abortion and female foeticide are concerned. Of the 15 million illegal abortions carried out in the world in 1997, India accounted for 4 million, 90% of which were intended to eliminate the girl child.

On 8th March 2006 New Delhi Governor, launched a campaign against selective abortions. In Delhi alone the situation is “becoming alarming”: only 814 girls are born for every 1000 boys in the Capital; while the 2001 census showed Delhi’s sex ratio to be 865 for age group 0-6 years, against the national average of 927. This has consistently increased over the years: ‘Saheli’, a Delhi based NGO, has reported that between 1978-82, nearly 78, 000 female fetuses were aborted after sex determination tests in the country. During 1986-87 alone, 30, 000-50, 000 female fetuses had been aborted. During 1982-92, the number of sex determination clinics multiplied manifold and nearly 13, 000 sex determination tests were estimated to have been done in seven Delhi clinics themselves.

The irony of the whole situation is that in the 10 years since India enacted the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies (PNDT) Act, not a single person was convicted till very recently in the beginning of April 2006 only two people were convicted, fined and awarded five years of rigorous imprisonment. Only 23 cases have been registered under this act so far, according to India’s Health Minister Ambumoni Ramadoss’ s statement in the parliament in the year 2005. As the world celebrated 11th July as the World Population Day, we were helpless observers to the phenomenon of 60, 000 million girls ‘missing’ from the worlds second most populated Nation in the world: India! Ironically the theme of the year 2005-2006 World Population Day was declared by United Nations to be ‘Equality Empowers’! The UNFPA Executive director, Thoraya Obaid, had remarked then, “Equality benefits equal opportunities to education, societies become more prosperous, where women have equal access to income, assets and services, families become healthier. When both men and women are able to participate equally and exercise their full rights.

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Poem

GIRL UNBORN

Zoya Zaidi

My friend who came from the nearby village,
Told me this story of human pillage,
That, whenever a baby girl was born,
It was, more often than not, declared
“Still-born!”

And as a little boy, he often wondered:
Did he hear the baby cry?
Or, it was just
a figment of his imagination?
Did he see a certain gleam?
In the midwife’s dark-black eyes,
As she patted a bulge by her side...
But, why was she unable to sleep,
Tossing and turning in her bed,
In nightmarish dreams all night...?

‘Till one day the “Dai” went crazy!
Vacant eyed, she sat with her baby!
The GIRL was a
“Still-Born-Baby!”

But, did he notice the familiar blue?
On the neck of the baby, true!

They say an act oft-repeated
By force of habit,
Can spell your own “doom”,
If you don’t cap it!!!

And now they say:
There is Ultrasound!
You don’t “need” the “Dai” around...

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Book Review

NEHRU'S HUMANISM*

RC Mody

It is now nearly seventyfive years since books and anthologies covering the life, work and thoughts of Jawaharlal Nehru have been published. These include the three foremost ones by Nehru himself (referred to in the book under review as the 'trilogy' viz Glimpses of World History, Autobiography and Discovery of India) and many more by an array of writers in India and abroad. There are a number of other works large portions of which are devoted to Nehru, although their titles do not reflect it (a few examples are 'Inside Asia' by John Gunther, 'Indira' by Katherine Frank, 'Nice Guys Finish Second' by B K Nehru). In such a context, it is admirable for A P Saxena to have come out with another meaningful and readable book on Nehru which has something different to say about him.

The world knows Nehru as a legendary fighter for India's freedom, a statesman and a visionary. The book brings out after painstaking effort on the part of the author that, underlying all these aspects of his multi-faceted personality, is a basic trait from which the rest sprout: his humanism. Many know him as a man of compassion, one full of the milk of human kindness, but this book brings out how deep-seated was his humanism from which these traits emerged.

The book starts with an account of Nehru's interactions, in June 1920 (almost at the inception of his political career) with the suffering peasantry in the burning heat of eastern UP. 'Looking at them and their misery and (yet their) overwhelming gratitude' (to one who sympathised with them) filled Nehru with a feeling of "shame and sorrow": "shame at my own easy and comfortable life and sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India." These are the feelings, obviously not of Nehru the nationalist or statesman, but of one who was deeply human. As the author proceeds, he describes Nehru's accounts of his life in prisons in which he spent some ten years of his life. The treatment in jails was harsh and deliberately painful but Nehru, the author says, 'never complained personally about his treatment either to the authorities or outside' On the other hand, he viewed with pain 'the crushing of the spirit, humanity and freedom, of his fellow jail inmates'. These became the core defining concerns of Nehru's humanism. Elsewhere, the author describes how, inspired by Gandhi's ideals, Nehru took to immersing himself in self-suffering as an article of faith, and as strength giving; and following, in effect, the master's guidelines on preaching and practising voluntary poverty.

**Jawaharlal Nehru-the Spirit of Humanism (2008) by A P Saxena*

(Anne Books India: Rs 395:PP 161)

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After dilating on different aspects of Nehru's humanism, the author raises the question as to what the term "humanism" actually means. He gives a number of definitions which go to show that it had meant different things at different times. Apparently unable to fit Nehru's humanism into any one of them, he concludes that, in the given context, it is the spirit of humanism rather than its precise definition that mattered. To him Nehru emerges as a humanistic thinker with his lifelong commitment to reconstruct Indian society enlisting the cooperation and consent of the people, and with his declared lack of interest in religion, lack of belief in the supernatural. Despite such an attitude towards religion in a country so religious, he earned respect for his thought not only of the intelligentsia but of people at large. The author brings out the linkage between Nehru's commitment to democracy and his humanism. In many ways he viewed democracy as tolerance, "tolerance not merely of those who agree with us but also those who do not agree with us."

Though orthodox religion as generally practised and dogmas were abhorrent to Nehru, it may not be appropriate, the author says, to call him "irreligious". He never abandoned the quest for truth. In this quest, the book mentions Nehru's meetings and thoughtful discussions with philosophers like J Krishnamurthy and Andre Malraux. (with the latter he remained in touch for nearly 25 years). Krishnamurthy, despite differences in thinking, found Nehru 'a very fine and sensitive mind'. None inspired Nehru more than Gandhi and he always recalled Gandhi's words about wiping 'every tear from every eye'; yet he once recorded how Gandhi's continued talk of seeking God's help irritated him 'exceedingly'.

Nehru was deeply committed to science and technology for pulling millions out of the mire of poverty, yet he was deeply conscious of the limitations of science, its inability to measure intangible human factors. He raised questions about the intrinsic limitations of science to 'quantify key eternal human values: truth and goodness'. He was sure that science 'did not answer all questions'. He was clearly on humanist terrain when he said 'The value of human personality diminishes in a mechanical society'. He looked forward to a 'synthesis between humanism and the scientific spirit, in a kind of Scientific Humanism'.

During the long years of freedom struggle, Nehru was not merely fighting to throw alien rulers out of the country but laying the foundations of 'a just, ethical, humanitarian state'. His spirit of humanism led to the firm belief that independence must mean equal opportunity for all..He was also apprehensive of the inevitable growth of centralization to an extent that human factor i.e. the freedom of human being almost vanished. Calling Nehru a 'Universal humanist' the author gives examples of his work against exploitation of Bolivian economy by US bankers (1928), his protests against the cruel Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1936) and travel to civil war torn Spain (1938). Thus,

many are the angles from which the author has described Nehru's humanism. And yet his enormous work can be summed up in a single sentence in the book which reads as follows: "... Nehru always considered man as the determining factor in his approach to humanism and the core feature of his creed enveloping the mind and the spirit".

The book is illustrated with some rare photographs, all which show the human face of Nehru. Despite its comprehensive coverage, however, there is one aspect of the book on which the reader could expect something more from the author: it is Nehru's work during his years of power, on his ideas of 'a just ethical and humanitarian state'. The author has no doubt told us that he made himself accessible to people, despite objections from people around him. But he does not tell us much about his efforts at things like eradication of illiteracy, making available minimum necessities of life to the common man whose cause he espoused all through his long public career, and like matters. Or were they considered outside the scope of the present study?

R C Mody is President of the Humanist Endowment Fund Society, and a Life Member of the Indian Humanist Union.



** Continued from Page 359*

The divide between Gandhi and communalists, both Hindu and Muslim, was not merely for the political goals; it ran deeper, to the way of looking at society. It was about the approach to the social and human values. A section of Hindu communalists perceived Gandhi as the "biggest enemy of Hindus.". Nathuram Godse symbolised this section. He killed the father of nation. He began his career as the trained pracharak of RSS and was later to become the Secretary of Pune Branch of Hindu Mahasabha. The paper he edited had the title, *Agrani* and was subtitled as *Hindu Rashtra*. Even today while Hindu right pays lipservice to the Mahtama, they do not regard him as the father of the Nation, and look down upon his principles of non violence as being emasculating to Hindus and so should be forgotten. Their discomfort during the present revival of interest in Gandhi's values is palpable through their reaction as seen in number of list serves and web sites run by them, and through other expressions of theirs'.

Today, sixty years down the line, the world has come far. The increase in violence all over the world, the politics wearing the clothes of religion has intensified the 'Hate other' ideology. Can we look up to Gandhi to confront the misuse of religion for political agenda of the mighty at global as well as local level? Can we pick up some of the values from him rather than just bypass him or merely pay lip service to his ideals?



**Reproduced from ISP October 2007 by permission of the Author. ram.puniyani@gmail.com
Humanist Outlook - Spring 2008*

NEWS AND NOTES

Islamists Demand That Taslima be Kicked Out of India

The All India Minority Forum said last week that writer and NSS honorary associate Taslima Nasreen should be kicked out of the country because she has "hurt the sentiments of Muslims".

"Taslima has not only hurt the sentiments of Muslims, but she has defamed the Indian Constitution. The government should not extend her visa and she should move out of this country immediately," president of the Forum Idris Ali told a rally organised by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

Nearly 500 delegates from all over the country spoke in the open session. Some speakers emphasised the need to preserve the Sharia law which, they maintain, is the only way to preserve the identity of the Muslims in general. "There have been several attacks against the Muslim personal law. This is not at all desirable. The Muslims in this country have their own identity and that can only be preserved by the law framed according to Holy Koran," assistant general secretary of the Board Md Abdur Raheem Quraishi said.

Source: NSS Newslines 7 March 2008

Malaysian Apostasy Case Shows Why Secularism is so Essential

A Muslim-born woman in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who joined a banned sect, has been sentenced to two years in jail for renouncing her religion. An Islamic Shariah high court judge in the eastern state of Terengganu ruled that Kamariah Ali is still a Muslim.

"The court is not convinced that the accused has repented and is willing to abandon any teachings contrary to Islam," according to local judge Muhammad Abdullah.

Last month, Kamariah, 57, a graduate of Cairo's Al Azhar University, was convicted of declaring herself an apostate after she and 58 others were arrested in July 2005 for following the teachings of the banned Sky Kingdom, a local sect claiming to promote inter-faith harmony.

Kamariah's lawyer, Sa'adiyah Din, said her client has asked the court to consider a lighter sentence. Kamariah was convicted of apostasy in a separate case in 1992 and had served a jail term.

Source: NSS Newslines, 7 March 2008

Teen Pregnancy Greatest Threat to Mankind: Expert

A World Health Organisation (WHO) academic has branded unwanted teenage pregnancies following bouts of binge drinking the “Greatest threat to mankind”, saying that it is contributing to the world’s unsustainable population growth. “Every single week a new city of 1.7 million could be created, and the current global population growth is unsustainable,” news.com.au quoted John Gillebaud as telling a conference in Canberra via video link from London.

“Each year, there are around 80 million unwanted pregnancies and 30 million of these are aborted. The inconvenient truth is, the world is already overpopulated and soon may experience shortages of food and water,” he added. He also blamed reckless alcohol consumption for the rise in unwanted teenage pregnancies. “Alcohol causes more unwanted teenage pregnancies than anything else,” he said.

Liberal MP Mal Washer backed Gillebaud’s suggestion that binge drinking was the leading cause of unwanted pregnancies among teenagers. He also applauded Rudd government’s \$53 million binge drinking strategy, which includes a \$20 million television, radio and internet campaign to apprise youngsters of the consequences of the bringe drinking.

“I fully back the Rudd government on this issue, and I am sure it will go a long way in addressing the violenve and irresponsible behaviour that binge drinking causes,” he said. A British Parliamentary report on global population growth also claims that women with numerous pregnancies and lifelong childcare find it difficult to participate in education, employment and politics.

Source: Times of India, 20th March 2008

Gays Bigger Threat Than Terrorism: US Lawmaker

An audio clip on popular video-sharing website of an Oklahoma lawmaker’s screed against homosexuality, which she called a bigger threat than terrorism, has outraged gay activists and brought death threats rolling in.

“The Homosexual agenda is destroying this nation, OK, it’s just a fact”, Republican Sally Kern said recently to a gathering of fellow republican outside the capital. “Studies show no society that has totally embraced homosexualities has lasted, you know, more than a few decades. So it’s the death knell in this country.”

“I honetly think it’s the biggest threat our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam, which I think is a big threat,” she said.

Source: Times of India, 20th March 2008

Humanist Outlook - Spring 2008

LETTERS

Punjab bans rationalist literature

Dear friends,

There is something, we want to bring to your attention.

In whichever states in India, Bhartiya Janta Party (backed by Right-wing Hindu fundamentalist organisations – Vishva Hindu Parishad and Rashitriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) or their allies are in power, there has been a common practise of attempting to crush the voices of dissent and rational thought, of banning the literature, documentary films, silencing the writers and journalists through state machinery.

Punjab, a north Indian state, is the most recent example of this undemocratic, fascist and dictatorial act. And Megh Raj Mitter, founder of Tarksheel (Rationalist) Society and a prominent Punjabi writer (honoured with the title of Shiromani Lekhak, Punjab state's highest award for writers) is the latest to bear the brunt.

On Thursday afternoon, Punjab Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal (leader of Shiromani Akali Dal, a party supported by the BJP), imposed an "immediate ban" on four books, including Sri Lankan Dr Abraham T. Kovoor's renowned 'God, Demons and Spirits', translated into Punjabi by Megh Raj Mitter and his associates in 1985. And Punjab Government is said to be gearing up to take the legal course of action (like arresting the authors, confiscating the copies of books and banning the publication) as well.

Unfortunately, the Punjab government has forgotten the vital role these books have played in the development of rational temperament among the masses of Punjab. Ironically, about two decades back, with a written letter the state government had recommended these books for the libraries of the government run schools for the scientific knowledge they imparted. Also, when Mitter was awarded the Shiromani Lekhak Award by the Language Department of Punjab government in 2001, the citation of the award ceremony prominently hailed these very books. Today, fundamentalist forces, patronised by the government, are threatening to attack Megh Raj Mitter and other rationalist activists. A few rationalist activists were even attacked in the last few days.

Thus, through this letter we appeal all the humanist, democratic, rationalist and secular people to come forward to defend the right of freedom of speech and expression.

It is not just a question of a few individuals or organisations, but also a matter of protecting the shrinking democratic space in India. We appeal to you to condemn this heinous act at every possible level. Kindly forward this letter to as many people as you can, write an appeal to President, Prime Minister of India, CM Punjab and Governor of Punjab.

Regards
Surjit Talwar
(Editor, Tarkbodh)
Source: IHEU website <http://iheu.org/node/3119>

Hot Issue

I must compliment Vir Narain for an excellent editorial in the Autumn 2007 Issue of the Humanist Outlook.

The editorial is more like a well researched article on the role of religion, bringing out the ravages of the past, the situation today and the fears of tomorrow. The issue is hot, it is already there with all the forces of hatred. An issue as important as the question of environment and global warming. We need to wake up to this reality.

Mahesh Kapoor,
New Delhi.

THE HUMAN CONDITION	
Eleven Eminent Thinkers Speak	
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Habib Tanvir	Ravinder Kumar
Jane Wynne Willson	H.Y. Sharada Prasad
Irfan Habib	Prabhat Patnaik
B. R. Nanda	M. N. Venkatachaliah
Deepak Nayyar	
<i>edited by Prakash Narain</i>	
<p>In this turbulent era, our disquiet and concerns in respect of what may be called the Human Condition, are many. In these Narsingh Narain Memorial Lectures, delivered by eleven eminent speakers, some of these concerns have been brought out. The reflections here, however, do not merely express the fears and the misgivings. There are many suggestions on public policies and individual attitudes. Some of these may work; some may not no one knows. But the message and the vision is clearly one of hope. As a statement, quoted in his lecture by Chief Justice Venkatachaliah, puts it: "My friend you are asking for the hour of the night; it is already morning."</p>	
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