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India-Pakistan: Friendship as Enmity

While one can barely deny the importance of the episode of Noor Fatima from Pakistan receiving medical treatment in Bangalore, an excavation into our mass psyche would perhaps reveal something extremely disturbing. Treating Fatima was not a usual apolitical medical practice. It is rather an unusual political gesture of benevolence arising out of a profound sense of otherness based on a clash of national identities, Indian versus Pakistani. In the otherwise spontaneous gesture to negate the otherness of her there is simultaneously an unconscious affirmation of her otherness premised on national identity.

IRFAN AHMAD

The unbounded enthusiasm and joy expressed both in Pakistani and Indian media over the successful open heart surgery in Bangalore (on July 15) of Noor Fatima, a Pakistani baby, has been widely and uncritically hailed as a new milestone of friendship on the otherwise bloody road of Indo-Pak relations. This episode, otherwise of hardly any significance, has assumed such tremendous importance that even CNN telecast (on July 21 in Amsterdam) a special report on it. Indian media, particularly the English newspapers, reported her updates almost on a daily basis. Photographs of children holding bouquets and best-wishes cards for Fatima were published (*The Pioneer*, July 16). Karnataka's information minister visited hospital to enquire about her health (*Deccan Herald*, July 16). And it was not uncommon to hear the middle class Indian intelligentsia wedded to peace in south Asia fervently talk about it. 'Look, they are so much like us'.

While one can barely deny the importance of this episode, an excavation into our mass psyche would perhaps reveal something extremely disturbing. It would not be unjustified to ask: What is so unique about Fatima getting medical treatment in a Bangalore hospital? Do not dozens of Indians undergo such an operation every day in different hospitals of India? Do their stories of treatment even get mentioned in the media? For instance, a poor, illiterate person from Bihar travels all the way to Bangalore or New Delhi to get medical treatment. Why does not her

poignant story get into the media headlines even as she faces humiliation and deception right from the village lord through her train journey up to the mal-treatment by officials, for instance, of New Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Science?

A moment's reflection would tell us that the story of the Bihari woman getting treatment is nothing unusual. It is 'natural'. By contrast Fatima's treatment is 'unnatural' and 'unusual'. She belongs to the nation of enemy; yet those who do not belong to her nation can treat her. Fatima and her parents may not have undergone the same hardship the Bihari woman may have: yet the latter is not a story worth reporting. Given media's unofficial principle to report things dramatic and unusual, her story does not fit the bill. She may be a country bumpkin coming from a proverbial corrupt, and backward territory of Bihar but she is far from an enemy. She can be butt of joke or heartless derision for the 'cultured' Delhites or Bombayites. But seldom is she an object of hatred as an enemy. Fatima, by contrast, belongs to the territory of a nation unanimously regarded as an enemy and hence an object of suspicion bordering on hatred. Treating her is not a usual apolitical medical practice. It is rather an unusually extended political gesture of benevolence arising out of a profound sense of otherness based on a clash of national identities, Indian versus Pakistani. In the otherwise spontaneous gesture to negate the otherness of her and probably bring her closer to us – this is what the media seeks to show through its excessive coverage of Fatima rather

than the Bihari woman – there is simultaneously an unconscious affirmation of her otherness premised on national identity.

It is this feeling of Indian nationalism anchored on an oppositional identity of 'the other' vis-à-vis Pakistan and the vice versa that explains the media attention to Fatima's treatment. It seemingly tends to defy the deeply entrenched belief – some might argue far more sacred than belief in religion – of most Indians and Pakistanis as being two different, nay, mutually inimical, people on both sides of the border. Ernest Gellner is quite correct in observing that so pervasive is the influence of nationalism that people think nationally rather than rationally. One must hasten to add that nationalists around the globe present nationalism as rationalism, however. Cast against this backdrop, Fatima getting treatment in India almost appears like a Jew embracing a German soon after the second world war, or a 'Negro' walking with a white woman in Montgomery during the pre-civil rights movement era in the US as so beautifully shown in a Hollywood film 'Far From Heaven'. To take a more recent example, it looks as common sense-defying as a Taliban commander hugging an American soldier (all the three examples could easily be reversed).

Nationalists, whatever their colour, often make a distinction between at least three sets of peoples – friends, foes and strangers. The first two are obvious. The last one is by definition liminal. For nationalists in both India and Pakistan citizens of Brazil or Kenya are thus strangers. They would, therefore, invoke neither a hearty welcome nor a hostile rejection. As a stranger a Brazilian or Kenyan getting a medical treatment in India would, therefore, have hardly made news. As a kid born in Pakistan, Fatima on the other hand is not a stranger by any standard. She clearly belongs to the nation rendered as 'the other' in the hegemonic Indian nationalist imagination. It is altogether another matter that as a kid she knows, thankfully, no nation as yet.

'Otherness' and National Identity

Where does this belief of otherness emanate from? To be sure, it is the newly created nation states called India and Pakistan after the Partition of India in 1947 that have madly struggled to create 'Indians' and 'Pakistanis' as opposed to exemplary human beings in the past fifty

years or so. In their nationalist obsession to create Pakistani (based on Islam) and Indian (based on Indian civilisation predominantly defined in Hindu terms by the currently ruling Bhartiya Janata Party) the respective nation states have fashioned by design hostility in their citizens against each other. The generation that witnessed Partition had still some vivid experiences of shared cultures and common civilisational roots. With its near passing away and onset of new generation in both the countries there was hardly anything left of that shared cultures. Memories, though fading, definitely were there. But that too were allowed, rather forced, to extinguish or go into dim oblivion. The post-Partition generation on either side of the borders thus grew on the powerful myths of mutual otherness manufactured by respective nation state and filtered down either by their mighty institutions such as schools, colleges and media or mass-based political-religious parties in the civil societies. As a result, on both sides of the border new generations have developed a sense of hostile otherness towards each other.

For many on both sides of the Indo-Pak border the numerous wars waged between the two countries were the first ever lesson in nationalism. They hardly knew of a nation before. It is commonly believed that feeling of nationalism based on otherness causes war. From this perspective war is thus only a culmination of antagonism of a wide variety between the two already accomplished nations. There is a good enough reason to unsettle such a popular view. Far from being a result of an a priori nationalist solidarity, war is indeed its cause. The Indo-Pak war of September 1965 demonstrated it so clearly.

Barely six months after the war, Naim Tahir, a writer in Pakistan, expressed, perhaps unconsciously, this view in such a ruthlessly categorical way. Reflecting on the role of writers in a crisis like war he wrote:

Our experience before the crisis were merely of an individualistic nature, at most shared by a few thousands or a few lakhs.... We now feel to be one nation more than ever before. In fact, if we want to become one nation the experience of this war will have be of the utmost significance in the achievement of that goal [italics mine, quoted in Naim 1969: 276].

Tahir's is not an idiosyncratic view. One can cite more or less a similar view from the Indian side too. Without multiplying examples, one should, however, ask: what is Tahir's feeling of 'one nation more than

ever before' pitted against? He and his colleagues defined it essentially against India, nay a 'Hindu' India. The century old ties with India were denied. Indeed India became the other personified and the self of the 'one nation more than ever before' was instead stretched, rather too generously, to include Persia and the Arab world (ibid).

Likewise for the new generation on both sides of the border the war afterwards (including the Kargil War) created a nation. The national identity based on violent notion of otherness periodically kept on inventing nation. But far more important than irregular wars it was the regularised institutions of schooling that ceaselessly produced the otherness. Following the gory Partition institutions of schooling and higher education were established to create 'Pakistanis' and 'Indians'. On the Pakistan side books were hurriedly printed on a mass scale to transform people into 'Pakistanis'. But what it meant to be a Pakistani? A coherent positive definition was indeed hard to discover. It could, then, only be defined in opposition to Indian (read Hindus; Muslims in India either did not exist or if they did they mattered little). Gul Shahzad Sarwar-authored textbook, a compulsory reading for graduates of all subjects, christened *Pakistan Studies* thus contends:

When the Hindu was contemplating his past, he thought of Kautallya [sic] (the author of *Arth-Shastra*); when the Muslim looked back, he recalled Al-Farabi. The philosophical past of the two peoples was so different as to obliterate any prevailing community of thought.

...Muslims looked to Mughal buildings as their artistic heritage. It was the Taj Mahal of Agra or the Red Fort of Delhi or the Royal Mosque at Lahore, which stirred their imagination and excited their pride. On the other hand, the Hindus were equally

impressed and affected by the architecture of south Indian temples, the Rajput or Kanga schools of painting, or the Gandhara school which was definitely Hindu in origin and nature [Sarwar 1989: 17-18].

Taking this argument of perennial otherness to a more conclusive height he argues that Pakistan was created to further Muslim distinctiveness. "It is obvious that the purpose of establishing a separate homeland for the Muslims", writes he, "was to safeguard the Islamic ideology" (1989: 26). It raises two interlinked questions. First, what is Islamic ideology? His answer is a political order based on Divine Laws and the one that existed during Prophet Muhammad's time, *Nizam-e-Mustafa*. Second, who is it to be safeguarded against? Sarwar mentions, occasionally explicitly but more often implicitly, that it is the Indian Hindus against whom Islamic ideology is to be safeguarded. Millions of students have thus been indoctrinated over generations along this ideology of hostile otherness. In this context the role of religious seminaries, firmly established and widely dispersed in civil society, cannot be underestimated. As of now more than a million and a half students study in over 10,000 madrasas in Pakistan [ICG 2002:2].

On the Indian side too the process of producing an Indian identity in opposition to Pakistan has not been any different in essence. Unlike in Pakistan in India this, however, remained largely a force outside of the state's arena until the dramatic rise of BJP. With its rise since the late 1980s, the process of producing an Indian was ruthlessly set in motion. And much like in Pakistan, the BJP defined this Indian identity essentially against a Muslim other, Pakistan being its embodiment par excellence and Indian Muslims being either irrelevant or at best silent agents of the latter. Having captured power in 1991 in

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UP, it changed the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. The textbooks prepared in 1991 for primary schools by Basic Shiksha Parishad (BSP), an organ of UP state education department, clearly reflects the kind of nationalist Indian it seeks to produce through its pedagogical arsenal. Stating the larger mission behind its textbooks, BSP says:

Its [textbook's] subject matter aims at enhancing knowledge of male and female students and also to develop their potential and abilities so as to make them *useful citizens for the nation* and society [italics and translation mine, quoted in Siddiqui 2000: 2].

What is being taught to the children to become useful citizens for Indian nation? In several of its textbooks, mostly relating to humanities, it defined Indian nation exclusively in terms of Hindu culture. Muslims either do not figure at all in this definition or when they appear they do only as 'the other' of Indian nation. A chapter titled '*Hamari Dharohar*' (Our Heritage) in a textbook for standard three, *Hamari Dunya, Hamara Samaj* (Our World, Our Society) offers a clever style of indoctrinating students in a simplistically monolithic 'Hindu' history. "In our nation Chandragupta Maurya, Ashok, Chandragupt, Vikramaditya et cetera rulers", says the text, "were born" (Ibid: 5). By deliberately omitting other rulers of India it undoubtedly wants to inject into young budding minds that only those mentioned were India's rulers. In the Indian nation thus rulers such as Sher Shah Suri, Akbar and Shahjahan simply did not exist.

When Muslim or Islam is mentioned it is done in a manner that it emerges as quintessentially 'the other' of Indian nation. In part two of the book cited above it mentions Guru Nanak as follows:

Initially, Guru Nanak was under the influence of Islam. He also went to the famous pilgrimage of Muslims in Mecca. But he was pained to see the ostentation and deception (*Aadambar*) in the name of religion there. Guru Nanak opposed religious ostentation and deception [Ibid: 5].

In a beautifully smart way, the lines quoted above seek unambiguously to suggest that Muslims' religious belief to perform pilgrimage to Mecca is a sign of ostentation and deception. In so doing Muslims are thus rendered as the other of Indian nation defined solely in Hindu terms. Not a single word is mentioned about Hinduism and the reasons why Nanak preferred to leave it.

BJP's hijacking of state institutions such as government schools is quite recent, though. Prior to capturing state it has been silently but rigorously spreading its anti-Muslim nationalist ideology through its thousands of schools run through the length and breadth of the country. Discredited and pushed to margin after Gandhi's assassination, the first major collective initiative of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), ideological fountainhead of BJP, was to establish a primary school at Gorakhpur in 1952. In 1977 RSS set up Vidya Bharti to bring about a better co-ordination among its chain of school. By the beginning of early 1990s its network of schools grew amazingly huge with 4,000 schools, 40 colleges and 36,000 teachers and in number next only to the government ones. In the last 50 years or so these RSS schools have produced through its declared as well as hidden curriculum 'Hindus' who define themselves only in a virulent opposition to Muslims and Pakistan [Sarkar 1994; also see RSS. Undated. *Rashtriya Jagran Abhiyan*. Folder circulated for its campaign during November 12 to December 12, 2000. In Hindi.]

Ban on Kite Flying

The latest in the production of this binary, hostile otherness on the Pakistani side is the ban City Administration of Lahore has imposed on kite flying. It says that flying kites and celebrating the century old festival of Basant are against the public interest. Though the main arguments justifying the ban are apparently economic and security related such as extravagance, fights and killing and so on, the really deeper reason is the self-created spectre of Hinduism haunting Pakistan's Muslim nationalism. "Flying kites and Basant are", declares it, "against the spirit and teachings of Islam" ('Patangbazi Ghair Islami Hai' (Kite Flying is un-Islamic), BBC Urdu. Com. 2003, July 22. http://www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/news/030722_kite_ban_court_fz.shtml, in Urdu.) From such a position, it follows then that the festival of Basant with its origin in Hinduism ('Govt Issued Notice on Petition: Ban on Kite-Flying', July 4. Internet Edition, *Dawn* 2003) would have no place whatsoever in a Muslim Pakistan. But what about flying kites?

In one of his poetic masterpieces, *Kaun Dushman Hai* (who is the enemy?), composed in the shadow of Indo-Pak war of 1965, the late Ali Sardar Jafri had skilfully

mobilised Banaras and Lahore as two glorious symbols for his dream of a war-and hostility-free future Indian sub-continent. Lahore and Banaras for him symbolised the antithesis of an aggressive nationalism paraded by ruling elites in both the countries.

Clad in flowers of Lahore's garden, you come
With fresh light of Banaras' morning we come
And then ask
Who is the enemy? (translation mine, quoted in Ahmad 2001: 407).

Sadly enough, the multicultural universe of Lahore with its proud history of cosmopolitan heritage and exemplary tolerance, much like that of Banaras, now appears to be vitiated with an exclusivist, monocultural language. But when more and more kites begin to fly over Lahore's sky and Basant is celebrated with far more passion, stories of Fatimas getting medical treatment in India would for the better cease to become sensationally unusual headlines across the border? **[BW]**

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