

Understanding the Muslim Mind

Why does a book¹ leave a mark on your mind? I think the secret lies in the subject of the book. I have not been able to think of any other reason, nor could anyone known to me think of any other reason.

There are many ways to present a theme or the subject of the book. But no theme will leave an imprint on your mind unless the message of the author appeals to your sensibilities and experience. This is why all book lovers feel that there is a time for each book in your life; such entry of the book at the 'right time' gives you a lot of insight.

Hindu-Muslim rift is a subject that has interested many movie producers and authors. It has been discussed for so many years. Even so, both the communities have, for several generations, knowingly or otherwise, imbibed very sharp and negative feelings on the minds of their children. It has been over fifty five years since the partition but the wounds have not been healed.

As for me my thoughts about the Muslim community were somewhat unclear and confused. As a child I had many Muslim friends and many were close to me; they were like my all other friends, I did not think they were any different. Some were doing well in studies and some were doing well in sports. They did not speak 'shudh' Marathi but they never spoke anything disagreeable.

On one hand my Hindu friends and I had this good experience and on the other hand we were growing up feeding on the stories of Shivaji. The stories depicted Moguls as an enemy; cunning that he was he would, like Aurangzeb, kill his relatives and even father and would commit heinous crimes against women. An image of Muslims was gradually forming in my mind. I did not have the ability to relate to my good experiences with them; the world of experience was different and the books were unknowingly shaping a hostile mind.

Sometimes an experience makes you aware of such a schism. I remember I must have been a young boy in secondary school when I accompanied my father for dinner at his friend's place. My father was a doctor and was very progressive in his outlook and influenced by western culture. He was invited by his Muslim friend for dinner. We reached their place in the evening. This Muslim family hailed from Allahabad. They spoke mellifluous Urdu and were excellent hosts. My father and his friend were engrossed in their conversation but I was ill at ease. Many eatables served to us were unknown to me. Those may have tasted well but I did not have any appetite for them. After reaching

¹ The Editor of our magazine 'Tutari' asked many managers in our organization to write about a book that influenced us. This article was my response. [March 2004]

home I vomited. My father however had enjoyed his meal. I could not digest it at all.

I realized even at that young age that the reason for my vomiting was my bias against Muslims. I remember that I also realized that my father did not have any such bias; that experience created a sense of guilt in my mind.

A guilty mind often looks for an opportunity to get rid of the sense of guilt. I felt that I unjustifiably held a bias against a Muslim family. Such a feeling is like a mouse in your house; the mouse moves everywhere, you find it difficult to get rid of him and the very awareness of his presence bothers you incessantly.

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While working in Asian Paints² I used to travel almost a hundred days in a year. I often bought a book at the Airport and read it completely during my travel. My eyes fell on a book titled 'Understanding the Muslim Mind' in the book shop at Santa Cruz airport and I searched for author's name. That was a well known book authored by Rajmohan Gandhi but I had not heard about it then. I had heard about Rajmohan Gandhi though, he was the grandson of two eminent men: Rajgopalachari and Mahatma Gandhi. I bought the book.

It contained the biographies of eight Muslim leaders. The author explained in the introduction that he has studied the lives of eight leaders and tried to understand their psyche; and attempted to reach others.

A good biographer must present his protagonist well; he must bring out vividly the turning points in his life, the influence of his period and surrounding on the development of his personality. He can not paint a larger than life picture of his protagonist and if he indulges in such glorification the readers will discard the biography.

Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Jina, Fazlul Haq, Abdul Kalam Azad, Liyaqat Ali Khan, Zakir Husain are the eight Muslim leaders whose biographies are included in the book. Jina's role in creation of Pakistan is well known, Liyaqat Ali was the Prime Minister of Pakistan and Dr. Zakir Hussein was the President of India.

But I will talk about the book a little later.

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² As Corporate Industrial Relations Manager then.

It was 11th January 1994. Some miscreants broke open the roof of Nazim³ Ali Kadri's house. Some were banging his door from outside, trying to force it open. Kadri did not open the door. The communal riots in Mumbai had taken a violent turn. It looked as if the riots were subsiding but the Kadri family lived in fear. He realized that his worst fears had come true. He hid his daughter in the toilet and locked it from outside.

The mob entered, they assaulted Kadri family with swords and knives. Kadri's wife intervened and tried to stop them but she too was not spared. They stabbed Kadri's college going son.

Kadri ran to Dr. Badwaik's Hospital carrying his son in his arms. He met a nice man in the rikshawala who took them although both Kadri and his son were bleeding profusely. They moved from Badwaik Hospital to Government Hospital in Mulund and from there to Sion Hospital on the same day for medical attention.

Kadri's wife was so worried about her husband that she did not move away from his bed in the Sion hospital at all. Terror had gripped them and they were still trying to come to terms with the reality. Kadri moved from the Hospital to his brother's home in Police quarters at Naigaum. He was safe there.

As soon as I learned about Kadri's ordeal, I went to see him. I can never forget my meeting with Kadri. He was staying with his brother in his police quarters on second or perhaps on the third floor. It was not a very well illuminated drawing room, paint had lost its colour and shine long back and was sparsely furnished. It was a very depressing milieu.

Kadri was sitting on a synthetic mat. He was wearing a lungi and had covered his body with towel. I had gone without informing him, he did not know about my visit. He saw me and was filled with emotions; he could not speak for quite some time. I also did not know what to say to him. Kadri in that state with wounds everywhere on his body was not a sight I could bring myself to see. Both of us sat there without speaking a word. Not a word exchanged but both of us were fighting back our tears.

I have seen a few men who are courageous; Kadri is among them.

"Sir, they attacked us very badly", Kadri said and turned around to show his back to me. I could see several hits of the sharp blades of weapons. A baked potato has deep cuts; Kadri's back reminded me of it. At least twenty five cuts I thought I saw. No, there is no exaggeration in this; I saw a quite a few cuts on his head too. I wondered how he survived that attack, only Allah can tell us I said to myself.

³ Nazim Ali Kadri was a worker in our Bhandup Factory.

I have seen the Hindu-Muslim violence very closely as I used to stay at Kalyan.⁴ I have seen houses set on fire. I have seen families leaving their homes and fleeing Bhiwandi. But nobody known to me was ever injured. Unless somebody close to us is injured we tend to be indifferent to violence around us. [Perhaps it suits us to be indifferent which is so unfortunate!]

Kadri's wife was not at home when I reached their home. She was at their neighbour's place. She returned hurriedly as soon as she came to know about my arrival. She went to kitchen and brought a jug of water and placed it between Kadri and me. She was returning to kitchen when Kadri called her back.

"Wait, do not go" he said. Turning to me Kadri said, "Look at her wounds". Kadri's wife showed me wounds around her neck, cheeks and on forehead. There were wounds on her back too. The assailants had hit her with meat chopper.

During the strike⁵ at our Bhandup factory I had heard a word used commonly by our workmen; it was 'Half murder'. I thought it was funny and had laughed heartily wondering how a murder can be 'half'. But now I was seeing what the workmen meant when they said 'Half murder'.

Kadri's wife refused to return to their home in Bhandup. Kadri accepted her decision and searched another residential accommodation.

Seeing his plight I felt that he needs financial help. I spoke to the union committee. I suggested that all employees including managers can contribute some amount. Nobody from union said no but they did not say yes either. If staff and workmen had collected some amount to help him I could have obtained some help from the management too. But all union committee members maintained studied silence. The irony is that Kadri was a member of that union [interestingly that was Bharatiya Kamgar Sena, a Shivsena Union] and was also a shop steward for several years. Political stance of the party had come in the way of extending helping hand to an old loyalist of the union!

The company helped by providing fifty thousand rupees. But my failure to persuade the union committee members to help Kadri makes me sad whenever I think of it.

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⁴ Kalyan is about 35 Km from Mumbai and it is a hot bed of Communal violence. Its proximity to the notorious Bhiwandi makes things worse. Curfews were not uncommon during some Hindu and Muslim celebration days. Situation has improved now, but tension remains in some areas. I stayed there for twenty-five years.

⁵ This was a prolonged and a very violent strike. Two murders and some murderous attacks on managers and workmen alike punctuated this six month strike.

One of the many causes of Muslims drifting away from the masses is a feeling of 'exclusion' .

Kadri was a member of the union for decades, but he is neglected, excluded by the same union. When you read 'Understanding the Muslim Mind' you see exclusion everywhere. I am citing from the book and from the chapter on Dr. Zakir Husain.... [See page 305]

"Because he was Vice President, Zakir Husain was besieged with invitations. Because he was polite he accepted many of them. And if he went to a place he had known before he had become so important, he would look out for the humble person there who know him in the past, a mali perhaps, or a peon or a driver, who would be too diffident to come forward on his own to greet the Vice President of India; on finding the person Zakir Husain would grasp his hand, or embrace him. If, as happened but very rarely, someone called on him thinking of what he or she could do for Zakir Husain, and was curious about what was on his mind, he was very grateful. Such persons - he told Mujib⁶ - helped sustain his faith in human nature.

India and Pakistan clashed a year later [after Nehru's death]. When the neighbours come into conflict, a Muslim citizen of India experiences thoughts that do not trouble his Hindu compatriot. He wonders, at times, whether his loyalty is being questioned; and he wonders too whether the conflict will hurt Hindu-Muslim relations in India. In Zakir Husain's case there was a third factor. A brother of his, Dr. Yusuf Husain, was a professor in Pakistan.

Shortly before the 1965 war, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, at the time an advisor to President Ayub of Pakistan, had visited New Delhi. AT a lunch given for him at the International Centre, Zakir sat in the middle. Placed to his right, Bhutto ignored him totally and talked past him to an I.C.S. officer sitting on the Vice President's left. Zakir Husain sat through the lunch without turning to either side and without an expression on his face.

A good biographer portrays his subject truthfully bringing out his strengths of his character and weaknesses. In the eight Muslim leaders essayed in 'Understanding the Muslim Mind' I could see both sides of their personalities. I understood and appreciated their dilemma and gradually my bias I guess must have vanished.

How did I acquire the bias? Is it because of reading the books on Shivaji's life or is it because of the influence of people around me? I do not think I can answer this question but perhaps all these reasons may be true, I do not think any one cause can be pin pointed.

And perhaps removal of bias may also be attributed to many reasons. Once you accept a thought, you tend to read many books or articles on the same theme.

⁶ Biographer of Dr. Zakir Husain

While writing this article I read the articles of Indian and Pakistani writers published in 'Akshar' magazine. Those articles strengthened my new attitude. But even then I would say that the impact made by 'Understanding.....' book was clear and powerful.

When the Babri masjid was pulled down I translated the introduction to the 'Understanding.....' book and published in 'Tutari' immediately. I was pleased with the change I experienced in me.

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January 11, 2004. It was sheer coincidence that Kadri had come over to my residence to meet me. Down with slipped disc, I was at home for almost two months. He had come to know of my illness and he came over to see me. We discussed about our days at the factory. Suddenly Kadri exclaimed "Oh, it was exactly eleven years ago that we were assaulted". And we remembered our meeting at his Naigaum residence.

"Did you know the assailants?" I asked him. And the answer was very unexpected. "They were not our neighbours and I did not even know them, they were strangers to us," Kadri said. "You know that I had shifted my residence to my brother's place at Naigaum. Everyday I would commute to work by 'local' train to Bhandup from Dadar. One day I boarded a local train and saw who was seated in front of me. He was the same person who had assaulted me and my family! He saw me and was surprised. He grew uncomfortable, got up and moved to the door and got down at the next station. He could not sit there and look into my eyes. Guilty mind!"

I said to myself that I can today talk to any Muslim person and look into his eyes!

Vivek Patwardhan