

A Letter to Chachaji on Hindus, Muslims, and the Gujarat Riots

My Dear Chachaji:

All of us here are shocked, outraged, and saddened by the recent events in Gujarat. The unholy nexus between religion and politics seems to have once again taken the lives of hundreds of innocent people in the very birthplace of Gandhiji. Our friends in Ahmedabad tell us that the state machinery has been openly inciting violence against the Muslims, and Sangh provocateurs were trying to disrupt even relief lines to riot-torn families. We have also seen reports of peace marchers being harassed and concerned citizens being intimidated into silence. All this, in a state where, just a year ago, civil society had responded so marvelously to the disastrous earthquake.

Don't you think there is something terribly wrong with a society where otherwise decent citizens, whether in Godhra or in Ahmedabad, can deliberately torch women and children? And law enforcement officials can stand on the sidelines making excuses for mob violence? "It is the Hindu psyche," reportedly justified one police official. 'Psychosis' may have been a more apt description.

How did we ever let things get to this stage?

Chachaji, I can almost hear you: "It is the damn politicians. Those rotten goondas who run our country!"

But are *they* the real culprits?

Deep down, who is letting those politicians and the so-called religious leaders get away with mass murder? I think it is *you* and *I*, ordinary citizens, who refuse to confront our misconceptions, ill feelings and, sometimes, outright hostility towards other communities, even during peaceful times. When violence does break out, we stand on the sidelines, mute spectators, shackled to our biases, unable to stir. I think it is we who provide the Oxygen in which extremists thrive and wreak havoc on our communities. *We* are the guilty party.

An unfair indictment, you think? I have thought about it long and hard. And my mind keeps harking back to our long discussions on how, through their silence, ordinary Germans allowed the Nazis to co-opt them in their platform of hatred for the Jews. Don't you see an eerie parallel in the deafening silence of civil society in Gujarat following its own '*kristallnacht*'?

Remember how often you and I used to debate international politics (much to Chachiji's consternation)? But when is the last time you and I had an honest discussion about our Muslim citizens? Yes, yes, I think I know your views on the matter. I have heard you and Papaji often talk about 'those Mussalmans.' I have even sheepishly laughed at bigoted jokes by my dear cousins. But the fact of the matter is that I never had the courage to confront any of you with my true feelings. Why unnecessarily hurt the feelings of my near and dear? *Guilty* on Count Two.

Chachaji, all that changed last week as we witnessed the mayhem. I have decided that enough is enough. I shall hold my tongue no more! I am convinced that true harmony will come to India only when we start openly embracing one another's humanity. And that is not going to happen by merely talking to, or at, the 'other' community. **We must begin an honest dialogue about**

our prejudices *within* our own community--with parents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters and cousins, and neighbors. And hope like hell that saner voices in other communities will do likewise.

Shall we then, you and I, begin today by placing our own biases on the table?

Chachaji, I have always known you as a well-read, fair-minded person, who in his heart believes in a secular, tolerant, democratic society. Yet, when it comes to our fellow Muslims, you have always seemed ambivalent. And, if I may say so, ever since BJP came to power, that ambivalence seems to be slowly turning into resentment. I can understand the trauma that your generation went through with partition, the wars with Pakistan, the situation in Kashmir and, more recently, the bane of terrorism. But laying every real or imagined historical wrong at the doorsteps of *today's* Muslim citizens? That is what the Sangh Parivar has been trying to do for decades, with few takers. And now, even those who should know better are beginning to casually toss around terms like 'self-hating Hindus' and 'pseudo-secularists' in their discourses. It gives me the sinking feeling that they are succeeding, after all, in their sinister plan to steal our souls.

"If they don't like it, let them go back to Pakistan!" How often have we heard this from relatives and friends around the comfort of our dinner table? I don't recall anyone ever objecting. We could have. We could have told them that, like you and me, Indian Muslims too grew up in their own villages and towns, with their own parents and grandparents, and with their own set of prejudices. That no one has the right to question the legitimacy of an entire community in a democratic society. And when we set them apart, we are making a bold leap of faith that the Hindu community is a monolith, an illusion that VHP has been trying hard to foist upon us. Chachaji, if we don't say NO to demonizing an entire community today, can 'Marwaris go home' and 'Tamilnadu for Tamils' be very far behind? Uncomfortable as it may be, let us face the reality: India is home to the third largest Muslim community in the world, and they are here to stay.

What about Ram Uncle's favorite grievance, "Why should only Muslims be allowed four wives and Triple Talaq?" I wasn't joking when I used to snap back with, "Uncle, aren't you happy with auntie?" It is one thing if we Hindus feel that laws regulating our personal lives are unjust --we have had plenty of opportunity to modify them, and we have. It is quite another when we deliberately attack another community under the guise of the Uniform Civil Code. Does Uncle seriously believe that polygamy among Muslims is the norm, and monogamy among Hindus universal? Has he forgotten those 'two-timing' relatives of ours, whose antics he used to humorously refer to as 'Krishn Leela'?

Sure, a uniform code would be a wonderful thing to have. But, per our constitution, any initiative for legal reform must come from the minorities themselves...if only we, the majority, would give them the breathing room for debate. When we haven't been able to reform ourselves on matters of child marriage, dowry harassment, treatment of widows, and pernicious discrimination against Dalits, fifty-two years after adopting the constitution, what gives us the right to expect Muslims to change their traditions overnight?

"Indian cricket has sunk to rock bottom," bemoaned Praveen Mama the other day, as we were watching a one-day match together. For a man being swept away by Hindutva, he wasn't just trashing the Indians, but was *actually* admiring Pakistani gamesmanship! Thank goodness, the Sena folks hadn't gotten to him yet. At the end of the day, we couldn't resist the temptation to

ask him how he would have reacted had an Indian Muslim expressed the same views as he had. He stared at us for a long moment and didn't say a word. But I think he understood. Understood how absurd it is that the game of Cricket had become the ultimate litmus test for a Muslim's 'loyalty.' Do you see what an awkward position we have placed our minorities in? Unlike Mamaji, they can't even appreciate a good game when they see one, let alone talk about their friends and relatives in Pakistan, without their loyalty being questioned.

And what does our society hold out for one's 'loyalty'? A fair shake in our civic space?

I remember our experience in buying a flat last year. As we were getting ready to sign the papers, we had casually inquired about the other owners. "Don't worry sir, we don't sell to any Muslims," came the cocky response. We were shocked! As we picked up our papers and stormed out, I don't think the poor sales lady understood what the fuss was all about. The episode reminded me of Mummy, who years ago had hurried home from her chit-chat with neighbors to anxiously share the gossip that a Christian family was moving in next door. "At least they are not Muslims," she had consoled herself! Poor Mummy has sure come a long way since, but I am not so sure of the rest of our society. So I wasn't in the least surprised when our old neighbor Chari Saab, who only a few years ago was ready to disown his daughter for marrying a Muslim boy, asked me for help the other day in securing employment in the U.S. for his son-in-law. "He's having a tough time with his Mohameddan name," he confided.

So much for 'appeasing' our minorities.

I know what you are thinking. Why is only discrimination against Muslims deplorable, when our society seems to practice discrimination at every possible level (FCs vs. BCs vs. OBCs vs. SCs/STs vs. the State vs. FCs...and so on)? It's just this: we don't demand any other community to prove their 'loyalty' again, and again, and again.

Speaking of appeasement, Chachaji, I notice that you too have started to use that term lately. But, tell me, why is the term used only in the context of minorities, and only when it comes to Congress-bashing? Aren't political parties of every stripe and color pandering to this or that voting block all the time? Why, even the BJP made flimsy attempts recently (and failed miserably) to woo the Dalits. So, why is appeasement so sinister when it comes to Muslims, when it is the name of the game in every democratic society? Only, here in America, we call it lobbying. If, on the other hand, by appeasement, they mean that Muslims are getting preferential treatment over Hindus, what a laughable claim, when every reasonable socio-economic indicator presents a sorry picture of the state of India's Muslims. Frankly, appeasement is a RSS red herring and, unfortunately, many of us are falling for it.

That brings me to Chachiji, the gentlest human being that I have ever known. Anything and everything I know today about our traditions and our religion, I owe it to her. Those wonderful stories from Ramayan and Mahabharath that she used to tell us as children are some of the best memories of my childhood. Thanks to her gifts of Amar Chitra Katha, our children too have acquired a great sense of our open and tolerant culture. They can hold their own on a discussion of the psyche of Karna or the subtle meanings behind Lord Rama's controversial actions.

As far as I am concerned, Chachiji couldn't hurt a fly if she tried. So when she would talk about her wonderful tailor, and used to add a postscript, "Poor chap, he is a Muslim," it never used to bother me. I wasn't going to give her a lecture on patronization and stereotyping. When she used to come home from her Veda classes and tell us how even a Dalit or a Muslim can be a

Brahmin, “if only he is pure of heart,” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. How was I ever going to explain to her that may be Muslims didn’t aspire to Brahminhood? I never tried. Of late, she has been talking about how great Hindu society might have been, but for all those brutal Muslim invasions. Having just returned from a trip to Somnath, how could I argue with her? But when I asked her yesterday what she thought of the Gujarat violence, and she said, “What can we do? *They* did it first,” it hit me like a ton of bricks! She was now on *their* side! Methodically, step by step, they had managed to steal my dear Chachiji’s soul too.

What am I to do now? Tell her grand children that her Ram, whom they remember so fondly, is the same Ram Lalla who wants a shrine built for him ‘at any cost?’ Even if it be a mountain of dead Indians? That the Mandir she so aspires is to be built with bricks of hatred and the mortar of intolerance?

Chachaji, when the framers of our constitution defined a secular India, they tried their best to put in checks and balances to protect our minorities, without at the same time taking away the rights of the majority. Reasonable people may disagree with their definition of secularism, but I think they did a masterful job of understanding what it takes to preserve the integrity of our nation of nations. But even they couldn’t have foreseen how one of the most egalitarian constitutions in the world could be rendered impotent overnight by our entrenched personal prejudices for the ‘other.’ As I write this, Gujarat appears close to a constitutional meltdown. A highly communalized citizenry seems to have taken the law (or should I say lawlessness) into its own hands, with the acquiescence of the State. The cancer seems to be spreading to other states now. And no one—not the Central Government, not the judiciary, not even the National Human Rights Commission--seems ready to challenge the “Tyranny of the Majority.”

As a social activist from the frontlines of Gujarat told us, “This is not the time for us to feel ashamed of being a Hindu, or a Muslim, or an Indian. It is our silence that we should be ashamed of.”

Chachaji, don’t you think it is time for you and I to break *our* silence?

Shall we make a start by proclaiming from the rooftops, as loudly as we can, that the Sangh Parivar does not represent us? That they profane Hinduism? Shall we, for the sake of our country and our future generations, reclaim our souls *now*, before it is too late?

I remain (I hope) your favorite nephew.

Raju

Email: communalharmony@hotmail.com