

COMING TOGETHER

ABDUS SAMAD

I begin with the sacred name of Allah, the all-powerful, the merciful. I do not speak as someone who knows everything. I speak with the realization that there are many, who know more than I. At the same time I feel that it is my duty to faithfully present the opinions of a community which is not much represented in the various forums of our country.

India is the cradle of religions

The history of this great country of ours has been that of harbouring and encouraging plurality in all spheres of life. We cannot say that there was only one language spoken here, or only one religion was followed here, or people of only one race lived here. Many religions emerged and took roots in our country. Amongst the religions that were born here, the foremost is the very ancient sanatana dharma, or Hinduism, but there is also Buddhism, which emerged in India a few millennia ago and spread to large parts of the world, there is Jainism, which is as ancient as Buddhism and attracts large numbers of Indians even today, and there are the relatively more recent religions, like Sikhism, Virasaivism, and so on. All these religions sprouted here and grew into large trees providing the cool shade of devotion and faith to vast numbers in India and abroad. The plurality of these religions hardly ever disturbed the equanimity of India, it only added to her greatness.

There are not many countries in the world that have the honour of having given birth to even a single religious thought of widespread acceptability. We have not only given birth to a multitude of religions, many of which are amongst the great religions of the world today, but we have also accepted religions that were born elsewhere and have provided them the opportunity to flourish and

grow on our soil. This is a rare achievement that we can be legitimately proud of. There is hardly another country in the world that can match our record of evolving and letting grow such a variety of religions and faiths.

We fought together for independence

India has a civilisational history of many thousand years. But at the time of domination by the Europeans a kind of slavishness had spread over our country. In order to remove the yoke of this slavery our leaders waged a glorious struggle for independence. All Indians, of all regions and all religious persuasions, participated in this struggle. It cannot be said that the people belonging to any one particular religion alone were active in the struggle, or that the people of any one class alone led the struggle, or that any one community alone made sacrifices. All of us fought together to liberate India from the European dominance. All of us participated in this struggle. All of us contributed our might.

In this context it is good to remind ourselves of the first war of independence that we fought in 1857, and which the Europeans and some of our own historians keep contemptuously referring to as the sepoy mutiny. It was a time when everyone in India, particularly in the north, joined together to declare war against the British, who by then had usurped power over much of India. And in this war of independence the people of India unitedly chose Bahadurshah as their leader. They did not choose him because he was, nominally though, still the Mughal Emperor of Delhi. The warriors for independence did not put their faith in him because he was, in the pejorative terminology made current nowadays, “Babar’s Aulad” – a descendent of the first Mughal Emperor, Babar. They chose him because Bahadurshah was the first among the kings who had summoned the courage to fight the British. He was chosen the leader of the first war of independence, as the first among the Indian kings. And, when he signed the declaration of war against the British, he did not sign it as the Mughal Emperor of Delhi, but as the first citizen of the Indian nation.

Indians could not throw off the British yoke then. They had to make repeated efforts and offer great sacrifices for another almost a hundred years before India could achieve her independence. The

struggle for independence took a new and powerful form when Mahatma Gandhi came and led us on to the path of satyagraha, swadeshi and swaraj. And on that path, the Muslims of India and their leaders stood behind Mahatma Gandhi as firmly as any other community of India. History records that the Indian freedom movement acquired a larger mass base with the Khilafat movement. And it is important to remember that Gandhiji himself led the Khilafat in India.

But independence also brought the pain of partition

India ultimately achieved independence in 1947. The coming of independence was a happy event, which however was tinged with great pain. We were not destined to enjoy the unalloyed happiness of a people freed from the foreign yoke after almost two centuries of slavery. Our happiness was vitiated by the pain of partition. Before we were given our freedom, a part of our country was separated from us. I do not wish to go into the causes and consequences of that unfortunate episode of our current history. I only wish to record the fact that the partition of the country was a pain that all Indians – the Hindus, the Muslims and all the others – had to bear in common. And it left a wound on the collective psyche of India that keeps rankling till today, almost five decades after the event.

Partition created a new Muslim country by taking away those regions of India that had a Muslim majority. But we must remember that Indian Muslims in other parts of India, in the regions where the Hindus were in a majority, chose to live amidst their Hindu brothers. There were about 4.5 crore Muslims in India at the time of independence. They were born here; they chose to continue to live here. And, they had a right to live here as equal citizens of the Indian nation.

Free India became a great inspiration for others

In the years following independence, we had to face many problems, we had to face many crises. Fortunately, we had a leadership which was enlightened and large-hearted, a leadership which was aware of and cared for the institutions, sentiments, and cultural preferences of various communities of the Indian people. We had a leadership that wanted to keep all communities together while preserving their distinct identities. We had a leadership that wished to make India

into a great democracy that provided a place of pride to all of her people. It was because of such a leadership that India earned the respect of the nations of the world.

For the nations of the world, the freedom of India meant much more than just that. Free India raised hopes of the freedom of other nations that had been similarly enslaved. The voice of independent India within the world community was to an extent responsible for the liberation of more than 60 nations, which were still under the yoke of European imperialism when India became free. Support from the free people of India gave strength to the liberation struggles of those countries.

Therefore, India has had a special place in the comity of newly freed nations of the world. India has been recognised as the natural leader of this community from the day of her independence. Of around 150 countries which in course of time became members of the United Nations, more than a hundred accepted the leadership of India under the umbrella of the non-aligned movement. These nations continue to respect the sentiments, opinions and policies of India in the affairs of the world, and they look up to India to set an example for a model internal polity, a polity in which the dignity of all the people and all communities is guaranteed and preserved.

There is no cause for disillusionment

In this situation, where India was seen as a model of an ideal internal polity and a leader of the newly independent nations of the world, the events that happened in Ayodhya on December 6 came as an unfortunate aberration. Those events have given an unbearable pain to the Muslims of India. Their faith is shaken. And the world outside too is disturbed. But still I am not willing to accept that these events imply any momentous change in the polity of India. I have faith in India and in the basic good sense of her people. I continue to believe that December 6 was merely an aberration. And I believe that soon we shall leave these events behind us and return to the situation, where the sensitivities and sensibilities of all communities are respected and taken care of.

It is perhaps true that these events have pained only the Muslims of India. But the Muslims of India are not a small community. Their numbers are not so small that we may ignore their feelings

and sensitivities, without seriously straining the social and political fabric of India. Muslims are indeed a minority in India, but they are a very large minority. There are perhaps more than 15 crores of Muslims in India. That makes India the nation with the largest Muslim population in the world. It is said that Indonesia has the largest number of Muslims. But this is not true. In Indonesia there are only 13 crores of Muslims. Indian Muslims number more than 15 crores. In terms of the size of Muslim population, India tops the world; Indonesia comes next, Bangladesh after that, and Pakistan at the fourth place. The older Islamic nations, like Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Egypt, come much lower in this ranking. In fact, the total population of Muslims in the 22 Arabic nations of the world is merely 16 crores, a number which is not much larger than the number of Muslims in India alone.

Considering the large number of Muslims in India, we should be occupying a prominent place in the international councils of the Muslim world. It was with this understanding that I had once urged in parliament that we should be a part of the Organisation of Islamic Nations (OIC). India participates in many forums of the world. Why should we not be a part of the OIC too? At the time I raised this issue in the parliament there used to be only 22 members in the OIC, now 48 states are members of this organisation. If India too had joined the OIC it would have naturally got the status of a leader and guide. As the country with the largest Muslim population, and as the largest democracy of the world that also has a great civilisational tradition, India just could not have been ignored in that forum. And then a country like Pakistan could not have used that forum for mischievously raising anti-India issues. But unfortunately in spite of our large Muslim population we have tended to keep away from the international organisations of Muslim nations.

Indian Muslims remain a large and integral part of India

A minority of 15 crores in a population of 85 crores cannot be ignored. It is erroneous to think that the sentiments of such a large minority can be slighted, their aspirations can be ignored, their religion can be desecrated, and yet a peaceful and stable Indian nation can be built.

The events that took place in Ayodhya on December 6 were the ultimate consequence of such an erroneous thinking. Those events pained us, but the most painful aspect of this affair for us was the realisation that there are people in India who seriously believe that they can build the Indian nation by slighting their Muslim brethren.

But the Ayodhya events also brought forth the great Indian genius for harmonious living, which is the finest expression of the traditional greatness and the civilisational uniqueness of India. This genius was fully in evidence in the aftermath of the Ayodhya events. The feelings of grief, pain and sorrow that gripped most of the Hindus were in fact as intense, if not more so, as those of the Muslims. It gave us courage and solace to see our Hindu brethren freely expressing their grief, and condemning the desecration at Ayodhya in the strongest possible terms.

Some people may have hoped that the Ayodhya events would terrorise the Muslims and would be an example to show them that they could not expect a life of security and equality in India anymore. Such hopes have not been fulfilled. The response of the political establishment, and especially of the national newspapers, has on the other hand demonstrated that India values her plurality, and that the Indians who matter would stand up to any challenge offered to this basic feature of Indian polity.

This sentiment has comforted the Muslims. It has given them the hope that they would continue to be an important component of the national mainstream and would continue to have the right to participate in the national polity with dignity and confidence. That is why I believe that these events are unlikely to effect any momentous changes in the psyche of the Indian Muslims and I am certain that the Muslims shall never develop a negative outlook towards the Indian nation.

Recent events bear out my hope and confidence in the attitudes of the Indian Muslims. A few days before the Republic Day some people had released a statement calling for a boycott of the celebrations this year. But the call received no support from the Muslim community. The response of the Muslims to the call for the boycott of the Republic Day celebrations was in fact so negative that even those who had issued the statement in the first place had to retract it. Several Muslim leaders came out in open condemnation of such a call. Muslim religious leaders, even those of them who had never

been involved with politics, requested the community to ignore the boycott call, enthusiastically participate in the Republic Day celebrations, and offer the event the respect due to it. And, Muslims all over the country did participate in the celebrations. It is possible that some small groups here and there may have gone against the overwhelming sentiments of the community and showed some disrespect during the Republic Day celebrations. But such minor disruptions keep happening all the time, and not only the Muslims but also the non-Muslims are often responsible for such frivolous expressions of protest. Such minor disruptions do not matter.

Outsiders need not meddle with our affairs

The Ayodhya events seem to have re-emphasised the dangers that India faces from without. It is an unfortunate fact that we have failed in our efforts to establish good neighbourly relations with the countries with which we have common borders. And the reactions of these countries to the Ayodhya events cannot be ignored.

Pakistan to our west has been inimical to our interests since the day of its birth. It has been creating continuous trouble for us over the issue of Kashmir. The people of Kashmir have been determined to stay in India. At the time of independence they formally joined the Indian union, and later they sacrificed their lives to defend the sanctity of their soil in wars with Pakistan and in skirmishes with infiltrators from Pakistan.

But I do not wish to go into what has been happening in Kashmir during the last few years. Although we have stationed considerably large forces in Kashmir, ordinary day-to-day living remains impossible even in the capital city of Srinagar. It is our responsibility to find why normal life is not possible there, even though the Kashmiris have unequivocally linked their fate to ours, and even though they have lived with us, as a constituent state of the Indian union, for more than 40 years. But meanwhile normal life has become difficult even in the other north-western state of Punjab.

While this is the situation on the western borders, there is no peace on the eastern borders also. There was a time when we in the south used to complacently believe that all such troubles are confined to the north, and the south would remain undisturbed. But

the situation of our brotherly neighbour Sri Lanka has rudely broken that illusion of the peaceful south too.

In this situation of tension on all our borders, the reaction that the Ayodhya events have evoked in many of the countries around us is not such as to give us any comfort. The Bangladesh parliament has passed a resolution condemning the demolition of the mosque and demanding that it be reconstructed. Iran, which is not even a neighbouring country, has said that the Babri Masjid must be rebuilt, and that it would be willing to offer any help that might be needed for such reconstruction. That offer of help was of course meant to be an arrogant insult to India.

Our response to such statements of concern from the neighbouring and other foreign countries indeed ought to be that we are an independent nation and no other country has any business to meddle in our internal affairs. Our government has officially, and correctly, expressed this sentiment. But, we cannot merely dismiss what other nations of the world say about the situation here. If that were so we would also lose the right to speak about events that take place elsewhere in the world. And the world outside tends to look upon the Ayodhya events not merely as a religious issue, but also as an issue of human rights. That concern cannot be easily brushed aside.

The Muslims of India are, of course, more concerned about the reactions of their fellow citizens within India. They find solace in the concern expressed by highly respected representatives of public opinion in India. And going by the concerns expressed and promises made by the highest in the land, the Muslims are hopeful that an adequate redress for the injury inflicted upon them would be found in this country. They hope that such redress shall emanate directly from the people of this country, and that the elders of the community in whose name the mosque was demolished would themselves get together to reconstruct it.

Indian identity is defined by her religious genius

The special distinction of India in the world is that it is a country where the religious consciousness runs very deep. For Indians, religion is more important than anything else, it is certainly more important than economics or politics. As a result of modern western education some of us may have stopped following the ritual routines

of daily life, but even the most educated amongst us remain deeply religious at the bottom of our hearts. And in a situation of conflict our natural response is to throw away all extraneous constraints and follow the dictates of our innermost religious consciousness.

While this depth of religious consciousness gives India a unique identity in the world, it also casts a special duty upon the Indians. It is our duty to channelise this consciousness in ways such that the religious consciousness of any one group of Indians would never stand in opposition to the religious consciousness of another, and that our diverse religious instincts would find only such high expressions that add not only to the greatness of India but also to the good of humanity at large.

By channelising our religious consciousness in this manner, we shall continue to protect the Indian civilisational traditions, which we have protected for many millennia and which are the envy of other peoples of the world. I am confident that not only shall we be able to protect our own civilisational traditions, we in the near future shall also be in a position to guide other nations along the path of harmonious living that India has perfected over time.

I pray to the all powerful and merciful Allah to give us the strength and the wisdom to remain steadfast in our traditions and our civilisation.

DISCUSSION

Hinduism and Indian culture

RADHA RAJAN: Sir, in your talk you have repeatedly emphasised the propensity of Indian culture and civilisation to support plurality of thoughts, beliefs and faiths within it. This of course is correct. But it is also a fact that there is a unity behind the apparent plurality of India. There is a cultural and civilisational canvas on which this game of plurality is played. You may not like to give the name

Hindu to that canvas, to that original bedrock of beliefs, values, and ways of thought and action, on which all else is structured. Giving it a name is perhaps in any case unnecessary. But this cultural and civilisational complex that constitutes the essence of India has evolved over a long history dating back to perhaps more than 3000 years, and that essential aspect of India cannot be ignored. It has to be recognised.

SAMAD: The origin of Indian culture probably dates back much farther than that. I accept that. But we cannot say that Indian culture is merely a product of the Hindu religion. In any case the term Hindu is not very appropriate. You may say that Indian culture is the *sanatana dharma*. That may be more acceptable.

We, of course, accept that Hinduism is a major religion of India, that it is the oldest religion of India. We also accept that the greatest contributions to Indian civilisation and culture have come from the Hindu community. These are accepted facts. But even then it cannot be said that Indian culture is merely the Hindu culture. That we cannot accept.

RADHA RAJAN: Sir, please do not pay attention to my words. But try to understand the spirit of what I am saying. You seem to have a strong objection to the word Hindu. It is true that the word is not native to India, it is a word used by others to describe us. In that sense it may be right to say that Indian culture is not Hindu culture. But, whatever name we may choose to give it, there is a culture that the people of India have practised for thousands of years, there is a tradition that they have evolved over millennia. That tradition and culture is our heritage. It has been passed down to us. And whether we like it or not, we are the product of all that has gone before, and all that has come down to us as our heritage. None of us in India can disown this heritage. All of us carry it within us. We can look upon it as a burden or an asset, but we cannot ignore it. We have to recognise and accept this heritage. It does not matter what we call it – the *sanatana dharma*, or the *Hindu dharma*, or nothing at all.

Why is it that we cannot accept our cultural and traditional heritage and identity? Why can't we be proudly ourselves? Why is there so much antagonism towards our cultural and traditional self-identity?

Why is this larger Indian identity sought to be differentiated from other identities of individual communities and groups? Why

is this identity counter-posed to say the Muslim identity, or the modern identity, that some of us are seeking to acquire? Shouldn't we recognise our basic identity, our basic heritage, and then try to explore the possibilities of letting our individual and group identities flourish and blossom within that larger identity? Let a thousand flowers bloom on the soil of the essential Indian identity. But we tend to deny the soil we are born on. We seem to have a deep antagonism to our basic identity. And that is what disturbs me.

SAMAD: I understand. I understand both the words and the spirit behind them. I want to make one thing clear: We, the Muslims of India, are not opposed to the word Hindu or the the culture referred to by that term. But there is certainly a difference between Indian culture and the Hindu culture. The proposition that Hindu culture represents the only cultural tradition of India is unacceptable not only to the Muslims of India, but also to most of the intellectuals of this country.

Hindu culture and civilisation, of course, have taken root and grown in this country for thousands and thousands of years. That cannot be denied. At the same time, it cannot be accepted that the culture that prevails in India today is nothing but the unmixed and pure Hindu culture. When we refer to Indian culture today, we also refer to the myriad contributions made to it by cultures and traditions other than the native Hindu culture of India. The culture of today cannot be said to be based only on the Vedas or the Itihasas. Through these alone we cannot even comprehend the essentials of our current world-view. The culture that we practise today carries the influence of the ways of life and thought of diverse people who came here from other cultural and civilisational backgrounds. These diverse ways mingled together here for thousands of years, and that conglomerate, that mixture, is what constitutes Indian culture of today. You may call it Hindu culture, if you prefer. The Hindu influence is indeed the dominant influence in the mix that we have today. But it has not much similarity with the pure, unmixed Hindu culture of the classical texts.

While speaking about Indian culture today, we must in particular recognise the contributions made by the varied religions that have flourished on the soil of India, not only the religions that were born in India, but also those that came from elsewhere and took roots here. When people talk about Hindu culture, they merely wish

to belittle the contribution of other religions. This we cannot accept.

We cannot accept that being Indian means learning Hindi and adopting Hindu ways. When such propositions are made then we protest. We protest as citizens of India, governed by the constitution of India, and not necessarily as followers of a particular faith. We protest as good Indian citizens, and not as a community intent on a separatist identity. In fact, we value the opportunity provided by the constitution to join in the mosaic of Indian culture and civilisation. We do not wish to be separated from that mosaic.

You were asking why this resentment against the word Hindu is building up now? I do not have any resentment. But people do resent it when they are told that they must call themselves Hindus if they are to continue living in India. It is such compulsion that leads to the development of inimical feelings and resentment towards the word 'Hindu'.

But I do not believe that all Muslims are resentful of the word or are inimical to Hindu culture and tradition. Many of us in fact belong to this tradition as much as the Hindus. Much of what happens during the marriage ceremony in most Muslim households is part of what is said to be the Hindu tradition. According to the Islamic ways, for a wedding there should be the bride, the bridegroom and two witnesses. And the bridegroom should settle a mehar, a dower, for the bride. This is the essential part of the Muslim wedding. And this alone is Islamic. Other than this, whatever is done during most weddings amongst Indian Muslims is entirely Hindu. We decorate the front of our houses with plantain trees; we throw rice on the couple; and so on. Where did all this come from? Of course, from the culture of our ancestors.

Our ancestors are the same as those of our Hindu neighbours and brethren. This is the historical truth. We are all part of the same family. But we have accepted a different reality of God. That reality we keep in our hearts. In our daily life, we try to follow the instructions of the One whom we have accepted as the messenger of God. We should have the right to follow thus. That is the path we have chosen. Our path is for us, your path is for you. But beyond this reality of God and His Prophet, that we have accepted, we remain brothers, not only because we share the same land, but also because we share the same culture, the same traditions, and the same ancestry.

There cannot be any compulsion about the path one follows to realise God. When the Prophet first gave expression to his vision of God even his parents and his family members did not agree with him and he felt unhappy. Then God said, your duty is only to explain, it is not for you to compel anyone to follow the path. This is the dictate of God. We, the Muslims of India, accept it. We certainly do not wish to destroy other faiths, to suppress them or to look upon them with an inimical mind. Similarly we also expect that the larger and the more ancient society of India would not look upon the Islamic path, the path accepted by the Muslims, with disdain or with a vengeful mind.

ANOTHER PARTICIPANT: Sir, you seem to accept the reality of the Indian culture, but have some objections to calling it Hindu. But is there an Indian name for the culture that we practise? This culture certainly did not begin after the Westerners observed it and named it Indian. Is there an older name for it in any Indian language that you would find unobjectionable?

SAMAD: Today the name Indian is well-known. We have used that term in our constitution. So the idea of a composite Indian culture should be acceptable to all of us.

We, of course, had an older name for India: Bharatavarsha. We have somehow forgotten that name. Though the constitution does refer to this country as “India that is Bharat”, we seldom use the term Bharat now. That is a beautiful name. We should probably again start calling our culture and civilisation by that old name. Let us use the names Bharatiya culture and Bharatiya civilisation.

But, I want to say another thing. We, the Muslims of India, do not resent the word Hindu. It is the Arabic name for the people who lived across the river Sindhu. And, it was Iqbal who sang “*Sare jahan se accha Hindustan hamara*” – “Hindustan, the land of the Hindus, is the best in the world.” Today, when we go to the Arab countries they look at our beard and cap, and ask us whether we are Pakistanis. We say, “No, we are Hindis.” The term ‘Indian’ is still not familiar to the Arabs, they know us as ‘Hindis’.

We are not ashamed of calling ourselves Indians or Hindis. When we go to other countries we identify ourselves as Indian Muslims. In India, in the secular contexts, we think of ourselves as Kannadigas, or Tamils, or Oriyas, or Bengalis, etc., not as Muslims.

Indian Muslims are, in fact, proud of their Indian-ness. There are indeed some people in India who resent being called Indian. But Indian Muslims, in general, are not to be counted among such people. In any case, the reason some people express such resentment is because some others behave as if they hold a monopoly on Indian-ness, as if Indian culture belongs only to them. That is what alienates some people from their Indian moorings. And, that is what makes those who are essentially one to begin emphasising their separate identities and slip away from the essential unity.

Vote bank politics

A PARTICIPANT: Sir, a feeling generally prevails that during the elections all Muslims vote as a single block, and this puts other communities, who vote according to more mundane political considerations, at a disadvantage. Secondly, there is an opinion in the country that Muslims consider all non-Muslims to be Kafirs, and they are obliged by their beliefs to eliminate all Kafirs. Could you comment on these conceptions that prevail very widely within India?

SAMAD: Let me give you an example from Tamilnadu. You all know Haja Shareeff. He used to be the Chairman of FICCI. He is a perfect gentleman, and a good friend of mine. He stood for election to the Tamilnadu Assembly from the harbour constituency, but we decided to vote for C. P. Sittarasu, who became chairman of the Legislative Council later. Whenever a political decision is taken we vote according to that and not according to the religion of a candidate. Just because Haja Shareeff was a Muslim, we did not vote for him. This is the pattern of Muslim voting in all constituencies of India, both for the parliament and for the state legislatures. At all levels the decisions to support one candidate or the other are taken politically, not on the basis of religion.

THE MEANING OF KUFR

Coming to your second question, let me state it clearly that it is not correct to say that Muslims are obliged to wipe out Kafirs. This is not a correct interpretation of the Quran. The Muslims of India harbour no such notions. How can we think of wiping out the majority community and still hope to live peacefully? I don't know

how such misconceptions could have arisen. But I think these are of recent origin.

Kafir, by definition, is one who denies God, rejects Him. Kufr means denial, and Kafir is one who denies God. We cannot be friendly with those who deny God. God created all human beings and He created everything that the human beings need. We should be grateful to Him. One who denies God denies human beings, denies all that is good in man. Such a person deserves to be condemned.

This is the meaning of Kufr in Islam, and going by this meaning, all Hindus cannot be termed Kafirs. This is my humble understanding of the concept of Kufr, and I would suggest that this understanding should be propagated as far as possible.

Islam and intolerance

Parthasarathy: Sir, you have firmly asserted that in the eyes of Islam all religions are equal. This of course is also the Indian conception of secularism, of *sarvadharmā samabhava*. But highly respected Indian scholars of Islam seem to hold otherwise. There are scholars who publicly pronounce in their writings that those who talk of the equality of all religions are either naively ignorant and thus unaware of the differences between Islam and others, or deliberately evil and thus intent on misleading the faithful. Some religions, according to them, have been defeated by the might of Islam. Those religions could not stand up to the truth of Islam. And the refrain of the equality of all religions is merely a pathetic attempt to cover up and wish away that defeat.

There is another related matter that I want to raise. In a women's college in the city, run by the Muslims, no holidays were given till recently for festivals like Deepavali and Pongal, even though a majority of the students in the college were Hindus. This is only one example of the kind of inequity and ill-will between communities that exists in the society. What is the meaning of theoretically asserting the principles of equality of all religions, and equal respect for all communities, if in practice we fail to accommodate each other in such crucial yet simple matters?

SAMAD: To say that all religions are equal does not mean that all are one. It only means that the followers of all religions are equal, not that all religions are the same.

Of course, ultimately in front of God there is only one religion. But human beings have created their distinct paths to the realisation of God. Different religions arise from different interpretations of the same reality. Different people have arrived at different interpretations and thus found different faiths and beliefs. Thus in a way it is also correct to say that all religions are one.

But it is perhaps more important to remember that we Indians are a religious people. We, all of us, are imbued with the religious spirit. Some of us nowadays may have learnt to live without religion. It is perhaps alright if some people are without religion, but even they cannot be without ethics and morality. When people at large lose both religion and ethics, it leads to very serious consequences for the society. Therefore, in general, everyone in a society must be keen about religion. We should all believe in God. Our beliefs and faith may come from any religion. But in our life there must be the 'One', before whom we have to account for our good and evil. We must keep faith that ultimately good will be rewarded and evil punished.

Thirukkural says that the evil-minded will do good only out of fear. In some societies people fear only the power of the state. Good conduct of people there is assured only out of fear of the coercive apparatus of the state. We, on the other hand, have the spirit of religion that ensures good conduct in society by inculcating a sense of right and wrong, of good and bad.

This noble concept of religion should not be used to destroy the peace of another community, especially a community that is striving to lead an ethical and peaceful life. Whatever be the religion that we follow we have to accept the basic premises of religious living. We must learn to be a little detached from the day-to-day happenings, and from the mundane irritants that keep arising in life. All of us have to make an effort in that direction.

As far as your second question, the one about Muslim educational institutions not observing holidays during major Hindu festivals, is concerned, let me remind you that the total number of holidays are fixed by the government and the managements have to operate within that constraint. We complain about the Muslim institutions, but thousands of schools run by the Christian convents do not allow

a holiday even for the birthday of the Prophet. We do not find that objectionable. Nevertheless, I agree that we should learn to be more accommodative of the sensitivities, and also the festivities, of each other. If you let me know the name of the college that you are referring to I shall certainly arrange for them to declare holidays on festivals like Deepavali and Pongal. If they have not been observing holidays on these days then they are indeed in error.

Islam and social reform

BALACHANDRAN: Sir, all religions, in the course of time, tend to acquire a burden of anachronistic rituals and practices. Such anachronisms, which often take the form of social aberrations, need to be remedied either through internal reform or through state legislation. In the last two hundred years a major effort has been undertaken in India to undo social evils associated with religious practices and beliefs through legislation, and Hindus by and large have responded positively to this effort. We thus now have laws proscribing the practices of untouchability, child marriage, sati, dowry, temple-dancing, etc. Hindus have generally accepted such legislation in the spirit of necessary reform. On the other hand, the Muslims of India seem to resist any legislative intervention in their religious and social affairs. They are not willing to accept even a common civil code that would be applicable to all sections of society, including the Muslims. Could you please comment on it?

SAMAD: It is true that in civil matters the Indian Muslims have been following their own separate law. But, by thus following their own code are they doing any harm to any other community of this country? And the Muslims are not alone in having a separate civil code. There are perhaps 36 communities that have been granted the privilege of retaining their own laws in civil matters. It has caused no harm to the country.

Hindus are so large-hearted. They have indeed been accepting legislative interventions in their civil affairs. They have been accepting amendments made from time to time in the laws governing their civil and religious matters. But sometimes even Hindus have been pained at such frequent changes. Even a legal luminary of the stature of C. P. Ramaswami Iyer was once constrained to comment

in extreme sadness that instead of tampering with the Hindu law so often, it might have been better to replace it entirely with the Islamic code.

The constitution of India, in the chapter on the directive principles of state policy, of course mentions the desirability of a common civil code to be applicable uniformly to all communities. But how and by whom is this common code to be drafted? Let there be a draft. Then we can discuss it. We of course would want the Shariat to be the basis of this common code. The Shariat defines a complete legal code, much of which remains suitable to the modern social context. Why not build on the basis of that code which has been already in practice for 14 centuries? But first of all someone has to produce a draft of the common civil code, only then there can be a meaningful discussion on this subject.

Temples and mosques

SOUNDARARAJAN: Sir, you have mentioned that the people who are responsible for the Ayodhya events are in fact talking of 3000 mosques, which according to them stand over the ruins of temples that were razed to the ground by alien invaders. If a programme is now undertaken to demolish these 3000 mosques, it would completely destabilise the Indian polity. Do you expect, or demand, any effective steps from the central government to forcefully put down this challenge?

SAMAD: I have deliberately avoided speaking about the demolition of the Babri Masjid, because that would have only led to unnecessary bitterness and recrimination.

When the issue of Babri Masjid began to take a virulent form, some Muslim leaders from the north came to set up a unit of the Babri Masjid Action Committee here in Tamilnadu. We offered them tea and told them to kindly go away by the Bangalore Mail of the same evening. We pleaded with them to avoid making Babri Masjid into an all-India issue. We requested them to keep it isolated, to solve it at the local level.

They said that we had lent our support to making the Shariat issue into an all-India affair. Why were we then vacillating on the issue of Babri Masjid? We told them that the Shariat issue had been

long discussed in the lower courts of Uttar Pradesh; we did not make it into an all-India issue at that stage. We took it up as an all-India issue only after the matter was settled at the level of the Supreme Court. As far as the issue of Masjids was concerned we told them that we had no problems in Tamilnadu, and that we were building Masjids here almost at the rate of one a week. And these Masjids were being built on temple lands generously offered by our Hindu brethren in Tamilnadu.

In the intensely cultivated localities of districts like Thanjavur, there are no private lands that can be spared for the building of places of worship. Only *Matham* lands are available for such purposes. Therefore, when we want to build a Masjid somewhere, we go and ask the *Mathadhipati*. Immediately he calls the *karnam*, the keeper of accounts, and tells him that they have come for a good cause, take some nominal amount and give them the land they want. Mathams give us the lands, and we build the Masjids.

I remember they gave us land to build a Masjid in Thiruvavaduthurai, and when the construction was completed and the inauguration ceremony was to be held, the Mathadhipati called us and solicitously asked how we were planning to feed a thousand or two thousand people that were expected to come for the function. We told him about the cooking arrangements that we had made. And he sent us two bags of rice on behalf of the Matham. This is happening. All this is happening in Tamilnadu even today.

We told these things to our friends from the north, and requested them not to make the dispute over a single Masjid in Ayodhya into an all-India issue. They went away. Even today, the All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee does not have a branch in Tamilnadu. We refused to have such a branch here.

Later of course Hindus were mobilised to believe that Babri Masjid was a symbol of shame. A feeling was created that only by destroying that mosque could Hinduism be saved and Islam taught a lesson. When such feelings were generated, even then many Muslims felt that it was best to let that one Masjid go. Many said so in public and wrote thus in newspapers. But many Muslims also felt that if the issue is not of building a temple to Srirama, but of teaching a lesson to the Muslims, then they were duty bound to make a stand for the protection of that Masjid. This is how the feelings were exacerbated on both sides.

About the question of expecting and demanding effective action from the government of India for the protection of our interests, there is little to be said. In the matter of the Babri Masjid we were deceived and betrayed by the Indian government itself. The prime minister of India had personally and explicitly guaranteed that the Masjid at Ayodhya would not be allowed to be touched at any cost. We reposed our trust in the words of the Indian government and of the prime minister. And, many Muslims today harbour a stronger sense of distrust in P. V. Narasimha Rao than in the Bharatiya Janata Party. When asked about his impetuous statement about the rebuilding of the Masjid at Ayodhya, Sri Rao said that he had to say it before Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan could! What kind of trust can one repose in him now?

Ramasubramanian: Sir, you have just told us that Hindus in Tamilnadu are offering temple lands for the construction of mosques. If this is so, why is it that Muslims could not concede just that one spot in Ayodhya for the construction of a temple for Srirama at his Janmasthan?

Samad: There were talks being held to come to an amicable settlement. Those talks would have come to some conclusion if the matter had not been decided by force at Ayodhya on December 6.

When we say we need some land to build a Masjid or temple, it is a different matter. In Ayodhya, what was being said was that an existing temple was destroyed to build a Masjid, and therefore that Masjid must now be removed to build a temple. This is a different matter. Because in this case even if the Masjid were removed and the spot handed over for the construction of a temple, the accusation would have stayed. That is why the Muslim leaders wanted the courts to settle the matter, and they even promised that if it were to be held in a court of law that a temple was destroyed to build the Babri Masjid, the Muslims themselves would remove the Masjid.

But we must understand that it is not just to destroy a standing Masjid in order to build a temple, even if that Masjid in some remote past was built on the site of a temple. Because, if we destroy the Masjid and build a temple, we shall just be repeating the mistakes of history. People will then say that this temple of Srirama at Ayodhya is built on the ruins of a Masjid. The dispute will remain. And there will be room for permanent misgivings.

Discrimination in favour and against

A PARTICIPANT: Sir, you say that the incidents of December 6 have hurt the Muslims. But is it not true that the cause of all this is the discrimination that has been systematically practised in favour of the Muslims for a long time?

Samad: Thank you for raising this question. It gives me an opportunity to elaborate upon the so-called appeasement policy of the Indian government, which I could not do in my talk. There is no notion more mistaken and more misconceived than this one about the alleged appeasement of the Muslims in India. We know nothing of the benefits and concessions that are supposed to be accruing to us. Where are those benefits going?

There are 544 seats in the Lok Sabha, and of these only 19 are occupied by the Muslims. Going by the proportion of Muslims in the population there should be almost a hundred Muslims members in the Lok Sabha. The proportion of Muslim members in the various state legislatures, whether in Tamilnadu or elsewhere, is even worse. The situation is similar in the bureaucracy and the army. The Muslims of India form 12% of the Indian population, but their presence in the central government services amounts to no more than 2.2% of the total employees. Muslims do not add up to even 1% of the total strength of the armed forces. This is the actual situation. The Muslims are grossly under-represented in the legislative forums of the country, in the government, in the armed forces, in public sector companies, and even in the private sector industry and trade. Nowhere have we been given our due. And yet there is talk of appeasement, of undue benefits being extended to the Muslims.

Insistence on separate identity

Sriram: Sir, I entirely agree with you that the Muslims are under-represented in most sectors of Indian enterprise. But it is generally felt that the Muslim leadership itself concentrates all its attention on issues concerning the separate religious identity of the Muslim community, and consequently matters concerning economic, educational and social development of the community get ignored.

SAMAD: What you say is true to some extent. But, all leaders are not like that. We in Tamilnadu have been trying to work in the fields of educational and social development of our community. We

have been working towards maintaining harmony between different communities. We have not been indulging in mere electoral politics.

But, please also consider the way national politics has moved with respect to the Muslim community, the way we have been kept tied up in battling over one trivial issue after another.

Almost immediately following independence, the Muslim identity of the Aligarh University was sought to be changed. And we had to wage a long struggle for restoration of the original character of that university. For long the attention of the Muslim leaders was focused on this issue, and it seemed that the Muslims of India had nothing else to do. From the parliamentary records of that period it would seem that for the Muslim leaders nothing else mattered. All of us had to keep referring to this issue even in parliament. I myself remember having spoken many times about this issue in parliament.

And as soon as the Aligarh university issue was settled, the Shah Bano issue came up. It was a matter concerning an individual family. It was a dispute between a father and his son, both of whom were lawyers. They had some grudge to settle between them. The mother took the side of the son and separated from the husband. The son moved the courts demanding maintenance for the mother to teach the father a lesson. And as the matter moved through various courts it snowballed into a major controversy involving the whole of the Muslim community.

We had to wage such a big struggle over such a small issue. And it was made out as if we were fighting to deny justice to an indigent old woman. Shah Bano was of course not indigent, and in any case once the matter reached the Supreme Court it no more remained an issue of individual concern, it became an issue of interpreting the Muslim law for the whole community. We had to put up that big fight in order to correct a mistaken interpretation of the Shariat, an interpretation that the Supreme Court chose to make in such a minor matter. The Shah Bano case was really not so important as to tie us all up in such knots.

Then, almost on the day the Shah Bano issue was settled, the doors of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya were opened for the Hindus to pray there. From that day till now we have been kept embroiled in the Ayodhya issue. Now in a way the Ayodhya issue is closed. I don't know what will be brought up next. The Muslim community has thus been kept continuously engaged in one emotional battle or

the other. One day it is the matter of the Aligarh University, the next day it is the Shah Bano issue, and on the day after it is Ayodhya. Thus have we been made to simmer within ourselves. Reflecting upon all this I sometimes tend to feel that it is a matter of good fortune that they have razed the Masjid at Ayodhya to the ground in one go. We have been saved the extended misery of seeing the structure being broken little by little, bit by bit, over a long time. We have been spared that at least.

Perceptions of separatism and appeasement

RADHIKA: Sir, as you say, there is nothing that the Muslim community has gained in real terms during the last four or five decades. But, there is a wide-spread impression that the Muslims as a community are being appeased. It may be true that the impression has been created by political parties opposed to the Congress to serve their narrow interests. But the impression is there. And this has happened in a culture which over its long history has welcomed so many different people with open arms. India has welcomed and absorbed diverse people, who not only professed different religions – Syrian Christians, Parsis, Jews, Muslims and so on – but also came from varied ethnic stock. And this accommodation took place when there was neither a constitution that enjoined secularism, nor a community of self-professed scholars, commentators and reformers out to teach the virtues of secularism to the people of India. We did not know of the concept of secularism, but still we were not killing others or pulling down their places of worship. Given this open and hospitable attitude that seems to come naturally to the people of India, something must have happened during the last century or two, to make the Hindus and the Muslims so suspicious of each other. What is it that has gone wrong?

RAVI: May I supplement this question. There is something like the common memory of a society. People remember that before 1947, for about 20 years, there were a series of divisive demands put forth by the then Muslim League, led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Those demands included, among others, proportional representation for the Muslims in various elected forums and in different services. These were the kind of demands which ultimately led to the partition of the country. That experience is etched deep in the memory of the

nation, and it is not surprising that today when the Muslims agitate on issues that concern their separate identity, the people in general tend to see in it a replay of the same divisive politics. What is it that the Muslim leadership has done in the last four or five decades to re-assure the people that their repeated assertions of separateness of the Muslim identity are qualitatively different from the Muslim politics of the pre-partition days?

SAMAD: I have to take some time to answer that question. When Jinnah Sahib first entered Indian politics, he was called the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. This title was given to him by Sarojini Naidu. We should ask ourselves how such a man went to the extent of asking for a separate country.

Jinnah Sahib began by asking for only a fair share for his community in the polity of the nation. But each one of his demands, each of his representations, was denied. Even after that Jinnah Sahib was agreeable to the cabinet mission proposals of making the country into a federation of three groups of states: the Hindu-majority states, the Muslim-majority states, and the Princely states. An agreement was concluded along these lines. But after agreeing to the arrangement, Pandit Nehru went to Bombay and retracted from it. It was only then that the question of dividing the country arose. And the partition happened only after the proposal for partition was accepted by all concerned. It is true that Jinnah Sahib proposed the idea of partition, but the partition took place only after Pandit Nehru put his signatures to the proposal.

When speaking about Jinnah Sahib, it is said that he created a nation within a nation. And we speak of his two nation theory as the bane of Indian politics. But before 1947, we were not a nation...

RADHA RAJAN: That is wrong. Such assertions cannot be accepted.

SAMAD: But, before 1947 we were British subjects. We became a nation only after achieving the right to govern ourselves. After that, while so much has been happening in the country and the world, we have kept harping on the matter of partition and the two nation theory of Jinnah Sahib to keep the Muslims of India on the defensive.

Today many of our young people, who are born and brought up in free India, do not know what Pakistan is. When some team comes from Pakistan, plays here, and there is rioting in the streets over the game, then alone these youngsters come to know of the existence of Pakistan, and usually their reaction is to think of Pakistan as a

country whose business is to create trouble here. They have nothing to do with the historical events that led to the partition and to the creation of Pakistan. They do not know who created that country and for what reasons. But we keep on holding them responsible for the acts of their grandfathers.

We rake up old issues, and as in the story of the wolf and the lamb, we tell them that their grandfathers said this and their fathers said that. We dig up history to vitiate the present. And while digging up the past we do not talk of the positive features of that tense period of our history we had to pass through in the years before Independence.

Even today there stands a hall in Bombay named after Jinnah Sahib. It is known as P. J. Hall—People's Jinnah Hall. When Wellington after his cruel rule in India was returning to England, the city of Bombay hosted a farewell for him. Jinnah Sahib went there with his wife, created a ruckus and disrupted that farewell meeting. As a gesture of thanks for that brave act and to honour Jinnah Sahib for his patriotic zeal, the people of Bombay collected a fund to build a memorial hall in his name. They called it the People's Jinnah Hall. And till today it is called P. J. Hall. We do not talk much about such events. We do not ask how a man like Jinnah Sahib, who was such a patriot, went to the extent of asking for partition of the country. We do not go into the political compulsions of the time, and the vested interests of the British in breaking the nation. We simply blame it all on the Muslims of India and their leaders.

And we also do not talk of the contributions the Muslims of India have made to the task of protecting and building the nation since independence. We do not happen to recall that after the accession of Kashmir to India, Mohammed Ismail, the leader of the Indian Muslim League, publicly declared that Kashmir was an integral part of India, and his statement was prominently quoted by the Indian representative in the United Nations. The Muslims of India did not say that Kashmir was a Muslim majority region and therefore it should go to Pakistan.

Are there any Muslim names in the list of people who have betrayed this country since independence? Can anyone point to the Muslims for having acted in ways inimical to the well-being of the nation? Is there even one major accusation of that kind? When such questions are asked, the only charge that is brought up is that when

cricket is played between India and Pakistan, and the Indian team happens to lose, some Muslims tend to distribute sweets in their muhallas. It is such a trivial charge to make. Cricket is anyway watched only by some townspeople. And can't we take such minor aberrations in a sporting spirit?

Muslim contributions to nation building

When the Pakistani army first entered Kashmir, the Indian commander who faced it was a Muslim. He lost his life defending the Indian soil. We gave him a Vira Chakra posthumously. In 1965, when Pakistani tanks were menacingly moving across the Wagha border and nothing could be done to stop their march, a Havildar tied explosives to his body and lay across the path of the tanks. In this way he was able to immobilise a few tanks, thus obstructing the movement of the whole column, which was then finished off by the Indian aeroplanes. That Havildar was also a Muslim. On the Wagha border today, there stands an arch built in the memory of that brave soldier of India, Havildar Abdul Hamid Khan.

The Muslim community of India has made its contribution to defending the Indian borders and upholding the Indian constitution. On the economic front too, the Muslim artisans, even though they remain very poor, contribute their mite to the foreign exchange earnings of India through their handicrafts. A community that has thus been living peacefully and contributing its best to the nation is now being told that it has no right to live in this country, that it should give up its Muslim identity. This is our pain, and I am relieved to have shared it with you this evening.