

“As Bad as All That!”

I COULD NOT believe my eyes!

About 26 years ago, I was able to obtain a report showing the proportion of Muslims in Central Government Services. It was just about two percent. I was shocked, disgusted, furious. For more than a quarter of a century the Muslims of India had been told that they should strengthen the hands of Pandit Nehru and, after him, of his daughter, to save India's Muslims from Hindu communalists. And this is just what the Muslims of India did—strengthen the hands of the Congress and particularly of Nehru and then his daughter. And what have the Muslims received in return? Their representation in Central Government Services has been reduced to roughly one-sixth of what it should be. If this is secularism, then secularism is nothing but a farce and a fraud, a word coined (or borrowed) to make fools of the Muslims of India. Even if India had been ruled by Hindu communalists for the past quarter of a century how could things have been worse? Perhaps there would have been zero percent Muslims in the Central Government Service. Well, what is the difference between zero and a measly two percent? Is the loudly trumpeted “secularism” of the Nehru-Gandhis only worth this much?

I wrote all this. More than 50 Urdu newspapers carried my articles prominently. Many commented editorially, endorsing and acclaiming my views. I belong to a family of ardent Congressmen. My elders staunchly opposed communalism, fanaticism, partition, etc., and valiantly fought for freedom. My eldest uncle, Tasadduq Ahmad Khan Shervani, was a close friend, colleague and comrade of Jawahar Lal Nehru. He was in and out of jails with him. My second uncle, Nisar Ahmad Shervani, was one of the very first Indians to resign from British service and join the national movement. My father, Fida Ahmad Shervani, was one of the first students to leave the university on Mahatma Gandhi's call. The Shervani Brothers stood firm against communal and separatist Muslims. Why?

Because they had faith in India, in the Congress, in Gandhiji and in Jawaharlalji. They believed that we, the Indian Muslims, belong to India and that India belongs to us. And this is what we have received from those we thought were our friends and leaders!

Such strong condemnation by someone from this kind of stock could not be ignored. I could not be brushed aside as just one more Muslim fanatic, probably in the pay of Pakistan. They had to contend with me. I got a call from the Prime Minister's house. I went. She understands and shares my concern at the dwindling number of Muslims in government service, she said.

I lost my temper at what I thought was sheer hypocrisy. This lady's father and now she have ruled India for over a quarter of a century, and mainly because of Muslim votes. During this period the proportion of Muslims in government service has been decreasing rapidly right under their noses. Could this happen unless the father and the daughter wanted it to happen? Certainly not, thought I. And this lady has the nerve to sit calmly and tell me that she "shares my concern!" Is she mocking me or what?

I said this in so many words. Your father and now you have continued telling Muslims that you are our friends, protectors and benefactors. Like fools, the Muslims have believed all this and blindly voted for you, keeping you in power. And, in return, you have both been easing the Muslims out of government service. And, to top it all, you say you fully share my concern!

The Main Reason

But you are ignoring the reason, she said. What reason can there be, I asked, except that Muslims were discriminated against, cheated out of their fair share, and all under the guise of what is called secularism? Madame Gandhi was calm. You have a right to blame us but not entirely, she said. The main reason is that Muslims are lagging behind badly in education. I became even more angry. '*Uẓr-e gunāh bad-tar az gunāā*, I said. Excuse for a sin is worse than the sin. It is bad enough that you have reduced the Muslims to virtually zero in government services. Why add insult to injury by blaming the Muslims themselves for it?

But it's true, she said, not so calmly. Among those graduating in India the number of Muslims is just about two percent. So how can more than two percent of the Muslims enter government service. You're only

looking at the effect of the lack of educational achievement among Muslims and getting upset about it. I understand your being upset. But why are you ignoring the cause? Unless and until the cause is removed, the malady cannot be cured, she said. I do not believe it, I replied. You will when you see the facts, she said tersely, and gave me some papers.

I started looking at these papers. The number of Muslims among those graduating from one university after another was just one percent here, two percent there. If it was more than two percent at one school, it was less than one percent somewhere else. The average was between one and two percent. I could not believe my eyes. I got up, made a sign of *ādāb* to the lady and slipped out, still looking at the papers she had given me. My head was going round and round. I tottered out, clutching a chair here or a door there for support.

The next day I went straight to the office of the Central Board of Secondary Education. After some persuasion (and, needless to say, some name-dropping) the officer allowed me to go through five volumes, of about 300 pages each, containing the results of approximately 70 thousand students who had taken the secondary or Class X board examination. In five days I only counted about 1,200 Muslims. Even at the Class X examination level this was the situation. How could the situation be better than this at the graduation level? Or in government services?

I went to Madame Gandhi again. I have come to apologize, I said rather sheepishly. What for? I was rude to you last time, I said. Oh were you really, she said, I didn't notice. I told her that I had examined the figures on the number of Muslims among graduates, and then I had gone to the CBSE office and counted all the Muslims who had taken the last Class X board examination in the whole territory of Delhi. How many? Only 1,200. Out of? About 70,000. Just about 1.7 percent? Yes, just about. And what is the ratio of Muslims in the population of Delhi? About 8.5 percent. And 1.7 percent is one-fifth of 8.5 percent. Yes. Awful, isn't it? Much worse than awful, it's pathetic, miserable, wretched, disgusting. I told her of my resolve to do something. She gave me valuable suggestions and assured me of her help whenever I needed it. This is how I started doing the work I have been doing ever since.

How Did it Happen?

Now, every Nathoo, Buddhoo and Khaira (Tom, Dick and Harry) knows and says that Indian Muslims are lagging badly behind others in educa-

tion. Then, hardly anyone had an inkling. When I said that there was one and only one problem among Muslims and that was their lack of education, everyone looked at me with surprise, thinking that I was mad or something. However, the facts were too glaring. Even the so-called leaders of the *millat* could not shut their eyes to the facts.

The extent of the problem differed from place to place and from one level of education to another. For instance, in some areas of Uttar Pradesh I found that Muslims were only lagging about two or three times behind others at the primary or Class V level. At the middle or junior high school or Class VIII level they were three or four times behind. Then at the high school, secondary or Class X level, Muslims fell about five times behind others. Finally, at the higher secondary or intermediate or Class XII level, the extent of the problem was about six times. Naturally at the graduation level Muslims would be about seven times behind others.

Similarly, there were variations from state to state. For instance, at the Class X level in Uttar Pradesh Muslims appeared to be about five times behind others, while in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh Muslims appeared to be only about three times behind. In Rajasthan, Haryana and West Bengal, Muslims seemed to be more than ten times behind others and in North India about six times behind. Obviously, the Class X board examination is also called the “entrance” examination. That is, one may enter the field of higher education only after passing the “entrance.” So, if a community is lagging six times behind others at the “entrance” level it is more than likely that it will lag more (not less) than six times behind at higher levels of education. How did this happen? Who is to blame for it? These questions are often asked. Here is what I feel.

I sat for the high school board examination in 1947, just a few months before the partition took place. In that year about 350 thousand students from what is now called North India sat for the examination. Out of these, about 35 thousand, or ten percent, were Muslims. The proportion of Muslims in the total population in this area was roughly 13.5 percent.

So, Muslims were slightly behind others in education at this level in 1947. Instead of 13.5 percent they were only 10 percent. Then what happened? During the first decade after independence there was an increased interest in education. The total number of students sitting for the Class X examination doubled to about 700 thousand. The number of Muslims also increased, but only from 35 thousand to about 42 thousand. So, the percentage of Muslims actually fell from ten to only six percent. During the second decade the total number of students taking the examination

increased to about 1.25 million, while the number of Muslims decreased to about 40 thousand, just 3.2 percent of the total. In the third decade, the total number surpassed two million but the number of Muslims was lingering somewhere around 45 thousand, just 2.25 percent of the total. This was the situation when I became aware of the problem.

During the fourth decade Muslims just managed to keep pace with the others. They did not slide further down nor did they go forward. Finally, during the fifth decade after independence Muslims began to inch forward just a bit. The present position is that out of all the students taking the matriculation examination in North India, roughly 2.5 percent are Muslims. Based on their proportion in the population, now about 14 percent, this means that Muslims are still five to six times behind others at this crucial level. Till 1976, Muslims were sliding down the slope, year after year. Then they put a stop to that and started climbing up, though not very noticeably.

But *why* did Muslims slide downward from 1947 to 1976? Why, for more than thirty years, did Muslims not come forward in education at the same speed as others? Many so-called Muslim leaders blame the government for this problem along with all the other problems faced by Indian Muslims. I will not argue this point with them. I will only say that these very “Muslim leaders” have continued shouting from the housetops that the Muslim vote in India is decisive in each and every election. So, whichever Government comes to power in India is put there by the Muslims themselves. If that Government, or all those Governments, push the Muslims back, then the Muslims themselves are to blame. Are they not?

In the various seminars and meetings held on this subject, some *pundits* of the government have tried to put the blame on the Muslim community, and more particularly on the “Muslim leadership,” for this sad plight. To them I have said that in the first three decades of India’s independence the only “leaders of the Muslims” I have known are Mr. Jawahar Lal Nehru and Madame Indira Gandhi, because Muslims always voted for one of them and for whomever either of them wanted the Muslims to vote for. So, if the Muslims suffered because of “bad leadership,” we know who the “bad leaders” were, first the father and then the daughter. This silenced the *pundits*. They had to look the other way, pretending not to hear what I said so loudly and so clearly.

Nevertheless, I consider this argument useless and meaningless. When I am talking to Muslims I say: “You have suffered, your children have suffered, and no matter who else may be responsible, you are undoubtedly also guilty. You should have seen to it that your children did

not lag behind in education. If you did not, it is your own fault. What will be gained from blaming others?”

And when I talk to the minions of the government I say that it is, and has always been, the duty of the secular government to ensure that no part of the great Indian nation lags behind in education. The Muslims of India are an integral part of this nation, a large and important part of it. If such a large, integral and important part of this nation has lagged behind so badly in education, how can the national leaders and the secular government of India be free from blame? They are guilty, totally guilty.

However, instead of getting bogged down in a useless and meaningless argument about who is to blame and how much, I have tried to do something to remedy the situation, to take Muslims forward in education.

What Did I Do?

First of all, the resources. Not a lot, but I did need some money. I told Mr. Mustafa Rashid Shervani, industrialist and philanthropist, what I had found out and what I wanted to do about it. Go right ahead, he said, take as much money as you need. Next, the information. I started collecting the Class X examination results from the Muslim high schools in North India. I wrote asking each principal to complete a simple one-page form, and in exchange I agreed to send prizes for the best students. In this way I received results from many schools. In 1976 only about 30 percent of the Muslim students who took the examination passed. Pathetic. The proportion of first divisions was only about one percent. More than pathetic. Miserable.

So the position then was that the number of Muslims sitting for the examination was about one-fifth or one-sixth of what it should be and, out of those, more than two-thirds failed and barely one percent earned a first division. These results were from schools run and managed by Muslims themselves. If Muslims, in their own schools, make a mess of the education of their own children, then who can help the Muslims? Even Allah does not help those who do not help themselves. I wrote all this, again and again.

I gradually obtained more and more results, confirming this disastrous situation. But there were exceptions. Some Muslim institutions were doing well, a few even exceptionally well. Their principals were promptly presented with awards, accompanied by quite a bit of fanfare to

enhance the importance of the awards. I wrote extensively. Urdu newspapers were flooded with hundreds of my articles and reports. For the first time Muslims started to become conscious of the poor performance of their own high schools.

Muslims began to ask, "If our school here is doing so well then why are those schools there and there and there doing so badly?" The managers and secretaries of those Muslim schools had to answer. They, in turn, started questioning the principals. And the principals, in turn, started calling the teachers to account. Everyone concerned began to realize that they had to do better, much better. No more taking it easy. After the process of evaluation and comparison got underway, improvements naturally followed.

After a completed form was returned, I would send a second form asking for the detailed results for each teacher, in each subject. Subject-wise, teacher-wise results from hundreds of schools began pouring in. In school A, the math teacher did remarkably well, but the physics teacher did quite badly. In school B it was the other way around. There were schools in which the overall results were quite poor and yet there were still one or two teachers achieving fairly good results in their respective subjects. There were also schools in which the overall results were good, but in one or two subjects the teachers were doing quite badly. We must recognize and acknowledge the merit and hard work of individual teachers. Thus awards for teachers were introduced. At the same time we also pointed out and criticized the poor performance of individual teachers.

I wrote to the principal of one school, "With our best wishes, we are presenting awards to the learned teachers of math, history and Hindi in your esteemed school, for improving their respective results. However, the results in other subjects can and should also be improved. Particularly in physics, geography and Urdu, where the results of your esteemed school are very poor. Special attention to the teaching of these subjects seems needed." Such letters began to have the desired effect. More and more teachers became conscious of the scores of their students in the board examinations and of the need to improve these scores.

Encouraged by prizes, the dear students started studying a little more. Motivated by awards and awakened by unfavorable comparisons, the learned teachers started giving a little more attention to their teaching. And how much would results improve if students exerted just five percent more effort and teachers taught just five percent more earnestly? You might say five percent improvement would result but you would be quite wrong. The interplay of just five percent more effort on the part of the

students and five percent more stimulation from the teachers produces results which are twenty-five percent better. Don't ask me how, but it does. It did so in dozens and dozens of Muslim high schools in North India.

Results slowly began to improve. In the last 23 years the average result for about 300 Muslim high schools improved from less than 30 percent passing to more than 60 percent passing. The proportion of first divisions increased from barely one percent to about ten percent. The total number of boys and girls from Muslim high schools in North India who obtained a first division in the matriculation examination was, believe it or not, less than 150 when we began. Yes, that's all! Now the number is, again believe it or not, about 6,000 or 40 times that number. I am an incorrigible optimist. Yet, even in my wildest dreams, I had not expected so much improvement. But Allah, the Kind, the Beneficent, rewards sincere efforts with much more success than mere human endeavor deserves.

But, even now, there are nearly 200 Muslim high schools in which there has been no improvement whatsoever. In fact, in quite a few the condition now is worse than it was in 1976 when our scheme was launched. Why? Because ... well, that, as the barman in *Irma la Douce* would say, is another story. Some other time, perhaps.

The overall improvement in most Muslim high schools is heartening, to say the least. We certainly have no intention of resting on our oars. There is still a lot more to be done. Muslim high schools are still in need of much improvement. The success achieved so far should only become an incentive for an even more earnest, more concerted struggle.

The Stone Rolls On

During these last 23 years I have written something on the order of six thousand articles, reports, and so on. About a thousand of these were specially written for and published in individual newspapers and journals. The other five thousand or so were each cyclostyled and sent to about 200 Urdu newspapers and journals. The more provocative ones were published in about 150 of them. Some of the comparatively tame ones were only published in about 50. On the average, a report was published in, perhaps, 100 newspapers. If the printing of one report in one newspaper can be considered one publication, then this means $100 \times 5,000$, or 500,000, publications have appeared. Again and again, Muslims have read about the improvements effected in the results of their high schools,

about the increasing number of first divisions. They have become more aware, awake, interested and enthused. During this time more new Muslim high schools have been established than in the three decades immediately preceding.

Even in other Muslim schools (outside the area covered by our project) the number of first divisioners has increased many times. There is a noticeable change in the approach toward education taken by many Muslims. Just 20 years ago the most prevalent attitude was one of dejection and defeatism. The letters I got from principals mostly ran like this: Muslims here are very poor. Muslim children do not even get two square meals a day. How do you expect them to do better? The school has not added a single book to the library in ten years and most of the old books have been half-eaten by white ants. The science laboratory is even more of a joke. The Muslims of this area are not at all interested in education. The students feel that they have no future. They will not get jobs anyway because Muslims are discriminated against. The Managing Committee is in the doldrums. Even the members of the general body which elects the Managing Committee do not pay the annual school fee of ten rupees (less than a quarter of a dollar). The school building badly needs repairs. The roofs of three classrooms may collapse any moment. In these circumstances, if even 25 percent or 30 percent pass it is a miracle!

Such “miracles” were happening in most Muslim high schools. Mind you, most of what these principals said was true. The conditions were undoubtedly difficult. Nay, severe, harsh, cruel, backbreaking and unnerving. But I continued repeating the same thing over and over again. Whatever the difficulties, we have to go forward, we have to take our children forward. We have been left behind, far far behind, others. We have to catch up with them. *Ṭalabu l-‘ilm farīqatun ‘alā kulli Muslimin wa Muslimatin*. Education is compulsory for each and every Muslim boy and girl. Any Muslim who ignores the education of his son or daughter will burn in hell. Do you want the Muslims to be subservient to others? Do you want Muslims to be inferior to others? Do you want Muslims to be a laughing stock of others? Do you want Muslims to polish the shoes of others? And I compared the results of Muslim schools with other schools and asked, “Are you not ashamed? Has Allah not given the believers at least as much intelligence as He has given others?”

And then I drew attention to any improvement in any Muslim high school. One of our own schools has done well, look! Why can't your school do better? You are not so incompetent a principal, are you? Such and such teachers of this or that school have attained such fine results, see!

Why can't the teachers of your school do better? They are not all incompetent, are they?

The carrot and the whip. The carrot of prizes and awards and of profuse praise showered on those who did well was effective. When we presented awards to the best principals and teachers we said, "These, our brothers and sisters, are the greatest benefactors of the *millat*. We are indebted to them for having taught our children well. We are a poor *millat*. What can we offer them except our heartfelt gratitude, our deepest admiration? And that is just what we are offering them. But when we want to present a gift to someone we love, respect and admire, don't we wrap that gift in a piece of paper? The amount of the award is nothing. It is but the piece of paper in which we have wrapped our gratitude, our very heart." This is how we presented "awards" of about Rs. 500 (less than 12 dollars). How else could we present such small amounts to them. Often I saw tears roll down the cheeks of the award-winning teachers. I could hardly hold back my own.

Then the whip of stinging criticism, biting sarcasm, blunt condemnation. This too had its effect. Yes it did. The good old carrot and the equally effective whip did it again. It was like pushing a stone down a slope. The initial effort was stupendous. At first these people didn't seem to want to move. They had become used to years and years of lethargy, topped off with large doses of the fatalistic belief that Muslims are doomed, condemned to remain educationally backward forever. But once the stone began rolling, it rolled on and on and on, gathering momentum as it went. And it's still rolling.

A Drop in the Ocean

Altogether there are hardly a million students in the Muslim high schools of North India. However, there must be at least 50 million school-age Muslim children in India. So what I have done to improve board examination results in the Muslim high schools of North India has only benefited about two percent of all Indian Muslim children directly. I have not been able to do anything for the remaining 98 percent. South India has been left untouched. Even in North India, Muslim children studying in government high schools, and in high schools run and managed by other communities, have been left untouched. And what about those Muslim children, more than half, who go to no school at all? What I have done is no more than a drop in the ocean.

Yet, in this very small sphere, something positive has been done. Much more remains to be done but what has been done, even if it is only a drop in the ocean, is not such a small drop, after all. And the cost? I have not spent even one crore rupees (less than a quarter of a million dollars) per year. You need about one crore rupees to establish a proper high school these days. But by raising the average results in about 500 high schools from 30 percent passing to 60 percent passing, we have gained as many Muslim matriculates per year as we could have gained by opening 500 new high schools. And by increasing the number of Muslim first divisioners from 150 to 6,000, we now get as many more Muslim first divisioners every year as we could have gotten by opening 20,000 new high schools! Had the results not been improved that is.

In the end I would say that, basically, it is the responsibility of the government to see to it that Muslims come forward in education. Are the children of Indian Muslims not the children of Bharat Mata? If tens of millions of these children of Bharat Mata lag behind in education, it is the fault of the government. Undoubtedly it is. The government has neglected the education of Muslims. If any part of the Indian nation lags behind, and Muslims are a fairly large and important part of the Indian nation, then any government which calls itself decent, not to mention secular, should be ashamed of itself. The government should take more effective steps to redress the educational deficiencies in the Muslim community and it should do so immediately.

This does not mean, however, that we Muslims should just sit and wait for the government to do its duty. The education, the future of our children, is at stake and we have to do, and go on doing, as much as we can, regardless of what the government does or does not do. □