

Calcutta Notebook

RP

LAST THREE DECADES HAVE been the worst as far as negative projection of Islam is concerned. Globally the US Empire, after the decline of Socialist block, was on the lookout for unhindered control on oil resources. In order to dominate West Asia for the sake of oil wealth, it designed mechanisms to demonize Islam as a cover for political control in the region. These attempts of Empire peaked after the 9/11, 2001 when US media coined the word *Islamic terrorism*. The political-economic phenomenon leading to terrorism was presented as a religious one. During the same time in India the Hindutva political forces asserted their political assertion by targeting Islam. In nutshell a religion which had come to establish peace in the region came to be presented as religion of violence. Popular perceptions about Islam as religion and its various aspects were so modulated to present them as if the followers of this faith are moving around with bombs and swords.

It is in this background that Asghar Ali Engineer's popular work, seeped in profound scholarship comes as a breath of fresh air, presenting the truth of the religion as propagated by Prophet Mohammad in the war-torn tribal society of Saudi Arabia. Engineer, a multifaceted scholar activist, has been one of the major contributors to the enrichment of humane values in general and has been elaborating the values of Peace and Justice in Islam in particular.

Engineer's recent book—*The Prophet of Non-Violence, Spirit of Peace, Compassion and Universality in Islam* (published by Vitasta Publishing Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2011, pages 246, price Rs 395, HB) is actually a compilation of 19 of his essays, contributed periodically and they address the vast range of subjects from the basic teachings of the prophet, concept of war and peace, values of justice, status of women and finally a commentary on social issues. Engineer does well to refer to the basic book of Islam, Koran as the base of his understanding and brilliantly yet simply explains the truth behind the misconceptions popularized by the motivated critics. His contention is that many precepts and misconceptions have been there due to the history of Muslims, Muslim Kings and clergy who for their vested interests have misrepresented the teachings of Koran, to suit their political and social interests. In order to retrieve the reality of the Prophet of Non Violence from the myriad myths surrounding him, the author, does not resort to Maulanas and Muftis (who give religious opinion) but to the Koran itself in all its complexity. He places most of the teachings in their proper context to elaborate the truth of teachings of the contributions of Prophet to the development of values of humanism in the World.

Non-violence in Islam is a matter of deeper conviction and not of mere convenience. In the strife-torn Arab society he preached for Brotherhood and Sisterhood, a novel concept in the society divided along hostile tribal lines. The presentation of violent image of Islam took place also during the period of crusades, which had nothing to do with religion but were for expanding the empires of Christian Kings. Similarly currently Huntington thesis of clash of civilizations has more to do with the oil lust of United States rather than with any religion as such.

Similarly, Jihad, the much abused word, was the word abused by Muslim Kings for conquering lands. These military expeditions were titled as Jihad while such wars had nothing to do with spreading the values of Islam in any way. The same word is currently being associated with terrorism. As such Jihad means 'striving to the utmost'. It does stand for striving for betterment. In Koran, this word appears 41 times and not once it stands for war or violence of any type.

Even the perception of Islam being against Human rights is baseless as Equality is central to Islamic teachings. That is one of the reasons for spread of Islam World over and India in particular. In India the birth based inequality of caste system had been the major factor for low caste shudras embracing Islam to escape the caste tyranny. The regimes being run by despots in the name of Islam have violated Human rights but that again has more to do with the political character of those regimes and is not related to religion.

All in all, this entire book is a timely intervention in the global debate on the nature of Islam. Engineer totally identifies Islam only with Koran, this though on the dot, leaves out other faces of Islam which prevail in the common sentiments, the Muftis, Maulanas, the rituals in Islam etc, also need to be analyzed in their proper perspective. □□□