

# Culture: Vulture, Hawk, Ostrich

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*'Religious freedom is the product of two equally pernicious fanaticisms each canceling the other out.'* — Fareed Zakaria.<sup>1</sup>

This quote is an inference from the 150 years of revolts and wars ending with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 during which one-third of the population of central Europe was killed in a conflict nominally over religious beliefs, namely, Catholicism and Protestantism. However, the statement does not relate to the earlier and longer episode of Crusade, or 'collision of two great faiths': Christianity and Islam, that began on the eve of the twelfth century to last for 250 years. Even after nine campaigns in all, there was hardly any hint of religious freedom between the two belligerents. This slice of European history leaves behind the message that religious matters have a tendency of falling as pawn at the hand of narrow politics, and that they are better addressed if left to the judgment of the people. This lesson would resonate in the present context.

1. *Islamic Resurgence*: Cultural tension today is concentrated at three focal points—one among the immigrant Muslims seeking a social space in the West; another among the Christians in the West wary of losing their corner; the third among the Hindus of south and south-east Asia bewildered at the advance of Islam. It surfaced in the wake of the Islamic resurgence that got under way in the 1970s and picked up steam in the 1980s.

Demography has played a role in it. In the West, population growth is slowing down, to turn negative within decades. By contrast, the Muslim society all over the world has recorded population growth at spectacular rates. In 1980, Muslims constituted 18 percent of the world's population, in 2000 the ratio rose to 20 percent; by the next two decades it would reach the level of 30 percent.

Compared with the West and Russia, for many years to come, Muslim populations will be far younger. The proportion of youths (between 15 and 24 years of age) in major Muslim countries rose significantly and tended to exceed one-fifth of the total population. In several Muslim countries the youth bulge peaked in the 1970s and 1980s; in the others it will do so early this century.

For instance, the share of youths in the Iranian population rose sharply in the 1970s, reaching one-fifth during the last half of the decade; the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1979. It happened in Algeria in the early 1990s just as the Islamist FIS was winning popular support. The Saudi Arabian peak is estimated to be again at one-fifth, which is likely to occur in the current decade.

The people in this age-cohort are overwhelmingly urban and have at least a secondary education. This combination of size and social mobilization has significant political consequences. First, young people are the protagonists of protest, instability, reform and revolution. Second, larger populations need more resources, hence people from societies with dense or rapidly growing populations tend to push outward, occupy territory and put pressure on other less demographically dynamic people. Population pressure combined with economic stagnation promotes Muslim migration to Western and other non-Muslim societies, elevating immigration as an issue in those societies. Third,

expansion of literacy in Arab societies creates a gap between a literate younger generation and a largely illiterate older generation and thus a disjunction between knowledge and power likely to put a strain on political systems.

No religious revival or cultural movement lasts for ever, and at some point the Islamic resurgence too will subside and fade away. A premonition of that denouement would be when the demographic impulse powering the resurgence weakens in the second and third decades of this century.

Besides demography, economics has been a factor. The windfall of petro-dollars in the course of oil price hikes beginning in 1973 had worked as another impetus to the Islamic resurgence. The oil bonanza dwindled in the 1980s, but population growth continued. That mismatch bred a scissors crisis: one going down while the other goes up. It lent a powerful economic dimension to the crisis in Arabia. The oil-rich kings and sheiks had squandered their easy money on conspicuous luxury for a few, leaving the people in the lurch. People's frustration in Arabia burst forth into splinters of rage across the West which had propped up the corrupt Arab regimes to serve its own purpose.

As rulers of the Middle East grew more distant, oppressive, and hollow, fundamentalism's appeal grew. Pakistani scholar Abul Ala Maududi was, in many ways, the original ideologue of the modern fundamentalism, followed by Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. It is Qutb who is read throughout the Islamic realm today. The fundamentalist call has resonance because it invited men to participate in contrast to a political structure that reduces citizens to spectators and also asks them to leave things to their rulers. At a time when the future is uncertain, it connects them to a tradition that reduces bewilderment. Fundamentalism has given Arabs a powerful language of opposition.

*2. Vicious Circle:* Politics is local. Local politics was also at the root of the Crusade. Pope Urban II was besieged with intrigues at his doorstep. Meanwhile, the Byzantine emperor Alexis was being harassed, to his east, by the Turks. The emperor's complaint reached the Pope who saw in this a perfect way to settle his own score. Urban, an opportunist, personally promoted and launched in 1095 a Holy Crusade with the ostensible pretext of reclaiming the Holy Lands from the barbarian Turks, as a means to end his personal trauma.

Nearer our times, every second year comes election for the Senate and the House of Representatives of US Congress. In the midterm of his first presidency, George W Bush had reasons to worry about the performance of his party in forthcoming elections. Now, nothing mobilizes voters as solidly as does a call to rally under the flag. Iraq came to be the unfortunate victim of that workout. During his second midterm in office, it was Lebanon which fell on the same altar of US election-cycle belligerence. To describe this phenomenon, commentators have added a new phrase to the American media lexicon, namely, the politics of fear.

Trouble is, this brand of politics attracts a law of physics: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Enemies have the nasty habit of firing back; worse still, they seem to pop up here, there, and everywhere.

Bush had come to Baghdad to distribute the culture of his democracy. But, look, what happened! Hizbullah is now stronger. And it is possible that Hizbullah and al-Qaeda might negotiate a division of labour between them separating their theatres of

battlefields and coordinating their movements. In a word, the world is becoming a stage of piling corpses and broken skulls.

3. *One-Eyed History*: In India a cultural warfare has been going on. 'Hindutva is not a word, but a history,' proclaims V D Savarkar in his pamphlet, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* 'Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva.' The equation is as follows: Hindutva = Hindu + a sovereign Hindu state. A conception of 'Hindu' is the most fundamental element of it all; it provides the base upon which stands his entire structure.

Savarkar invokes the Rigveda which prominently mentioned river 'Sindhu' (Indus). Now, Sanskrit letter 'S' is transformed into letter 'H' in *Prakrit*. Accordingly, the river that Vedic Aryans called Sindhu was, indeed, Hindu to the aboriginals who spoke the vernacular language of *Prakrit*. So, Hindu is an ancient word, not a modern creation by the West or whatever. By association, then, the people living on the banks of the river had come to acquire the title of Hindu. This process of transferring an attribute from a part to the whole, or vice versa, has a category also in English language: the figure of speech, synecdoche. It means that Hindus had been there since the birth of time, the Creation of the universe. It is amazing to us how much about Indian civilization he hangs on two letters, H and S.

The Aryans, Savarkar concludes, were indigenous of India, not immigrants or invaders from abroad. As for another piece of evidence, the Vedas contain no description of anywhere far beyond the Indus region, especially not at all of the life in central Asia, nor of an epic journey thence through the mountains, nor of arriving in the so different an environment as of the subcontinent of India.

The usual retort by the opponents of this claim is that, by the time the Vedas were composed, the Aryans' migration from central Asia was so remote that all memory of it had gone. Some scholars proceed to say that the missing link between the Aryans of India and their brethren in other parts of the world can be traced from the very construction of the language and literature of Sanskrit. In 1786, William Jones, an English polymath, reached after full scrutiny the following conclusion: Sanskrit was of a wonderful structure, more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, yet bearing to both of them a close affinity, both in roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than can have been possibly produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologist could examine them all without believing them to have been from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists.

This being the case, most north Indian languages, which derive from Sanskrit, were related to most of Europe's, which derive from Latin. The Germanic and Celtic languages also probably belonged to this linguistic family, and likewise ancient Persian (Avestan). Scholars called the elusive 'common source' language (and the family of languages which derived from it), at first, 'Indo-Germanic', or 'Indo-European'. This changed to 'Indo-Aryan', or simply 'Aryan', after it was realized that the ancient Persians had indeed used their *arya* word in an ethnic sense; they called themselves the 'Ariana' (whence derives the modern 'Iran'). The idea of a single race sowing the seeds of civilization from Bengal to Donegal proved intensely exciting, and ultimately irresistible.

The theory of Hindutva lays down two qualifications as necessary and sufficient for making a Hindu: one, the person has Hindu blood in his veins; two, he regards

Hindusthan as his holyland. In the light of this doctrine, Savarkar drives a wedge within the Muslim community of India. He distinguishes between, on the one hand, the Indian Muslims who are descendents of Indian ancestors converted from Hinduism, and on the other, those who are offspring of the immigrant Muslims.

The majority of Indian Muslims today, he observes, are aware of the fact of conversion and realize that they therefore inherit Hindu blood in their veins. So they meet the first of the two tests for being a Hindu. Now consider the second one.

There is no reason why those Muslims would not consider India as their holyland. After all, one can have any number of holylands. There are several sacred places of pilgrimage for them in this country. For instance, the tomb of Muin ud-Din Chisti is at Ajmer, where millions of faithful come to visit every year. If that be the case, the converted Muslims and their descendents can return to the fold of Hindutva. This argument is atrocious.

The other group of Muslims of India descended from migrants. Muslim immigration to India began in the twelfth century. Indeed, far larger number of Muslims entered India as refugees from the Mongol invasions than as warriors in the Ghaznavid and Ghorid armies combined — refugees who included retreating armies, princes, scholars and artisans from all over Turkestan, Khorasan and Afghanistan. The Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), following Savarkar's theory, treat them as alien. Isn't the period of 800 years enough to let them be full Indian?

At any rate, the two conditions laid down by Hindutva for making a Hindu is evidently vacuous. The two sentences relating the conditions have the word 'Hindu' in their predicate, which means they commit the error of circular reasoning. In effect, they are saying unknown X determines unknown X, which makes no sense. How can you identify Hindu blood, when you are looking for the definition of a Hindu? Likewise, how do you find Hindusthan when you do not yet know what a Hindu is?

America has its own version of theocratic fanaticism. The 2004 presidential election was unique in the assertiveness of evangelicals and the overt appeals made by the candidates to the faithful. Going back to Jimmy Carter, recent presidential candidates have made their faith a public matter. In 2004, both candidates were particularly overt in admitting religion into their politics — no surprise, because a poll found 68 percent of Americans think it important that a president have strong religious belief.

Religious conservatives have been a force in national politics since Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign. In the past, evangelicals participated in politics reluctantly, at the urging of such figures as Jarry Falwell and, later, Pat Robertson. This time, 2004 election, more than 26 million of them turned out — 23 percent of the electorate — in local church-based networks closely coordinated with the Bush team. And, the candidates showed an increasing willingness to wear their faith on their sleeves — not just George W Bush but also his Democratic rival John Carry, who was known to exhort audiences: 'Let us pray. Let us move the feet. Let us march together and let us lead America in a new direction, toward that mountaintop which has always been our destination.'

Also, there is the series of evangelical thrillers with the caption, 'Left Behind', which centres on Armageddon and the Second Coming of Jesus. The latest number in the series

has the title, *Glorious Beginning*, which has the son of God returning to Earth to wipe out all non-believers from the planet. In this theocratic novel, the divine son merely speaks and the bodies of the enemy are ripped open. "The riders not thrown [from the saddle] leaped from their horses and tried to control them with their reins, but even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues melted away, leaving grotesque skeletons standing, before they, too, rattled to the pavement.' One might have thought that the heavenly apostle at least would be more of an animal lover! But no, carrying unbelievers on their shoulder the horses had committed a sin.

The 'Left Behind' is a series of such best-selling novels for adults in the United States, and they have sold more than 70 million copies. But, instead, had a Muslim written an Islamic version of 'Glorious Appearing', America's conservatives would have a fit.

*4. Identity Formation:* France has Islam as the second religion by the number of believers, which include mostly the immigrants from former French colonies. It follows a policy of cultural integration; that is, immigrants are called upon to imbibe themselves with the French culture.

In principle, France does not officially recognize the existence of minorities. It treats all people as equal citizens, with no consideration of their colour, creed, or race that could presumably undermine national unity. It does not see ethnic differences. No statistical statistics are compiled to count the number of people descendents from immigrants, or to ascertain the number of Muslims in the country. It has no programme of affirmative action.

The integrationist approach of France relies on the individuals clambering up the ladder all by themselves. Yet this meritocratic theory clashes with the reality of virtual segregation and poverty.

'Your name says everything in France,' asserts a young black man in the Paris suburb of Grigny, who gave his name as Billy Frabice. 'If you are called Dillo or Amir, that's all they want to know. If you are called Jean-Pierre, you show up for a job and they take you.' For those whose name is Hasim or Omar, laments another Youngman, or whose address carries the 93 post-code of Seine-Saint, the department covering the northern Paris suburbs, securing even a temporary job is a struggle. Many job applications from young men end up unread in the bin.

In 1981, Brixton in south London was not much different from the Paris suburbs of 2005; and it had a similar experience of riot as did Clochy-sous-Bois, a northern suburb in October 2005. After Brixton, Britain adopted policies that in many ways echoed America's response to its own urban racial disturbances. It embraced ethnic diversity, although that fell short of American-style affirmative actions, which Britons see as illegal discrimination. After the incidents of terrorism in London, July 2005, Britain is debating over whether identity politics is a good idea at all. Maybe, some people are saying, immigrants should be stripped of their distinct ethnic identities, rather than made to feel comfortable in them. That sounds somewhat like the way the French already think.

A 'golden middle' or a 'unified approach' relative to British and French models is coming to light. It would recognize diversities among ethnic groups (as in Britain) as well as acknowledge the multiple affiliations and association that a person has (as in France). For example, a person may be a Hindu, a vegetarian, a lawyer, and a musician. He will

make a reasoned choice from among these. When he goes for dinner with friends he will choose the vegetarian identity; in the hall of a symphony he dons the robe of a musician; and so on.

Certain identities of a person may be practically omnipresent and unshakable, regulating and dominating other identities. For instance, a Muslim would rarely allow his other identities to prevail over his faith. In a word, all identities do not have equal salience. His choice of food, dress, purchase and some day-to-day other transactions may be guided by well-defined, documented codes of behaviour. Second, the connotation of an identity may vary: a Christian in a Hindu home may be treated as an untouchable. Third, some identities may prevent having other identities: a child of blacksmith may not get admission into a village school in view of his ritual position. In a word, just acknowledging all identities does not seem to address the central concern of violence today.

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.<sup>2</sup> In the present context, individual's identity has only been reckoned in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

*5. Engels' Law:* 'According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.'<sup>3</sup>

These two kinds of production take place at the site of respectively factory, and family. Families assemble to constitute a society; the factories, an economy. To maintain society and economy a third sector springs up, namely, polity. They are interrelated.

Polity is fairly agile, it can change relatively fast; economy is rather slow to move; society is the laziest. Usually, science and technology have an inherent urge to expand our horizon of knowledge and productivity. Economy, taking advantage of that advance, tends to develop. Society gets transformed by the influence of the economy, and in turn has an effect on the economy and polity. This has been the pattern of history in Western Europe.

But it is also conceivable that, in certain situations, society and economy may get so seamlessly enmeshed into a low-level equilibrium trap that the society loses its vitality and remain stagnant. This has happened in several parts of the world; India may be considered an example of such a stunted society. Across the world today, we see wide disparities among societies in terms of respect for human values, while economies and polities appear seeking to be homogeneous, or at least comparable. Information flows freely within and among economies and polities of the world. But there is hardly any dialogue within and among societies. Temples, mosques, churches are shrouded in mists of exclusiveness or secrecy: herein reside the roots of global cultural tensions.

Economies are ruled by capitalists and landlords; polities by kings, presidents or prime ministers; and societies by the canons of priests and preachers. Capitalists and kings talk to one another in the open, but not the preachers of different faiths. Preachers are not answerable to any mortal, let alone to the people at large. Yet they shape of the worldview of children at their formative stage. They pronounce on moral codes of

conduct, settle disputes in villages, and dictate judgment on family matters. They occupy such a large chunk of our life, without being subject to checks and balances. Absolute power is prone to breed absolute corruption.

In the late eighteenth century, Adam Smith proposed open debate among preachers of all faiths and denominations. As a cure for excessive enthusiasm and unsustainable promises, he suggested 'the study of science and philosophy' for all candidates who aspire to be priest or preacher, and a period of probation before confirmation of their services.<sup>4</sup> Time has come for seriously considering Smith's recommendations. ~~del del del~~

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