

Book Reviews: The Left and Political Islam

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***Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights* by Meredith Tax (New York: Centre for Secular Space), 2013; pp 123, \$10.**

Contents

- [Repeating Mistakes](#)
 - [Wrong Ideas](#)
 - [Pan-Islamic Resistance](#)
 - [Hindu Fundamentalist Politics](#)
 - [Limits of Tolerance](#)
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Historically, communists had a rather tenuous relationship with the Muslim right. In the first flush of the Bolshevik Revolution, the new Soviet state in the early 1920s, while resisting the western imperialist offensive, sought allies from among the pan-Islamic forces which were then smarting under the wound of the defeat of their Ottoman empire by the British forces at the end of the first world war, and were looking for a platform to retaliate against the British.

M N Roy, who was in Moscow in those days as a part of the international Comintern leadership, gives us a fascinating account in his autobiography of the dilemma that Lenin faced. On the one hand, Lenin lent political support to his natural ally – the secular Kemal Pasha (who, following the collapse of the Ottoman empire, captured power in Turkey, abolished the feudal domination of the religious caliphate and introduced egalitarian reforms), on the other hand, he also grudgingly agreed to provide military aid to conservative pan-Islamic leaders and their followers (who had been opposed to Kemal Pasha, and wanted the revival of the caliphate), in the hope that they would fight western imperialist powers.

One such leader was Enver Pasha, a member of the erstwhile feudal ruling clique, who after Kemal's assumption of power in Turkey became a political destitute, and was given asylum in Moscow. While the Comintern agreed to supply him with arms to stage revolutions in the western-ruled Muslim countries, a sceptical Roy warned his Bolshevik comrades that the feudal landlords and priests who shaped the pan-Islamic ideology were basically counter-revolutionary in their beliefs and could never be trusted as allies of a socialist revolution. Predictably enough, Lenin's hope of converting the Turkish leader to the international programme of anti-imperialist upsurge, was dashed when Enver Pasha ended up as a stooge of a British-backed anti-Soviet rebellion in Bokhara – his body being discovered by the Red Army after its suppression of the rebellion, as "dressed in a British army officer's uniform", according to Roy's memoirs.

Repeating Mistakes

This rather long introduction to a review of the present book becomes necessary because it comes at a time when sections of the Left, both in India and abroad, are repeating the same mistakes in their understanding of political Islam. They hope to conflate the Islamic ideological opposition to the western neocolonial order (an opposition which is rooted to a great extent to the Islamic feudal and patriarchal resistance against democratic and social reforms, which they brand as “western”), with their own secular and progressive agenda of anti-imperialism. That such an alliance, born of immediate expediency, can never work for long should be evident from past experiences. But some among the Left (and also liberal bourgeois human rights activists) continue today to nurture the same illusion.

Consider, for instance, how the Indian Left – both the Maoist and the parliamentary – tries to cuddle up to the Islamic fundamentalist groups. Soon after the Pakistan government, prodded by the United States, swooped down upon Taliban supporters, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)) politburo bemoaned “the massive offensive on Islamic jihadist forces in Pakistan”. [1] Its leader, the late Koteswar Rao went a step further and said: “...we feel that the Islamic upsurge should not be opposed as it is basically anti-US and anti-imperialist in nature. We, therefore, want it to glow”. [2] Under a similar delusion, another Indian Leftist commentator belonging to the parliamentary stream, Vijay Prashad, has come out with a theory of “principal contradiction...between imperialism and humanity...and the Lesser Contradiction...between the left and reactionaries who are not identical to imperialism”. Among these “reactionaries of the Lesser Contradiction”, he listed Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and others, about whom he said: “We are divided from them, but not against them in the same way as we are against imperialism”. [3] Neither the Maoists nor the parliamentary Leftists notice the extremely dangerous and inhuman practices that these Islamic radical groups indulge in within their community – discrimination against and exploitation of women, imposition of shariat laws that violate human rights, suppression of art and culture through acts of vandalism, and killing of innocent citizens.

To come back to this important book, its author Meredith Tax meticulously documents how a gullible western Left, along with some liberal intellectuals, are being taken for a ride by these Islamic groups. A section of the western liberal sympathisers of the Muslim Right is influenced by the postmodernist analysis, which as pointed out by Haideh Moghissi in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (1999) – quoted in the book – has a “curious affinity with the most reactionary ideas of Islamic fundamentalism. For, the two share a common ground – an unremitting hostility to the social, cultural and political processes of change and knowledge and rationality, originating in the west, known as modernity”.

Wrong Ideas

But the Islamic opponents of western modernity had no qualms in accepting the same western powers as allies in their military aim of overthrowing the socialist regime in Afghanistan. In this connection, the author not only exposes the false pan-Islamic claims of fighting western imperialism (in an important chapter entitled: “Five Wrong Ideas about the Muslim Right”), but also faults the Left for bending over backwards to support pan-Islamic groups and leaders with dubious reputation, under the illusion that they are the genuine anti-imperialist force (in a chapter entitled “The Muslim Right and the Anglo-American Left: The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name”). The anti-imperialist credentials of the Islamic Right have already been exploded by revelations about how its leader Osama bin Laden and various outfits like the Taliban and mujahideens were trained by the Central Intelligence Agency in Afghanistan to overthrow a socialist regime there. Their present onslaught

against their past patron is not motivated by any anti-imperialist ideology (as the far Left would have us believe), but by the single-point objective of replacing US hegemony with the establishment of a shariat-based theocracy. Among the other “wrong ideas about the Muslim Right”, there is the tendency to equate their defence of their theocratic regimes and expansion of their control over other states (through armed insurrections against the US) on the one hand, with the secular national liberation movements of the past (e.g., the anti-apartheid African National Congress, the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonial rule, the Vietnamese war against the US) on the other. In drawing such a parallel, the leftist supporters of the Muslim Right ignore the ideological roots that differentiate the Islamic insurrections (based on the regressive objective of restoring a feudal theocracy to replace modern western political institutions) from the national liberation movements (motivated by the progressive objective of replacing the colonial order with a secular nationalist and democratic egalitarian political system). Surely, no socialist worth her name can equalise the two – just because both oppose the US.

Pan-Islamic Resistance

It is understandable that the Left and liberal sections (which often bend over backwards to defend the pan-Islamic resistance against the US) feel outraged by the exposures of horrific torture of suspected Islamic militants (as well as innocent Muslims) in Guantanamo and other centres of incarceration run by the US. But they should exercise discretion when choosing for defence the victims from among the plethora of prisoners, according to their own standards of democratic rights, secular beliefs and humanitarian values.

Sadly enough, they chose a prisoner from Guantanamo, who turned out to be a champion of the Taliban (responsible for equally brutal torture of their opponents and innocent people in Afghanistan and other places where they ruled). The ex-prisoner was Moazzam Begg. Meredith Tax narrates how Begg started his political career as a distributor of Islamic jihadi literature from a bookstore in the United Kingdom (UK), and then went to Afghanistan in 2001 to volunteer as a Taliban activist to run schools there. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, he was arrested by the US forces, and sent to Guantanamo where he was incarcerated for two years. After his release, he set up an institution called “Cageprisoners” for protecting the human rights of Islamic militants who were still behind bars, as well as those outside. His campaign drew support from several British Left-liberal intellectuals, as well as Amnesty International, which often provided him with a platform where he propagated his view that the “Taliban had made some modest progress – in social justice, and in upholding pure, old-style Islamic values”, and that under its rule Afghanistan had become “free from corruption and despotism”. (This was at a time when reports had already come out about the way the Taliban financed itself by cultivating and exporting opium, and ran the country by diktats banning education of girls and musical performances, and executing opponents under the shariat law.) In his public statements as the director of Cageprisoners, Begg made it very clear that: “It is not only the right to a fair trial that Cageprisoners promotes, rather the morality of the law” Judging by his faith in “pure old-style Islamic values”, one assumes that for him the “morality of the law” must be best represented by the tenets of the shariat – regarded by all humanitarian standards as discriminatory and violating human rights.

When in 2010, Amnesty International chose to provide Begg with a platform to propagate such views (presumably under the plea of freedom of speech), Gita Sahgal who headed its gender unit at that time, went public protesting against Amnesty’s partnership with an Islamic fundamentalist group headed by Begg, which while demanding the release of its own followers from prison, kept its own women imprisoned within feudal religious barriers. Sahgal was suspended by Amnesty, which in its liberal humanist delusion, invented the bizarre concept of “defensive jihad” to justify the

indefensible acts of terrorism by the Islamic jihadists against innocent citizens. Gita Sahgal and her friends, in protest, formed an alternative organisation – Centre for Secular Space – which has published the present book.

Hindu Fundamentalist Politics

Moazzam Begg's entry into the discourse of human rights (as enunciated and institutionalised by the west – which he opposes, but still wants to make use of) has an interesting parallel in India's Hindu fundamentalist politics. The Sangh parivar had always denounced human rights groups as western-inspired pro-Pakistanis (because they exposed the parivar's involvement in successive massacres of Muslims whom the parivar leaders in their hate speeches during riots branded as "Pak agents"). But in 1992-93, when for a brief period, the Sangh parivar's followers were arrested after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the killing of Muslims, its leaders all of a sudden invoked the principle of human rights, and bemoaned that the human rights groups were not coming to the defence of their cadres in jail!

In dealing with Islamic fundamentalists like Moazzam Begg (who take recourse to the humanitarian provisions of western laws to defend themselves, but deny the same human rights to people under their own shariat laws), one understands the dilemma faced by the Left, the liberal intellectuals and human rights activists. They have to reconcile their opposition to US aggressive expansionism with their need to defend its opponents (who in the Muslim world, are mostly led by the extremely conservative religious Salafi, Wahabi type terrorist groups). Meredith Tax lays down a condition for taking up their case: "It is critically important for defenders of human rights to continue to track state violations committed in the name of counter-terrorism. But it is also incumbent upon human rights organisations to scrutinise the ideology of groups they defend, and to make it clear that while they may defend the human rights of those accused of terrorism, they do not support their beliefs".

Limits of Tolerance

I would go a step further by raising several questions. Should we not make a distinction between propaganda by revolutionary groups which fight for social justice and egalitarianism on the one hand, and hate campaign by groups motivated by religious fanaticism, and ethno-nationalist xenophobia, on the other? Should the state allow the propagation of a fascist ideology under the garb of religious freedom? Is it not urgent for both the Left and secular civil society groups to combine ideological campaign against such fanaticism with active resistance against its followers on the streets (by opposing acts like the vandalism of exhibitions of paintings of M F Hussain by the Hindu religious zealots, or the Muslim mullah-led demonstrations baying for the blood of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin)?

It boils down to the basic issue of the limits of tolerance in a democratic society. We may ponder among other things over Herbert Marcuse's suggestion that tolerance of speech and assembly should be withdrawn from "groups and movements which promote...chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion..." To justify his position, Marcuse added: "If democratic tolerance had been withdrawn when the future (Nazi) leaders started their campaign, mankind would have had the chance of avoiding Auschwitz and a world war...". [\[4\]](#)

Sumanta Banerjee

P.S.

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<http://www.epw.in/book-reviews/left-and-political-islam.html>

* Sumanta Banerjee (suman5ban yahoo.com) is a long-time contributor to EPW and is best known for his book In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India (1980).

Footnotes

[1] "Post-Election Situation - Our Tasks", 12 June 2009, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/postelection_situation.htm

[2] The Hindustan Times, 9 June 2009.

[3] Radical Notes, 1 February 2011, quoted in the present book.

[4] Repressive Tolerance in a Critique of Pure Tolerance (ed.) by R P Wolff, B Moore and H Marcuse, Boston, 1965.