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Welcome MSD, but be focused

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On Gandhi Jayanti this year, a group of educated urban Muslims crossed the Rubicon. They decided to take on the hardliners in their community and, in their words, 'call the bluff of the fundamentalist Shahi Imams and mullahs' through a national alliance called 'Muslims for a Secular Democracy.' (*The Times of India*, Mumbai, October 3, 2003)

MSD's agenda spelt out by its members in Mumbai the other day is unexceptional and laudable. The organisation's local level study groups will meet Muslim people and give them 'the right information' on core issues such as the need to **i.** control population, **ii.** discourage the use of loudspeakers for *azans* and **iii.** discontinue slaughter of goats during Bakri-Eid in pluralistic housing societies.

The organisation wants reform of all personal laws through a uniform civil code, a halt to all the so-called minority appeasement policies such as the Haj subsidy, and the resolution of contentious issues such as Ayodhya through the rule of law. And the MSD also wants to counter what it calls the hate agenda of the Islamic extremists as well as of the Sangh Parivar. MSD wants Muslims to make an informed assessment after it has given them 'the right information.'

In this salutary mission, imparting 'the right information' thus becomes critical.

In that respect, the MSD has, regrettably, begun on the wrong foot. In its press release (reported in *The Times of India*, Mumbai, October 10), the MSD condemned Imam Bukhari for his recent speech defending the death and destruction of 9/11, as well as the recent Vijayadashami speech of K. S. Sudershan, the RSS chief, wherein, the MSD stated, he 'lambasted the National Human Rights Commission for filing a petition in the Supreme Court in the Best Bakery case.'

This simultaneous criticism might seem very even-handed, but the fact of the matter is that 'the right information' was not given on that Vijayadashami speech. What the RSS chief had done there was to first contrast the English newspapers' empathy with a weeping young man, Qutubuddin Ansari, in the Gujarat riots with their indifference towards the Kashmiri Pandits languishing in wretched refugee homes even 14 years after they were terrorised out of their homes, and then say the following.

'Equally strange is the behaviour of our Human Rights Commission. In the Best Bakery case when the accused were set free because the main eyewitnesses turned hostile, the NHRC rushed to the Supreme Court saying that justice cannot be rendered to the victims in Gujarat and hence the case be re-tried in a court outside Gujarat. But when the accused who were charged with burning down the whole of Radhabai Chawli in Mumbai during the riots in 1993 were set free by the lower court for want of evidence, why did not the NHRC come forward to take that case also to the apex court? Is it because those killed in

the Radhabai Chawl episode were all Hindus? In 1984 riots in Delhi, thousands of Keshdhari Sikhs were killed by the mobs that were led by Congress leaders, but almost all the accused were set free, because the prime witness had changed her statement. Why did the NHRC fail to take note of it? Will not the extreme concern for Muslims and Christians and utter disregard for Hindus by the NHRC, make people question its impartiality?

The above excerpt shows that Sudershan's speech had raised the issue of NHRC's credibility with the people, and had not 'lambasted' it -- as the MSD's press release would have us believe.

What is amiss with the above excerpt is that the RSS chief did not give his audience 'the right information' on the Radhabai Chawl case. A designated court of the Terrorists and Disruptive Act, 1987, (now extinct), had, in October 1996, convicted the 11 accused (all Muslims) in that case on an incident during the January 1993 riots in Mumbai.

The conviction was under eight different sections of the Indian Penal Code and two sections of the TADA Act. On appeal, the Supreme Court freed all the 11 by ruling that their convictions were 'without any legally admissible trustworthy evidence'. The then NHRC presumably did not dub that verdict as 'miscarriage of justice' as the present one dubbed the Best Bakery acquittal. Ergo, the Radhabai Chawl case closed without a single conviction for a crime in which one male and five females of a Hindu family and their neighbours were charred to death while three others sustained serious burn injuries after their residences were first locked from outside and then set afire.

The MSD has also demanded stern action against Sudershan for creating ill will and hatred between different religious communities. Well, well, look at another excerpt below from the man's Vijayadashami speech.

'Recently in Delhi, under the auspices of an organisation called Mai Hindustan, 126 Muslim representatives from 9 States of our country had assembled. ... There were 18 women and 38 Mulla-Moulvīs among the participants. Senior bureaucrats, academicians, businessmen and social activists had actively participated in the two-day deliberations and passed four resolutions... The second resolution advocated a legal and constitutional umbrella for social uplift of Muslim women. It called for appropriate laws in all States making registration of marriage and divorce mandatory; a ban on oral *talaq* and enactment of a common civil code... The fourth resolution demanded free education for Muslim girls from primary to higher education level; a short-term vocational training programme for Muslim girls and boys engaged in handicrafts and arts, and modernisation of *madrassas*. The RSS welcomes all such developments that strengthen our nationalism and foster a feeling of love and fellow-feeling among the different religious groups in the country.'

And at another place in his speech, Sudershan said, 'Ordinary Muslims in general want to live in peace and harmony with their co-religionists, but the extremist leadership of the community cherishes the dreams of Hindustan becoming Islamic. In this environment, it

is really an encouraging signal that the nationalist leadership among them is asserting itself.'

Is this creation of communal ill will?

Really, 'the right information' that MSD gives to the lay Muslims will be critical for the desired success of its declared mission.

One set of information which it should get right is that Hindu-Muslim riots are an old historical phenomenon; they are not a product of British rule or of the formation of the RSS in 1925 or of the establishment of the VHP in 1964.

In their 565-page book, *The Proudest Day -- India's Long Road to Independence* (Pimlico, 1998), which was described by *The Financial Times*, London, as 'One of the profound epic tales of modern world history,' the authors Anthony Read and David Fisher have set the record straight. On page 78 they write:

'Many nationalists blamed the British for fomenting trouble between the two communities, claiming that, before they came, Hindu and Muslims had always intermingled happily in cities, towns and villages throughout India. This is pure myth. The British may have utilised the division between Hindus and Muslims, but they certainly did not invent it, there had been communal friction since at least the time of Aurangzeb -- the time, incidentally, when Sikhs became sworn enemies of Muslims.'

Another fact which their sympathisers must get right is the reason why the Muslims are a 'depressed community' as labeled by veteran journalist B G Verghese, in an article in *The Times of India*, Mumbai, of September 22, 2003.

Verghese states that 'Muslim Indians have legitimate grievances and the State and society have a duty to ensure that they get their due.' But he contradicts this statement just a couple of sentences later when he states that 'Where Muslims have shed social conservatism and religious orthodoxy' and proceeded to 'seek modernity through social emancipation, gender justice, education and training to compete with others... individual Muslims have done extraordinarily well in every field.'

He ends up advocating that 'No quarter must be given to Muslim communalism or obscurantism... The community must turn its back on the religious conservatism that has retarded its progress and widened the divide with others.'

The path to the overall Muslim community's advancement is clear. God helps those who help themselves. The sad part is that the welcome advent of MSD with its announced agenda and Verghese's latest prescription for moving from 'Ghetto To Mainstream' are not exactly new. As Read and Fisher tell us, advice to that effect had been given in a book titled *Mussadas (The Ebb and Flow of Islam)* by one Altaf Husain Ali in 1879.

In that book Hali appealed to Indian Muslims 'to throw off their ignorance, indolence and self-centredness and seek progress...'

The coming of MSD is therefore a case of 'better late than never.' However, it will do itself and the nation proud if it concentrated on its core agenda rather than cloud it with the hate agenda of others, perceived or real.