An article by Radhika Coomaraswamy entitled "The Swamy and the Sub-Text" appeared in ***Pravada*** *No.6, June 1992. It discussed a dilemma with which many South Asian intellectuals are faced:*

> *If we speak the language of secularism, we become marginalised, a cosmopolitan elite incapable of communicating with the vast majority of our people on an emotional cultural level. If we speak the language of religion, we fragment our continent, create divisions and separate worlds. We become unwilling accessories of the fundamentalist project.*

This article provoked much comment and criticism in private, but we are disappointed that no one has come forward to propose an alternative way of meeting the dilemma that the writer posed.

We publish below extracts from the introduction by Nighat Said Khan to a book entitled ***Voices Within :Dialogues with Women on Islam*** *(1992), published in Lahore by ASR Publications. We hope this will stimulate further discussion.*

RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Nighat Said Khan

Much has been written about the political, economic, and religious reasons that led to Pakistan. While I agree that the answers lie in these and other areas, and that the economic and political reasons may have been paramount, I am concerned here only with the religious separateness and more concerned with trying to isolate that strand of feeling within religion that constitutes and manifests itself as identity, a dimension I find seldom considered or expressed. What does it actually mean to be a Muslim, how is this articulated and how and why do economic and political issues get played out through religion? Regarding the partition of India, I am intrigued as to how the leadership on both sides was able to tap a religious identity within the Hindus and the Muslims and to separate this religious identity from an overall cultural and historical identity which all the people of India had in common, especially those in the North and the East, the two areas that were partitioned.

Obviously these separate religious identities existed and, as history testifies, were repeatedly used by the British to divide the people. But I think that we have been looking at the issue the wrong way around. Hindu and Muslim identities and their separateness were not positive affirmations of their respective faiths. Had this been the case, Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists would have been the first to have articulated this and would have been in the forefront of the struggle to separate the two. But those supposedly most intolerant of the other did not think that their separateness warranted a division of the country; while those supposedly most tolerant of difference, the secular and progressive elements on both sides, took positions that divided the people and eventually the country.

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However, when I say that we need to look at the issue the other way around I mean that we should not be looking at the obvious: that the Muslim League was able to draw upon a creative Muslim identity which looked to the realization of the dream for a homeland for the Muslims; or that Congress was able to hold together a national liberation struggle that was decidedly secular and singularly non Hindu. The Muslim League was not as Muslim as it was made out to be, and the Congress was more Hindu than it professed. Yet in articulating the concerns of Indian Muslims, and needing to establish a separateness, the Muslim League used Islamic symbols and slogans that necessarily alienated Hindus, an alienation which intensified when the Hindus felt that their nation itself was being threatened.

However, this is somewhat understandable since the Muslim League never pretended not to be of and for the Muslims. But many Muslims were unable to identify with the Hindu symbols, colours and images used by the Congress and felt excluded from the national liberation movement. Added to this was the linguistic struggle between Hindi and Urdu. The Indian State identified the Urdu language and script as 'Muslim' and made attempts to 'Indianize' it. But in giving language a religious identity, it alienated Urdu-speaking Muslims who felt that their language, expression, culture and history were being obliterated, and with it, themselves (it is interesting that post partition, Jinnah supported Urdu as the national language of Pakistan because it was closer to other Muslim languages, and Nehru rejected it as one of the national languages of India for precisely the same reasons). On both sides therefore, the separateness was not positive ex-

pressions of religion and identity from within, but being pushed into these identities by the other.

After the creation of Pakistan other identities surfaced: linguistic, ethnic, sub-national and provincial, and ideological. It took nine years for the nation to come to some sort of an agreement on a Constitution, but in these years far from anything getting resolved, the other identities became more articulate.

However the lynchpin of this process Islamization was women. In his first address to the nation Zia-ul-Haq vowed to uphold 'the sanctity of chaddar and chardivari.' The State moved to take over the lives of women, to control their bodies, their space, to decide what they should wear, how they should conduct themselves, the jobs they could take, the sports they could play, and took it upon itself to define and regulate women's morality. This was done through a series of legislative changes such as the Zina and Hudood Ordinances, and the Islamic Law of Evidence; through directives such as the dress code, women not being allowed to participate in spectator sports; but mainly through a persistent ideology that women were not equal to men and that they must be regulated.

If the tradition, or ethnic, or code of life of a people is to kill a woman who disobeys, as is the case in parts of Pakistan, I do not and cannot respect their way of life, and do impose my own morality on them. There must be a point where acceptance and respect of difference ends. What is this point?

While the people of Pakistan have resisted Islamization, particularly women, Islamization has been very detrimental to the nation. It has given legitimacy to fundamentalism and has put the nation, especially the urban middle class on the defensive, by constantly having to prove it's identity. There is always a tendency that in asking larger questions such as what is a Pakistani or a Muslim, one ends up with narrower answers and narrower identities, because the more refined the definition, the greater will be the exclusion. This constriction is continuing in Pakistan, with even Islamic sects being pushed out of the central discourse.

Also since Islam has no ultimate authority on earth to determine what Islam is, or who a Muslim is, the attempt to impose a single interpretation of Islam has pitted Islam against Islam, and sect against sect, and has also led to a proliferation of sub-sects. All of this has made every one, other than those in one's own community, the 'other' and has made for a very disintegrated and violent society.

Yet while being against a single interpretation of Islam, and against the theocracy, Muslims in Pakistan have internalized an Islamic identity and they see themselves as Muslim. It is this core that the State is able to tap, and this identity that makes it difficult even for progressive movements to move outside the Islamic debate.

Women in particular have been fighting back, especially since 1981. The Hadood Ordinance which specifies Islamic punishments was passed in 1979. It requires the evidence of four Muslim males of good repute for maximum punishment, and makes no distinction between rape, adultery or fornication. Since then women's organizations have fought every anti-woman measure, and the first demonstration against Islamization under Martial Law was a women's demonstration in 1983 against the proposed Law of Evidence which stipulated that the evidence of two women would be equal to that of one man.

But there is an ambivalence in the movement. It has also raised a host of questions in terms of the movement itself and what constitutes it, it's positions and strategies, and it's future.

What does constitute the women's movement in Pakistan? The spectrum in the movement that opposes Islamization the way that it has been articulated since 1977, ranges from women's rights groups; women in progressive political parties; women in the left; professional women's groups; development groups; resource centres; and individual women. But women in the right and Islamic fundamentalist women are organized, in many cases, as an opposition to the women's movement. These women also struggle for the rights of women as they see them and are often able to mobilize a much larger number of women. Often these women have found an identity, a space, and even a freedom within the right. They are empowered by this, and even though their ideology totally negates the struggle of the progressive women's movement, their experiences can't be denied.

Again, since these women also take up similar issues such as rape, pornography, or using women as sex symbols, do these then make for a commonality of women, and a consequent commonality of struggle? And if one allies with the right, how far does one go without being changed in the process? In a demonstration against an incident of rape, in Karachi, women from the whole political spectrum came together. But since the progressive women's movement took the position that this rape was connected to the whole process of Islamization, the Islamic fundamentalist women separated themselves.

This also raises another series of questions on the issue of diversity and the acceptance of difference. While I have no problems with it conceptually , especially given how I grapple with my own multiple identities and expressions, I do wonder if there is not a point beyond which one cannot accept the other as they are, or where their expression lies. I think sometimes we, in the women's movement and those of us into participatory and alternative development, bend over backwards to respect the cultural norms and knowledge systems 'of the people'.

As we listen to the voices of 'the people' we must be aware of the danger in this. I have often listened to voices that I don't want to hear, and I do feel an intervention is in order. To give a crude example, if the tradition, or ethic, or code of life of a people is to kill a woman who disobeys, as is the case in parts of Pakistan, I do not and cannot respect their way of life, and do impose my own morality on them. There must be a point where acceptance and respect of difference ends. What is that point?

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The women's movement, and Women's Action Forum in particular, initially used the strategy of using progressive interpretations of Islam to counter the interpretation of the State. In other words it used Islam against Islam, and was reasonably successful in sometimes pushing the State into a difficult position, but even more successful in mobilizing women who identified with Islam, and who would not have gone along if they felt that what they were doing was against their religion. Yet I have personally been very uncomfortable with this, especially if it is 'strategic use' and not faith. Also if we ourselves are selective in what we use from the Qur'an, are we in a position to oppose the State or the fundamentalists for being selective? The other aspect of the strategy of using Islam to fight Islam is that there is a danger that we will end up reinforcing it, or at least reinforcing the notion that it is only within the Qur'an that we can demand our rights.

To return to religion, culture, and identity in the larger context, I find that like most Pakistanis, I have not resolved these issues, for myself or within myself. They are all obviously interrelated and interconnected. Religion is not only faith, but a world view and a way of life, especially in a codified religion like Islam; and culture is not just what we eat or the way we dress, or the language we speak in, or the music we listen to; and in any case all these are not unrelated to religion. Identity comes from both and from a variety of other interrelationships. Yet there is sometimes even an intangible, Muslim identity, unique in itself. It stems from Islam and no Muslim can therefore ever get away from it.

Given this I wonder about secularism, especially in the context of Pakistan. Women's Action Forum recently made the demand that Pakistan should be a secular State. I am very supportive of this position and had actively worked for it. But somewhere within me this is a hollow victory. In a country where Muslims are in a majority, even if legislators are not actively seeking guidance from the Qur'an and Sunnah, the laws that they make will not be religion free or value free. As Muslims they will have internalized Islam, and this world view, and way of living, will be reflected in the laws and in governance. No State is really secular, and all carry within it the seeds of the predominant faith.

In any case Pakistan cannot replicate the experience of Western secularism since that came out of specific historical conditions. We do not have a history of a breaking away from the Church, or of that period of Western industrialization, and Imperialism. Also there is a problem for Islam in the classic definition of secularism. The notion of the State is built into Islam on the one hand, and on the other, Islam has no Church to break away from. Again, can one have a personal faith in Islam when the essence of Islam is the community? Can feminists say that their faith is personal and has nothing to do with the public, while still upholding that the personal is the political?

Perhaps these are unresolvable issues. I raise them here because women speak on these issues. Since even peeling layer after layer, trying to unravel my own identities, I am still unable to make sense of my core, I accept what each of these women say as long as they don't try to convert me. My problem lies not with the expressions of identity, for my commitment lies beyond personal faith or the nation state. My resentment surfaces when identity, especially religious identity and nationalism is thrust upon me, either directly through coercion, or by being pushed into becoming the 'other'. However I am equally resentful when my identity is subsumed or negated when I express it, or when I am dismissed as being negative when I give voice to my difference.