

By Sidharth Mishra



If there at all was any doubt about the timing of the raking up controversy around Pakistan founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah's portrait at the students' union office of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), it has been set to rest by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. The saffron clad leader, who is Bharatiya Janata Party's most sought after campaigner in Karnataka after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at a poll rally in the state that "the glorification of Jinnah was unfortunate. My government would act strictly against all those who were behind the trouble (on Wednesday)."

The world was taken aback when all of a sudden BJP's Member of Parliament from Aligarh, Satish Gautam, demanded the removal of Jinnah's portrait which has been hanging in Aligarh campus, albeit innocuously, for the past 80 years. Gautam timed his demand in a manner that it raised the "requisite sentiments" ahead of the Karnataka polls. The Hindi axiom of "Kahin Pe Nigahein, Kahi Pe Nishana (Eyeing one thing while targeting something else)" perfectly explains Gautam's game plan.

The larger question however is how justified is having Jinnah's portrait hanging from the walls of AMUSU office and the answer certainly should not get drowned in the cacophony of poll campaign. Following the portrait controversy, I am, however, reminded of an incident which I covered two decades ago. In the spring of 1997, the prestigious Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC) in Dehradun was celebrating its platinum jubilee and a large group of its pre-independence alumni led by Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Sahibzada Yakub Khan had arrived. The delegation principally consisted of old soldiers, who had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with their Indian comrades-in-arms in the pre-independence era and later as counterparts against each other during the 1947, 1965 and 1971 wars.

The delegation also had some of the veterans from Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA). They had joined forces with Netaji when he raised a militia of the British Indian army soldiers taken prisoners of war by the Japanese. They held Netaji in high esteem, so did some of their mates from the school who had stayed on this side of the line which Cyril Radcliffe drew dividing India into two nations.

In the delegation was a venerable veteran Captain Taj Mohammed Khanzada. After

independence he had taken to politics and become an influential lawmaker in the Punjab Province. The family followed the tradition of countering the extremist inspirations in their areas of influences. In fact they were in news recently when in a suicide bomb attack Taj Mohammed's nephew ShujaKhanzada, who was Minister in Pakistan's Punjab government, was killed.

Coming back to Taj Mohammed; during their 1997 visit, the delegation of Pakistani alumni was taken to the hall of fame of their old school, which was founded by the Prince of Wales in 1922, and also later to the Indian Military Academy, from where Taj Mohammed was commissioned into the British Indian army. At the dinner that night Taj Mohammed had expressed great joy at finding his name in the hall of fame of both the institutions for having won the Military Cross for gallantry during World War II.

Later interacting informally with the gathering, he also mentioned that he was not sure if pre-independence institutions in Pakistan have retained pre-independence history. Jinnah portrait controversy raises the question of whether we are to retain our pre-independence history or go the Pakistan way.

India as a nation has been much superior to Pakistan economically, militarily and socially, thus why are we inflicting on ourselves the Pakistani mentality. A Jinnah portrait covered in dust hanging from a dilapidated wall cannot hold a threat to the Indian nationhood if it has not managed to do so in the eight decades.

Unfortunately a section of Indian politicians, now greatly propelled by right-wing ideologues, has not yet been able to exonerate Aligarh of its intellectual complicity in the formation of Pakistan. They continue to look at the campus as centre of conservatism bordering to fundamentalism and issues needing no cognisancelike Jinnah's dust covered portrait are blown out of proportion.

About two decades back I used to frequent Aligarh as the education correspondent for the paper I worked for back then- The Pioneer. The lure of the books stacked in Maulana Azad Library would keep me back on the campus beyond the call of duty. I would pester the public relations officer of the university to get a room at Old Guest House, and each time that I got an accommodation there I would be reminded that QurratulainHyder, the famous Urdu novelist, was born in that bungalow which was then occupied by her father SajjadHaidarYildrim, a pioneer of Urdu short story writing.

Let Aligarh Live In Peace

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Her mother Nazar Zahra too was a novelist. AineeApa, as Hyder was known, had migrated to Pakistan in 1947 but came back to India in 1960, initially settling down working and writing in Mumbai and then finally to Noida, where she died a few years ago. AineeApa truly represented the Aligarh mindset. Though the campus was initially votary for formation of Pakistan, it later came to reject the concept as the new nation degraded into a degenerative fundamentalist anarchy.

But given the current state of politics in our country and its reflection on the television, it's unlikely that the Aligarh campus would be allowed to live in peace. Likes of SatishGautam, the local MP, whose mother SheelaGautam too represented Aligarh for some terms in LokSabha, would continue to make 'discoveries' about Aligarh's connect to Pakistan and keep kicking the dust settled on weather-worn Jinnah's portrait.

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