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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Wed, 03/28/2018 - 05:43

Paper No. 6361

Dated 28-Mar-2018

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Of late, some of the leaders of the Muslim community and particularly the radical Islamists are found to be more and more restive and have taken it upon themselves to oppose any move of the government to reform the system for the general good of the community. Whether it is a proposal for modernising madrassa education or reforming the oppressive Sharia laws against women, many of them have taken it as an interference in their religious affairs.

They are now campaigning for “Deen(faith) Bachao Conference”(Conference for saving Deen) proposed to be organised by Imarat-e-Shariah(House of Islamic Laws) in Patna on April 15 under the banner of All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB).

Imarat-e-Shariah is an outfit of Deobandi Islamist movement meant to impose Shariah laws on the community. Similarly, the AIMPLB was also established by Deobandi Ulema in 1973 when the then government on the recommendation of a committee of Islamic scholars called for certain reforms in Muslim Personal Laws.

The proposed conference looks to be a ploy of radical Islamists to challenge the women of the community who have been opposing those portions of laws that go against equality of the women. It is also against the move of the government to modernise madrassa education to be in conformity with what is taught in the mainstream schools. In fact the AIMPLB is planning to establish more and more Sharia Courts throughout the country to debar the community from taking their disputes to the mainstream legal system of the country.

Those fundamentalists who have grabbed the leadership in the community, instead of sensitising the community towards the issues related to their overall advancement particularly in the field of education, health care and economic development - are encouraging them towards

madrassa education of medieval era which hardly has any space in the changing economic profile of the country. Although separate personal laws based on religion is against the principle of secular democracy, Islamists in India while inciting the community against any reform seek to continue their theocratic overlord ship over them’.

One Lochan Madan filed a PIL seeking an immediate dissolution of all Islamic and Sharia Courts in India which are posing a challenge to the Indian judicial system. On this, the Supreme Court observed that “there is no place for a parallel system of justice. The bench headed by Justice Ruma Pal ruled that *fatwas* have no locus standi in a secular nation and that every citizen will have to follow the law as laid down in the Constitution of India”.

(<http://www.cwds.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ShariatCourts.pdf>: [1])

But the Islamist priestly class under the banner of AIMPLB while ignoring the observation of Supreme Court is again trying to mobilise the masses to create a situation like mid- eighties of last century when they put pressure on the government and succeeded in neutralising a Supreme Court verdict in Shahbano case through a constitutional amendment. Now when Supreme Court declared triple Talaq void and subsequently a Bill against triple talaq was passed by Lok Sabha though yet to be passed by Rajya Sabha, the Islamists, apprehensive of losing their theological hegemony over the community are now aggressively agitating against the Bill.

The attitude of AIMPLB indicates its deep rooted conservative patriarchal approach based on religio-cultural tradition of the Arab world in the name of Islam to justify their centuries old subjugation of women by misinterpreting the Islamic laws. This self-acclaimed representative body of Muslim society in India is least bothered either about the verdict of Supreme Court or about the diversity and heterogeneity of Indian Muslims and is found determined to undermine the right to equality for women.

Sharia was compiled a couple of centuries after the death of Prophet Mohammad by the then dominant patriarchal Islamist establishment when the medieval socio-cultural ethos was prevailing over Islamic scriptures. This was the reason why many Muslim countries subsequently reviewed the Sharia laws for reform. Today the Muslim women in India are also conscious of the global socio-cultural ethos which is based on human reasoning. So much so, Muslim women organizations have now raised their voice for reform of the anti-women Sharia laws- particularly polygamy and instant triple talaq.

Ironically, the post-colonial Muslim leadership in India hardly made any sincere attempt to bring about reforms in Muslim Personal Laws. Even an attempt of the Union Cabinet in 1963 in forming a committee of Muslim scholars was negated by the Islamist radicals who considered it as an interference and an infringement of the religious rights of Muslims. They are not even ready to understand that a larger section of their women population have already launched a movement against their medieval subjugation in the name of religion and are getting support also by liberal sections of the community.

Islamist conservatism in India has been detrimental not only to the overall development of Indian Muslims but it is also a major hurdle in the desired reforms of Sharia laws. The conservatives while politicising all the Muslim issues have now grabbed the leadership of the community only to push the community back into medieval ages.

This is the reason that despite being a second largest religious majority in the country, Indian Muslims have failed to play any assertive role in the developmental march of the country even after over seven decades of independence as their future is still held hostage by their religious leaders. These leaders don't allow them to think beyond mosque and madrassa though there is no reference of either of them in Quran. Similarly, there is no tradition of priesthood or even monasticism in Islam but after the end of Muslim rule in the sub-continent some Islamic scholars transformed the madrassa and mosque as monasteries of Islam, promoted priestly class known as Ulema, Mullhas and Maulana for whom the end of Muslim rule in the sub-continent became unbearable. They then launched an institutionalized Muslim separatist movement by founding Darul Uloom Deoband in 1866 which gradually emerged as the epicentre of Islamic conservatism.

Since there was no challenge from any section in the community, the members of AIMPLB bargained with the ruling party for self-seeking political shares and have pushed the community as pawns in vote-bank politics. They even succeeded in radicalization of a sizeable section in the community members through madrassa education and resisted any attempt by the government to modernize the medieval education and rationalize the Sharia laws.

On the issues of gender equality and Islamic reforms when the radical Islamists from AIMPLB failed to counter the tough theological challenge in TV debates, they took a confrontational path against the government by taking a subversive stand that the court or the government should not intervene in the matter relating to faith. They are not ready to understand that unlike their jubilation over three decades old Shahbano case when the Muslim masses blindly followed their dictates and progressive Muslims also maintained silence, today a sizeable section of Indian Muslims celebrated their defeat in Saira Bano case. But in absence of any aggressive challenge by the progressive section in the community, the Islamists are able to prolong their movement through one of exclusivism, intolerance, gender inequality and discrimination.

From time to time, liberal and moderate sections in the community raised their voice for modernization of madrassas and some of them even wanted to ban the madrassas. According to a media report, Shia Central Waqf Board President Waseem Rizwi wrote a letter to Prime Minister Modi and UP Chief Minister Yogi asking them to close down madrassas. He alleged that they have produced “more terrorists than civil servants in the last seventy years of independence. He also alleged that All India Muslim Personal Board (AIMPLB) had been a wing of terrorist group running from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan” and asked the centre to ban it. (Times of India dated February 13, 2018). However, the voice of liberal Muslims is so weak that it hardly stirred the Muslim masses against the Islamists’ dictation. The people within the religious majority community loudly raise their voice against the draconian ‘Khap Panchayat’ dictates and the media too highlights it but hardly there is any voice raised against the functioning of Sharia Court and its verdicts.

The Islamists always take shelter under constitutional provisions to practise sharia laws but they never agree to the implementation of constitutional directive for Uniform Civil Code. They have in fact been stalling its implementation indefinitely. So long this politics of minorityism is played by our political parties; the Islamists will never allow the community to become an integrated part of the national mainstream.

Thus, until and unless the progressive Muslims confront the Islamists and popularize the Islamic theology as a religion of peace, inclusiveness, respect for democracy and secularism – the Mullahs will continue their protracted war against mainstreaming the community by the government.

The need of the hour is therefore, for both the state and liberal intellectuals in the community to launch a sincere and meaningful campaign to educate the common Muslims so that they are freed from the self-seeking politics of their religious leaders. At the same time intellectuals with great Islamic scholarship should take the initiative for re-codification of Sharia on the basis of a rational, scientific and gender-just interpretation of Quran and other Islamic scriptures which could be instrumental to justify the Muslim women’s struggle for their rights to equality in Islamic laws.

They should also take a lead to ensure that women activists are also allowed to place their views in the proposed ‘Sharia Bachao conference’. The proposal to convene a “Deen Bachao Conference” is a regressive measure and all right thinking individuals of the community should understand what it really stands for.

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