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DANISH CARTOONS: REACTIONS IN INDIA, PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH

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The reactions to publishing the satirical cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper were largely muted among India's Muslim community. India had sought to be politically correct on issues relating to Islam. The Prime Minister's Office expressed deep concern over the cartoons and the hurt caused to the Muslims. But an elected Member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh, Mr. Haji Yaqoob, shocked the secular elements in the country by announcing a bounty of Rs.51 crores for anyone killing the Danish cartoonist. Two little known Shariat courts soon joined the Uttar Pradesh minister in prescribing death for the Danish cartoonist but got little endorsement from prominent Muslim groups. Mean while, some protestors burnt the Danish flag outside the Jama Masjid in Delhi after the imam criticized the Danish government. This was followed by violent protests in Srinagar where police had to use force to control angry mobs threatening to destroy anything in sight. In Hyderabad, the old city area which has a sizeable Muslim population, witnessed large scale protests with violence spilling onto the streets. Significantly, the states with a large Muslim population (Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad, Kerala) witnessed aggressive protests instigated by local religious leaders who were intent on using this opportunity to strengthen their position within the community.

The response in Pakistan to the controversy was more furious. The cartoon controversy drew condemnation from the Upper House of Parliament, echoed by President Musharraf, and a diplomatic protest by the government made in various European countries. Aggressive students attacked private and public properties especially targeting foreign companies. The army had to be deployed in the Lahore, Multan, Faisalabad and Gujranwala to help the civil administration control law and order. In Lahore miscreants set buildings and vehicles on fire before going on a looting spree. In Karachi, around 50,000 people attended a demonstration, while a complete hartal was observed in Multan, its cantonment area, and Dera Ghazi Khan on a call by 200 traders' organizations. The gathering was largely peaceful in contrast to Lahore and Peshawar. Despite a ban on public gatherings imposed in Islamabad and police sealing off the capital, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), known for its fundamentalist outlook, went ahead with an anti-cartoon rally, where over 300 protesters were arrested. Qazi Husain Ahmad, the leader of the MMA, was placed under house arrest in Mansoor.

The religious groups in Pakistan played a prominent role in instigating public reactions as in India. Injured religious sentiment had seldom translated into public unrest, especially in Pakistan, unless there is political mileage to be gained by vested interests. What was striking was the lack of any real discussion on the row over the Danish cartoons. The blasphemy law has pre-empted the possibility of an open debate on Islam and its role in a changing world.

While taking the matter very seriously, there were no hasty reactions or outbursts in Bangladesh. Its Parliament demanded an official apology from the Danish government. While condemning the cartoons in the strongest terms it did not support any aggressive protests, choosing to take things in its stride in a composed manner. For a country with an overwhelming Muslim majority, it was truly praiseworthy to see how level-headed the reaction was. There was much emotional rhetoric by religious groups followed by protest marches but the government ensured that they remained peaceful.

Although these protests were largely religious in nature, the liberal community in these countries felt that the freedom of expression which the West espoused had to go hand in hand with greater responsibilities. Offence for a just cause is understandable, but in this case there was hardly any just cause to promote. The Danish newspaper is infamous for its sympathy towards fascism and Nazi dictatorship, which provided a basis for these cartoons to be perceived as anti Muslim.

Curiously, the sub continent's reaction to the controversy ranged from passive protests to violence. Infact, the Muslim community in the region was largely divided over its response. The uneducated masses were instigated to demonstrate violent responses by the local ulemas and political parties for selfish reasons, while the upper class and intellectual community did not feel the incident was important enough for violent condemnation. Significantly, in the case of Pakistan, the reaction though aggressive was largely delayed but it was largely overshadowed by the remarkably restrained and mature reaction in Bangladesh.