

Article

"The Route to Regeneration"

“Verily Allah Will Never Change The Condition of A People Unless They Change What Is Within Themselves”(Quran:13:11). This guidance came fourteen centuries ago, but we have not been paying heed. What then is it that we need to change within ourselves?

This is a moment for introspection, deep and unsparing. What is wrong with us? The most fundamental is a collapse of values, both spiritual and temporal. How do we weigh up on the scale of morality, decency, honesty, integrity, truthfulness, tolerance, fairness, benevolence, compassion, respect, restraint? Woefully short! They almost seem like quaint concepts from another world, no longer our own. Unless we can restore our values and regain our moral compass, we cannot prepare the ground for reconstruction and regeneration.

The route to regeneration is through education. What is the state of our educational institutions from madrasas at the grass roots level, through schools, to the provision of tertiary education? The much-maligned madrasas can serve a very useful purpose of educating a substantial, underprivileged section of the community. Making their curricula more relevant to the needs of the present day and age can breathe new life into these moribund outfits. What prevents this from happening- a lack of imagination, resources or will? What about our schools and institutions of higher learning? Surely their standards need to be raised. But how? We cannot have good education without good teachers. What kind of facilities do we have for training teachers? Education is more than just a profession; it is a mission and those engaged in it must pursue it with missionary zeal. Is that possible? I have personally had the good fortune to be schooled in two Christian missionary schools. I bear witness to their commitment, sincerity and quality. Indian Christians run many excellent schools; Indian Muslims generally lousy ones. We can take pages from their playbook and improve our schools. What about tertiary education? We need to look no further than St. Stephen's in Delhi, St. Xavier's in Mumbai, Loyola College in Chennai, Christian Medical College in Vellore, XLRI in Jamshedpur, and this list can be expanded to include several more. Where is our list, and how do we compare? While they strive for excellence, we are all too ready to lower the bar and accept mediocrity or worse. The purpose of saying this is not to generate defensiveness or envy, but to induce aspiration and provide inspiration. What prevents us from learning from their example? How can we institutionalize structures and processes that will allow us to adopt educational best practices?

We are educationally weak, but our artisans excel in their crafts. At present we have a scenario where myriad artisans toil away with negligible bargaining power, while most of the profit in the value chain is appropriated by middle men. Surely these matchless skills can be leveraged to produce greater rewards for those who create things of such beauty. Social enterprises aimed at assisting artisans to improve their raw material selection, designing, processing, finishing, packaging and marketing could help to remedy the situation. Social enterprises could also provide guidance and resources, including finance, to the millions of other micro-businesses that operate at the base of the economic pyramid, helping to generate employment and income.

In an expanding economy, where the private sector will continue to be of ever increasing

importance as a provider of employment opportunities, Muslim representation in private sector jobs will significantly impact the economic well-being of the community. The current state of affairs, so far as Muslim employment in the private sector is concerned, is no better than it is in the government and public sector. While the community is economically weak, the aggregate buying power of two hundred million consumers has the potential to concentrate minds in corporate board rooms. Most companies in the private sector are indifferent to the employment of Muslims, in spite of declarations of equal opportunity and promotion of diversity. This could change if Muslims could effectively find a way to patronize the products and services of those companies that have a better representation of Muslims on their payrolls. The proposition to employers would be fair and simple: you support our just aspirations as equal partners in progress and we will support your business as consumers. The message may begin to seep in and attitudes may begin to change resulting in improved consciousness among employers and a fairer representation in employment. Of course, this approach has to be subtle and nuanced so as not to trigger any unintended reactions.

While concerted and coordinated efforts are needed to improve Muslim representation at all levels in government, the paramilitary and armed forces and the public sector, the big opportunity is in self-employment in small and micro businesses. Developing and upgrading relevant skills and entrepreneurship competencies are key to the economic emancipation of the community.

Change is a function of dissatisfaction with the status quo and the stimulus necessary to precipitate it. It is hard to believe that we can be anything but extremely dissatisfied with our present situation. And we have received much more than a stimulus - we have received a shock! So what is needed to turn things around? This is where we need thought leadership to be the catalyst. For that to happen, we have to provide institutionalized platforms to bring people and ideas together. Unless we make thought the springboard for action, our responses will be confused, contradictory and counter-productive. We must pool together our intellectual resources and try to assemble an agenda for empowerment that would determine a roadmap for regeneration and revival.

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