

VERSES OF AN INJURED NON-MINORITY

(*The Book Review, Silver Jubilee Special II, Sahithya Akademi Comprehensive Anthologies of Indian Literature, February 2002*)

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(*Jihaad: Poems of Muslim minority poets, published by Revolutionary Writers Association, Prakasam district, Jan 1997.*)

The Revolutionary Writers Association (RWA), better known by its Telugu acronym *Virasam* has published this collection of 52 poems in Telugu by Muslim poets. *Virasam* is a leftist writers' organisation committed to what may briefly be described as the Maoist current of Marxism. The poets whose poems have been compiled in this collection are, however, not members of *Virasam*.

The title of the compilation comes from a poem by Khaja, the most prolific of the contributors. Perhaps the choice of this particular title for the compilation is unfortunate, since the tone of the collection, and even that of that particular poem, is far from the militant pan-Islamic tendency that has come to be associated, rightly or wrongly, with the word *jihad*. The tone is that of injured protest, and the idiom owes much more to broadly leftist and dalit philosophies than to any current within Muslim politics. Some of the poems by Sky Baba, in fact, are directed against the suffocating grip of orthodoxy on Muslim society, especially women.

The explanatory sub-title 'Muslim minority poets' is equally inept. The sensibility that informs the poems is not that of the alienated or discriminated *minority* that the hyphenated expression suggests, but of a *wronged* people. And the identity of the writers as Muslims merges smoothly and effortlessly with the poor, the toiling, the *dalit* and the lower *sudra* communities to the point that some of the poems assertively state that they are the majority and the *Hindutvavaadis* the minority. It is to be remarked that outside the Hyderabad-based Muslim aristocracy that may in part have had Persian or West Asian origins, the rest of the Muslims of the state are, almost without exception, converts from the toiling communities of Hindu society, and as poverty-ridden as any of them. And the spread of Marxian class analysis as well as bahujan politics has opened up a wider identity for such Muslims.

Time was when socially conscious Muslims in the state preferred not to see themselves as Muslims, impelled perhaps into a defensive attitude by the predominant Hindu prejudice against Muslims as an inherently bigoted people. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Mumbai killings that followed have had the positive consequence of ridding such Muslims of this induced amnesia, and they have started seeing themselves as Muslims,

as an injured people, without losing any of their previous concern for social justice as such. The more rounded and healthy attitude that has resulted is reflected in a literary effusion that has marked the nineties. This compilation testifies to its richness.

The poem that probably marked the origins of that literary sensibility is Khader Mohiuddin's *Puttu machcha*, birth-mark, the last poem of this compilation. Written before the demolition of the Babri masjid but in the wake of the aggressive rath yatras and brick-mongering by the Sangh Parivaar, the poem speaks of the birth-mark of treason that an Indian Muslim comes into the world with. And the unyielding accusations he/she has to answer throughout life, about not being patriotic enough, not rejoicing at the victory of the right team at cricket, etc. Khaja, Afsar and others have carried forward what Khader Mohiuddin began.

None of the poets offer any easy resolution of this predicament, though *Virasam* in its foreword gratuitously offers the Maoist solution of struggle and unity between Muslims and revolutionaries, but none of the poems ends in a tone of despair or nihilism. A general tone of hopefulness without any specific hopes is perhaps the most realistic attitude that one can expect today, and it is to the credit of the poets that they realise this.