

Shared Living and Social Interaction in Bikaner:

An evaluation of Peaceful Coexistence

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Situated in the midst of the Thar desert, Bikaner has a long history of shared life between the Hindu and Muslim residents of this ex-princely state/ Rajwaadaa. The local population lived in the fortified area of the city which is still densely inhabited. Bikaner is one of the few Indian cities that has had no incident of communal rioting in the last 500 years. Police lathi charges have also been rare. The Peaceful Co-existence Project of the AMAN Trust undertook a study to map the nature of and challenges to peaceful co-existence in Bikaner. On the one hand the city has a glorious history of communal amity, but on the other hand, questions have been raised about the nature and longevity of this peace. Trends such as communal tension during elections and segregation in social life are causes for concern. Our study examines this 'traditional' peace and the challenges it faces from 'contemporary' forces.

Methodology:

Discussions and interviews were held with writers, politicians, social-workers, representatives of religious groups, journalists, traders and others. Street corner meetings (an age-old tradition in Bikaner) and workshops were also held. Questionnaires were used in some cases. The study also used insights from group discussions with youth in colleges. Since Bikaner has a history of communal peace we began our research with examining the factors behind this amity.

Factors Responsible for Communal Harmony

The Role of Kings:

The medieval rulers of Bikaner pursued policies that ensured friendly relations between the two major communities of the city - Hindus and Muslims. Though local Pushkarnas (a Hindu caste group) constituted a majority of the ruling elite, both communities had equal opportunities in employment. Both observed freedom of belief and practice. They were both given grants to celebrate festivals and the king or his representative graced these occasions with their presence. Ruling elites are generally believed to practice a policy of 'divide and rule' to buttress their authority. However the state of Bikaner remained unique in this regard. Here the elite tried to generate harmonious relations among communities and succeeded to a large extent in generating communal amity. Many examples can be cited to prove this. The kings donated generously to Hindus, especially Pushkarnas for festivals, temples and marriages and participated in the occasion. Though Pushkarnas were not given opportunities for pursuing education, the

kings hosted feasts and banquets and kept the Pushkarnas happy. The Pushkarnas hailed the kings for their generosity.

Muslims were free to pursue their caste and sub-caste based traditional occupations and beliefs. Gajner palace was constructed 30 kms from Bikaner and the Dargah of Jelha Bhutta Pir was constructed nearby. Members of the royal household paid their respects at the Dargah and it was opened to the public. Other Dargahs such as Naugaja Pir, Char Pir (built in Sadul colony by Maharaja Lal Singh), and Gemna Pir (at Karmisar) also enjoyed royal patronage. This contributed to good relations with Muslims. Legend has it that once there was a marriage in the royal family. After the preparations had been made, it was realized that the day of the ceremony coincided with Muharram. The royal family thereupon postponed the marriage. This is cited as an exemplary act of sensitivity.

Town Planning:

Bikaneri Kings deliberately settled colonies of Hindus and Muslims in a manner that prevented the ignition of communal violence. The basic character of town planning ruled out the congregation as a residential colony of a particular community based on caste. This prevented ghettoisation. A street starting with Brahmin families ended with Muslim houses. Though the names of the Mohallas are based on the castes that constitute the majority of its inhabitants people from all castes and communities lived there. In the center of the town at historical Kotget, the houses of Hindus and Muslims are close to each other. Such town planning - adjacent houses of Hindus and Muslims in the locality, their economic interdependence and encouragement of harmonious relationship by the ruling kings paved the way for lasting communal harmony.

In 1947 when India gained independence, Bikaner was being ruled by Maharaja Sardul Singh. Like other regions during Partition, Bikaner also witnessed mass desertion. But incidents of communal violence were rare. Corner meetings and interviews with elders suggest that few Muslim families left Bikaner and few Hindu families came to Bikaner. However, both the king and the residents of Bikaner prevented Muslims from deserting Bikaner and assured their safety. Fraternity was emphasized. Despite the environment of fear and anarchy prevailing in the town, the assurances given worked in the light of age-old harmonious relationship between the communities and many Muslims returned to their homes. Some Muslims did go, but they left the keys of their houses with their neighbours in the hope of returning. Many of our respondents mentioned that adequate provisions were made for Muslim families leaving for Pakistan or returning from Pakistan by the ruling family.

Dangerous Signs:

Though the efforts for disrupting communal harmony began soon after independence, they were largely unsuccessful. After the demolition of Babri Mosque on 6th Dec, 1992,

while the entire nation witnessed communal violence, Bikaner remained peaceful. However, the emergence of caste based violence in recent years is a cause for concern. Vote bank politics and the growing influence of Hindutva forces are slowly disrupting the carefully cultivated communal amity of the city. The growth of the RSS in the region, their success in making the common Hindu mind suspicious of Muslim Maulvis and Madarassas, and the emergence of caste as a major factor in university and city level elections point to the threat that the tradition of harmony faces. In the last five years communal tension has been provoked over minor land disputes, but compromises have been struck avoiding violent conflagration. Two incidents illustrate this point.

A piece of vacant land opposite the Bhutto ka Chauraha has been at the centre of tension for the last four years. Hindus groups claimed it was land meant to be used for the ritual of burning the Holika fire during Holi, while Muslim groups produced evidence to show it was a burial ground. Matters came to a head when a boundary wall began to be built around the land, both parties represented their claim in court and the matter is currently subjudice. A police post has been constructed on the site and the area is now considered 'sensitive'.

The construction of a mosque in Pratap Basti was resisted by the Hindu inhabitants of the area on the somewhat ridiculous pretext that the Azaan disturbs their cattle and affects their milk producing capacities!! The residents had no objection to the functioning of the Madarassa that existed on an adjoining plot of land but severely opposed the building of a Mosque. The Mosque was not built and the matter was allowed to rest.

These incidents point to a trend that is being increasingly noticed in Bikaner. With the increase of population the town expanded beyond the fort within which older colonies lay. New colonies developed with fewer local residents and a majority of immigrants. These colonies house well-off people of the upper middle class. Professionals from the Army, Government and Private Sector reside in such localities. There is now almost a new/old divide in the city with the older residents living within/close to the fort and newer, migrant residents inhabiting colonies outside the main city. The careful traditional townplanning of Bikaner has been centrally responsible for its harmonious history. The newer colonies however are not based on any such motivations and as a result segregation between communities has been noticed in these colonies. The contest over land and land disputes taking on a communal tinge reflect this trend. One can ensure healthy living in new localities if the planners study the old localities for their traditional communal harmony and plan the new ones accordingly.

While the tradition of conflict resolution through the timely intervention of elders, leaders, meetings on street corners and peace committees continues, such incidents point to a dangerous trend. The harmonious social fabric of Bikaner is fraying. It also suggests that the celebrated peace of Bikaner is changing from a vibrant peace to a silent peace,

one maintained by the inertia of tradition. It is imperative that pro-active steps be taken to ensure that the harmonious tradition of Bikaner is not taken for granted, the challenges it faces are recognised and it is consciously maintained and cultivated.