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Asghar Ali Engineer: A man for our times

By Siddhartha*

I travelled to Mumbai a few days ago to meet my friend Asghar Ali Engineer, who was just out of hospital after being badly beaten up by members of his own Dawoodi Bohra community. I had known Asghar for more than fifteen years and it pained me considerably (as it did all those who admired him for his courageous defence of human rights and religious freedom) that he had once again been brutally beaten. This was the fifth attack on him. Two previous attacks had almost killed him. He had escaped narrowly in Hyderabad in 1981 when the knife aimed at his throat, barely missed and instead slashed his face. The scar still shows. In 1983, in Cairo, he was surrounded by a mob of forty people who pummelled him first, then threw him on the ground and danced over his body. The fury of the mob went on for forty-five minutes till the police came to his rescue. He was bedridden for six months after that and both his eyes were damaged. He could regain his normal eyesight only after artificial lenses were implanted.

Asghar was now sixty-one years old. I wondered if this would be the last attack on him, whether he would be lucky to get away with his life the next time. (Morbid thoughts, to be sure, but these are sullen times to live in.) He was visibly moved on seeing me and embraced me warmly. As always he was dressed in white pyjama-kurta. We chatted in his small cramped office in Santa Cruz East. Outside, three uniformed policemen sipped tea. There were two others in the front room where his small staff sat. One of the policemen carried a modified Sten gun, a 9mm carbine. A young police officer sat in Asghar's room keeping watch over those who came and went.

It was difficult to speak with Asghar at any length as the phone rang incessantly. Once it was the film director Mahesh Bhat, who had met the Chief Minister a few days earlier to protest the attack on Asghar. Another call came from a former judge, Justice Suresh. There were calls from friends from several parts of the country. Asghar answered each one with the same words and the same tone, low pitched and without any flourishes. "I was returning from Bhopal where I had spoken on communal harmony at a workshop of police officers. The plane made a scheduled stop in Indore, but was delayed there for thirty minutes to permit Syedna Burhanuddin, the Bohra head priest, to board. Several passengers, including me, objected to the unfairness of it all. One passenger was travelling with his doctor and needed to get to a hospital in Mumbai without delay. Two others had connecting flights to catch. The pilot said he could not take off till he was given clearance by the control tower. Anyway, the Syedna and his group boarded the plane 30 minutes after scheduled departure time. No sooner had the plane taken off than they started hurling abuses at me in Gujarati. One of them even called me a filthy dog."

When the plane landed in Mumbai the barrage of abuse continued and Asghar was assaulted by several of Sydena's entourage in the baggage recovery area of the airport. He bled profusely. His son Irfan rushed to the airport and took him to the Nanavati hospital. The attack appears to have been premeditated, as other miscreants broke into his home and his office in Santa Cruz East at the same time and ripped everything apart, particularly at his home. When Asghar finished explaining I wondered if we would at all succeed in nipping intolerance in the bud and end the slow descent into calibrated violence. There were too many incidents burgeoning all over the country to leave much ground for hope. (Yet hope we must, for what is there to live for if hope is snuffed out!)

Why was Asghar Ali Engineer singled out for this kind of treatment? I must admit that I did not know very much about the reform movement going on among Dawoodi Bohras till this recent attack on him. I have always seen him as a campaigner for communal harmony and did not see his role as a reformer within his own community as so crucial. I also wondered if Asghar's zeal had occasionally got the better of his judgement to merit so violent a reaction. But my fears were put at rest when I came across two enquiry commission reports that went into human rights violations within the Dawoodi Bohra Community. These were the Nathwani Inquiry Commission (May 1979) headed by retired high court judge Narendra Nathwani and the commission consisting of retired Justice D.S.Tewatia and Kuldip Nayar (March 1994). The Natwani report states at one point that those who disagree with Syedna, even in purely secular matters are subject to "social boycott, mental torture and frequent physical assaults". Baraat, or social boycott, has been used in a devastating ways to compel a husband to divorce his wife, a son to disown his father, a mother to refuse to see her son, and a brother or sister to desist from attending the marriage of

his or her sister or brother. An ex-communicated member becomes virtually an untouchable in the community.

"Now that some of the culprits have been arrested, are you hopeful of getting justice?" I asked, knowing well that political clout and money-power could so easily subvert justice.

Asghar looked tired and helpless. He had gone through similar situations too many times before to feel sanguine about justice ever triumphing. "I am only a writer and a campaigner for human rights. The whole weight of a powerful religious establishment is against me. True, I have the support of good people all over the country. Some of them are people of some importance. But even they can do little. On previous occasions nothing came out of attacks against me. One case in Hyderabad dragged on in court for five years, by which time my memory of events had begun to fade. Witnesses also forgot the details. What can be done! Unless people all over the country rise against this kind of religious intolerance our democracy will go to pieces."

The phone rang and Asghar once again went through the same explanations, his voice now carrying a tone of monotony. I walked over to the framed certificates hanging on the wall. One was from the University of Calcutta conferring an honorary doctorate on him. The other was the communal harmony award for 1997 from the National Foundation for Communal Harmony, a government outfit. Interestingly, at the bottom of the certificate was the signature of L.K.Advani, chairman of the award.

Seeing the quizzical look on my face Asghar quickly clarified, "Actually I was chosen for the award by the previous home minister, Indrajit Gupta. But the government had changed meanwhile and Advani, the new minister, signed the award."

Asghar excused himself to write out an urgent clarification for the police, although it was clearly not what he wished to do. He said, "Siddhartha, you don't know how miserable I feel doing all this. I am a man of peace and a writer, and here I am sitting in my office surrounded by bodyguards and writing petitions to the police. I haven't written anything for a week now."

He looked miserable indeed. I knew he must miss his wife Sakina at a time like this. Sakina had passed away a few months earlier from serious complications arising from diabetes. I had met her twice: once in Thailand, where she accompanied her husband for a meeting, and then in Bangalore, when they visited me. She was completely different from him, full of fun and practical concerns. Asghar, always very serious, was often teased by Sakina. He always kept quiet when she teased him, quietly accepting her criticism that he was much too serious for his own good. Sakina's light hearted nature had extended to her attitude to diabetes as well. She never took her illness seriously and was notorious for drinking Pepsi on the sly. One day last August, her blood sugar shot up dramatically and she went into coma and died several days later. She had been a pillar of strength to Asghar for thirty-two years. "I would never have had the courage to brave so many personal attacks and misfortunes if she had had not stood beside me so steadfastly. She was a simple person with a good heart and sound common sense. She would worship in the mosque, in the temple and the church. She did so spontaneously. It was all the same to her and she believed that God was equally present in all religions."

Asghar returned in a few minutes. "My eyes trouble me after the attack," he said. "I can't read or sit by the computer for more than a few minutes at a stretch."

I asked Asghar if the recent attack had demoralised him, coming as it did only a few months after his wife's death. He said, "No, no! I have gone through far more difficult times." His biggest ordeal was in 1972 when he was excommunicated from his community after he published a critical article in a newspaper. He could not bear to see the suffering his mother underwent at this time. She was a simple person, whose husband had been a priest. And now her son was not anymore a part of the community she loved so well. And if she kept in touch with him she would face the same fate. Asghar almost went mad with anxiety for his mother and the thought did cross his mind several times whether he should not buckle down and give up the struggle. The price to be paid for continuing his reforming crusade was too high. Not only for him but for his mother and all those he loved deeply. But in the end he stood firm, and paid the price several times over. He told me he had not entered his sister's house for the past 28 years for fear of putting her in jeopardy. After his excommunication his children visited their close relatives secretly. Whenever somebody came to the door they would hide under the bed. Irfan was six then and his daughter younger; a hard way for children to grow up.

Another heart-rending time was when his older brother died. He was greatly attached to this brother, who, among other things, had also taken care of his education expenses at the university. The body was kept overnight in the Bohra cemetery for burial in the morning. Asghar went and sat beside his dead brother and cried all through the night. The next morning a cousin approached him and said that the religious authorities would not allow the burial to proceed as long as he was present in the cemetery. Asghar was further crushed with grief on hearing this, but agreed to wait outside. He stood at the gate and wept while the burial service went on. When it was over, two of his uncles went up and embraced him when they left the cemetery. The religious authorities noticed this and the uncles were asked to pay a fine. They each paid Rs.25,000 to avoid the prospect of being excommunicated.

Later that day we drove in a jeep to Nariman Point where Asghar had to give a talk at the Bahai Centre. The event had been fixed several weeks earlier and he did not want to disappoint his Bahai friends by cancelling the talk due to his present preoccupations. We drove through Mumbai with a security detail in the front seat and a carbine-wielding policeman at the back. "Asghar, you're driving through Mumbai like a mafia don," I quipped. He laughed, but there was no joy there, "I am a man of peace. Look at what has happened to me!" he moaned. Asghar had cast himself in the role of reformer and a man of peace. Always serious, he never indulged in small talk or cracked jokes; not the kind of person to spend a relaxed evening with.

At the Bahai Centre, the audience was treated to a series of speakers who spoke along expected lines about the grandeur of their respective religious traditions. Asghar was the last speaker and he questioned the notion that pious inter-religious meetings, such as the present one, were of much relevance at a time when religious intolerance was on the boil. He insisted that all religions said more or less the same things about compassion, tolerance and good deeds. Therefore one could not quarrel too much over the merits of the basic religious texts; although it was also true that most religious people preferred to selectively refer to the texts that were positive and clear and avoid the ambiguous or problematic ones. All religions were unique with their specific historical origins and cultural moorings. But being unique did not mean being superior. In fact therein lay the crux of the problem, for it was easy to confuse uniqueness with superiority. Asghar said he was shocked to hear a friend's comment at the time of the anti-Sikh riots, that if the Sikhs in Delhi were to cut their hair and shave their beards they would be safe as their persecutors would be unable to identify them. "But why should Sikhs cut their hair and shave their beards?" cried Asghar. "Do they have to hide their uniqueness to survive?"

Sitting in the last row, I watched the audience in the Bahai Centre with some interest. They were listening to him attentively. After all, this was the first time they had come across a non-VIP speaker with a gun toting guard standing nearby. Asghar's words were not plagued with sclerosis or ambiguous qualifications that took away from their purpose. He ended his talk on a didactic note. "Three D's are vitally important for our country," he said, sounding like a schoolmaster. "They are democracy, diversity and dialogue. All three are inter-connected and none can stand alone. Dialogue with the other is crucial. When we dialogue we are not trying to convert but to understand the other. When we get to know the other, he or she ceases to be a threat."

I found myself agreeing with much of what Asghar said. I suspect that the audience was also touched, even if his language was not graceful or his manner practiced. Asghar was cast in the mould of an Islamic liberation theologian. He picked up the essential teachings of Islam that had to do with justice and charity and applied them to the context around him. ("My blood boils when I see injustice," he had often told me.) He was the son of a priest and his whole life was guided by Islamic ideals. I knew he had admirers all over the world and many thought of him as the most consequential activist-thinker in the Muslim world, combining a deep love for Islam with compassion for the wider human family.

On the ride back, Asghar's daughter Seema and a journalist and a photographer from a journal joined us. Seema intended to get off at Bandra West where her husband was waiting for her. As we drove through Mumbai's interminable traffic Asghar spoke of the need to separate religion from the State. Pakistan was in permanent crisis because of the tendency to bring religion into politics. Extreme religious positions were taken to swing unsuspecting voters, or were used by dictators to cling to power. We arrived at Bandra and the driver stopped to let Seema off. Her husband, who was waiting in a shop, came up to greet us. The journalist wanted a picture of Asghar with Seema, and asked the photographer to take a few shots. But Seema's husband intervened and insisted that the picture should not have his wife in it. "Why drag her into all this confusion," he protested.

The reaction of Seema's husband was understandable enough. I saw a wave of pained emotion cross Asghar's face. All his adult life his family had to pay for his convictions, even if most of them had done so without demurring. I knew Asghar was not unaware that one day he might have to pay with his life, although this was not of overwhelming concern to him. What was a nagging source of grief was the tumult his actions caused in the lives of those he loved dearly.

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This article originally appeared several years ago in the Deccan Herald newspaper in Bangalore. However, it still captures the spirit of the man in his last years. The article was also included in a book of Siddhartha's essays entitled 'The Birdwoman' published by Dronquill Publishers, Bangalore.

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