

Asghar Ali Engineer (1939-2013)

Emancipatory Intellectual Politics

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This tribute to Asghar Ali Engineer argues that apart from his contributions to secularism, human rights work and reform within Muslim communities, his abiding legacy would be towards establishing an emancipatory form of intellectual politics which remained analytically open but grounded on politically committed arguments.

There could be many ways to commemorate the contribution of Asghar Ali Engineer, who passed away on 14 May 2013. We may begin in a conventional form and reproduce a story of struggles and achievement to describe Engineer's political legacy. This is not at all difficult, especially after the publication of Engineer's autobiography, *A Living Faith: My Quest for Peace, Harmony and Social Change* (2011), which offers us a systematic account of Engineer's transformation into an intellectual activist.

Born in a highly religious Daudi-Bohra family on 10 March 1939 in Salumbar, Rajasthan, he was introduced to basic Islamic literature – Quranic *tafsir* (commentary), *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *hadith* (Prophet's sayings) – by his father. At the same time, he was also sent to a regular school. These two educational traditions, as he himself points out, gave him a critical outlook to find out a significant difference between Islamic teachings and practices. His autobiography records many incidents where his obvious and deeply Islamic questions were discarded by religious elites.

However, he did not become a radical activist overnight. He graduated in civil engineering and worked as a professional engineer in Mumbai for two decades. During these years he continued to write on Muslim issues and participated in the Bohra reform movement. However, in the 1970s his radical ideas virtually forced him to give up his professional life and become an independent researcher and political activist for the rest of his life. His contribution has been widely recognised: in 1983 the Calcutta University conferred an honorary degree of DLitt on him; he was given the National Communal Harmony Award in 1997, and finally in 2004 he was awarded the Right Livelihood Award which is popularly known as the alternative Nobel Prize.

This life-story of Engineer is exceptionally interesting and it is possible to celebrate his life as a biography of courage and determination. He could rightly be described as a "secularist" because of his adherence to a particular kind of secular values; he could be called a "human rights activist", because of his energetic participation in various socio-political movements and campaigns; he could be labelled as a "liberal Muslim" because he continued to oppose the upper-caste, upper-class politics of Muslim elites; and above all, he could also be remembered as an informed commentator – a prolific author – who wrote almost 50 books and a vast number of articles in the last four decades.

All these images of Engineer are legitimate and necessary. However, these identity templates – secularism, human rights, liberal Muslim – it seems to me, might not be able to fully explicate the originality of his political perspective and uniqueness of intellectual activism. Therefore, to understand the political legacy of Asghar Ali Engineer, we need to unpack those facets of his work, which make his contribution extraordinary. In my view, two intrinsic features of Engineer's writings can be useful in this regard: his *political hermeneutics* – a theory of interpretation, which he developed to produce an alternative, emancipatory, and above all non-essentialist analysis of religious (mainly Islamic) texts and social history; and his *technique of argumentation* – a style of producing analytically open but politically committed arguments.

Political Hermeneutics

Engineer, as his very early writings suggest, was a nonconformist in the true sense of the term. He was highly critical of the Islamic religious elites, who represented (or rather "preached") Islam as a set of ritualistic practices and dogmatic ideas. At the same time, he was equally unhappy with the dominant social science discourse, which was not at all interested in recognising religion as an important sociological or political category. Engineer refuted the claims made by these two traditions simply by focusing on the text (Quran) and its historical

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context as a point of departure. For instance, in an early article on the origin of Islam, he said (Engineer 1975: 22):

The religion of Islam has to be studied against its historical and social background if one subscribes to the theory that the socio-economic formations of a period replicate themselves in an ideological movement... There has hardly been any attempt in India... to analyse the available material on Islam... to put one of the most significant religious movements in its proper perspective.

This rather elusive search for a “proper perspective” forced Engineer to make a few innovative moves. He started engaging with Marxism, not merely to bring out ready-to-use theoretical formulas or models but to work out a theory by which Islamic history as well as the power structure of contemporary Muslim communities in a postcolonial society like India could be analysed.¹ In fact, he deliberately called himself an “unorthodox Marxist” in one of his early books, *Islam, Muslims, India* (1975). It would be interesting to compare Engineer’s Marxism with Moin Shakir’s Marxism, which also offers a creative exploration of Muslim politics. Shakir does recognise the limits of rigid-orthodox Marxism, but his adherence to class analysis does not allow him to fully escape the religion as a false consciousness thesis.

On the other hand, Engineer’s unorthodox Marxism pays equal attention to those conceptual spaces within Islamic traditions, which could further be developed for interpreting the specific nature of community formation in Islam. Engineer’s rather specified criticism of Shakir is useful to elaborate this point. Commenting on Shakir’s book *State and Politics in Contemporary India* (1986), Engineer (1987) says:

Class analysis and class-based struggles should also not ignore the reality of caste, communal and ethnic feelings and their potential for political mobilisation. In fact, the dialectical interaction between the old and the new will have to be understood in all its complexities and richness. Either approach by itself is too simplistic to enhance our understanding of the real phenomenon.

This explanatory openness encouraged Engineer to develop a “liberation theology in Islam”. He argues (Engineer 1990: 1-2):

I am afraid the theology in its received form does not imply human liberation...it concerns

itself exclusively with liberation in purely metaphysical sense and outside the process of history...it is because the received theology has been an ally of establishment and the theologians benefactor of status quo’... Hence it is necessary to develop a liberation theology if religion has to be meaningful to the oppressed and weak who follow it most.

Engineer’s theory of interpretation thus becomes a theoretical tool to examine the historical evolution of Muslim politics in India. In his book, *Lifting the Veil: Communal Violence and Communal Harmony in Contemporary India* (1995), he looks at the question of Muslim politics and the legitimacy of the so-called Muslim issues. He tries to show that the Muslim elites mobilise Muslim masses by propagating a pro-upper class perspective of Islam. As a result, the religion of Islam, which primarily emerged as a political movement for the liberation of the poor, the women, the needy and the destitute of Arabian society in the seventh century, has become a tool in the hands of these upper class Muslim elite. Engineer forcefully argues that a pro-poor Islamic understanding can be used as a political strategy to counter the hegemony of Muslim upper classes.

It is important to note that Engineer’s liberation theology deviates significantly from the “Islam as way of life” thesis. This thesis claims to represent the “perspective of practising believers”. It is argued that Islam is compatible with modern values – science, rationality and progress – because of an enduring egalitarianism. The task before the modern Muslims, therefore, is to get back to its original roots to trace real rational Islamic contents.² Engineer does not subscribe to this perspective. He does not find “everything” in Islam and therefore brings in the question of the “here and now”. For him, the most creative mode to read a religious text like the Quran is to recognise the ways in which it is understood by the poor and marginalised sections of Muslim religious communities. These popular meanings, in his schema, could be organised around the everyday life struggles of people. His criticism of Iqbal is quite relevant here. Although he recognises a creative tension in Iqbal’s famous text, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, for

him “Iqbal was too conservative to undertake any real restructuring of religious thought. His only real concern was to check the liberal and progressive trends among the Muslim intelligentsia” (Engineer 1980: 62).

Technique of Argumentation

If we closely look at Engineer’s criticisms of religious dogmatism or even communalism, an interesting style of producing political arguments could be traced. Engineer always avoided rhetorical claims. He seems to pay close attention to the nature of arguments given by his adversaries. Instead of refuting the assertions of religious elites or communal leaders on the basis of any “secular”, “Marxist” or “pro-people” position, he engaged with the larger conceptual universe of these claims and the nature of supporting evidences. In other words, “dismantling of the internal coherence of political arguments” was his preferred technique to produce evolving comments, criticisms and politically sustainable positions. For example, his critique of dominant Muslim politics not merely points towards the moral-rational weaknesses of the so-called “religious” claims but also problematises the kind of Islam rightist Muslim elites evoke to articulate political demands.

His writings on the Muslim Personal Law, especially in relation to the Shah Bano controversy, are relevant here. He not merely disproves the claims of Muslim elites on moral-rational grounds but also highlights the limitation of their much celebrated Islamic world views. He says (Engineer 1994):

What is sad is that the theologians and ‘faqihs’ (the jurists) are not ready to rethink women’s issues even today. Islam and its Prophet have provided the Muslims with a dynamic and revolutionary principle of ‘ijtihad’ (creative interpretation) so that they can, in the true spirit of Islamic values, rethink many issues in view of the changed context.

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Engineer's technique of argumentation also remains sensitive to two possible compulsions of political debates – the need for empirical evidence and the firmness and clarity of political position. For instance, his early writings on the participation of Muslims in political processes very clearly show that he was highly critical of the notion of “Muslims as vote bank” (Engineer 1977, 1978). However, he does not merely express an opinion. On the contrary, he provides concrete empirical evidences to prove that Muslim electoral behaviour is highly fragmented. This can also be said about his explanation of communal riots. He says,

communalism and communal violence are two distinct stages...communalism may not necessarily lead to communal violence though it often does when some extremely provocative factors appear on the scene (Engineer 1992).

This search for “provocative factors” led him to produce a massive amount of empirical data and information on all recorded communal riots in post-colonial India.

Engineer also employed this evidence-based argumentation to give legitimacy to his political positions. Instead of expressing his loyalty to any political “ideology”, Engineer concentrated on the fluctuating power relations at the very grass-roots level. The creative encounter with social realities gave him a remarkable consistency in taking complex but firm political positions. His argument on the Muslim reservation debate is quite revealing in this regard. He recognises the fact that caste is a significant category, which determines the nature of social stratification among Muslims; he also supports the reservation in jobs and educational institutions for dalit Muslims. However, avoiding any caste or class reductionism, he links the reservation debate to the much larger question of Muslim backwardness, especially in the context of globalisation.³

Thus, the firmness of his politics allows him to embrace Marxism without giving up his Islam, to recognise the plight of dalit Muslims without ignoring the impact of globalisation, and to justify the rights of women in Islam without glamourising “Islam as a way of life”.

This brings us to the question of Engineer's political legacy. Our very brief discussion on Engineer's political hermeneutics and his style of argumentation reveals that although his intellectual work revolves around his politics of “here and now”, he never underestimates the analytical importance of the strictness of intellectual exercises. In this sense, his writings emerge out as an inseparable aspect of his politics – a praxis of a different kind. Thus, in my view, Asghar Ali Engineer should also be remembered for introducing us to the distinctiveness of intellectual politics.

NOTES

- 1 For a brilliant analysis of Engineer's *Unorthodox Marxism*, see Patil (1976).
- 2 Zakir Naik often evokes this thesis in his writings and public lectures. Naik argues, “the scientific evidences of the Qur'an clearly prove its Divine origin. No human could have produced a book, 1,400 years ago, that would contain such profound scientific facts” (Naik nd: 67).
- 3 Engineer says: “Though theoretically there is no discrimination on caste grounds in Islam but caste discriminations (as the words ashraf and 'ajlaf', i e, noble and low indicate) has always existed and short of untouchability low caste Muslims (ajlaf) have not been equitably treated...The best thing in the given complex situation would be a 'mixed bag' solution. Muslims and Christians could be assured reservation under Mandal categories. Secondly, the governments, central as well as state, could make special arrangements for higher education for weaker sections of society and even create institutions to search for talents among them and ensure jobs for them. Thirdly, on patterns of affirmative action in US industries, private sector foundations could be created for education

of such sections among dalit Muslims. Lastly leaders of Indian Muslims should convince well-to-do Muslims in India and abroad to donate generously from Zakat money to create educational endowments and foundations in India to establish educational institutions for poor Muslims, to cater to all castes. There is immense potential for such endowments” (Engineer 2004).

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