

SECULARISM ALERT-1

by Girish Mishra

Huntington's New Thesis and India

Once again Samuel Huntington, professor and chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies has come out with a new thesis, which underlines the danger posed to the unity, identity and culture of the United States of America by the continuing immigration of Hispanic people. The basic contours of this thesis have been presented in a longish article "The Hispanic Challenge" (Foreign Policy, March-April 2004), though its full elaboration will be available in his forthcoming book *Who Are We* to be published by Simon & Schuster.

He thinks America is facing a grave challenge to its traditional identity, culture and unity. It comes from migrants from Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. In his own words: "The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril." "The fertility rates of these immigrants are much higher. Thus if preventive measures are not taken forthwith, the Hispanic immigrants may, in the course of time, tilt the demographic balance in their favour. He obviously wants the country to rethink its policy of welcoming foreigners, especially the Hispanic people. To quote: "Americans like to boast of their past success in assimilating millions of immigrants into their society, culture, and politics. But Americans have tended to generalize about immigrants without distinguishing among them and focused on the economic costs and benefits of immigration, ignoring its social and cultural consequences."

As a result they have overlooked the unique characteristics and problems posed by contemporary Hispanic immigration. The extent and nature of this immigration differ fundamentally from those of previous immigration and assimilation successes of the past are unlikely to be duplicated with the contemporary flood of immigrants from Latin America. The reality poses a fundamental question: Will the United States remain a country with a single national language and a core Anglo-Protestant culture? By ignoring this question, Americans acquiesce to their eventual transformation into two peoples with two cultures (Anglo and Hispanic) and two languages (English and Spanish)."

Another point of concern for Huntington is that Hispanic immigrants are concentrated in the southwest areas of the USA, which are in geographical proximity of the country of their origin, Mexico. It may, in the future, pose a threat to America's security. Unlike them, the early waves of immigrants came from far off lands and once they reached the shores of America, they tried their best to adopt the language, culture and way of living of their host country. The overwhelming majority of them belonged to the Anglican Church and the Protestant sect of Christianity. Even those whose mother tongue was not English learnt it very quickly. They got scattered throughout the country, depending on the availability of economic opportunities. Factually, Huntington is wrong on several counts. First, like the 17th-19th century immigrants from Germany, Italy and the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, Hispanic immigrants from Mexico have also been fast learners of English. The first generation Hispanic immigrants may not be fluent in English, but the same cannot be said of their descendants. Richard Alba and Victor Nee in their study *Remaking the American Mainstream* have pointed out that as many as 60 per cent of third-generation Mexican-American children speak only English at home. Other researchers have also corroborated this. Thus every succeeding generation adopts English as its first language.

On the question of regional concentration too, Huntington is wrong. Data reveal that during the last decade of the 20th century Hispanic immigrants moved out of their traditional enclaves and went to other places mainly in search of better opportunities. As far as retaining ties with countries of origin is concerned, there is nothing unusual. History testifies that every ethnic group continues to have some sort of affinity with the place, region or country of its origin, but this does not mean that it is not loyal to the country where it is settled. One may refer to Indian-Americans in this regard. Their love for India and

Indian culture does not come in their way of performing their duties as American citizens. In the recent war in Iraq, people of Hispanic origin have not lagged behind others in doing their duties as both combatants and non-combatants. One of the topmost commanders of the American forces in Iraq is a Latino.

Let us turn our attention to India. Among the Hindu communalists, there is quite a sizable section that has been influenced by the ideas of Samuel Huntington from the time he came out with *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Its influence could be easily discerned in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Even a person like our Prime Minister Vajpayee who is supposed to be a liberal could not keep himself immune from the virus spread by Huntington. It was obvious from his speech as at a BJP conclave in Goa soon after the Gujarat massacres. There has been a systematic campaign against the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has been going for decades. They have been blamed for all sorts of ills from growing incidence of crimes and higher rates of fertility to mushrooming of slums and smuggling. They are supposed to snatch away jobs from the poor inhabitants of our country. They are regarded as a big threat to India's security because their loyalty to India is always in doubt. It is whispered but broadcast loudly by the VHP and others that they may tilt the demographic balance against the Hindus in the long run.

The present dispensation in India, led by the NDA has been trying to identify and deport these Bangladeshi immigrants. It is an open secret that this has led to harassment and extortion by the police. It needs to be noted that there is a big element of communalism involved in this exercise being carried out at the behest of the Home Ministry. The ire is directed only against Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh. The Hindus coming from Bangladesh are given sympathy and succour because they are supposed to be fleeing from oppression from their country. The immigrants from Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma are not frowned upon because they are Hindus. The recent thesis of Huntington may not cut much ice in the United States because as the reports indicate it has not been taken seriously by intellectuals, policy makers and public at large. Nor has it become an issue in the ongoing presidential election campaign. The *New Republic* in a recent article has dismissed it as a sign of muddled thinking. In India, however, communal elements may use it prop up their pernicious campaign.

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