

Politics of Labels and Stereotypes: Traumas and Assertions of an Imagined Community

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Abstract:

Why there exist only the term 'Indian Muslim' and no 'Indian Hindus' or 'Indian Christians' or 'Indian Buddhists' in that vigor was my initial curiosity that made me to take up this topic for the research. The paper engages with the self identity formation among 'Indian Muslims' by contextualizing it in the background the politics of labeling and stereotyping of Muslims at global and national levels. It looks at: how the marking out of Indian Muslims as a community occurred through history; how contemporary media adds to this marking out and carry forward with new intensity through stereotyping the Muslims; how the global geopolitics with the aid of local religious fundamentalism targets Muslims; and finally how the self identity of Muslims are formed in midst of these political strategies.

Key Words:

Identity
Marginalisation
Media

“I, the Indian origin painter M.F.Hussain at 95, have been honored by Qatar nationality”

The Hindu, February 25, 2010

M.F.Hussain, veteran artist, caught between a question of motherland and nationality at the age of 95 and the reason for which was his label of birth, i.e. 'Muslim'. The politics of label is my major concern here. From a series of dreadful communal riots to the silent deprivation of citizen rights- the politics of labels move further through its new word plays. 'Islamic terrorism', one among this is the most popular in recent times. Ather Farouqui (2009; 3) says that 'being born an Indian Muslim, I fit a definite stereotype, and against this background I can understand the dilemmas of Muslims in today's world'. I was initially hesitant to use the word 'Indian Muslim' not only because of my disagreement to categorize Muslim born Indians in a single homogenous frame, but the fact that there are people born in Muslim family who are not ready to accept the identity and the image of Muslim. As Farouqui rightly points out choice doesn't work out in case of Muslims since they are marked out as Muslims and thus arises their identity

dilemma. Why there exist only 'Indian Muslim' and no 'Indian Hindus' or 'Indian Christians' or 'Indian Buddhists' was my initial curiosity that made me to take up this topic for the research.

To sketch out the politics of stereotyping, Shahid Amin(2010) refers to the ubiquitous national integration poster that underlines the slogan 'we are one' by painting a beard and a Turkish cap on to a visage in order to make it the image of a musalman. He takes instances in train where a person is asked the routine question:

aap ka caste kya hai- with which chance meeting on a train are still rendered meaningful in the Hindi belt- and replies that he/she is a Muslim, the polite response is: *Achha! Aap lagte to nahin*(oh I see! But you don't look like).

A gap between real and stereotypical image is so prominent and the power of stereotypes makes the real taken as exceptional and the real is caught between the dilemmas of limited choice of either accepting the image and assert the identity or be an all together anti to the identity. To understand the self identity formation within muslims, they should be studied by locating them in Indian history, contemporary politics and economic developments both at the global and national levels.

Image out of history

The term Indian Muslim is so frequent and natural in the written and oral discourses in India that the very politics behind the term is beyond questioning today. My initial hesitation to use the word 'Indian Muslim' was soon replaced by another question: why are the Muslims in India forms a category (homogenous or non homogeneous is another big debate which I am not taking up here) and what is the history behind this categorization and labeling from within and from outside? For me the argument that the religion Islam homogenizes and unites all Muslims across the boundaries is not felt to be valid one since religion cannot exist in its purely textual or philosophical sense and always there exist a dialectics between religion and local culture. Religion is obviously one factor of categorization. But here the politics of marked religion and unmarked comes into play. For marking exclusively one community, there will be some other deeper factors. For this a historical inquiry is essential. Mostly when we talk about Indian Islam, it is the north Indian Islam that is pointing too and I am also maintaining this track to some extent.

Islam came to India from four different regions: Arabia, Persia, Turkey and Afghan. This also adds to the cultural diversity within Islam in addition to their mix with the local cultures. The history of medieval India has been dominated by the political hegemony of Muslim sultanates in Delhi and many other parts. In medieval age, ruling class and the rich oppressed the poor but the oppression was not based on religion. The ruling elite looked down on the common Muslims who were mostly converts, as *ajlis* in contrast to the high born *ashraf*. But under Muslim rulers there was a general progress in economic and political fields due to the semi centralized rule and the introduction of new technologies (Khan: 1995). According to national historians, in the initial period of colonial rule, there were not many cases of communal riots. In contrast to that, Hindus and Muslims stood together at critical moment to fight against British. This is evident in 1857 first war of independence. British took over power from Muslim rulers and they thought there is need for closer surveillance and control of Muslims. But later British changed this stand and they started to woo Muslims as a counter weight to the rising force of nationalism in which leaders were mostly Hindus (Pandey: 2006a). They also made an attempt to divide Hindu-Muslims through history writing. Gyanendra Pandey (2006b) writes,

The modern history of India, in this sense, was first written in colonial times by colonialists writers who established the pattern of the Indian past pretty much as we know it today. And in that pattern, sectarian strife was an important motif...The historical reconstruction was characterized also by an emptying out of all history- in terms of the specific variation of time, place, class, issue- from the political experience of the people and the identification of religion, or the religious community, as the moving force of all Indian politics.

We cannot pin down to exact time of this marking out of one community in politics from other community since it was a gradual process. However within Muslims, majority population were economically backward (most of them

are converts and had low status even under Muslim rule). Later from Indian side the divisive tendency started in two levels. One is in the form of the frequent communal riots and the other within the nationalistic movement against British. Within Nationalist movement, Muslim fraction emerged from elite Muslim and they acted as a pressure group, with the British's invisible back-up. At the same time, the anti-colonial movement led by the Congress compromised with communal elements and with pre-capitalist forms of consciousness; consequently, the movement witnessed a low level of struggle and had to rely on narrow levels of consciousness prevailing in Indian society (Hassan: 1982). Later the formation of Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim league based its politics on this divisive tendency. Savarkar's '*Punya-bhumi pitru-bhumi*' concepts, Jinnah's *two nation theory* etc came at these times. These developments with the grant support from British government further resulted in the partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan. After partition the Indian muslim's condition became terrible. Kuldip Nayar (farouqui: 2009) gives a description on this.

They were confused and rudderless. Their dependence on the generosity of the majority community was tragic; they behaved like somebody with a hat perpetually in hand.

The second part of the story begins from the texts and popular images of an independent India. The image of India in the writings of national leaders including Nehru has a deeply cultural and spiritual Hindu rooted ness. *Bharat mata* image and *Vande mataram* which was used as a nationalist invocation in past has become clearly connected to the call for a Hindu nation in the hands of Hindu fundamentalist today. Indian history is another problematic area that alienates Muslims from the Indian land. The present-day tendency to derive Indian heritage from "Hindu" civilization, bereft of extraneous elements, is one of the major tactics of history writing. Indeed, there can hardly have been a culture in any part of the world which grew to any stature that has not imbibed elements from the outside in constructing its own essential parts (Habib: 1997). History became the main visible contestation site after 1970s when RSS and BJP came to forefront in an immense way in Indian politics. Their major aim was to rewrite history by glorifying the ancient Vedic heritage and to historicize the Hindu Myths especially that of *Lord Sri Ram* and Ayodhya. At the same time they questioned the loyalty of Muslim towards India by invoking a distorted history of the demand for Pakistan as an aim for every Muslims. Here what they have selectively forgotten was few major historical elements. For India was not naturally a country from "times immemorial"; it evolved by cultural and social developments, and closer interaction among its inhabitants, in which geographical configuration helped, but was not necessarily decisive. Its interaction with different people from inside and outside (?) helped it to achieve a transformation where its culture was multi religious or supra-religious which was the first prerequisite for the evolution of India into a modern nation. A second pre-requisite was also possibly secured when the centralizing tendencies of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire repeatedly projected the sight of a politically unified India (Habib: 1997). The word Hindustan itself is not in RSS's sense of 'Indian origin'. Habib (ibid) reflects on the word

As is well known the ancient Iranian use of the consonant 'h' for Indo- Aryan 's', led to the Iranian form of 'Hind(u)' for the Sanskrit 'Sindhu'; there- after, to the use of the former name for the entire trans-Indus country, whence has come the form 'India' through the Greek 'Indos'; and, finally, to the later Persian name 'Hindu' for the inhabitant of India, and 'Hindustan' for India itself, with the usual Iranian territorial suffix -stan added to 'Hind(u)'. The suffix -stan, by the way, is general in Persian, e.g. Seistan, Gurjistan, Khuzistan, and Hindustan means simply 'Indian land' not 'the land of (the religious community of) the Hindus', as was construed by the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, who also tried to give it a Sanskrit form Hindusthan, although such a word never existed in that language

Media images and marginalization politics

Recently the news on the suspension of professor Siras of Aligarh University took the space in front pages of newspapers. The narrow-mindedness and conservatism of a Muslim university towards a Homosexual was celebrated in media for many days. But when incidence like this happened earlier in Delhi University, was not a news at all for media. The dismissal of Dr.Ashley Tellis due to his homosexual activities from Delhi University doesn't have any news value at all. Why is it so?

Media has a big role in the process of stereotyping Muslims in a way that exist today. There is a politics of selective representation, focusing and spacing of the news in media that promote this stereotyping. Vinod Mehta (Farouqui: 2009) remarks that there exist a gap in the relationship between Muslims and media. Due to the time constraint, laziness of journalist and hunt for the sensitive news, media come up with a certain way of covering the news of minority issues. For them the easily available Muslim voices are from the religious leaders or *mullas* or some influential Muslim organization. While taking their views as Muslim voices, media certainly ends up with a one sided image. Vinod Mehta criticize the educated liberal Muslims who are hesitant to come foreword to change this image by representing their voice as oppose to the conservative *mullas*. The backwardness of Muslim community because of their lack of education is a serious problem which is maintained even today by the Muslim political leaders for their personal ends. Rajini Kothari(ibid.) also raises the question of 'who represent the Muslim voices in media'. Media represent Muslims as a homogeneous community with no plurality within it. This is part of a larger hegemonising process. Kuldip Nayar points out to more serious issue of over simplification and interpretation of Muslim problems in media more in terms of religious belief than economic consideration. Post independence period was a critical period for north Indian Muslims. The Urdu press which supported two nation theories during pre independence time left with confusion and crisis after independence. They mostly dealt with Muslim issues in and outside India and created a communal separatist feeling among Muslims. After partition, the Muslims lost their faith in these news papers and their circulation decreased. Vernacular news papers especially those of Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi carried a strong negative bias against Muslims. The influence of RSS and BJP in recruiting the media persons in various media during their time of ruling has helped them to have a favored voice in media and to accelerate the bias against Muslims through media. English press too does not say much on Islam but interprets this neglect in a way which is acceptable to Muslims.

In the Post independence period, print media maintained a 'low intensity communalism' which represented Muslims as a community with particular leaders and the utterance of leaders is taken as the belief of communities as a whole. This low intensity communalism maintained by media was used by the government at power for their benefits. BJP used the space of media in an intelligible way by influencing the recruitment of people in media and to get their support to spread their ideology. BJP was also keen in representing their voice in media by giving sensational remarks on different events. The notion of Muslims as 'appeased community' was a careful media construction from BJP's part. The case of riot reporting is an important issue among these negative image creations by media. There is a code of conduct for the media to report the riot which insist not to mention the identity of community involved in riots. But many news papers give indirect hints to readers through mentioning a Muslim name or the dress code of victims or rioters. Though in most of the riots Muslims are the major victims, media's riot narratives revolve around the alleged aggressiveness of the Muslims. Even the attack of one religious fundamentalist group with the help of police and party in power are reported as a communal riot. The cases of Mumbai riot, Gujarat riot, etc are a few example of this. The existence of biases and unprofessionalism within news desk of newspaper result in the highlighting or spacing of certain news in accordance with the personal bias. The absence of Muslim media person is a major problem that keeps the media highlighting a negative image of Indian Muslims.

Politics/religion (?): Western geopolitics and the Hindu-Muslim fundamentalism

The founding of the RSS in 1925 took place in the first phase of great upsurge of fascist movements in Europe and, inspired by the European fascisms, elsewhere in the world. by mid 1970s, BJP, as its parliamentary and relatively benign face, has made its parliamentary mark, greatly aided by more openly fascistic members of the 'parivar' such as the VHP, Bajrang Dal, and Durga Vahini. Many of their ideas resonate strongly with a certain kind of widespread 'common sense' that has been prepared for them already, by other movements, social practices, intellectual productions, all of which they can now selectively incorporate, by re-writing, into their own history as so many precursors of modernday Hindutva. Ideologies of racialism, religious zealotry, majoritarianism, rightwing cultural nationalism, and millenarian rhetorics of racial and national redemption were their instruments which they masked beneath their 'nationalistic' and patriotic brand. *Rath Yatra*, series of communal riots, Demolition of Babri Masjid, Gujarat Genocide, BJP's parliamentary victories etc were shocking due to its communal fascists way of targeting muslims and the government's passive support to these actions. While in a visible frame, it is an attack on one

community. But in India, it was also a time of great shift in economic policies. Liberalization, privatization and globalization swiftly and silently took over the Indian economy while a mass mobilized by Hindutwa was shouting 'Jai Sri ram' and 'vande mataram' on top of the demolished mosque. Aijas Ahmed(1996) locate these event in international terrain:

As a reaction against the rise of revolutionary movements and many other kinds of dissent in the period up to the end of the 1970s; the growing stagnation of the advanced capitalist economies, from the early 1970s onward, and the need for irrationalist and national- chauvinist movements there to both control and divert the working masses; fall of soviet union and the vacant political space left by retreating communist parties; the burgeoning communitarian bases of organisation in diverse countries, especially the poorer ones, to take advantage of electoral politics for social advancement and to organize collectives to fight all the more ferociously over the distribution of limited resources, especially in the context of capitalist rapaciousness and weak working class movements; (h) the objective necessity of the bourgeois order to displace the terrain of struggle from class conflict to community conflict, and so on.

Muslim fundamentalism is another vast area that has to be investigated by locating it in the geopolitics going on in the contemporary world. Muslim fundamentalism is a confusing word since it has two faces. First face is the one which is working within a community to mobilize the people in the name of their *insecurity* as a 'Muslim'. Their conversation draws a picture of war against Islam by all other non Islamic nations. The solution is an Islamic revivalism to bring back real and undisputed faith within Muslim 'brothers' and to fight against these anti Islamic forces. Second is the pan Islamic fundamentalist group whose news and photos are coming everyday in newspapers as the most barbaric, savage people who is seem to be coming from an entirely new planet with their typical Muslim names and Muslim symbols. These two are entirely different which confuse the world about what is actually going on in the name of this 'Islamic terrorism'. USA declared 'war against Islamic terrorism' after the 9/11 incident and from which a world wide hunt on Muslims across world begun. The image of Muslims as the most uncivilized were spread world wide through media and the mission of US to civilize them through war started. At the same time the local Muslim fundamentalist activities within afro Asian countries also grown to its peak. It is interesting to note that after 9/11, almost all media covered on a daily basis, a story on a terrorist with a stereotypical Muslim look and a long Muslim name.

While Hindu fundamentalism targets and attacks Muslims mass, Muslim fundamentalism confuses the real problems of Muslims and exploits their insecurity feeling and economic backwardness for the fundamentalist's political (religious?) ends. Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists who use religion as a tool to mobilize people for their political ends have emerged on a global context in which vast changes and crisis was going on. But what is happening at regional level is a larger exploitation of poor mass in the name of religious fundamentalism to divert their attention from what is happening in the international and national political economy.

Conclusion: Identity in dilemma.

Indian Muslim self identity making is a much complex process since it is influenced and forced by many factors in which we already dealt with the global stereotyping and national stereotyping. Through media, the images of Muslims spread at global level and national level is acting as forces from outside which influence Muslims at various ways according to the class, locality and gender. As mentioned before, Indian Muslims are not homogeneous. They are different categories according to their locality, class, educational background, gender etc. and these factors are having much influence on the creation of self identity. Locality and class are crucial in determining Muslim identity because of the organization setup of Muslim community. The mosque, madrasa and the Muslim religious authority of a locality plays a big role in a person's life. According to one's class, education and status this influence can vary. Poor Muslims are very much under the pressure of these religious authority and they are often under their control. As the status and class position goes up, the influence can be nullified or can be turned to reverse order. Rich and powerful controls the local religious authorities. Within one locality, there may be different sects of religion like sunni, mujahit, jamaat etc and each section has their own mosque and madrasa with a separate interpretation of

Islamic culture. This may or may not act as exclusive separate groups depending upon regions. The recent times stereotyping at global and national levels with the terror created by Hindu fundamentalists affected all the Muslims though the way it affects the identity formation varies. They were forced to take a defensive position. Togetherness and collectively increased among Muslims and this is more visible in urban areas where they started making Muslim organization. The role of Muslim religious institution also increased since it created a space to discuss and share the fear and dilemmas. The collectivity formed among Muslims give strength in asserting and reasserting their identity as Muslim which becomes much similar to the stereotypical images. Another way of defense which is most prominent among the urban educated were deliberately giving a secular image by getting away from the religious symbols. The assertion of politicians and intellectuals (even atheists) on their Muslim birth identity is another form of defense to the stereotyping of Muslims as a single category. Rural poor, the majority among Muslims, were under the control of religious authority in direct level and the rich started giving guild lines for their conduct through *mullas*. Their economic backwardness and educational backwardness alleviated their problem in identifying their situation. The choice left for them was to make themselves accordingly what the Islam (for them the local religious authority) says. The urban class also shared such confusion in identifying their situation since they are much more exposed to the stereotypical images of outside world. their dilemma of identity as the rural poor caught within the limited choices. As opposed to rural poor, the urban took a path between two: either to adopt the stereotypical image and assert their identity or continually defend themselves in the name of secular Islam.

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