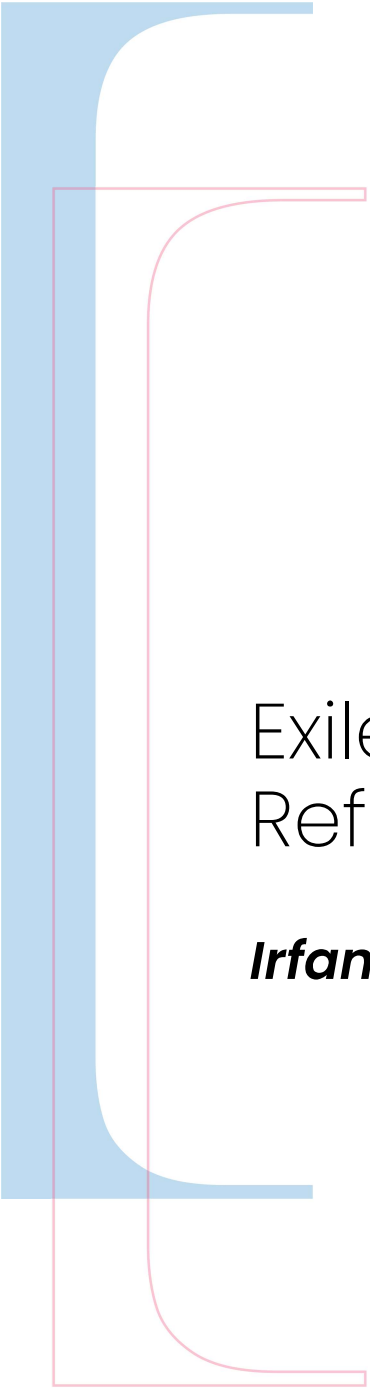




Exiled at Home: Reflections of an Activist

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Religion-based politics has dominated much of the popular contemporary discourses on nationalism, nation-state and nationalist identities. What is now perceived as a distinct 'Indian Muslim community', has its inception in the colonial rule of modern India. While the medieval times were replete with sectarian, linguistic, cultural, social and political diversity under various ruling dynasties, it was the colonial governance, its policies and the fear of alienation by the dominant religious community in the future arrangements of independent India that created much of the communal tensions. Communal violence during and after the colonial period played a significant role in promoting Hindu and Muslim communal identities. The Muslim community is now perceived at a popular level by non-Muslims as a violent community who strictly adhere to the tenets of Islam. Further, they are perceived as a community whose entire existence, culture and identity are determined by their religion. A dominant section of nationalists has popularised the idea that Islam is alien to Indian culture and Muslims are intolerant towards non-Muslims; further, Muslims have extra-territorial loyalties being a global community- *ummah*.

Here, it would be important to know three concepts that are useful in understanding the Muslim community - *qaum*, *watan* and *umma* (Aiyar, 2004 p. 10). *Qaum* is used for a political or ethnic community, or a nation, which aspires to establish a state. *Watan* is the country to which one belongs and which has geographical

boundaries, while Umma is the religious community with shared doctrines and belief systems. Muhammad Ali Jinnah towards the later period of his political career saw the Muslim community as a sovereign political community that must be governed under a state established by the community and for the community. His demand for Pakistan was based on such a proposition. The major struggle for the creation of Pakistan was directed against the Indian National Congress, whom he accused of being representatives of Hindu *qaum*. To Jinnah, British colonial masters were beneficial patrons, who would enable partition of the country. He mobilised the Muslims as a *qaum* by instilling fear of the Hindu *qaum* and Hindu *raj*, which, according to him, would oppress the Muslim *qaum* with its brute majority and obliterate its culture altogether if India remained united.

The JamiatUlema-e-Hind, a very influential organisation of Muslim religious leaders and learned Islamic scholars, on the other hand, opposed the demand of Pakistan on the grounds of *muttahidaqaumiyat* or composite nationalism. To them, Muslims and Hindus and indeed Indian followers of other religions together constituted a nation. *Qaum*, for them, included Indians of all religions. India was (and is) their *watan* (desh or country), while their *umma* (religious community) was (and is) the Muslim community. They stood for undivided India and supported a secular and democratic state where the Muslim *umma* would enjoy freedom to follow and practice their religion. They had faith in the leadership of the Indian National Congress, which was leading the freedom movement. They had faith in the promise of the Congress Party and fellow Indians that in independent India, all citizens would have freedom of religion. That the Muslim *umma* would be able to practice their religion unhindered and freely. The Jamiat wholeheartedly joined the freedom movement and mobilised the community. The Constitution of India extolled that promise along with equal citizenship to all Indians.

The Constitution of India relegates matters of culture and religion to the choice of the citizens.¹ The Constitution asserts that the citizen is free to choose her religion and free to practice it in the manner she wants to, subject only to the calls of public order, health and morality, and further subject to the fundamental rights of other citizens. Every religious denomination or a section thereof has the right to

1 Article 25 of the Constitution of India.

establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes². Neither the state nor leaders of any community can impose any religion or cultural practices. According to the Constitution, the state, neither subscribes to any religion nor sponsors any culture. Rajeev Bhargav (2013) terms this as principled distance of the state from all religions.

It is within this context that we have to understand the question of how “Indian”, and, how “Muslim” is the Indian Muslim community. In other words, what is the predominant influence on the community – its “Indianness”, that is, the influence of the local culture? or Islam? The question is complicated as it is challenging to define “Indianness” beyond geographical criteria, given diverse regional cultures, languages, traditions, customary practices, festivals, deities and diversity of castes. Equally challenging is the diversity of Islamic beliefs and practices, which makes it difficult to assert what is Islam beyond the confession (*shahada*)³. Islam has diverse sects, sub-sects, *maslaqs* or jurisprudential schools, theological discourses and religious practices. Nevertheless, it can be said broadly that those who imagine the community’s self-identity as a community having a predominant influence of Islam, prefer to call the community “Muslim Indians” with emphasis on their being Muslim, residing in the geographical territory of India, rather than being Indian. I propose Syed Shahabuddin and Zakir Naik as examples of the same. Syed Shahabuddin (1935–2017), who was known for his strident opposition to the Supreme Court Judgment in the Shah Bano case⁴ and his defence of Babri Masjid, was a firm believer that the primary identity of the Muslims in India is their religion and they should be called as Muslim Indians. Their loyalty to Islam is non-negotiable and the country should enable that. Muslim Indians strive to purge local cultural influences, particularly those that are considered to be against Islamic practices. Those who imagine the community as “Muslim Indians”, favour the continuous process of what they call “Islamisation”

2 Article 26 of the Constitution of India.

3 The shahada affirms that there is only one God, and that Prophet Muhammad was God’s messenger through whom the holy Quran was revealed to the human beings.

4 The judgment of Supreme Court in Shah Bano’s case upheld granting of maintenance to this Muslim divorcee under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The judgment was opposed by a section of Muslim politicians on the ground that a Muslim divorcee cannot be granted monthly maintenance in perpetuity under the Muslim Personal Law and therefore there should be a law that nullifies the judgment as far as Muslim community is concerned.

and persuade the followers to adhere strictly to Islamic laws and practices. It seeks to constitute Muslims into an exclusive pan-Islamic community with a more or less homogenous culture. Zakir Naik, a Muslim evangelist and orator is another example of one who imagines the Muslim community as “Muslim-Indian”. He is the president of the Islamic Research Foundation, and runs Peace TV, claiming to be a scholar of comparative religion. He has always propounded the superiority of Islam over all other religions. In a number of his videos, he is seen denigrating other faiths and converting people to Islam.

Other thinkers imagined the community as that of “Indian Muslims”, wherein, their being Indian was as important as being Muslim, if not more. These thinkers accepted and approved regional and local cultural influences on the community, including language, performing art traditions, and literature. The regional shared beliefs with non-Muslims were as constitutive of the community as Islam was part of the community. There is an ongoing conflict between the self-identity of the community. Which of these two imaginations of the community gains more influence depending on the social, economic and political context?

Those who are for a “Muslim-Indian” identity typically agitate over the right of Muslims to follow their Shari’a law or the Muslim Personal Law and are intolerant of the state’s interference in it. They defend their right to polygamy and unilateral triple *talaq*. They agitate to ban any act of blasphemy against Islam and strict punishment for desecration of Islamic religious establishments. A few examples include, the agitations to ban the book *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie and to prevent his entry into India, or to deny visa to Taslima Nasreen, the Bangladeshi author who had to flee for her life from her country after her novel *Lajja* was published, defending the minority character of Aligarh Muslim University and so on. They promote Urdu as a lingua franca of the Muslim community (the majority of Muslims speak regional languages and local dialects) and seek the state’s patronage for the language. The TablighiJamat leaders take up campaigns to ensure more compliance with the practices of the Hanafi jurisprudential school – hijab, burqa and even face veil for women, men’s dress too should not be in violation of Islam, giving up music and television, denouncing the composite culture as un-Islamic and so on.

On the other hand, the “Indian Muslim” proponents fight for inclusion in public spaces and the right to be treated equally. They fight for the democratic rights of Muslim citizens and the freedom to practice religion as a citizenship right. These include the right to be included in all welfare schemes, affirmative actions, educational institutions, livelihood issues, and the right to their culture. The Pasmānda Muslims (those converted from lower caste Hindus) who constitute roughly 85% of the community, agitate to be included as OBCs and are entitled to reservations in government jobs and education as for other OBCs. The Pasmānda Muslim leaders demand inclusion from the political parties in the form of tickets to contest elections. They assert that a large proportion of tickets given by the political parties to Muslims (to contest elections) invariably go to the Ashraf Muslim leaders, (or those converted from upper-caste Hindus) as they command better resources. The Ashraf Muslim leaders do not work for bread-and-butter issues of the Pasmānda sections. Those Muslims converted from the Scheduled Castes are called *arza/s* and receive the same treatment of untouchability from within the community as well as from other communities as they are engaged in occupations considered impure, like manual scavenging. The Arzal Muslims demand inclusion as Scheduled Castes and all the entitlements awarded to members belonging to scheduled castes. The Marathi Muslim Sahitya Parishad organised by Marathi Muslim litterateurs hold regular sessions asserting their dual identities as Marathis as well as Muslims. Marathi litterateurs from the Muslim community feel discriminated against in the main Marathi Sahitya Parishad. Through Marathi Muslim Sahitya Parishad (hereinafter – ‘the Parishad’) they assert their Marathi linguistic identity and Marathi culture as well as Muslim identity. The Parishad’s sessions, typically draw from the medieval ruler of Maharashtra; Shivaji’s inclusive politics, Maharashtra’s bhakti saints as well as Islam in a seamless manner. Yet, both The “Muslim Indians” as well as “Indian Muslims” have vociferously and effectively denounced terrorism as un-Islamic. The community has effectively campaigned against terrorism and Islamist politics. Hence, “Muslim Indians” must not be confused with Islamists, like Al Qaeda or ISIS, or mujahedeen who legitimize violent methods, including terrorism, to establish an Islamic State or an Islamic Caliphate and subject the entire populace to follow their diktats. The followers of other religions are subject to debilitating oppression. In India, there is hardly any influence of Islamists.

Given this diversity, how is the Muslim community perceived? Generally, they are judged by what side they belong to. It is posited as two pole positions though there are many nuances of identity such as regional and local community identities along with being an Indian and a Muslim. A large section of the community members are urban poor and from the Pasmada sections. They are discriminated against from within the community as well as by virtue of being Muslim. The majoritarian ideology views Muslims as foreign nationals or race and a community responsible for the “dismemberment” of India, hence they are seen as an obstacle to their political agenda of purifying the Indian culture of external influences, which they refer to as a process of “decolonisation”. The understanding of decolonisation includes de-westernisation, opposition to woke culture and liberalism, and de-Islamisation. Muslims are physically and emotionally targeted, there has been an increase in hate speeches and hate crimes last decade against the community with even the highest office in the government indulging in hate speech, causing an atmosphere of impunity (Engineer, 2024, pp. 220–222). The perpetrators of violence are seldom made accountable resulting in open oppression that includes arresting a large number of Muslims and misusing the law to demolish their homes. As is often the case with beleaguered minorities, issues of identity and culture have loomed large in the Muslim community’s political mobilization. Several myths frame the popular perception of Muslims as a homogenous and monolithic community of fanatics who aggressively, uncompromisingly, and if necessary, violently follow their religious teachings. According to popular perception, for Muslims their social and economic interests are secondary to, their religious interests and that they respond to the call of their religious priests, rather than their country. It goes as far as to state that Muslims are more loyal to other Islamic states, particularly Pakistan and that the political objective of the Muslims is to turn India into an Islamic State. In this direction, it is popularized that defending the Sharia Law (or what is more popularly called Muslim Personal Law) at any cost is the first step towards creating an Islamic State in India. Separate Sharia Law for Muslims means a separatist mentality of Muslims. Applicability of Sharia Laws for Muslims also means that Muslim males can marry up to four wives and there is an

Islamic conspiracy to increase the Muslim population rapidly and make India a Muslim-majority country. Further, a dangerous myth against Muslims includes the prejudice that Islam is a violent religion and supports terrorism and jihad. The conventional understanding of history is that during the Medieval period, Muslim rulers invaded the country to spread Islam. They came with the Quran in one hand and sword in another. In order to spread Islam, and due to their religious fanaticism and opposition to idol worship, the Muslim rulers demolished Hindu places of worship and built mosques.

Such widely prevalent prejudices make the community members feel that they are not wanted in the country and that the state will not protect them in case of violations and oppression. In such circumstances of feeling lonely, isolated and insecure, the community tends to seek refuge and safety, in stronger unity. The unity that the community seeks comes from merging one's individual identities, sacrificing self-interest, and suppressing internal cultural diversities. The community rallies behind those who want to lead the community towards a "Muslim Indian" identity. Even for the Pasmānda section of the community, the issue of security pre-dominates rather than their socio-economic issues and upward mobility. However, there is hope. The results of the 18th Lok Sabha elections are evidence that targeting religious communities will not pay rich electoral dividends. This opens up space for the marginalised sections of society to come together to address their common problems and overcome their state of exile in their own homeland, towards an aspiration for a more inclusive society.

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