

## Muslims: In the margins or pushed out?

“Indeed, the Muslims have all the social evils of the Hindus and something more. That something more is the compulsory system of purdah for Muslim women. These burka women walking in the streets is one of the most hideous sights one can witness in India.”

Thus B R Ambedkar, writing in the 1940s. “The evil consequences of purdah are not confined to the Muslim community alone. It is responsible for the social segregation of Hindus from Muslims which is the bane of public life in India.” Thus Ambedkar, again.

Writing in The Indian Express 75 years after the great constitutionalist and social reformer, but altogether lacking his authority or aura, I have caused controversy by terming the burka “reactionary” and “antediluvian”, and by comparing (not equating) it to the trishul. Apart from (at last count) 14 responses in this newspaper, there has been an array of critical commentary in social media and in other newspapers and websites.

My comparison was ill-chosen, and the chastisement I received for it is merited. I also agree that the headscarf and the skull-cap are akin to the turban and the vibhooti, markers of religious identity that should not offend anyone when displayed in public. That said, I agree entirely with Ambedkar that the burka is a mark of suppression, of women from men, and also of separation, of Muslims from non-Muslims. If you hide your face from me, how can we be partners in a shared political project? The burka is deeply inimical to fraternity, a quality that Ambedkar emphasised was vital to the creation of a democratic society.

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Beyond the burka, what are the specific pathways by which Indian Muslims can become full and equal citizens of our Republic? Here, to move the debate forward, I want to introduce what I think is a relevant comparison; that between Muslims and Dalits. From a sociological standpoint, the two communities have many similarities. Both Muslims and Dalits are spread across India; both are largely poor; both face stigmatisation at the hands of savarna Hindus. Many scholarly studies show that upper-caste Hindus have better access to modern education, proper healthcare, and jobs in the formal sector than both Muslims and Dalits. (In fact, a study led by the sociologist Sonalde Desai concludes that when it comes to school drop-out rates, Muslims may be worse off than both Dalits and Adivasis.)

Yet in their ongoing struggle to become equal citizens, Dalits differ from Muslims in several ways. They have the benefit of affirmative action, which has contributed enormously to the creation of an articulate and politically active middle class. Second, the way forward for Dalits, indeed the only way forward, is for them to look to the future since their past memories are of centuries — if not millennia — of oppression. Muslims, on the other hand, once ruled over great kingdoms in Iran, Iraq, Andalusia and Turkey, and indeed in India as well. This political overlordship is long gone; yet in gorgeous buildings and traditions of music and literature, its traces remain. Facing discrimination in the present, many Muslims seek consolation in a return to the past, by thinking, acting and dressing in a form they believe is consistent with the Golden Age their community is said to have once enjoyed.

In overcoming their disabilities, Dalits are inspired by the example of their great leader, Ambedkar, who urged them to “educate, organise, and agitate” (in that order). It was by schooling themselves, by entering the workplace and by taking up modern professions, that they could most effectively overcome discrimination and achieve rights of full citizenship. Ambedkar was also a vigorous advocate of gender equality; for him, men and women should not just have equal rights, but equal

opportunities to contribute to public life, to become top scientists, entrepreneurs, and lawyers. It is surely no accident that the pre-eminent Dalit politician today is a woman whose father or brother was not in politics.

In his contribution to the debate, the historian Harbans Mukhia focused on the siege mentality that affects sections of the community of Indian Muslims. This is in large part a product of the discrimination they have faced within their homeland. From the 1980s onwards, the political rise of Hindutva has been accompanied by a rising tide of attacks against Muslims. However, it is also developments outside India that have contributed to this sense of siege. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in 1979 and the invasion of Iraq by the Americans in 2003 were both unprovoked acts of imperialist aggression that led to civil war and enormous suffering in those countries. But they also stoked an already existing sense of vulnerability among Indian Muslims. Closer home, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan and Bangladesh has further emboldened Hindu fundamentalists in India, deepening these insecurities even more.

Hindutva bigotry within India and the spillover from global superpower politics may be the two central reasons for the predicament of Indian Muslims today. But surely we cannot ignore a third reason; the lack of effective leadership. That the Hindus, once led by [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) and [Mahatma Gandhi](#), are now represented by [Narendra Modi](#) and Amit Shah is — as I have said in many articles and talks over the years — a setback to the development of a modernist, egalitarian, and outward-looking sensibility. Likewise, there is unquestionably a need for more progressive leadership among Indian Muslims, even if advocating this has led to me being labelled an apologist for the RSS (which will be news to the RSS).

As I said in my original column, the fight against fundamentalism must be waged across communities. Maulana Azad (whom both Syeda Hameed and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi so movingly recall) was as great a patriot as Gandhi and Nehru, and a greater scholar than either. However, in meeting the challenges that Muslims face in the 21st century, the name I had invoked, of the forgotten Hamid Dalwai, may be more relevant. Like Ambedkar, he was a relentless moderniser, with a perspective on women's rights derived from the Constitution rather than the Koran. Here are some fresh quotations from Dalwai:

“Islamic personal law runs contrary to the modern notions of human rights. Its anomalies are obvious to anyone except Muslim males.”

“If Hindu communalism is responsible for Muslim communalism, by the same logic it would follow that Muslim communalism is equally responsible for Hindu communalism.”

“I attack all aspects of medieval religious obscurantism whether it is Muslim or Hindu.”

“There are Indian Muslims who are being modernised gradually. At present, such Muslims are few and they are confused... Being in doubt and feeling insecure, these Muslims oppose any new and different approach to the communal problem in India.”

“History, which has bred prejudices and animosity, is a hindrance to all of us.”

Dalwai was a working-class, Marathi-speaking Muslim from the Konkan. Unlike Urdu-speaking intellectuals, he had no glorious political or cultural past to console himself with. That may be why he was so unsentimental in analysing the predicament of his community. His advice to Muslims was similar to that offered by Ambedkar to Dalits; namely, that they must shake off the burdens of history while resolutely facing the future. Savarna Hindus themselves prone to ducking the challenges of the present by glorifying the past could benefit from reading Dalwai, too.

It is relevant to mention here that, aided by his socialist comrades such as Mrinal Gore, Dalwai began the struggle against triple talaq as far back as 1967. After his early death, his agenda of social reform was taken forward by his remarkable wife, Mehrunissa, who is fondly remembered in Maharashtra but sadly remains unknown outside it. Both Hamid and Mehrunissa wrote in Marathi; while a small selection of their work is available in English and Hindi, it would be wonderful if their writings were translated into all major Indian languages. Perhaps this debate in The Indian Express will encourage a progressive publisher to come forward.

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