

Lived Secularism

Indian Muslims often find themselves challenged by a liberal paradox of proving that they are secular but the terms of this 'examination of worthiness' is defined in a way that makes it impossible for them to pass it.

The debate on the issue was triggered by Harsh Mander's lament over the deteriorating state of affairs for the positioning of Muslims in India's polity and Ramchandra Guha's retort in his exasperation with liberals where he ended up comparing chalk with cheese. Liberals of different hues writing in this debate — Apoorvanand, Mukul Kesavan, Suhas Palshikar, Irena Akbar and Syeda Hameed — have amply demonstrated the problems with Guha's arguments. Ashutosh's piece read like a confessional on how [Aam Aadmi Party](#) marginalised Muslim voters, purportedly for their own good. This is actually a fine illustration of the argument forwarded by Harbans Mukhia and Shamsur Rehman Faruqi on the institutionalised nature of Muslim marginalisation by political parties. In the midst of all this was Rakesh Sinha's piece which sought to dress up a bunch of falsehoods the RSS is well-known for, in the respectability offered by a liberal debate. What I seek to do in this piece is to point out the very limits and problems of liberal discourse on Indian Muslims and their participation in the political and public sphere.

The problems confronting Muslims lie as much in the liberal attitude towards Islam in India, as it does in practice of Hindutva. At different historical junctures in Independent India whether the State leaned over to one of these more and the other less, it made a marginal difference to the fundamental questions of Muslims.

Liberal narratives often celebrate 'Lived Islam' as things that Muslims do but may have little to do with Islam. The term mostly indicates that Islam itself remains unlived or is unlivable. Learning from this line of argument I call the Indian notion of secularism as experienced by Muslims 'Lived Secularism'—indicating that the constitutional idea of secularism itself remains unrealised or is hollowed out in a way that renders it unrealisable. 'Lived Secularism' has been a burden for Muslims in India in the face of grave injury because it ruled that any claim by Muslims to an equal citizenship status was communal.

For example, a close look at 'communal riots' indicates amply that these are rarely conflicts in which the members of two communities fight each other. Government inquiries and citizen fact-findings have shown that these are essentially targeted attacks in which Muslims invariably suffer more, get indicted for being equal perpetrators if they act in any kind of self-defence, do not receive any justice, and get further ridiculed for the empty tokenism they received from 'secular' governments that are quickly labelled 'appeasement'.

Muslim SCs have been denied reservations based ostensibly on the claim that there is no concept of caste in Islam, but on the other hand other 'regressive' practices of Muslims are frequently called out for being found to be at odds with constitutional values and legislated upon.

Muslims continually face discrimination to enter educational institutions but minority institutions are easily scoffed off at as 'ghettos' even in academic circles. Their enthusiastic participation in electoral democracy never results in proportionate representation in state and central legislatures because political parties have consistently denied them tickets, and is labelled 'vote-bank' or 'identity politics'.

Muslims are tired of not only being discriminated against, attacked violently, not receiving justice; they are also tired of all their citizenship issues eclipsed by a single agenda of security from communal violence. Advocates and defenders of minority rights may take note of another fact that

the image of Muslims as victims of communal violence has not helped them get justice, although it has been successfully deployed to spawn the image of all Muslims as potential terrorists and sympathisers.

The truth is that as a targeted minority, Muslims have far too much at stake, and thus are, in general, more invested in maintaining peace, harmony and secularism. Aggression does not offer a way out of despicable conditions of existence. The only true choice in front of Indian Muslims, then, is to deepen secularism.

Muslim practice of deepening secularism is anchored in constitutionalism and manifested through young Muslims engaging with the law and legal institutions and undertaking cultural action rooted in criticism, hope and, yes, humour.

This is reflected in the work of numerous young lawyers, civil society activists, journalists and writers. In many cases, these are people who have been at the receiving end of state or organized communal violence, or just targets of everyday prejudice and discrimination. The names Shahid Azmi and [Aamir Khan](#) come immediately to mind—Muslims who went on to become defenders of human rights after spending inordinate and torturous time in prison when they were innocent. In her most recent book *Working with Muslims*, Farah Naqvi has chronicled the travails of civil society initiatives working with Muslims. In her book *Mothering a Muslim*, Nazia Erum confronts bullying and discrimination faced by Muslim children in school. Neyaz Farooquee's book, endorsed in touching words by Ramchandra Guha, is all about Growing up Muslim in India. Muslim activists and lawyers are tracking and recording hate crime against Muslims. Young students and researchers discuss books and ideas in study circles on important questions confronting Muslims. Poets and authors are giving their experiences as Muslim literary form of poetry, stories and novels. And standup comedians talk ironically and funnily about their Muslimness.

This, in my opinion, give a silver lining to the contemporary dark political cloud looming over Indian democracy. It is the prevailing political weather in the country which is enabling Muslims to speak as claimants of equal citizenship status.

We have today in India, if not two, definitely one generation of adult Muslims who are unencumbered by the burden of the history of the Partition. The increased ferocity of Hindutva inspired attacks, the impunity and glory granted to the attackers must force Muslims to re-evaluate their burdens and gather the courage to discard the polite appearances of lived secularism. The breakdown of the myth of benignly neglectful Indian state and emergence of a cunning state that is intent on showing Muslims their place has woken them up to the promises in the constitution of India. They are learning to insist that however flawed it may be, the promise that has been made by the Secular Indian state to its Muslim Citizens needs to be upheld.

This is an appropriate juncture at which we may stop to ask—Why should it interest a majority community to treat minorities civilly? Or, in other words, what use are minorities in a democracy?

It is clear to anyone interested that the political career and success of the [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) (BJP) has hinged on anti-Muslim rhetoric, threat and violence. BJP and its affiliates are too well-known not only for communal violence targeting Muslims but also for exercises in 'consolidation of the Hindu-vote' aimed at rendering political participation of Muslims futile. The BJP-led government came to power at the Centre in India on May 16, 2014 on the 'development' plank. Since after coming to power in the Centre, their strategy has been that of the frequent occurrence of contained violent attacks against Muslims by way of beef vigilantism and rumours of 'love jihad', instead of mass violence. The effectiveness of this strategy is heightened by continuous cultural terrorism by way of sustained incendiary misinformation campaigns, which are mainstreamed by

corporate media.

It is also a fact that in the recent assembly and byelections, whether the BJP won or lost elections, its vote share has more or less remained constant. The outcome of the elections has largely depended upon the making and breaking of coalitions of parties. BJP's biggest strength has been a part of electorate that has not only refused to hold it to its forgotten promise of development but also makes excuses for it—claiming that since no development has taken place in the 70 years of India's independence it is unreasonable for anyone to even enquire about it from this government. Judging by the record of the last four years, it can be reasonably claimed that 'development' was used by the BJP and understood by its electorate as a code word for communalisation of public sphere.

What we are observing today is an overall decrease in the perception and safeguarding of diversity as a valuable resource in democracy. The 'difference' produced by minorities, whether of opinion or appearance, is at the heart of the idea of democracy. The health of a democracy is best measured at the margins, at the bottom of the pile. Marking of minorities as visually undesirable, politically dispensable populations who do not have any constructive role to play in the political culture of the country is a strong indicator that our democracy is not doing well. When the majority can be appeased merely with anti-minorityism, it can only lead to coercing the entire political community into accepting an openly hyper-reactionary neo-liberalism.

The collapse of empathetic intellectual faculties of thinking and judging among the vast multitudes of people, understandably, has produced despair among Muslims and their defenders but this has also produced a blatant appeasement of majority community that is gnawing at the very roots of democracy in India.

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