The Politics of Muslim Identity and the Nature of Public Imagination in India: Media and Films as Potential Determinants

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Abstract:

The fundamental epistemic question that this paper seeks to examine is how the Hindutva discourse is increasingly getting mainstreamlined within India's socio-cultural milieu, buttressed by the economic transitions in the country. Due to the advent of globalisation, India has witnessed the twin phenomena of Hindutva and economic liberalisation, moving centre stage. In this connection, the paper seeks to argue that the place of Islam in the Indian ethos and the very identity of Muslims as citizens, has gained negative connotations in the current scenario which is propelled by the process of globalization. The central claim of the paper is that as left liberal policy in the economic sphere, the Nehruvian consensus in the political sphere and a sense of a composite tradition or shared heritage adored as the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb began to crumble in front of the juggernaut of a mythical Hindu nation, the public imagination got increasingly reified into the sense of majoritarianism and 'hate- the- other' impulse. Media and films, benefited by the virtues of globalisation, appear to have emerged as crucial factors in nurturing this majoritarian logic, largely among the expanding Hindu middle class by projecting the minority Muslims as a distinct 'other' and as potential

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threats to the security of Hindus. In this regard, the paper aims at understanding the ways in which they have demonised Islamic culture and projected the identity of Muslims pejoratively. It thus contends that such an approach is primarily geared to validate the hegemonic designs embedded in Hindutva majoritarianism.

Key Words: *Globalisation, Liberalisation, Media, Identity, Muslim, Hindutva*

Introduction

Human beings ever living in a group, have always felt a sense of misrecognition and a feeling of mistaken identity and loneliness has haunted them throughout history, despite their amalgamation with their fellow beings in a group. But never before, has the 'solitary man' of Jean Paul Sartre been so alone and the world appeared so hostile, as it has dawned upon him in the age of globalisation. Thus, the 'who am I' dilemma which has plagued the individual for long, has now assumed nightmarish proportions. To resolve this dilemma, man has through time, constructed homogenous, unified mirror images of the self by reaching out and forging identities. However, identities in general are neither simply inherited nor are they the 'givens' of a social set-up. Shaped and crystallized in a specific political context, they are contextual and not essentialist. With the 'Cunning of History' bringing about a gradual erosion and delegitimisation of long revered institutions, ideologies, belief systems, world views, ways of seeing, all certainties have been erased.

In this circumstance, the concept of identity thus hangs precariously, subjected to the vulnerabilities of diverse interpretations and the resultant contestations. Not surprisingly a lot of fishing is going on in these messy waters. Questions like, who is a Hindu? Who is a Muslim? Who is Secular? Who is an Indian? - have become highly contentious and politically charged. So, the integrated world capitalism that globalization produces has brought in a kind of cultural homogeneity which tends to undermine and de-establish the foundations of the already existing cultures. Consequently, there arises a severe crisis of identity, accompanied by an acute existential dilemma among individuals. By virtue of this intrusive effect, globalisation has thus engendered intense contestations of identity, mainly based on macro-social foundations like ethnicity, religion and race which tend to get eroded by the domineering presence of the monolithic conception of a globalised Western culture. Islam has been one such macro social identity that stands severely contested world wide, in this epoch.

In India, the last two decades have witnessed the twin phenomena of *Hindutva* and liberalisation, moving centre stage. At this crucial juncture, the identity of Muslims, who are in a minority, has become a critical component of cultural disputations largely due to the obtrusive assertion of majoritarianism by the *Hindutva* forces, which seem to have gained larger cultural space to foster their divisive agenda under a liberalized market based economy. Thus, the processes of modernisation, politicisation, participation, development, expanding education, media explosion, within a democratic framework, considerably emboldened by globalisation seems to have created a sense of self awareness and has sharpened urge for identities based on race, language, tribe, caste, religion, etc.

These sub-national identities acquired an added importance as they filled a vacuum created by, what has been referred above as, the 'Cunning of History'. Hence, globalisation and modernisation, mainly after the 1990s, seem to have affected an enhanced polarisation of the Indian society. This process of polarisation is evident in the crystallisation of the lethal nexus between religion and politics facilitated by the upsurge of a liberal market economy that has vitiated the political process and social life in India since the 1990s. This unhealthy liaison has been strengthened due to the increasing discontent among the masses, engendered by the corporatisation of various aspects of the societal activities in a globalising India. This prevalent dissatisfaction has driven the disgruntled lot towards seeking refuge in the devious agenda of politicising the processes of identity formation, hence leading to the political maneuvering of differences based upon macro social identities, such as race and religion.

The deep-rooted and pervasive sense of discontent has thus become even more explosive in character, as it has been exploited by some fractious forces to gain political capital, resulting in the violent assertions of identity. So, a vicious cycle of interaction has been created between religion and politics by the cultural transition ushering in with the globalisation of the media, expansion of the private sphere, a shrinking public sphere and the resultant individuation of socio-cultural structures and the corporatisation of religious symbols and rituals. As Nanda has so convincingly shown:

Aided by the new political economy, a new Hindu religiosity is getting ever more deeply embedded in the everyday life, both in public and private spheres. Use of explicitly Hindu rituals and symbols in the routine affairs of the state and electoral politics has become so commonplace that Hinduism has become the *de facto* religion of the 'secular' Indian state which is constitutionally bound to have no official religion. (2009, 72)

This has also determined to a considerable extent, the role of media and films in shaping the public imagination in the country. Benefited by the virtues of globalisation, they appear to have emerged as crucial factors in validating the majoritarian logic largely among the expanding Hindu middle class by projecting the minority Muslims as a distinct 'other' and as potential threats to the security of the body politic. So, the

fundamental epistemic question that this paper seeks to examine is as to how, media and films are increasingly getting seeped in the *Hindutva* discourse by virtue of the economic transitions in the country. It also aims at understanding the ways in which they have demonised Islamic culture and projected the identity of Muslims pejoratively. This paper contends that such an approach is primarily geared to validate the hegemonic designs embedded in *Hindutva* majoritarianism. To provide credence to this argument and to illustrate as to how the stereotyped imaging of Muslims is made, examples from both print and electronic media and some instances from Hindi films have been analysed in the paper.

Identity Formation in a Diverse Society

India is virtually the richest country, in terms of variety and diversity of its identities which cut across one another. Its large population is covered by such emotional bridges and exclusiveness that parochialism of one is checked by that of the other. In fact, strange as it may sound in today's homogenized times, the unity of the country is directly proportional to the number of diversities. During the freedom movement, for instance, all diversities were overshadowed by only one kind of diversity, namely of religion which resulted in the partition of the country. If these diversities did not exist or were not recognized, the unity of the country would have been less secure and the drift towards anarchy could have been easier. The recognition of linguistic identities through the reorganization of states on their basis, for instance, strengthened the emotional unity of the country by satisfying one of the most powerful urges and sublimating secessionist sentiments like those of Tamil or Marathi nationalism.

On the whole, India has achieved outstanding success in accommodating and integrating territory - based identities within a democratic system. However, a similar kind of success has eluded it, as far as religious-based identities are concerned. The question is why? Part of the answer lies in understanding the process through which identities are constructed, or as Benedict Anderson famously pointed out, '*imagined*'.[3] While most of the ethnic identities have proved tractable and are on the whole playing a positive role in promoting democracy, development and national unity, the same cannot be said of communal identities. Notwithstanding many common features between ethnic and communal identities, there is some sense in treating them as distinct categories. For religion is not merely a way of worship, rather, it also consists of a set of theological beliefs, rituals, and practices. But more than anything, it is a cultural and social entity of which even non-believers are an integral part.

[3] Benedict Anderson maintains that nations are imagined communities made possible by the emergence of print capitalism. See his, 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Indeed, religion cannot be conceived of without a community and there can be no community without socio-political urges. More importantly, the most noticeable characteristic of the present times is that no mainstream political party anywhere in the world even pretends that it wishes to change anything significant, leave alone systemic changes. What options then do the dispossessed and the marginalised have, in a system which has virtually forgotten and erased them? The obvious fallout is cynicism, despair and escapism which appear to be the perfect ground for the mushrooming of all kinds of irrationalism. The end result is religious revivalism with a political edge that seems to have taken centre stage with a vengeance, virtually in all societies and cultures. Globalisation, indeed, is making the whole world more religious and all religions more political. In India, this phenomenon has taken a humongous foothold in common consciousness. Under the neo-liberal economic regime, this all-encompassing religiosity, as Nanda has shown in much detail, is being cultivated by the emerging state-temple-corporate complex that is replacing the more secular public institutions of the Nehruvian era. So, the deregulatory regime which has been put in place to encourage a neo-liberal market economy is also boosting the demand and the supply for religious services in India's 'God market'.

Consider the example of the Tirupati temple in Andhra Pradesh which has overtaken the Vatican as the wealthiest and the most popular religious institution in the world. Its reach in society is huge: it runs 12 colleges, with 30,000 students, churns out 600 priests in its *Vedic* schools every year, and runs a string of charitable hospitals. The Government of India has put in place all the regulatory mechanisms that ensure financial support for, and official recognition, to such institutions and their modern priests, vibrant with a new sense of religiosity that has been fostered by the forces of globalisation. The process started in 2001 when the University Grants Commission (UGC) decided to introduce college-level courses in *Jyotir Vigyan* (astrology) and *Purohitya* (priest craft).

The UGC with the support of the government and the blessings of the Supreme Court, succeeded in institutionalising these courses in higher education. Another sector where the state and the corporate sector are making a common cause with Hinduism is the rapidly growing and lucrative religious tourism. The seemingly innocent and perfectly secular agenda of promoting tourism has become a channel for pumping taxpayers' money into promoting temples, ashrams, and pilgrimage spots. On February 4, 2006, a new temple *Shri Hari Mandir* opened in Porbandar, Gujarat. It is a grand sandstone temple with a priest training school called *Sandipani Vidyaniketan*. It is a joint venture of the Gujarat government, the business house of the Ambanis and the charismatic *kathakar* (religious preacher), Ramesh Bhai Oza. The temple was inaugurated by Vice-President of India with the Chief Minister in attendance.

Thus, the state-temple-corporate complex is creating new institutional spaces where Hinduism is renewing itself so as to remain relevant to new social context

created by the totalising force of global political economy. But in the process of renewing itself, it is also taking on nationalistic overtones by turning rituals into politicised assertions of Hindu identity. Thus, ordinary Hindu rituals end up merging the worship of god with the worship of the nation.

This obviously explains as to how people like Praveen Togadia can confidently state that ''Over 90 percent of Hindus are religious and we will convert that religiosity into a Hindu vote bank.'' (Togadia 2006, 9) This also explains why in spite of the glaringly obvious examples of state and corporate sponsorship of the majority religion, overwhelming numbers of Hindus believe that the 'pseudo-secular' state panders to the Muslim and Christian minorities at their cost. Hence the call for 'Hinduism in danger' necessitates the creation of its saviors like Modi and the collective ire against 'Muslim appeasement', even when as the Sachar committee report has conclusively proven that this 'appeasement' has led to their growing immiserisation and marginalisation.

Thus, putting things in this perspective, it may be argued that it is the role of religion in identity-formation that seems to have eluded the attention of those well-meaning political activists, as also scholars, who have been concentrating on establishing doctrinal harmony between different faiths. Much scholarship has also been devoted towards proving the essential unity of all religions. But the limitation of what may be called the Ram-Rahim approach in resolving the communal tangle was exposed during the time of its pioneering exponents, Gandhi and Azad, who had also succeeded in rallying around them almost the entire class of *ulema.* Jinnah, himself a non-believer, who did not use any religious sanction and religious arguments, won the day by taking up the cause of the Muslim identity and its secular problems like share in political power and economic opportunities.

So, any informed discourse on religious identity, must necessarily take cognizance of its underpinning socio-political agenda. It is, thus, not the communalism of different communities that causes tensions among them; rather it is the direct consequence of the power equations existing between them. Peace and harmony thus would exist in two possible scenarios: First, when the minorities, whether voluntarily or coercively, get fully co-opted into the majoritarian world; or in a second possible scenario, when no single identity exercises hegemony and in a truly pluralistic playing field, all have sufficient autonomy to pursue their own goals. The latter scenario would be possible only, if and when, there is a certain healthy robustness in their basic attitude and approach. This springs from inner confidence and an innate sense of solidity and self appreciation.

But for this, the goal on which their vision is fixated and all energies expended must be a kind of transparent spirituality and religiosity, and not any hidden socio-political agenda. A perfect example of this is the relationship that existed between the true followers of the *Bhakti* and the *Sufi* movements. But for obvious reasons, such a

scenario is a rarity. What replicates ground reality, is of course, the first. However, co-option is not easy, and establishing hegemony, as Gramsci so perceptively and painstakingly showed that it is although a process which is cleverly worked out and intelligently maneuvered, but still, it is an uncertain and transient process.[4] Nevertheless, what is absolutely fascinating is to deconstruct the processes through which hegemony is sought to be established. Crucial to this is the representation of the hegemonised. This then, brings us to the core issue of the construction of identities.

All identities are defined in relation / reference / opposition to those who are performing the task of defining it. Identity is not something that one is born-with; and something which is natural, innate and in-built. Instead, it is constructed, imposed from outside. There are those who are constructing / defining / imagining and there are those who are being constructed / defined / imagined and vice-versa. Those who define are the *ME* / *WE* / *US;* whereas those who are the defined are the *YOU* / *THEM* / *OTHERS*. More often than not, the dominant discourse in any society is the majoritarian one, but this does not imply that there is a homogenised majoritarianism in operation. It also cannot be preconceived that there will be unanimity in the viewpoint of all the members belonging to the majority community. Far from it, it is only the dominant fraction or the fringe which appropriates to itself the honour of representing the entire community. Thus, the sectarian voice of the few supposedly becomes the voice of the entire community, which in turn then seamlessly blends into the voice of the nation. It is from this majoritarian perspective that the minorities are defined / imagined.

Constructing the Muslim

Over the last two decades, if not much before that, the Muslims, not only in India but the world over, are increasingly being seen as an exotic, though a very dangerous, breed: Exotic, because of their archaic and veiled existence, lifestyle, dress sense, social norms, political structures, world views; dangerous, because in the global lexicon, *Muslim Jehadi*, *Terrorist* are words which have become interchangeable. Not surprisingly, Narendra Modi, on Star T.V., shortly before he legitimised and oversaw the pogrom in Gujarat 2002, summed up, 'All Muslims are not terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims'. Firstly if this is true, what is even truer is 'All wo/men are not terrorists, but all terrorists are wo/men'. Consider the immense implication of this statement. Secondly, this has been proven factually wrong with the unraveling of *Hindutva* terrorists responsible for a series of blasts in Ajmer, Malegaon, Hyderabad, Samjhauta Express, etc. Thirdly, apart from a refusal to engage with the intransigence of defining a 'terrorist' in the first place, this kind of construction doesn't even begin to

[4] Antonio Gramsci propounded the concept of hegemony, in order to explain as to how a capitalist order endeavours to establish its supremacy in the society. For this, see his, 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebook of Antonio Gramsci*, edited by Hoare Q. and Nowell Smith G., 45 and 169-170, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

acknowledge the variability and vast spectrum of social and cultural differences represented by Muslims, not only in India, but all over the world.

Indeed, how does one begin to justify the homogenisation of all people collapsed in the term 'Muslim'. Clearly the socio-political and cultural differences between Sudanis, Chinese, Indonesian, Arab and South Asian Muslims are far greater than the similarities they share with non-Muslim members of their country. What would Muslims from Kashmir, Sudan, Russia, China, France etc, have in common, operating in different worlds, afflicted by dissimilar existential problems, shaped by unique political cultures; linked (if at all) to national, sectarian, and pan-Islamic movements in vastly different ways? Indeed, even if they share the same faith, notwithstanding the considerable differences among Sunni, Shia, *Sufi*, *Bohra*, *Khoja* constituencies and any number of syncretic sects and cults, can it be assumed that this faith is practiced in the same way? In fact the question, who is a Muslim, is hugely problematic. Consider this: In early1953, less than six years after Pakistan became the first state to be founded specifically as a Muslim homeland; a number of religious leaders (*ulema*) instigated disturbances in pursuance of their demand that the government officially classify Ahmadis as a non-Muslim minority community. A public court of inquiry was appointed and it submitted its report in April 1954. Referring to the *ulema*'s call for Pakistan to be run as an official 'Islamic' state, and to their demands against Ahmadis, the Report stated:

The question, whether a person is, or, is not a Muslim will be of fundamental importance, and it was for this reason that we asked most of the leading *ulemas* to give their definition of a Muslim, the point being that if the *ulema* of the various sects believed the Ahmadis to be kafirs (unbelievers), they must have been quite clear in their minds not only about the grounds of such belief but also about the definition of a Muslim because the claim that a certain person or community is not within the pale of Islam implies on the part of the claimant an conception of what a Muslim is.'' (Quoted in Ali 2002, 41)

The Report reproduces verbatim the answers given by various *ulema* to the question: How do you define a Muslim? Their conclusion:

Keeping in view the several definitions given by the *ulema*, need we make any comment except that no two learned divines are agreed on this fundamental. If we attempt our own definition as each learned divine has done and that definition differs from that given by all others, we unanimously go out of the fold of Islam. And if we adopt the definition given by anyone of the *ulema*, we remain Muslims according to the view of that *alim* but *kafirs* according to the definitions of everybody else. (Ibid, 42)

Such contestations allowed Samuel Huntington to argue that there has emerged the age of Muslim wars.[5] This also draws upon Bernard Lewis's distinction between the

[5] The irony is that Huntington, who is in such great demand, since many have interpreted the 'war against terrorism' as a

'good' and 'bad' Muslim. Lewis argues that ''fundamentalism is not the only Islamic tradition'' and that ''there are others'' and that ''before this issue is decided there will be a hard struggle.'' (1990, 48) Coming to India, the perception of a hostile, different and an exotic sense seeped abysmally into the processes of the construction of Muslim identity. Admittedly, the earliest tropes revolving around 'Muslims' were not unequivocal; indeed the figure of the Muslim was even 'split'; as early ethnographers and census officials vacillated between tracing the Arab origins of hereditary Muslims who were subsequently indigenised in India, and the conversion of native Hindus to Islam. With growing evidence, it was accepted that the vast majority of Muslims were descendents of low-caste Hindu communities who had converted to Islam in order to free themselves from the tyrannies of the caste system. Were these converts 'lesser' Muslims, or could they be regarded as more 'authentically' Hindu? While politicising such questions, the thrust of the census reports between 1872 and 1901 was to prove, as Vishwanathan has pointed out that ''the Indian Muslim was not an 'autonomous other', but a 'version of the Hindu'.'' (2001, 192)

Underlying this need to prove that Muslims were different but not essentially different from Hindus was a scarcely disguised racial agenda. Indeed, early colonial ethnographers like Risley resorted to technologies like cephalic indexing, by which heads and noses of Muslims were measured to prove that these individuals were not of Semitic origin, but of native stock from the poor tribal communities. However, there was a hermeneutic twist to the argument: even as the vast majority of Muslims were identified as local converts, the entire community ('Muslims') was implicitly blamed for othering itself. Within the hegemonic logic, it was assumed, as Vishwanathan has pointed out, that ''the idea of Muslims as 'outsiders' ...was propagated by Indian Muslims themselves.'' (Ibid, 193)

This is a consciously orchestrated policy of divisiveness. For instance, in the open letter written by the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee to his 'Muslim brothers and sisters' which appeared as full page BJP election advertisement, in the Urdu edition of the *Rashtriya Sahara* on April 25, 2004, amongst other things it stated that, ''I say to Muslims that they should not consider themselves apart. We have to live together. We have one future''. This piece shows Vajpayee underlining their (Muslims) separate identity and his attempt at exhorting them to join the mainstream which apparently is a deliberate act of attributing them separateness from the mainstream of Indian life.

Even beyond the boundaries of the subcontinent, the accusation leveled against the self-othering of minorities can be regarded as a familiar trope in the rhetoric of racism. Minorities worldwide are frequently blamed for othering themselves, as if

civilisational conflict stemming from his thesis of 'Islam versus the West', has himself shifted the ground from under his own feet. Now he defines the post-Cold War conjuncture as one of Muslim Wars', arguing that Muslims fight each other and finally acknowledges that the age of Muslim wars has its roots in more general causes which lie in politics, not seventh-century religious doctrines'. See his, 2002. ''The Age of Muslim Wars''. *News Week*, 3 January.

'racial consciousness' was the cause of social division, rather than the product of pre-existing patterns of discrimination. An oft-repeated allegation against Indian Muslims, runs along these lines: 'They have themselves to blame for their ghettoised existence; if they didn't mark themselves as different there wouldn't have been a problem at all in the first place'. In fact this is the kind of criticism levied against all kinds of marginalised / fragmented / oppositional groups.

But the question is: Who marks them in the first place? Who others who? In any process of othering there has to be a posited self, against which the other is measured and judged. For all of *them* / *Others* there has to be a prior *Us.* Who determines the *self* / *Us?* What are the conditions of power by which this determination is made possible and hegemonised. This paves the way for uniformisation and centralisation, which then appropriates to itself the label of 'national tradition' to be treasured and preserved as our unique genius and to be used against all those oppositional forces which refuse to be co-opted. No wonder, such a monolithic hierarchical dispensation has supreme contempt for the identities of cultural communities / nationalities, is forever sniffing of secessionism and separatism in every nook and corner of the country and is belligerently opposed to what it dubs as 'minorityism'.

Let us revert back to from where we started off. Why Muslims are perceived as exotic and dangerous in places they constitute the minority community. Firstly it is because of the phenomenon of *othering.* The fundamental psychology evidenced in herd mentality is to look at the *other,* with a curious mix of amusement, disbelief, suspicion and even fear. Secondly, it is due to their identity construction in essentialist terms. This implies that they are imagined to be imbued with a set of character attributes which are supposedly innate, inherent, flowing in their blood stream, and which transcend time and space. This explains their being perceived as inflexible, rigid, intolerant, ghettoized, and intrinsically violent. Thirdly, and this is important: In the majoritarian discourse, Muslim identity is imagined in singular terms. What is erased here is the fact that like all individuals, even Muslims have multiple identities. Shabana Azmi, who is engaged in different roles, like being an actor, a political activist, someone who fights for women's rights as also those of slum dwellers, also was a member of Parliament, when asked which was the role that she most identified with, replied that it all depends on the circumstance. In front of the camera she was an actor, sitting in the Parliament, she was a member of the House, at home she was a daughter/wife, on the streets she identified with all those who were fighting towards a more just and equitable social order, while on the day of Id, she felt being a Muslim. It is, therefore, the context that determines which particular identity is fore-grounded, while others are obscured. However, the majoritarian discourse in India pushes itself into a state of selective amnesia, when it comes to recognising the fact that even Muslims have multiple identities. By and large, Muslims are indexed by their religious identity, while all others are completely erased. They are consistently marked by their *Muslimness, showing gross obliviousness to other facets of life.*

Fourthly, because of all the above mentioned reasons, Muslims are perceived as intractable and it is contended that it is hard to pin them down and to co-opt them. More than any other thing it is this which arouses tremendous hostility against them. Let us consider a simple fact. If we pose the question that whether there is any social group with which Muslims share socio-economic and political similarity; the simple answer would be the *dalits*. The mass of Indian Muslims, drawn as they are largely from the lower castes both in rural and urban areas, is 'dangerously' similar to the latter in their position within the sub-continental social structure in terms of deprivation, backwardness and marginalisation. However, at the same time their distinct religious mark stands in the way of effective ideological /cultural domination within the 'Great Tradition' by the upper caste elite. The Muslims (and to a lesser extent Christians) present a hurdle to a pan-Indian traditional-cultural hegemony leading to the strengthening of the upper caste dominance. Ideological exclusion of the Muslims and Christians would enable the *Hindutva* combine to tame and domesticate the lower caste masses and bring them under the traditional order, through the manipulation of religio-cultural symbols, something they have been so effective in doing as recent events in Gujarat, Orissa and Karnataka, have shown.

Media and Identity Formation

Even though there are several agencies which determine how identities are fashioned, imagined and congealed, yet by far the most important is the media. It does not simply reflect the social world, but actively constructs a coherent version of social reality within which ideological tensions can be contained and resolved. They produce a unified, intelligible, social reality, a 'world of the whole'. Dyer has argued, ''media images are both produced by, and help to produce, the sum of social knowledge with which we map society and make sense of it.'' (1977, 65) And since this construction is made of 'preferred readings' rather than excluded meanings, it is only a one-sided representation, which nevertheless is projected as the only authentic and *natural* reading of the phenomenon. Moreover the messages emanating from the media do not appear to be messages at all. Cloaked either as harmless entertainment, or dissemination of objective truths, they seep into consciousness, imperceptibly and almost invisibly.

Therein lies their potency and efficacy. The fact of the matter is that the actions of all individuals are predicated on their world view, which in turn is the product of their belief system. However, all their beliefs are contingent upon their concept of reality, which in today's age, more than ever is to a very large extent mapped out by the media. For instance, our take on the imbroglio in Ayodhya, Gujarat, Kashmir, Iraq or Palestine is crucially dependent on which newspaper or magazine we read. Or for that matter which news channel we watch. It is in this sense, that media does not simply *reflect* social reality, but *constructs* it. A case in point was the scathing criticism of the supposedly independent world press in their coverage of the US invasion of Iraq. The

incredibly biased and selective coverage of the invasion by the venerable members of the print media as also that of the high profile visual media was thoroughly exposed by a fledgling, almost nondescript Al Jazeera.

Closer home, let us take a brief look at the case of barbarism engineered by Hindu fanatics that was surreptitiously conspired by a cabal sphere headed by a *Hindutva* political establishment in Gujarat during 2002. We all know that the tempest in Gujarat has been roundly criticized allover the world, and words like 'pogrom' and 'genocide' have been used to characterize the nature of the atrocities committed. Apart from the obvious connivance of the State in the perpetuation of atrocities, what was even more remarkable was the widespread participation of ordinary people in the carnage. The plight affecting civil society seems evident in the lack of remorse and compassion both in the perpetrators as also the onlookers of the carnage, a stark contrast to the spontaneous outpouring of concern and help for the earthquake victims in 2001. The only explanation for this may be given by situating the argument in the context of the deep-seated internal contradictions present within a modem urbanised capitalist society which is characterised by asymmetrical inter-personal relationships. This is antonymous to the values of multiculturalism that affirms the importance of the cognation of diverse groups into an organic ensemble.

Viewing the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 in this regard, it may be argued that in a briskly industrialising society, the cabal consisting of the political class, the bourgeoisie and religious fanatics tend to fabricate minority identity in a manner that suits their collective interests. By a subtle coalitional inter-dependence among the three, attempts are made to mislead the entire society with an aim to further their own hegemonic interests. So, in Gujarat, through diverse overt or covert agencies, the Muslim identity has been projected in such a way, that to an overwhelming number of Gujaratis, as also to a lot more people, they appear sub-human, having ceased to be regarded as being of an equal human status.

Thus, the 'dehumanisation' of Muslims, was a necessary precondition to produce the collective fear of 'Muslim criminality' which in turn necessitated Hindu unity to provide security from Muslims. This resulted in mass mobilisation, triggering a public discourse that consolidated sharp anti-Muslim feelings among Hindus, overriding conventional caste alliances. This culminated in creating the powerful myth of 'Modi as saviour' which continues till today evidenced in his repeated electoral triumphs. 'Gujarat *Gaurav*' (Gujarat's Pride) and 'Vibrant Gujarat' are the catch phrases of myths which invoke sentiments of fear, pride and persecution all of which need the *other* to be defined as a vicious predator, needed to be stamped out and physically liquidated, which not only explains the kind of savagery witnessed in Gujarat 2002 but also the complete lack of remorse both amongst the perpetrators as also in civil society till today.

Hence, although such a kind of construction can only be the product of an amalgamation of diverse forces, nevertheless, there can be no doubt that it is the media which plays a leading role. For instance, on January 21, 1991, the Press Council, in its meeting held at Thiruvananthapuram, passed a resolution severely censuring four Hindi dailies, *Aaj, Dainik Jagran, S'watantra Chetna* and *S'watantra Bharat.* The Council felt that these papers had shown 'gross irresponsibility and impropriety, offending the canons of journalistic ethics, in covering the events relating to the *Mandir-Masjid* issue on and around October 30, 1990'. For instance on November 3, *Aaj* headline read:

Nihhate Ram Bhakton ko Gher kar Ghanton Firing --- 200 Maray. Kartik ke San parv par khoon se Nahayee Ayodhya, Jalianwala Baagh Kaand Bauna Pada''. (Hours of firing on unarmed worshippers of Ram after rounding them up - 200 die; Ayodhya Bathed in Blood on *Kartik* day Bath, Jalianwala Bagh episode becomes petty against this). The minority report submitted to the Press Council of India stated, ''Some editors and journalists seem to have totally failed to maintain their integrity as responsible media persons. They obliterated the borderline between their personal affiliations and the right to know of the society as a whole. Representatives of several social and cultural organizations in the course of their evidence pointed out that the editors of some dailies had deliberately tried to paint the picture that every Indian is a Hindu and every Hindu a '*Rambhakt*''. (Quoted in Engineer 1991, 913)

Likewise, in 2002, the Gujarati vernacular press was severely indicted for instigating and actively colluding in the pogrom. If the vernacular press is blatantly partisan and seems to openly espouse its agenda, let us see how the more respected and widely read national press operates. *India Today* magazine conceded that: ''post-Godhra Gujarat was a ''rotten, spot in India, a place where religion could burn, kill, divide and misrule''. (*India Today* 2002, 4) It then went on to ridicule the ''professional secularists, and the conscience keeping industry'' for demonising the rampaging Hindu, and concluded that the ''celebration of the popular will, shows the right way.''(Ibid, 5)

In fact, throughout its coverage there seemed to be a schizophrenic divide between the cover photographs and the articles within. For instance, the issue with Modi in traditional RSS attire on the cover held out the possibility of a critical look at his politics and mode of governance. In contrast to this expectation, the article actually bolstered the righteousness and iconic stature of the RSS man now fulfilling his avowed mission. We must keep in mind, that *India Today* with its huge circulation (more than that of *Outlook,* The *Week,* and *Frontline* put together) and its multi-lingual editions implies that it is both reflective of as also constructs dominant middle class values.

If one takes even a cursory look at TV channels, the Indian Muslim is a terrorist wanted for every other terror blast in the country. He is in close touch with Pakistan and the ISI and has extended links with Dubai. He is a wife beater. He is a rapist. He is anti-woman. He is uneducated and over religious. While the 'construction' of reality via

television news channels and the print media is fairly visible, that through cinema and television serials is a lot more subtle, though equally true. In this connection, Fareed Kazmi, in his book ''*Politics of India's Conventional Cinema*'', has provided an interface between politics, culture, society and mass media.[6]

In the last two decades, starting from *Roja* (1992) till the recently released *My Name is Khan* (2010) in film after film, irrespective of the genre, the recurring image of the Muslim is that of a terrorist. In fact, there is an overkill of them so that in common consciousness Islam and terrorism overlap. This is facilitated through the process of framing the terrorist in a singularly religious idiom. It is his Muslimness - the mandatory *shalwar kurta*, the beard, reading the *namaz*, etc., - which is fore grounded. At the other extreme there are the suave, successful, urbane, corporate executive types who are even more vicious (*Fanaa, New York, Kurban*). So like the devil, beware the Muslim who can take any form. To be politically correct this bad Muslim is counterpoised against the 'good Muslim' or some righteous soul who either liquidates him or shows the right path by sermonizing on the true meaning of Islam. Even when there is only the 'good muslim' as in *My Name is Khan*, throughout the film, he has to keep on proving that he is not a terrorist. But that is precisely the point. The vileness of the present discourse is such that it has Muslims being forever on the defensive, which is precisely the agenda of *Hindutva* and all such forms of authoritarian ideologies.

To illustrate this point, let us take the case of the biggest blockbuster in the history of Indian Cinema - *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (HAHK). At the overt level, there is nothing even remotely political about the film. However, a meticulous reading shows that the film which was released in 1993, when the *Hindutva* frenzy was at its peak, mirror images its discourse though in a highly intelligent and audience-friendly manner. Whether it be the Thackerays, Modis, Advanis, Togadias, Vajpayees, the proponents of *Hindutva*, almost parrot- like, keep on repeating that they are not against all Muslims, but only against a particular type of Muslim whose loyalties supposedly lies elsewhere. Hence they argue that the onus of responsibility is on the Muslims to prove that their heart lies in the right place, by merging into the mainstream and only then would they be accepted as one of 'us'.

It is precisely such a politically 'correct' couple which is found in *HAHK.* Though both husband and wife are doctors, yet they are defined in terms of their religion, not through their profession. They are marked as Muslims, not doctors. They are thus depicted in stereotypical terms, reciting Urdu poetry, doing the ritualistic *adab* and wearing the mandatory *achkan* and *gharara*, even while performing their duties in the hospital. This is the easiest way to homogenise the entire community, erase all kinds of

[6] Fareed Kazmi has challenged the myth that conventional cinema is pure kitsch and is only entertainment or fantasy oriented. In fact, according to him it always voices the concerns of the people, especially the subalterns, articulates the ideological tensions of the time and draws its 'raw material' from the specific social milieu in which it is located. In other words, it is politically and ideologically loaded. See his, 1999. *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging the Universe, Subverting a Multiverse*. New Delhi: Sage.

fragmentations, and slot them in a pre-constructed groove, in quite the same way as it is routinely done in the dominant political discourse. By injecting such a couple in the filmic world of HAHK, the film makes certain interesting statements.

First, that even pure, thoroughbred Muslims, with their 'Muslim' baggage are accepted in the 'our' (read Hindu) fold, but only on one condition. They must be willing to rectify their 'fault lines', make the requisite 'adjustments', so that they get fully 'integrated' in it. This is precisely what the *Hindutva* votaries are clamouring for. Second, only the educated, liberal Muslims would be willing to do such a thing, because they are intelligent enough to realize where their real interests lie. As Murli Manohar Joshi, in a television interview argued, ''The thinking Muslims in India are beginning to appreciate the cultural nationalism of the Sangh Parivar and the truth and strength of *Hindutva*. Our position hasn't changed. It is their perception of us that has changed''. (*Star* April 8, 2003) Third, that Hindu religion is so liberal, tolerant and accommodative, that it willingly embraces everyone within its fold. The implication is obvious. It is the inflexible, rigid, exclusivist attitude of the Muslims, which is responsible for rejecting this magnanimous offer of the Hindus, thereby leading to their marginalized existence and also for all the violence that is routinely visited upon them.

The conclusion is inescapable: All the tensions, strife, conflicts, bloody riots, are the product of this dogmatic, pig-headed, intolerant stand of the Muslims. This is the kind of logic through which the Muslim identity is constructed in popular consciousness, and it is this, which is both the cause of, as also the consequent rationalisation for Gujarat 2002 and other pogroms. Providing a theoretical spin-off to this phenomenon is Ashutosh Varshney's book *Ethnic Conflicts and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*.[7]

But here lies a small caveat. Both 'majoritarianism' and 'minorityism' are not absolute categories but contextual and relative within the filmic discourse. While sociologically, Hindus constitute the majority community, whereas Muslims the minority, yet within the closed world of a specific film or a television serial, there could be a reversal of these categories. For instance, in the filmic world of films like *Mughale-Azam, Mere Mehboob, Chaudhvin ka Chand, Sanam Bewafa, Khuda Gavah,* or serials like *Henna, Alif Laila*, etc., the Muslims clearly belong to the majority while the Hindus constitute the minority. Here it is through the majoritarian Muslim gaze that the minority Hindus are viewed and constructed.

Thus, operating in a multi-religious society, identity formation in films and tele-serials may take any of these forms: (i) Projecting a hermetically sealed and exclusive world where there exists a homogenous, monolithic community while shutting out all

[7] Ashutosh Varshney has argued that the existence or otherwise of civic ties between the Hindus and the Muslims at the town level is the primary cause of conflict or the absence of this between the two. Where such networks of civic engagement exist, tensions and conflicts are regulated and managed; where they are missing, communal identities lead to endemic and ghastly violence. See his, 2002. *Ethnic Conflicts and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

others. This could be a closed Hindu world or an equally shut Muslim world. (ii) While selectively allowing the intrusion of the minority community, yet ensuring that their peripheral existence does not disturb the hegemonic position of the dominant community. This is done by co-opting the marginalised into the world of the dominant community. (iii) An apparently pluralistic set up where fully homogenized communities happily co-exist with each other despite fundamental differences.

As far as the print media and news channels are concerned, it may be argued that reportage is not merely recounting of a particular event by a reporter, which itself is problematic and must be deconstructed carefully for showcasing the covert biases and leanings. With the media reporting every word of what they say, Modi speak or Togadia speak itself constitutes reportage. Thus, it makes news when Modi, while referring to Muslims in general, speaks of *miya musharraf* or *Hum paanch, hamare pacchis, pachhis key che-sau-pachhis.* The obverse side of this is anti-establishment and oppositional voices are marginalized or completely silenced or muted. Thus, even though it is important to take into consideration what is reported, how it is presented, which voices are articulated and which concerns are made visible; it is even more important to understand who has been made invisible and what has been erased.

Conclusion

In one of his most influential works, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman, the high priest of neo-liberalism, articulated contemporary capitalism's core tactical nostrum, what Naomi Klein calls 'The Shock Doctrine'. He observed that ''only a crisis --- actual or perceived --- produces real change … That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.'' (Friedman 1982, 1) Friedman predicted that the speed, suddenness and scope of the economic shifts would provoke psychological reactions in the public that 'facilitate the adjustment'. He coined a phrase for this painful tactic: economic 'shock treatment'. The question is: who will administer these shocks and to whom? Herein lies the role of the state. For Friedman, the state's sole functions were ''to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets.'' (Ibid, 2)

In India, two crises --- one social, the other economic ---'facilitated the desired adjustment'. In the socio-political domain, if we jog our memories a little, we would realize that the biggest mass movement in the history of Independent India was on the Ram *Janambhoomi* issue which not only completely fractured and communalized the body politic but oversaw unprecedented violence and deaths. In the economic sphere, it was a debt crisis which forced India along with other countries of Latin America and Africa, to be 'privatised or die'. So, the year 1991, was a nodal point in independent

India's history. After a period of gestation, this was the year that a new India was born, divorcing itself ruthlessly from the past. With the twin phenomena of *Hindutva* and liberalisation, moving centre stage, the ground was laid, for a radical restructuring of the entire socio-economic and political order. The old India, best characterized as the Nehruvian consensus, was jettisoned, to be supplanted by an altogether different terrain of discourse. In this discourse the 'enemies outside our gates' is Pakistan (read Muslims) and enemies among 'fellow-citizens' are Muslims and Maoists.

And now for the crunch question: What is it like to be a Muslim in India today? The answer to this was provided at a meeting organized in Delhi by an NGO, Anhad, between October 3-5, 2009, which was attended by victims of police atrocities and state injustice as well as activists, lawyers, journalists who were sympathetic and concerned. The audience listened with grim faces as the victims narrated their stories. And in the accounts an answer to the question emerged. Muslims are not feeling secure, as there is bias in the institutions of state. Communal stereotyping faithfully picked up and projected by the media, paints the Muslims as an extremist, and a possible terrorist. The state is turning partisan, with little difference between the Congress and BJP (the two major political parties in India) when it comes to profiling the Muslims, directing the police to go in for preventive arrests, and by ensuring that the first finger of suspicion falls on the minority community (even when they themselves are bombed and killed), ensuring that its representatives are arrested and imprisoned for anti-national acts. Justice and accountability have become dispensable, with the state unwilling to dispense justice to innocent victims, and of course remaining unaccountable in the process. The wounds are, thus, not healing as the emotions arising from incidents long since gone by demonstrated in the meeting. There was no anger or communal sentiment expressed at the meeting. Just a quiet resignation, fear and insecurity that was palpable in the (ironically) Constitutional Club of India.

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