

# *The Portrayal of Islam In The Indian Mass Media*

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## ***Abstract***

The Indian sub-continent being one of the oldest cradles of civilization boasts of amazing ethnic, cultural, and communal diversity. The mosaic of religions in this region is so complicated that often the interpretations of a particular faith get antithetical representations. The interesting contrast of monotheism and polytheism in the two leading religions of the region, Islam and Hinduism, the two major contrasting theological dogmas further accentuate the disparate perceptions and images of these religions in the media. Post-Hindutava upsurge, the Indian Hindu revivalism has distorted the minority religion's public image and has led to a devious propaganda which perhaps was non-existent in a country with a secular tradition for nearly 40 years in post-independence India. The iconoclastic attempts to "reinvent Islam" as a fundamentally polarized ideology and inherently opposed to Hinduism and other allied religions has created an interesting perspective within the cross-section of the media. On one hand, the images are those of a secular and all-encompassing fabric of unity which allows several centuries of melting influences between two faiths. And on the other hand, there is a schism which reinforces the inherently distinct identity of the two religions and juxtaposes Islam as the "outsider's faith". In the wake of the Babri Masjid episode, the entire nation was seized with communally sensitive portrayal of Islam as the invader's religion. Subsequently, the mass psyche was assaulted with an array of anti-Islam projections which stirred up the hysteria against and even for Islam.

This paper will reflect upon the existing dichotomy in understanding Islam and its depiction in the Indian mass-media, particularly films. The Indian Cinema and specially the Hindi films have captured Islam in its numerous forms. This paper will explore how these images have been both useful and harmful at the same time in endorsing the identity of Islam in the Indian sub-continent. Being the second largest faith in this part of the world, Islam has invoked many interpretations which have either led to public disharmony or the communal bonhomie. It is significant to note that these perspectives have shaped the lives of millions of people and have hugely impacted the understanding of Islam within the Indian cultural milieu. This is an attempt to discuss how the Islamic fervor as reflected in the local mass-media shapes the cultural exchange between Islamic and non-Islamic communities in a culturally diverse India and how the context for meaningful co-existence emerges.

### ***Opening up to a world of Religious Divide***

It is universally known that faiths create a dichotomous context for cultures and often give a new identity to an existing way of life. In India the culture lives in its legacy of centuries of built, destroyed and re-built identity of different religions, particularly its two most prominent signifiers of faiths, i.e. Hinduism and Islam. Islam has been generally perceived to be an invaders' religion in India. For instance, Indian Hindus are often reminded of the temple of Somnath in Gujarat which was plundered by the invader Mahmud Ghazanavi or the demolition of the temple at the site of the current Babri Masjid. And Indian media sometimes resurrects this tale with a twist reminding the mass psyche of the plunder and pillage of a bygone era which has no relevance to today's secular national fabric of India. And the same time builds up the images of peace and communal harmony by fostering universal brotherhood through tales of how secular Islam continues inspire India. In the post-Babri Masjid demolition chaos, India has tried to relive its traditional image of a secular nation with the media playing a sensitive role to disseminate various views both political and religious with a vehemence to create a new face of Islam in India. The trajectory of both pro-Islam and anti-Islam ripples in the media make up for an interesting odyssey of how Islam attracts and garners myriad interpretations from those who try to take its visage to a country of millions trying to grapple with its amazing diversity in faiths.

### ***Some Islamic Reflections of the Indian Print Media***

Every newspaper either claims its secular antecedents by soft-peddalling Muslim issues or perhaps takes a hardliner stand against the Islamic Fatwas to reclaim their allegiance to Hindutava. For instance, the recent fatwa issued against the singing of the national song Vande Matram sparked a barrage of news snippets both in the electronic and the print media shouting down the non-patriotic stance of Indian Muslims. However some of the news papers did take a neutral stance and reported the controversial Fatwa with views of the political parties and the edict. Just think of this news item on an Indian news channel Zeenews: "The Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind Tuesday supported a decree against the national song "Vande Mataram" on the grounds that some of its lines were "against the religious principles of Islam". The move drew fierce criticism from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which termed the move "anti-national". This clearly indicates that it is indeed obligatory for the mass media, particularly those vehicles of the politico-social ideologues to keep catering to the expectations of its readers and viewers by displaying a degree of sentimentality in endorsing the hype surrounding Islam as a "foreigner's faith'. At the same time, this news item may seem neutral to any reader and obviously the choice of discerning and interpreting the content's intent is with the reader.

The Babri Masjid demolition attempt and the Godhra carnage and the subsequent riots perpetuated an unspoken divide in the mass psyche and drew a line between the Hindus and the Muslims in terms of their cultural identity being disparate and the collective forces suddenly turning into divisive ones. In Gujarat, the newspapers are vocal about the communal sentiments of the Hindu to the extent that every time they do an action replay of the Godhra Carnage and

report any occurrences of even a cow slaughter in print, people go out on the streets with stones and yet another riot is around the corner. The local dailies such as Gujarat Samachar, the Lok Satta and the Jan Satta reverberate with the myth of the Hindutava being violated in a country of Hindus and the Muslim minority being the fanatic vandals whose religion is coercing them into antagonism and hostility towards other co-existing cultures and faiths. The despicable and venomous reportage often subsists on political dalliance and creates hype around Muslims being misfits within the larger ambit of Indian nationalism due to their religious aggression. The burning need to prove that the Hindutava ideologue cannot survive the Islamic Jihadist tendencies is often splashed on the front pages of newspapers in the communally sensitive states of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat more often than not. Here surprisingly the regional press is more peppered with these stories than the leading national dailies. This makes their intentions circumspect for some of them have readers from the community whose interests they cater to and therefore every news item peeping into the keyhole of Islam would perhaps be from the eye of the beholder who is a typical Hindu reader with a strong need to defend his religious identity from the Muslim zealots.

### *The myriad hues of the media's Islamic collage*

On the other hand, the Tehelka expose on the Gujarat riots of February 2002 shown on private Television News channel in 2007 clearly showed the black face of religious fascism and exposed the role of the Gujarat Chief Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and his goons in a political attempt to reinvent the supremacy of Hindutava with mere political ambition guiding his entourage. This journalistic attempt to show that the chief minister of Gujarat is harassing the Muslim minority of his state by juxtaposing the two different religions and its followers against each other was a credible reassertion of media's integrity in remaining secular in its belief. As a witness of the transition of the mass psyche, the media sometimes sings paeans to the Indian Muslim's secularism in joining his Hindu brethren in celebrating traditional Hindu festivals such as Diwali (Muslim celebrations, Firoz Bakht Ahmed, Hindustan Times, November 12, 2004, [http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/181\\_1102380.00120003html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/181_1102380.00120003html)), or at other times it simply reports an unusual episode of an all-embracing act of a Muslim woman Noor Fatima who built a Shiva temple in Benaras, the holy city of the Hindus (A Hindu temple built by a Muslim, Zee News, March 9, 2005 ).

Some of the Hindi newspapers such as Dainik Bhaskar, Dainik Jagran, Navbharat, Rajasthan Patrika & Hindi Milap or Punjab Kesari have older roots and hence try to navigate the currents of Islamic interpretation with a degree of social sensitivity. But other regional newspapers such as the Marathi newspaper Saamana in Maharashtra are often media vehicles of some political party (for instance Saamana is the mouthpiece of the local political party Shiv Sena) and hence such carriers of public opinion find it difficult to remain objective with their reportage on critically sensitive hot-button news related to the minority interests. The array of influences is so wide-ranging that often it is difficult to trace the real slant of the regional press and whether its Islamic interpretation is its own or borrowed from its political patronage. Islam's denunciation of idol worship or killing of cows is out rightly thrashed by the regional media as an act of religious

assault on the Hindu's sacred beliefs which may often not be true. Even the minutest departure from the norm is whipped up repeatedly through images in press to spur anti-Islamic emotions. A translated version of regional editorial which ran in the Hindi daily Dainik Jagran vehemently claimed that "It was discussed in a national congregation of Hindu saints at Bhivani that as cows are being tortured and killed, our culture is getting distorted..." (Dainik Jagran, Oct 27, 2006). It is not surprising since in an attempt to appease a large chunk of the Hindu heartland even a secularly biased newspaper may tilt to drum up support for the anti-secular forces.

Islam as a religion offers a very difficult interpretation for the myriad expressions of its subtle all-elusive identity as a unique faith to the Indian media. This often means that there is no independent understanding of Islam without any comparison with other faiths. As its identity is so ambiguous and not so distinctly clear, those who attempt to opine on Islam and wish to offer a perspective do not find it easy to do so. Hence they support their expression of this faith by juxtaposing this religion against the other prominent faiths particularly Hinduism. Islam's strong identity however does not allow for a smooth reflection of the Islamic world and leads to chaotic and incomplete representations of a very complicated faith. This may at times create a schism in understanding the real Islam as it is not the same as the "perceived and communicated" version of Islam. The media however cannot be blamed for this inadequate chiaroscuro on Islam as the faith itself often throws up exclusive rather than inclusive sub-context.

### ***Islam on the Celluloid: The "silver screen" Silhouettes of Islam***

The Indian films, particularly the Hindi films popularly known as Bollywood films, portray a dichotomous context of Islam without being representative of its mystical connotations. The faith is often carried on the protagonist's shoulder as the faith of the believer who believes in the supreme reality and also reinforces eternal good or the faith of the quintessential "outsider" whose patriotism is missing. For instance one of the lead characters in the Hindi film Kabzaa is a pious old Muslim teacher who tries to reform a goon and spreads the noble tenets of his religion. The nobility of his character is the only endorsement of the Islamic interpretation in the movie without any conventional trappings. On the other hand in the film "Sarfaroosh", the character with the Islamic belief is portrayed as one who is beleaguered at the loss of faith in his patriotism due to his Islamic countenance. He in fact quips in the movie "I am no less Indian than you are because I am a Muslim."

Sometimes, the interpretation in a typical Indian movie could hover on the bizarre portraying Muslims as anti-national and those who show solidarity only with Islam, to the extent of supporting the enemies of the nation across the border. Cinematic stories such as Gadar-Ek Prem Katha and Mission Kashmir tried to show the antithetical face of Islam against the backdrop of an Indian trying to be true to his patriotism. It is confusing for the lay audience to understand how a follower of Islam is often resorting to terrorism or anti-national activities. This maligns the much complicated interpretation of a misunderstood faith and deepens the schism that the followers of different faiths experience when they get riddled with numerous biased interpretations of a faith which singularly believes in one supernatural force like any other faith.

For instance when a Muslim girl gets married to a Sikh guy in the film *Gadar*, there is a communal revolt and the guy is hounded for his audacity to take a Muslim bride. The reaction of the Muslim protagonists in the film is shown to be venomous with hate underlying the vendetta that they plan against the Sikh youth. The love-story between two faith blossoms into a hate tale of two religions with unnecessary melodrama adding to the chaos which is demeaning both to Islam and its tenets of universal brotherhood. On the other hand, the film *Rang De Basanti* was more secular in its approach and did not bother to proffer much on the religious jargon of Islam and instead stuck to portraying inter-faith understanding amongst its protagonists delighting the Indian masses with its holistic depiction of secularism. Islam as a faith is neither an enemy of the other faiths, nor a friend of its followers without discrimination is the message which permeates some celluloid attempts. For instance, in the film *Amar Akbar, Anthony*, the Muslim protagonist Akbar had an Islamic upbringing and here the hero had a balanced understanding of all faiths. This sound depiction of Islam endeared this faith to many non-Muslim cine-goers and created an identity for the lay Muslim's own faith being no alien to an Indian of another faith. Whereas in the movie *Chak De India*, the Muslim hero wins the trust of his countrymen by winning the hockey match for his nation so that he can wipe out his identity as a Muslim who betrayed his own country. However the contextual loss of trust because of the faith does portray a very vulnerable face of Islam in this movie where only by virtue of being a Muslim who loses a match against Pakistan (a Muslim country perceived as being hostile to India), the protagonist is dubbed a traitor.

### ***Islam: The faith of the Jihad and the faith of Love***

In its paradoxical struggle for attempting a very passionate rediscovery of Islam, the Indian Cinema has often shown rich celluloid saga of love and Islam as the religion of not just Allah but those hearts which sing in natural harmony the divine song of love. For instance, an old movie entitled *Love & God* (1986) is an interpretation of Islam from the perspective of celebration of romance as the ultimate tribute to Allah. In another movie *Laila Majnu*, the lover who is dubbed the infidel for his passion for his beloved and who sees Allah in Laila brings the subtle Islam closer to the mass psyche by demystifying its worship of Allah as done in the traditional Sufi interpretation and reliving Islam as the message of love and peace. In a very sensitive portrayal of the Kashmir terrorism in the film *Maachis*, the Jihadist face of Islam is depicted with a degree of ambivalence which perhaps makes the Islamic understanding of Jihad and the terrorist interpretation of Jihad clear to a discerning viewer. The film in fact sympathizes with the misguided youth who is unfortunately getting destroyed both physically and spiritually like cinder (*Maachis*) because of his inability to comprehend the true meaning of his own faith. It is important to note here that the Indian Cinema is a global phenomenon and has a universal impact with viewers in many different parts of the world. Those who view these versatile attempts to capture the complicated facets of the world's most misunderstood religious dogma may often get confused with a very broad cinematic canvass trying to capture as many hues of this distinct faith as possible. The Indian cinema traverses this entire continuum of expression on Islam's many connotations by throwing up multitudinous ways of experiencing this all-exclusive faith through its iconoclastic reflections, both true and fictitious.

### *In Conclusion...*

As Bulle Shah, the revered Sufi mystic exclaimed:

Not a believer inside the mosque, am I  
Nor a pagan disciple of false rites  
Not the pure amongst the impure  
Neither Moses, nor the Pharaoh

The Indian media needs to reiterate this identity of the faithful Muslim with his understanding of Islam being seen through a new prism every time. It is not in the reverence for the “religion of the foreigner”, nor in the ordeal of a faith, which is sadly misinterpreted as the face of violence, that Islam should be captured. Surely, the Indian mass media does try the trick of dodging this question of how Islam is not the Jehadi’s weapon to salvation nor is it the worshipper’s call to pray namaaz. It does encapsulate various strands of the perennially intriguing faith’s multiple nuances. However, in its attempt to help secular bonhomie, the Indian films much-contrived and sometimes fictitious affection for weaving different faiths together will also do. At least this façade of Islam does not spark the flames of communal tension which could burn millions of dreams of a united India in a never-ending strife both within the country and of course across its borders too. The Indian media’s anxiety to touch the chords of unity through diversity can only be seen in this excerpt of a news columnist Mukul Kesavan when he writes in the Telegraph, India: “When my son found a place in a school where Muslim students were a normal part of its enrolment, I felt grateful and reassured that he would grow up in a school that reflected in an approximate way, the world in which it functioned.”, (The Telegraph, India 30/10/05). Let the media continue to explore the functional facet of Islam whose religious representation is perhaps more practical than its ideological interpretation. This is assuring, as India will have to live with its many faiths co-existing together and the media will play a very crucial role in interpreting Islam as a binding force rather than a divisive one. The Indian mass-media will have to cross this mirage of fragmentation to create a country of cultural confluence through its sensitive representation of Islam every time and this alone will help secularism survive the long battle against communal schism. As the noted Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi says:

“What is the mi'raj (miraj according to Islamic tradition is the ascent of Prophet Muhamamd from the Al-Aksa mosque in Jerusalem) of the heavens?

Non-existence.

The religion and creed of the lovers is non-existence.” (Masnavi VI, 233)

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## ***Annexure I***

### **Some Print & film Snippets of Islam's identity in the Indian Mass-media**

## Off-centre

### The Sufi

#### Makarand

#### Paranjape

He had a small cycle repair shop on the way to the tomb of a saint. Though many pilgrims had once trudged up and down this path, the area was now desolate. The town had developed in another direction while the way to the tomb remained the narrow dirt track that it always had been. Besides, there were greater monuments on the other side, grander, more imposing edifices, which claimed the small trickle of tourists that still frequented this backward place.

My friend had told me that I must visit this little-known dargah because, "You'll find something unusual and unforgettable there."

Though I am not particularly religious, I had decided to give it a try. I guess I must have miscalculated the heat because by the time I was half-way, I began to feel tired and dizzy. It was about noon and I thought that if I couldn't rest somewhere, I would drop. Just then, I sighted the cycle repair shop under the only tree in sight.

As attractive as the shade under the tree was the large earthenware pot on a base of sand, with a glistening white cloth around it.

Without worrying much about the plastic cup, I quaffed the mildly scented cool water which my host offered me. As I sat down and relaxed, I took a good look at him. He was about fifty-five, with a greying beard, clean-shaven upper lip, a weather-beaten, deep-

I thanked him politely for the hospitality and eyed the meagre tools of his trade neatly arrayed around him: an old air pump, a hammer, a wrinkled tube of rubber solution, old tyres and tubes, scissors, etc. I couldn't help asking, "Chachaji, do you get enough business out here. After all how many people come this way anymore."

"Tell me," I said, "what's so special about your saint. You know, he hardly has any following left. He doesn't even have a proper tomb over his grave..." He sighed, "Today, everyone looks only at externals. You see, my saint believed in the religion of the heart, not the religion of the book." He paused for a minute and added, "His heart became his book; it was there that the beloved writ his message of love and brotherhood."

We remained quiet and the moment seemed to stretch into eternity. I became oblivious of the heat and the dust. A soft breeze rustled through the tree under which we sat and in the distance some bird called plaintively, once then once again.

The tomb of the saint was plain and austere. There was no cash box nearby to collect money from the devout. I remained there but for a few minutes, yet felt that my visit had been more than worthwhile. Indeed, my friend's prophecy had been fulfilled. I had certainly found something unusual and unforgettable at the saint's tomb. The cycle repair man had answered my questions most completely. It seemed that, for a moment, I had



Weekend Newstime →

19 June 1988, p. 2

parture of the aristocracy that makes him sad. But as a relict of that age I now wonder whether it is really possible to separate the aristocracy from the glory of those times.

As I see it, the ruler, the aristocracy, the civil service, the public administration, the communal harmony, the prices in the market, were all reflections of the same system. How can any one of them be viewed in isolation.

What happened to Hyderabad after the forties is an excellent example of how self-righteous, self-seeking political "meddling" from outside can ruin a perfectly good and functional system. If things had really improved after the Police Action, nobody would mind. Instead we have seen the unnecessary tripartite division of an integrated quadrilingual State, the virtual destruction of a once proud capital and its culture, the erosion of values, and the demise of an honest and stable administration.

Yes, Mr Desikan is right. Those were indeed benign days. They will never come back. In the late evening of my life I look back over the years and recollect how happy and content we were then. That was an altogether different world, graceful and humane. I share Mr Desikan's grief that it has gone forever.

P Venkatrama Reddi  
Hyderabad

## That unforgotten past

In his letter of 12th June 1988 in the Weekend Newstime Mr R Desikan gets quite nostalgic about old Hyderabad. He says that it is the passing away of those benign times rather than the de-



# Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India

J J Roy Burman

*Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India has deep cultural roots which has survived political and social upheavals. There are numerous syncretic shrines across the country which even today continue to attract people of both faiths.*

THE rise of fundamentalism in recent years in India has obliterated the deep rooted syncretism in Indian culture. In India, few have studied the syncretic phenomenon of local religion, though many have studied it in terms of formation of composite culture. According to Rasheeduddin Khan, Indian civilisation has been profoundly affected by two fundamental traditions: the Indo-aryan cultural stream which provided vedic philosophy, and the Indo-Muslim strand of culture based on the intertwining of 'bhakti marg' and Islamic Sufism. "It is not surprising, therefore, to realise that the composite culture in India originated in an environment of reconciliation, rather than refutation, co-operation rather than confrontation, co-existence rather than mutual annihilation of the politically dominant Islamic strands" (1987:36). Khan, thus, strongly refutes the history advanced by the orthodox scholars who view the medieval period in India as being marked by religious intolerance and communal wars between the Hindus and Muslims.

Khan considers the notion of Hindu religion a misnomer. According to him, the term includes people of different religious ways which "gives Hinduism a flexibility and resilience and a tradition base wide enough to cover the syndrome of Indian culture. That is why sometimes the revivalism of Hinduism takes the form of revivalism of Indian culture, symbols, values, idioms and traditional pattern of living. It does not take the particular form of the revival of a faith because there is no such ordained, integral and defined faith to be revived. Hinduism's religious content has been generally referred to as brahminism, while the term Hindu which was used by the ancient Persians, Greeks and later by the Arabs and the central Asian people, referred essentially to the ethnic geographic identity of inhabitants in and around Indus valley" (Khan 1987:42). Khan

of the important mechanisms of ensuring communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims.

What is sociologically relevant is that many of the local saints were supported only by certain sections of the population, determined either by locality, social or professional group. There is thus a sort of a patron-saint relationship. For example, Khwaja Khizr protects all castes associated with water: washermen, water carriers and boatmen. Similarly, blacksmiths invoke the name of Hazrat Daud, who is none other than biblical king David. Oilmen ('teli') and dyers ('ranrez') follow saints whose family names refer to the professions, namely, Hasan Teli and Pir Ali Ranrez. Many of the saints are also linked with curing certain specific diseases. Instances of saints curing sterility are galore. Sakhi Sarwar is believed to cure eye problems; Makhdun Saheb exorcises the possessed; Sheikh Sadhu cures melancholia; Guga pir and Saheb Madar cure people of snake bites [Saiyad 1989]. Such saints are frequented both by Hindus and Muslims and also by people of other faiths.

Many scholars feel that the bhakti movement in India has been to a large extent responsible for promoting eclectic faiths and lessening the religious orthodoxy. Lokhandwalla states, "The Sufi and bhakti movements blurred the differences between the two religions so much that it was very common till very recently to have a sadguru or a pir having a common following of Hindus and Muslims. And no pir or sadguru ever forced a Hindu or Muslim to give up his religion for any other. The medieval age was the period when sufi and bhakti thought and practice blended and coalesced at many points" [Lokhandwalla 1987:121].

Rasheeduddin Khan also states that most of the bhakti saints tried to harmonise the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the great and little traditions of Hinduism and

the notion of god as a mystic object, regarded the spiritual foundations of Hinduism and Islam as one and found equal inspiration in both.

Right from ancient days syncretism is linked to the shrines which are dedicated to the objects of nature. This is perhaps due to the fact that humankind has to depend on nature for its sustenance. Pir Jharion or 'saint of the woods' in Sind was perhaps one of the earliest saints to have preached about syncretic values. The wandering saintly beggars like Guga Pir or Zahir Pir ('king of the serpents') are also counted among ancient syncretic saints of India [Ahmad 1994].

The syncretic trend continued to thrive even during the Moghul rule. Both Babar and Humayun had broad visions and inclination to support Islam and Hinduism. However, owing to their short rule, not many positive steps could be initiated. It was Akbar who took decisive steps in this direction. Akbar removed the Jizya - pilgrim tax for the Hindus - immediately on assuming power. He also passed a law treating both Hindus and Muslims in the same way. Hindu epics like Mahabharat, Ramayan, and vedic literature were translated into Persian at his insistence for the convenience of Muslim readers. Later, Dara Shikoh translated Hindu theological texts like Upanishads, Bhagwat Gita and Yoga Vashishtha into Persian. He wrote a book, *Majmaul-Bahrain* ('The Meeting Place of Two Oceans'), a comparative study of Hindu and Muslim mystic philosophy. He even wore a ring on his finger with the inscription of 'prabhu' in Sanskrit on it [Mohiuddin 1987:94].

Recent research also helps to dispel wrong notions harboured by the common masses about Islam in India, particularly with reference to Aurangzeb. "Modern research has revealed a surprising fact that even Aurangzeb granted jagirs to a large number of temples. Again, the wars between Muslim





