

ESSAY

The Deadening Silence Of Good Intentions and the faith of Ahmadis in India

Closed gates; zipped lips. What happens when an exhibition on the Quran opens in New Delhi.

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“There are two tyrannies of a religious majority. The first is easy to recognize and challenge : it occurs against some religious minority external to the majority. The second usually goes unnoticed : it occurs against some small minority within the majority. Justice, nevertheless, requires that both tyrannies should be exposed and countered.”

I

In September 2011, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in India organized an exhibition on the Quran at the Constitution Club of India, New Delhi. It highlighted the teachings of the Quran under a wide range of headings: Justice; Suffering; Death; Science; Peace; Women’s Role and Rank, and so forth. It also put on display the translations of the sacred text in 53 languages—including Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Russian, Korean and Vietnamese—that the Ahmadis have successfully produced over many decades. [1]

The exhibition was to last three days; it closed after one day and a half. There were raucous demonstrations outside the club by various local Muslim organizations, and the police ordered the exhibition closed. The authorities feared further, and more violent, protests. To their credit, however, the Delhi police did a good job of keeping the demonstrators from physically damaging the exhibits and the organizers. Credit is also due to the Congress MP, Mr Pratap Singh Bajwa, who represents Gurdaspur (Punjab), where Qadiyan is. He helped his constituents by making available the space for the exhibition—one hopes his party did not reprimand him. Also commendable is Mr Wajahat Habibullah, the Chairman of the National Minorities Commission, who visited the exhibition and also publicly spoke in support of it. In both cases, it was an act of personal courage besides being what was officially expected of them.

The Ahmadis had not only the right but also a particular claim to organize an exhibition highlighting their translations of the Quran in so many languages. It was an Ahmadi scholar, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, who was the first Muslim to translate the complete standard text of the Quran into English. He started the work in 1909 and brought it to completion in 1917. His translation received high praise, from scholars and laymen alike, including those who were not Ahmadi. Contrary to the statements now being made by people like Syed Ahmad Bukhari, who could not have read even a page of it, the translation was not then accused by anyone of being “unorthodox.” Further, its influence on

subsequent translations, including those by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, has been well known. This is what Pickthall wrote about him in 1936, long before Ahmad Bukhari was born: "Probably no man living has done longer and more valuable service for the cause of Islamic revival than Maulvi Muhammad Ali of Lahore." If I remember rightly, Pickthall's translation, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, was at one time widely distributed by the Saudis. I can however more confidently say that Maulvi Muhammad Ali did more for Muslims worldwide than any of the demonstrators did for the Muslims in their neighborhoods. Even Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi, a fiercely orthodox person after a significant spell as an atheist and himself a respected translator of the Quran into English, openly credited the Ahmadi translation for the recovery of his faith. This is what he wrote in his autobiography:

"I had become half a Muslim again when I went to Aurangabad in October 1920, and stayed with my relative Nazir Yar Jung, who was a Judge there. In his collection of English books I came upon Muhammad Ali Lahori's translation and commentary. I eagerly pulled it out and began to read. As I read it my faith in Islam increased. Praise be to Allah... When I was finished I peered into my heart and discovered I was fully a Muslim again... May Allah bestow the Paradise upon this Muhammad Ali. (allah is Muhammad ali ko karwaT karwaT jannat nasib kare). I have absolutely no concern with his belief concerning the Mirza Sahib [i.e. the founder of the Ahmadi sect], but I cannot help describe my personal experience. The final nail in the coffin of my rejection of Islam (kufr-o-irtidad) was hammered in by him." [2]

And yet in 2011 a gang of ignoramuses in New Delhi managed to present themselves as "defenders" of Islam and disallowed an exhibition of that and similar translations.

Of course, it is not that there have not been controversies over Quran's translations and interpretations. Syed Ahmad Khan's translation and commentary drew harsh criticism, so much so that it never received much distribution, and remains proscribed at the Aligarh Muslim University, the institution that otherwise swears by his name. I have on my desk a book by "Maulana Jamil Ahmad Naziri, Fazil Deoband.," published in 1990 from Azamgarh. It is a highly inflammatory attack on the translation of the Quran by the founder of the Barelavi sect, Ahmad Raza Khan, and his close disciple, Naimuddin Muradabadi, who wrote an extensive commentary on that translation. In the introduction, the author also claims that the Barelavi translation has been banned in eight Arab countries and a Saudi fatwa has been issued to seize and burn its copies if found in the luggage of some pilgrim. That, of course, has been the name of the game for the mullahs for a long time, and is not likely to change soon. It is the duty of the Indian state and a responsibility of India's civil society to clearly draw a line beyond which no one would be allowed to indulge in that game.

The trouble at the Constitution Club was well reported at the time, both in the English press and Urdu. [3] Some TV channels gave it coverage too. But, to the best of my information, no notable Muslim, except for Mr Habibullah, was heard in the media condemning the demonstrators or supporting the right of the Ahmadis to hold the exhibition. Then the matter disappeared, at least from the English press. In the Urdu press, in particular in the *Sahafat Daily* (published from Delhi, Lucknow, and Mumbai)—the newspaper I more regularly read on the Internet—denunciations of the Ahmadis kept appearing. [4] A few samples will give an idea of the viciousness beneath the expressed sentiments:

Sahafat (Delhi), September 24. Under the banner heading, "Wajahat Habibullah Should be Boycotted," Mumtaz Alam Rizvi wrote: "*The Chairman of the National Minorities Commission, Wajahat Habibullah, provided the proof of his enmity of Islam and Muslims when he attended the opening of the Qadiyani exhibition as its Guest of Honor.... His action was roundly condemned by*

Syed Yahya Bukhari, the National President of the Jama Masjid United Forum, who said that the Government of India did not make Habibullah a Chairman so that he could play with the sentiments of the country's largest minority."

Sahafat (Delhi), September 25. The issue carried several reports on how an assortment of Muslim "leaders" across Western U.P. and Haryana had condemned the Ahmadis, including one report from Ludhiana, under the bold heading, "Qadiyanis are Out of Islam and Traitors to the Country." In it Maulana Habibur Rahman Ludhianvi, described as the "National President of the Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam" and the "Shahi Imam of Punjab" claimed that the Government of India wished to "interfere" in Islam by encouraging the Ahmadis, who were "agents of Great Britain and the Jews," and intend "to make hollow the foundations of our nation." [5]

Sahafat (Delhi), September 27. In a front-page article, a former government servant named Athar Siddiqui claims that an intervention by Maulana Abulqasim Banarasi of Deoband stopped Mr Hamid Ansari, the Vice-President of India, from inaugurating the exhibition. He then adds, "As for *Wajahat Habibullah*, it is reputed about him that he is a Qadiyani himself." According to Siddiqui it was the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao "who allowed the Qadiyanis to come into India and settle here." In another report on October 21, Siddiqui further bemoans that "in India, in universities and government offices, the Qadiyanis are obtaining good jobs under official patronage." [6]

Sahafat (Delhi), October 1. Under the headings, "The Terrorist Face of the Qadiyanis is Exposed" and "Involved in Cases of Illegal Weapons, Forged Licenses, and Drugs," Mumtaz Alam Rizvi writes on the front page: "From India to Pakistan the Qadiyanis have spread a network of crime. Much information concerning it [in the shape of cuttings from an obscure Karachi newspaper named *Ummat*] has been provided to this paper by Maulana Shah Alam Gorakhpuri of Deoband. The Maulana said that it was not just the Pakistani Qadiyanis who were doing such thing, the Indian Qadiyanis were acting similarly, and that he had much evidence against them too."

It is worse than disappointing that the local press council took no notice of the paper's crude allegations and inflammatory language. Not even when the same paper splashed the word *Nutfa-i-Haram* ("Bastard") in 28 points across the top of its front page on October 13 to describe someone in another news. No one demanded that the paper should at least make an attempt to present the views of the organizers and Mr Habibullah. As for the quality of the Pakistani paper *Ummat*, here is an excerpt from its report on the New Delhi incident:

"It is important to note that the Muslim protestors also revealed at the venue that a diplomat from the Israeli government, which is the supporter of the Qadiani Jamaat in New Delhi, was also present at the Constitution Club from day one, to 'monitor' the exhibition and Muslims' protests against it. Muslim leaders strongly protested against it, and said that because of the Israeli diplomatic official's presence at the exhibition, there remained no ambiguity regarding the Israeli sponsorship of Ahmadis (Qadianis)." [7]

Meanwhile a report in the *Munsif* (Hyderabad) of October 28 suggests that more trouble for the Ahmadis could be expected. It said that a delegation of the Confederation of Islamic Organizations met with the President of the Waqf Board at Hyderabad and demanded that the Waqf properties of the Ahmadis should be scratched from the records of the Board, and that the Ahmadi mutavalli should be removed from the Board's membership. It also demanded that the Ahmadis should not be allowed to bury their dead in Muslim graveyards—"firm instructions to that effect should be issued to all graveyard committees"—that the Ahmadis should be ordered not to solemnize their marriages in the Islamic manner, and that any Waqf property presently held by any Ahmadi should be taken away from him.

One hopes these mischievous demands are firmly and unambiguously rejected, lest the day arrive when we see gangs of Muslim fanatics going around desecrating mosques and vandalizing graves the way it has repeatedly happened in Pakistan over the last decade. The state should make it explicitly clear that under Indian law not only all Indians have the same rights; all Muslims have the same rights too.

II

I would love to be corrected but from what I could access on the Internet it appears that the Muslim leaders and intellectuals who only too frequently represent Indian Muslims in the national media, be it in English or Hindi, were entirely quiescent throughout. I came across no letter or statement from any such person even in support of Mr Habibullah, nor did I receive from that quarter any request for my signature on some petition or public statement. To the best of my knowledge, only two young journalists, Irena Akbar (*Indian Express*) and Amit Julka (*Viewpoint*), were wise and earnest enough at the time to express concern over the incident and its implications for the Ahmadis and India. [8]

A week or so after the forced closure of the exhibition came the news that the Delhi University had decided to drop a brilliant essay by my late colleague Professor A. K. Ramanujan from its required syllabus because it was considered highly objectionable by certain groups. Within days I received two protesting petitions to sign, and every third or fourth day I still come across some new article or report on the issue. There has been a sustained and vigorous engagement, involving many voices. I was also reminded of the shameful incident many years back at the Ramayana exhibition organized by SAHMAT. It too remained a live concern for innumerable people, not only in Delhi but also across India, for many months if not years. Why then such lack of concern regarding this equally questionable act of censorship?

It would be easy for me to invoke here the favourite phrase of certain savants—"Muslim appeasement"—but I would be wrong. The closing of the exhibition was no appeasement. Mr Bajwa and Mr Habibullah stood up to the challenge. The police did not allow the demonstrators to vandalize the exhibition or harass the visitors. The peaceable organizers, in consultation with the officers of law and the officers of the club, chose to close the exhibition. And, if one must insist on calling it "appeasement," it was only of a tiny belligerent section and not of all Muslims.

In any case, my concern is different. Appeasement is generally defined as an attempt to reduce for oneself the difficulties caused by some party by making some kind of a concession to that aggressive party. The people who showed a relative lack of concern never faced any particular difficulty from the instigators of the demonstration. That unconcern, I believe, was just one more instance of a sad and worrisome gulf between one cohort of North Indian Muslims and the rest of their co-religionists in the region identified with Urdu and Hindi.

Let me put my argument this way. In Kerala, for example, local Muslims at all levels of the society not only speak the language of the region but also think, argue, and communicate—with each other as well as their non-Muslim peers—in that language. The same can be said to be true for the Muslims of so many other states. A Muslim professor of sociology in Bengal will not only be conversant in Bengali but also very much aware of what was being said or written in Bengali on the issues that should be of concern to him. Likewise, a Muslim intellectual in Gujarat would not hesitate to jump into some cultural debate in the Gujarati press because she would most likely be a part of its readership. These persons of my examples are unlikely to be entirely circumscribed by the English media in their regions. That situation, I aver, does not exist in Delhi, U.P., and Hyderabad. (I leave out Bihar and Madhya Pradesh since I know nothing about the Urdu press there.) Over the last five

or six decades, the educated Urdu-speaking Muslim elite in Delhi and U.P., particularly those equipped with higher education in social sciences and thus expected to hold and express considered views on socio-political and economic issues, have become cut off from the Urdu-medium discourse around them. Those who seriously read and write on contemporary issues do so almost exclusively in English. That disconnect does not affect their wellbeing either professionally or personally. Most remain oblivious of it, and a few cheerfully so. Many of them, in my experience, express a little disdain when Urdu press comes up in conversation. Of course, that is to their loss. But, more importantly, it is a greater loss to the general Muslim population of the region.

Consider this. My regular reading of the *Sahafat* (Delhi and Lucknow editions) and *Munsif* (Hyderabad) over the past six months, and of *Hamara Maqсад* (New Delhi) and *Etimad* (Hyderabad) intermittently, suggests that the following nine issues are of primary concern presently to the editors and readers of these papers and to the so-called Muslim “leaders” who, unchallenged, use these papers for their own varied purposes.

1. Arrest and conviction of the guilty in the recurrent cases of anti-Muslim violence. Much to the shame of India, the occurrence of these “riots” has not stopped or even declined, and in most cases the guilty have gone free. However, much to the credit of the Indian society, an increasing number of non-Muslim individuals and groups have become active over the last three decades on behalf of the victims of the riots, and their efforts have brought some gains recently.
2. Reservations for Muslims in all government jobs, proportionate to their numbers in the census and regardless of any other criterion.
3. Taking away from the Archaeological Survey of India all mosques and Muslim shrines that the ASI presently controls, and giving access to them to various local Muslim “leaders.”
4. Taking away from the control of the Sunni and Shiah Waqf Boards as many trust properties as possible, to give the same to other local “leaders.”
5. Preservation of the “Muslim identity” of the Aligarh Muslim University and the Jamia Millia—in other words, making sure that Muslims overwhelmingly dominate in admissions and jobs, regardless of any other criteria that are used at other Central institutions.
6. “Preservation and Development of Urdu,” and expansion of the acceptance of Urdu degrees for government jobs, school grants, and admission to graduate and post-graduate education at universities.
7. Defending the “Finality of Prophethood” against an alleged onslaught by the Ahmadis.
8. Campaign to expel Taslima Nasreen from India. Contrary to what most people would like to believe, this issue has been kept alive in the Urdu press. In October, the *Sahafat* drummed it up for three days accusing Taslima of a “blasphemous” tweet! They never explain how they got it. Then, on November 17, the *Munsif* carried an article by some Syed Ahmad Wamidh Nadvi, entitled: “How Long Will Taslima Continue to Have the Government’s Ashirvad?” An excellent example of how a person trained at the Nadva can curse and swear like a lumberjack while displaying his expertise in Arabic like an ‘alim.
9. Interminable skirmishes and power-plays between various Muslim sects and their leaders, disguised as demands to bring out processions to “Protect the Honor of the Prophet’s Companions,” to name a road “The Mourning Road,” or to declare some group as “agents of the Jews,” “heretics,” or “terrorist.”

Except for the first issue, the rest receive hardly any serious attention from the English-using Muslim intellectuals. It is also the only issue on which non-Muslim liberal activists have stepped forward and taken bold stands. The remaining issues may be understood as consisting of three sets. The first set contains issues 2 to 6. These are what their proponents might call “bread-and-butter” issues. A closer scrutiny would show that these are also the issues that benefit more the existing Muslim elite, the so-called sharif people, and strengthen their present hold on authority in the community. Issues 7 and 8 make up the second set, and are raised every so often by the so-called “leaders” in order to rally the community around themselves when they suspect any decline in their power or prominence. In other words, if the first set contains issues of substance, the second contains strategic issues. Raising the latter helps a petty local boss burnish his image and raise his hopes of some day becoming a national leader. As for the final third set, it contains the evergreen matters of our mullahs’ deepest concern, what Iqbal had called (in Victor Kiernan’s lovely translation) his propensity to “meddle and muddle, and mangle.” They have been with us for long, and will not disappear soon.

I stand open to correction, but I do not recall seeing any serious examination in the English media of the issues in my first set—something that one would expect Muslim intellectuals to take the lead in. Similarly, Muslim academics from Delhi and Aligarh have remained conspicuously absent from the pages of Urdu journals where these issues are brought up and confounded repeatedly. Preservation combined with proper public use of archaeological sites; required qualifications for the students and faculty at the two Central universities; the nature of the Waqf holdings and their fair and equitable use in contemporary India; the alleged link between Urdu and Muslim prosperity. These issues cry for extended serious debate. They, however, seem not to have registered on the radar screen of North Indian Muslim social-scientists, who otherwise participate in the English language discourse on all sorts of national issues. Needless to say, the space created by the absence of one cohort of Muslims has been filled—and exploited—by the other, more motivated cohorts of the Urdu-speaking sharif Muslims who have dominated the scene in North Indian polity for generations as representatives of all Muslims.

Here one might ask: if Urdu-knowing Muslim social scientists in North India failed due to their preference for English, why have their counterparts in the Humanities behaved in a similar fashion? Again I can offer only my impressions and remain open to correction. It seems that most Urdu academics now teach and study Urdu literature as if it didn’t have an integral link—either in the past or in the present—to the socio-political life of the North Indian Muslim elite. That compulsion could arise from a misplaced zeal to establish a so-called Ganga-Jamni nature for Urdu in today’s India, as if that was exclusive to Urdu and not much more true for languages such as Sindhi, Punjabi, and Malayalam, which brought together not just the Hindu and Muslim elite but also the illiterate masses of Muslims and non-Muslims speaking those languages. Or it could be due to the fact that serious sociological or philosophical studies of Urdu literature are seldom undertaken in the departments of Urdu at our universities, where they still seem to fight over each other’s “progressive” credentials. Many Urdu academics no doubt suffer from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the social scientists, and thus fear to tread where “angels” decline to go. They don’t realize that given their expertise in Urdu and thus an easier access to its vast archive, they are the ones to lead their colleagues in creating significantly useful debates on all major issues that concern the larger community of their co-religionists. Their abeyance has only allowed for an unquestioned dominance by conservatives and extremists.

One major question still remains. Why did non-Muslim liberal intellectuals in Delhi fail to show the same concern regarding the events at the Constitution Club that they displayed only a few days later with regard to the Delhi University’s censuring of the essay by A.K. Ramanujan? Possibly they did

not see much significance in the incident. It could also be that they waited to see the reaction of their Muslim colleagues in order to take a lead from them. Or it could be that most of them felt the same way as a most respected friend of mine did. He replied to my query: "I, for example, am tempted to write on this incident. (I've already written a piece ... on the Delhi University incident.) But I'm afraid of fuelling the propaganda that Hindus are out to discredit Islam."

To him and to others my only response can be: Please do not take on some unwarranted collective guilt. It would be totally misplaced. Also, that is exactly what the reactionary elements among the Indian Muslims wish you to do. All Hindus are not out to discredit Islam. And those who do so are being hotly challenged by not a few Hindus, including you. That is well and good. But a part of that challenge also arises from the strong belief that those who are smearing Islam are also discrediting Hinduism. To put it crudely, your challenge to Hindu extremists comes out of a mix of altruism and self-preservation. And that too is only natural. However, it is neither just nor helpful, dear friend, if you rush to the help of those who are victimized by a particular cohort of Hindus but then hesitate when it comes to challenging a particular cohort of Muslims as they victimize another minority. Your hesitation could be adding to the reluctance of those Muslims who think differently but are reluctant or afraid to take a stand against the extremists for fear of being left totally isolated.

There are two tyrannies of a religious majority. The first is easy to recognize and challenge: it occurs against some religious minority external to the majority. The second usually goes unnoticed: it occurs against some small minority within the majority. Justice, nevertheless, requires that both tyrannies should be exposed and countered. Those who holler that all Muslims are traitors to India must be condemned, but so must also be those who calumniate against the Ahmadis, accusing them of being Israeli agents out to destroy Islam and India. "Victims" should not be allowed—for our sake and theirs—to become "victimizers." To do otherwise would be a betrayal of the unwritten notional commitment of all the people of India that makes it possible for them to come together as one nation of Indian citizens.

To conclude, I can do no better but to quote from one passionate critique of the "silence" of the liberal-left that another friend brought to my attention. The author is Shuddhabrata Sengupta, about whom I know nothing; it is titled "A Curious Silence and an Un-Crossed Line: In the Wake of A Disbanded Exhibition," and posted on Kafil.org [9]

"We all know that when the Hindu right comes to town - declaring that this or that text should not be taught in the university, or this or that painting should not be seen, or this or that film should not be shown - the secular left-liberal intelligentsia in India automatically gets outraged, signs petitions, holds press conferences and generally vents its righteous anger. I know this because I do all these things, along with all my friends. I sign the online petitions, attend the demonstrations, express my anger and do some (or all) of that which needs to be done, that should be done. We should never give an inch to the hoodlums of Hindutva.

However, when it comes to responding to the equally aggressive, reactionary and utterly arbitrary actions of sections of the Muslim clergy and other self appointed leaders on the 'Muslim Right' a strange inertia seems to take hold of the best and boldest foot-soldiers of secularism in India.

At best, there is an embarrassed looking away, a mortified silent wish that the troublesome objects and subjects of a specifically Muslim variety of intolerance would just melt away. Substantially, this pained reticence amounts to a secret hope that there were no living differentiated Muslims in our midst to actually engage with (to stand with and stand against, depending on context and circumstance) as opposed to simply undifferentiated dead Muslims that can be elegantly mourned forever.

As any dedicated watcher of the great secular institution of the Hindi cinema will attest—generally—a good Muslim dies sometime after the interval. That is how we know he is good. And so, curiously, a broad swathe of the left-liberal intelligentsia and Hindutva hoodlums arrive at the same conclusion, in a roundabout fashion. Both their worlds would be better off without the troublesome Musalman.

The Indian left-liberal's critique of Hindutva amounts to an engagement with the presence of a Hindu way of life. It is in the end affirmative of something in Hindu life-worlds that is beyond Hindutva. Correspondingly, The Indian left-liberal's refusal to develop a robust, concrete critique of Muslim fundamentalism (and its consequent denuding of the Islamicate cultural space) is symptomatic of a profound apathy regarding Islam and what happens to Muslim people. Which is why some liberal commentators have even found it possible to say that whatever is wrong with Hindutva is because of its 'semitization' – betraying thereby their profound prejudices against the 'semitic' (Judeo-Arabic) peoples and their cultures and beliefs.

Actually, let's face it, as long as Muslims are not being torched by Hindu mobs, the Indian left-liberal could not care less about what happens to Muslims. And when people who call themselves Muslim are sat upon by Muslim hegemons, the Indian Left-Liberal really does not give a damn."

Strong and harsh words, but with much to chew upon. Also much that rings true, at least to these ears.

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P.S.

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<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?279021>

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Footnotes

[1] Pictures of the exhibition can be seen at
<http://flickrhivemind.net/Tags/ahmadi,exhibition/Recent>

[2] Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *Ap Biti*, Lucknow, 1978, pp. 254-5.

[3] For example:
<http://www.theindianherald.com/2011/09/muslim-protest-leads-to-cancellation-of.html>

[4] A sizable collection of related cuttings from Urdu newspapers can be seen at
<http://www.qern.org/wiki/display/qarchives/Fallout+of+Quran+Exhibition+in+Delhi>

[5] For more on this particular "Shahi Imam," see my essay, "Learn from Pakistan" at
<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?271564>.

[6] For other products of Mr Siddiqui's perfervid imagination, see my essay, "In the Name of Defending Islam," at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?277774>.

[7] The full highly inflammatory report can be seen in translation at <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/5806.htm>

[8] Their essays are available at <http://www.newageislam.com/NewAgeIslamArticleDetail.aspx?ArticleID=5838> and <http://www.newageislam.com/NewAgeIslamArticleDetail.aspx?ArticleID=5811> respectively

[9] Available at: <http://kafila.org/2011/11/14/a-curious-silence-and-an-un-crossed-line-in-the-wake-of-a-disbanded-exhibition/>