

**Globalisation and the Representation of Islam**

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Globalisation has shrunk the world in more ways than one. It is marked by diffusion of ideas, along with commodities. Wireless technologies, internet communications, and rapidity of media reportage have all resulted in a splurge of information. Apart from making available a sea of information, it has attempted at homogenising our knowledge. Under the creation of a 'one world' culture, varieties of ideas are getting mitigated by those that dominate. There is no denial of the benefits globalisation has done to us but whereas information gluttony has put knowledge in order before us, there remains a serious problem of credibility and correctitude of information. Islam, as a faith, has been one of the most obvious victims of the representation provided by the modern means of disseminating ideas. Today, we are fed on the popular media and this is what formulates our opinions about things around us. At the receiving end, we need to understand this problem of representation. How is a particular idea being represented today and how does it affect and crystallise our opinions and perceptions? This question deserves a brainstorming of the kind that awakens us with a better perception of things around.

Islam is a world religion. Its notion of pan-Islamism, i.e. transborder Muslim brotherhood, has preceded much before we ushered into the era of globalisation. However, a study of various Muslim societies reveals how they differ significantly marked by their own local variations and regional distinctions. Creation of Bangladesh in 1971 in the South Asian context is a glaring instance of how Islamic faith by itself has failed as a gluing factor transcending political boundaries. Although the notion of a monolithic Islam has rightly been subdued and questioned over time, Islam as it is represented today is probably even more questionable. What do we know about Islam or, do we at all try to know about it?

A layperson's knowledge about Islam comes mainly from two sources. Popular media in both its visual and print forms has continuously processed the idea of Islam held by a majority of people across the globe. Of late, there have been representations given to a few extremist individuals and organisations sending out a feeling of dreadfulness, if not neutrality, about Islam. News items and breaking news about horrifying violent incidents taking place continuously shape our understanding of what Islam and its followers have been doing. Gruesome activities of terrorists, be it the London bomb blasts or a suicide bomb attack in any corner of the world, send vibes of

negative impressions rather than what the majority of Muslims do. A prejudice generated thus is further complemented and reinforced by another source. Apparently not very significant, much of the misconceptions about Islam come from a lack of interaction with people who profess the faith.

A survey conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 2004 shows that knowledge of Islam among average Americans is low but it is the presence of Muslim friends and colleagues that drives an enlightened attitude. The survey further expands that 73 per cent of the Americans surveyed had no Muslim friends and 78 per cent never had a Muslim colleague. The point here is that personal relationships with Muslims are a major driver of positive attitudes as about 1 in 4 Americans believes in anti-Muslim canards such as Muslims teach their children to hate, and that Muslims value life lesser than other people. So how do we use such a study to make sense of the Indian context?

No doubt, only a similar study as CAIR's would allow us a direct comparison. For now, at least one point can easily be driven home. India has had a long history of interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims at several quarters of day-to-day life. But there still exists an iota of suspicion and prejudice against Muslims, though it may not be as same as in other parts of the world. What causes this situation? Obviously, no single factor can be attributed to this state an analysis of which is beyond our present purview. Coming back to the issue of representation, we need to look into how Islam is represented before and conveyed to the people. What varieties of Islam catch the attention of people? Do people who easily run into the headlines represent the larger Muslim population?

Two more recent media highlights can be glanced through. First, the Imrana episode in which a local village panchayat in Uttar Pradesh gave the verdict about a woman named Imrana allegedly raped by her father-in-law. As a way of judgement she was rather punished and was sentenced to marry her father-in-law. Second, a mufti from Benaras issued a fatwa proscribing Sania Mirza, the latest sportstar and youth icon from Hyderabad, from wearing the regular tennis attire as it was argued by him to have been against the dress code prescribed within Islam. What do these stories tell us? Do one mufti and a few panchayat members represent Islam? Once such people make it to the bold prints, they adumbrate the minds of the people with a particular image of Islam. Can we deny the fact that such players steal the limelight at the cost of a majority of others whose opinions and deeds must be in complete contradiction to the former? It is a travesty that those who do things unusual easily make it to the glare of publicity. Millions of simple cohorts are decidedly blinked away, although they may be as much Muslim, if not less. Even those Muslims who constantly defy living by the tenets of the faith through their acts and deeds fall beyond the pale of representation, despite falling under the category of Muslims. It is a sheer business gimmick that aberrant individuals find a space of representation, though they may not at all be the majority's shadows. More emphatically, it is an irony that a particular assortment of Islam is more often

being occupying the centrestage. A close observation of what and who from within Islam have been finding the space of representation is a matter of growing concern. More so, this depiction has radically impacted the way people perceive and judge Islam.

How is the issue of representation of Islam in the open space related to globalisation? As we set out in the beginning, one of the attempts that globalisation has incessantly made is to create uniformity. Representing a specific ilk of Muslim individuals and organisations in the headlines at the cost of the larger mass of followers has come to attain some sort of universal arrangement of portraiture of Islam. Continuous illustration of anomalous cases has reached a phase where global receivers of information find it to be nothing but normal.

We have a host of examples ranging from suicide bombers to wacky extremists layered on top of each other as presented before us — a repeated feeding of which breed a feeling none other than that of prejudice. It is this preconception that ultimately obscures the basic visible positive aspects of Islam in the eyes of those who even have had a chance of experiencing interaction with Muslims firsthand. There might be differences between the ways Islam is perceived in India and the Western societies but there still remains a congruity. Despite its boons, globalisation has brought some banes to the image of Islam. What is required is not that the global media of information should glorify Islam but that it should stop presenting Islam as represented by a handful.