Portrayal Of Muslims As Threat To Society By The Media-An Overview In Indian Context

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Abstract: The mass media has transformed the manner in which information is collected and disseminated. It has been the singular most powerful tool of influence, mobilization and shaping of political, religious, economic, cultural etc. agendas and discourse. The media has the unique and often grueling responsibility of reporting fair and unbiased news stories. However, the global media are now overlooking the ethical issues especially when it comes to the question of Muslims, which has been highlighted in the paper. The central theme of the research work is to through light on the Systemic discrimination against Muslims and the recurrent negative portrayal of Muslims in India by the media. Exaggerated misrepresentation of Muslims by the media has pushed Muslims of India to the very margin of society – a dangerous trend that threatens to alienate them. The risk of creating social outcasts is seen as a great challenge to the long–term cohesion of society. Media has launched a concerted campaign against Muslims in the name of a campaign against terror and has torn down the image of Muslims and has limited it to terrorists only. Media in India has double standards while reporting about Muslims and is politicized which has been highlighted in this research paper.

Keywords: Islam, Media. Muslims, Terrorists

I. INTRODUCTION

Islam is world's fastest growing religion. Muslims are living across the globe in some countries with full majority and in rest as a minority. With the advancement of technology change has there been in almost every sphere of society. Media being an important component of today's fast moving world has been prime source of presenting any sort of image of any community, religion or area. Today media is privately owned and backed for particular purpose that serve the interests of the capitalists and in many cases serve the purpose of particular nations.

II. PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIMS BY THE GLOBAL MEDIA

In the era of communication, wars begin, continue and end with media war. The Media shapes public opinion and covers realities by their censorship. The mass media are used as the most important weapon. There is a connection between the role of media and post-modernity. The media shapes the world how we see it. The media coverage on Islam and Muslims has reached a peak during recent decades (Shadid & van Koningveld (2002), p. 174), in the wake of tragic events such as attack of the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001. And the London and Madrid bombings in 2004 and 2005 respectively. There is a common denominator for all these actions: the ones allegedly responsible were all Muslim. This has been widely acknowledged and emphasized by western media, and the consequences have been devastating

for the Muslim identity. Laws have been stipulated in parts of Europe against, for instance, Muslim clothing as the *niqab*, and the construction of minarets (BBC News Europe April 11th 2011) .As Said, somewhat controversially, states: "There is a consensus on Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns" (Said (1997), p. 4).

This image is further fuelled by the media, which both by using value-laden language and by giving it disproportional weight and coverage results in sustained stereotypes. Media is a powerful actor in conveying messages, so called „priming" and „framing" (McCombs *(*2006), p. 118), to the public and thereby influencing its opinions. This has implications for societal relationships, since an „us" and a „them" are created. Studies on the media have been conducted in a wide selection of nations – including Australia, France, Germany, Great Britain and USA – in which a significant amount of Muslims, both as a percentage of the population and in nominal terms, live. These media give us, according to Kai Hafez, "an image of oriental life that consists of 50 percent wars, catastrophes, revolutions, terrorism, crises and tensions" (Hafez (2000), p. 191.).

III. POST 9/11 IMAGE OF MUSLIMS PRESENTED BY THE MEDIA

Media undoubtedly play a major role in shaping societies through distributing values and opinions. Nowadays, Most western media are using the September 11th event to capitalize its political gain. These media depict Islam as "fundamentalism", "extremism" and "radicalism". Of course, in the modern world where the role of media is central, the image of reality can be manipulated to misrepresent the actual facts. The media have tried to represent Muslims as "terrorists" posing a threat to the western security. By doing so, they try to justify the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the explosion of media coverage and publications on Islam and Muslims, the major challenge today involves getting accurate and verified information. The sense of threat to the Muslim cultural identity is enhanced by a predominant feeling that a secular and powerful West imposes its values upon the Muslim world. When asked the open ended question, "In your own words, what do you resent most about the West?", the most frequent response across all Islamic countries for both moderates and political radicals was "sexual and cultural promiscuity"; followed by "ethical and moral corruption" and "hatred of Muslims". Another source of resentment comes from the depiction of Muslims in the Western media. A survey by Jack Shaheen in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, found that the vast majority of Arab characters in 900 American films were outright racist characters. Images of common day life and ordinary Muslims in their countries are almost non-existent or distorted in the western media. Moreover, the western media which are most popular in the Muslim world encourage emulation of Western fashion, personalities and values.

TV news are the most important source of public knowledge about world events. Approximately 80 percent of population relies on it as their main source of news

(PhiloandBerry2006:199).Western media with considerable financial resources try to show a rough picture of Islam to their public. Some scholars believe that there is a direct connection between terrorism and modern global communication. Their studies show that most terrorists' acts are propaganda. Terrorism is an indirect psychological strategy which avoids direct contact with opponents. So, without media coverage terrorism disappears. After 9/11 the terms "Muslim" and "Terrorist" became synonymous in many western countries. Since this event, many experts and activists in the field of human rights have warned of the escalation of Islamophobia and racism against Muslims in many western countries. The representation of Muslims in the media relates to the lack of acceptance of differences. The media creates public panic around the terrorist threat. As one scholar said the War on Terrorism is a war of images, and the most effective images are those of terrorists' victims. But on the other side we see discrimination associated with "Islamophobia". This phenomenon tries to show that Muslims are a threat to security. The focus on terrorism unifies TV coverage of Muslim news and the dominant image is "Islamic Terrorism". This belief leads to the production of anti-islamic films like "Fitna" by Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders. What is clear is that after the September 11th attacks, most experts talked about security matters, while the social and political causes of the attacks were forgotten. This stream continues in the Iraq war. Here too, the economic and political causes of the invasion were forgotten. It is obvious that the West has to review the idea of its own "Self" and the "Other". The representation of Muslims in the western media has to change and Interculturalism has to replace Islamophobia.

To improve the image of Islam in the West it requires a strong and persistent effort from Muslims themselves, both in the Islamic world and in the Muslim communities in the West. These efforts should include a comprehensive process of reforms. Muslims will never be able to improve their image in the world if they fail to appear as a nation of culture and civilization. Effective initiatives must also be undertaken to educate non-Muslims concerning correct Islamic concepts of peace and tolerance and to clarify the incorrect views of Islam held by some.

IV. INDIAN MEDIA REPORTING ABOUT ISSUES RELATED TO MUSLIMS

In a true secular democratic country there are equal rights for everyone despite of following different religions. India claims to be a secular democratic country. 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. Media is called fourth pillar of democracy. Its aim is to provide the news as it is devoid of any adulteration or bias. India has always been vocal about freedom media. The Indian media has talked much about being secular in reporting and presenting news. But the reality is something different when it comes in practice. Following are some examples which raises finger on media being secular in India.

- The media are fond of using terms such as 'Islamic terrorists' and 'Islamic Jihadis,' making the link between Islam and terrorism appear too obvious to all. Media reports usually suggest that terrorism is a Muslim monopoly. The facts, however, are quite different. In India, the militants in Indian Mujahideen are Muslims, but they are only one of several militant groups. The Punjab militants led by Bhirandanwale were Sikhs. The United Liberation Front of Assam is a Hindu terrorist group that targets Muslims rather than the other way around. Tripura has witnessed the rise and fall of several terrorist groups, and so have Bodo strongholds in Assam. Christian Mizos mounted an insurrection for decades and Christian Nagas are still heading militant groups (Aiyar 12). Secular terrorists in India (anarchists, Maoists) have been the worst killers. Still, the media focus overwhelmingly on Muslim terrorist.

- The media have presented a wholly incorrect and negative stereotype of women in Islam as inanimate objects, submissively attending to the needs of their lords and masters, locked away in darkened homes. In reality, the potential of women in Islam is far superior to anything offered in Hindu and other civilizations. From domestic decision-making to outside matters, Muslim women are central to family affairs. Where their lot is miserable it is to be attributed to Muslim male tyranny, not Islamic advice.

    However, an isolated incident like the marriage of a minor Muslim girl in Hyderabad to a Saudi Sheikh is converted into a general attack on women in Islam. The media give extensive coverage and the whole story is discussed threadbare. It is true that child marriage is a norm in some parts of India among non-Muslims, but this does not interest the media. This is not to justify that the marriage of a Muslim minor is right but to illustrate the media's great concern' for Muslim women, which actually leads to a strengthening of the negative stereotype of women in Islam. It ought to go without saying that media are profit-seeking corporations and therefore, quite understandably, have an interest in promoting certain images of reality before others.

    The media never stops to ponder the rights given to women in Islam. No other major religion has given as many rights to women. Whenever this issue comes up for discussion, however, a very grim picture of women in Islam is presented. The veil which Muslim women use to cover their bodies decently and protect their modesty is seen as a symbol of physical and mental enslavement, forced upon women by men. They cannot accept that behind the veil there might be an enlightened woman who has decided to use the veil voluntarily. For the media, exposure of the female body has somehow come to be construed as a form of women's empowerment. As Islam does not subscribe to this simplistic logic, its approach is said to be antithetical to modernist tendencies. Increasingly politically active, educated women are consciously choosing to wear the veil as a source of their Islamic identity. For many of these women the veil has facilitated rather than inhibited a wider social and economic participation in bestowing respectability and modesty on female public appearance.

- The media are adept at creating a controversy where none exists. The very natural and positive concept of divorce (Talaaq) in Islam has also been dragged in a needless debate. The controversy over 'triple divorce' has come in handy to demonize Islam. Learned editorials and researched papers are written on this subject without understanding its real meaning and context.

    Divorce is allowed in Islam, but not the way it is presented in the media. The irreducible basis of what the media have to say on this subject is that in Islam a married woman is like a pawn in the hands of her husband who can get rid of her by simply uttering the word 'Talaaq' thrice in one go. This is an extremely ignorant and damaging distortion. Instead of recognizing the positive concept of divorce in Islam where the contract of marriage allows an honourable exit for both the parties after they have explored all means of living together and failed. Divorce is the last option, and not the first. This certainly is more natural and human than the irrevocable marriage in some religions where both spouses have to live together, come what may, till death, the result of which may be clandestine illegitimate affairs, secret second marriages, and, in rare cases, murder when no other option seems viable. Instead of applauding the provision for divorce in Islam, the media have decided to concentrate upon the technicalities of its operationalization without trying to understand it properly. The irony is that a positive feature of Islam has been used as a stick to beat it.

- The media's charge of intolerance derives from protests in 2006 against the Danish newspaper cartoons depicting the prophet in appallingly bad light; big demonstrations against Bush's visit and Minister in the State Government, Yaqoob Qureshi's offer of Rs. 51 crore to anyone who kills the Danish Cartoonists. The media, however, found no fault with Yaqoob Qureshi when he campaigned for Narendra Modi after the Gujarat pogrom.

- It is often alleged that Madaris, the schools where young minds are brainwashed to carry forward the messianic spirit of Islam and where the dogmatic approach and intolerance of other points of view produce fanatics are tolerated by the Governments to prove their democratic credentials despite the allegation that the Madaris are "breeding grounds of terrorists" (Bandyopahyay 1483). However, there are no solid grounds for believing what is generally alleged about Madaris. In India, Muslim Madaris are no different from theological seminaries of Hindus.

- Another noteworthy myth about the alleged appeasement of Muslims which the media never tries to dispel concerns the demand of the rightist forces for a Uniform Civil Code in India, which they say is not being enforced for fear of annoying Muslims. The issue dates back to 1985 when a Supreme Court judgment, strengthening the rights of divorced Muslim women to maintenance from their former husbands, opened up a debate about the position of Muslim women. Questioning the system which allows for separate civil laws for various religious communities, the

verdict argued for a Uniform Civil Code. Muslims all over the country took to the streets against this interference with their personal laws. In keeping with the popular Muslim mood, the Government introduced a new law which restored the special family laws for Muslims. The Hindu nationalists were very critical of the Government and accused it of Muslim appeasement. They have since then tried to create an impression, ably assisted by the media, that the whole country, but for the Muslims, is in favour of a Uniform Civil Code.

✓ The census has been used always as a tool by Hindu communal forces, ably assisted by the media, to compare the Hindu community with other religious communities, especially Muslims. In 1979, the *Hindu Mahasabha* brought out a publication called "They count their gains, we calculate our losses," a publication that, by using distorted census data, raised fears of a growing

Muslim population. A recent book published under the auspices of the Indian Council of Social Science Research has made a negative forecast that within six decades Indian religionists would become a minority in India (Joshi) According to the population growth projection of the coming two decades, the annual growth rates of Muslims would remain the same, but it would start diminishing after 2021. Despite the higher growth rate, because of their lower base, Muslims will add substantially less population to their fold than Hindus. The net addition to the population during the next hundred years is estimated to be 180 million for Muslims and a whopping 440 millions for Hindus, or an addition more than twice that of Muslims. Thus, the fear that Muslims would outnumber Hindus in India is totally unfounded.

✓ Another myth spread mainly by the vernacular press is that Muslims do not practice family planning and that the Government does not pay any attention to this issue. The figures, however, tell a different story. According to the official survey of IIPS (1995) and IIPS (2000), the current use of any method of family planning was observed to be 37 percent in 1989-99 among Muslims, as compared to 49 percent among Hindus. Similarly, the use of any modern methods varied from 30 percent among Muslims to 44 percent among Hindus during the same period. However, the increase in the use of any methods, as well as modern methods was much faster among Muslims during 1992-93 to 1998-99 as compared to Hindus. Female sterilization constituted 65 percent of any modern contraceptives used by currently married Muslim women, compared to nearly 82 percent among Hindus. Also, Muslims use a higher level of spacing methods like pills, the IUD as well as traditional methods such as periodic abstinence, as compared to Hindus.

✓ Another widespread belief which has become a part of national 'common sense,' is that polygamy is rampant among Muslims and this is the main reason for the growth in the Muslim population. In reality, its evidence is quite low among Muslims, and official figures have shown that an almost equal percentage of Muslims and Non-Muslims practice it. Interestingly, according to Union Ministry of

Welfare's figures, 5.8 percent of Hindus practice polygamy as against 4.3 percent of Muslims.

V. BOLLYWOOD PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIMS

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 "*Sarfarosh*", 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. The protagonist is dubbed a traitor. Recently *PK* movie stared by Amir Khan was in controversy when RSS activists burnt down posters, damaged cinemas running *PK* all hue and cry was made debates over debates were going on about hurting Hindu religious sentiments. No media attention was given to movie *Oh My God* stared by current BJP MP Paresh Rawal in which case is being filed in court against Hindu Gods.

In popular cinema, the shady character is usually a Muslim. A butcher is necessarily a Muslim who is depicted as capable of cutting the necks of animals and humans with equal excitement. The image of a typical Muslim which takes shape in the minds of an ordinary non-Muslim is that of an illiterate man with four wives and many children, running a small trade, sympathizing or colluding with terrorists and cheering for Pakistan in cricket matches against India. This is not to suggest that no Muslim comes true to this image or at least some features of it, but so do some non-Muslims. The problem, rather, is that in a ruthless and deliberate sweep an entire community has been given this image. One Muslim is, therefore, as representative of all Muslims and of Islam in general.

VI. POLITICAL PATRONAGE AND NEWS REPORTING IN INDIA

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 then Gujarat Chief Minister Mr. Narendra Modi now Prime minister of India 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), 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 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.

VII. CONCLUSION

The past three decades have produced a considerable increase in scientific and journalistic publications about Islam, the Muslim World, and the position of Muslims in Western Europe. This considerable growth has mainly been prompted by national and international developments. Of course, there are not only negative images of Islam are present in the media. The problem, rather, is that negative images of Islam are very much more prevalent than positive ones, and that such images correspond not to what Islam 'is', but to what some sections of media take it to be. These sections have the power to propagate a particular image of Islam, which therefore becomes more prevalent. The tendency of the media to reduce 'Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes and generalizations about the faith, its founder and all of its people, then the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam' is perilous and has harmful ramifications . The animosity and reductionism found in these representations breeds the tendency to produce misinformed news when covering Islam and its followers. The framing of Muslims illustrates that media secularism is still vulnerable and media that has power to influence the government policy and mould public opinion has to remove blinkers in reporting communal issues and speak the truth.

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. 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 Muslim community even if they too are 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.

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