

February 18, 2019

Young, Middle Class and Muslim in Urban India

By: Meera Rizvi

For young middle-class Muslims in urban India, negotiating prejudice and bigotry is an everyday affair. Experiences are varied, but the predominant feeling among them is to move ahead. They devise strategies, establish solidarities and try to build a future.

Muslim generations are labelled according to their watershed years, when our emotional landscapes changed forever. For some it was 2002, others 2014. For my generation, it was 1992.

I was getting ready to go for a lunch with colleagues when the news came that the Babri Masjid had been brought down. Within minutes, the Muslim ghetto in which we lived was reverberating with the sounds of “Nara-e-takbeer, Allah-o-Akbar.”

My grandfather and father rushed out even as the streets and narrow gullies started teeming with people, mostly young men. Collective anger was flooding the streets as people streamed out of their houses and congregated around the only mosque in the colony. They were shouting slogans; grown men were crying; someone stood up to make a speech but choked; someone tried to calm everyone. No one seemed to be listening as the streets swelled with more and more people.

At that moment, we realised we had lost something very precious, and collectively mourned it.

Grief inevitably turns into acceptance and, soon, our Muslim locality limped back to normal. We moved on, grew up and raised another generation of Muslim children. Schools came up in houses and backyards, and mornings became replete with children’s voices reciting English nursery rhymes, with the singsong tonality of *qirrat*, the recitation of the Quran. New and shinier mosques came up, as did more shops and restaurants, burqas gave way to hijabs and houses to tall buildings with multiple, tiny flats. There was safety in numbers and the ghetto expanded both outwards as well as upwards.

|| **Muslim millennials in urban India, who are from the middle class and are exposed to both global trends as well as blatant hate at schools and workspaces, have learnt to be pragmatic and resilient.**

While we adjusted to a new reality, we also inadvertently communicated it to our children. The fear that 2002 brought to Muslim homes was palpable, but it also ensured that the generation that grew up with that fear surrounding them became somewhat immune to it. Muslim millennials in urban India, who are from the middle class and are exposed to both global trends as well as blatant hate at schools and workspaces, have learnt to be pragmatic and resilient.

I spoke to a few to find out how they were coping with a difficult situation.

Indian Millennial Muslims

Amir, now running a business in Delhi, was just two when the Babri Masjid was brought down. Obviously he does not remember the events that unfolded in the wake of the demolition but associates vague negative emotions with it, a vibe he probably picked up from the people around him. He grew up in Aligarh, where being Muslim was considered “normal,” but he did know he had to be better than his peers to make a mark and has tried from an early age to acquire that edge.

Today, Amir has no interest in issues like Mandir–Masjid. All he wants is closure, for the matter to end one way or another. He does say that he would not feel that justice has been done if a Ram Mandir is built on the site, but is too busy with his fledgling business to spend much time thinking about it. He says that nothing has changed for him after the Narendra Modi government came to power. Of course, his business took a hit when payments got delayed or stopped in the aftermath of demonetisation but that is a grouse he shares with many of his non-Muslim friends.

Amir’s major issue right now is how to pacify his father who lives and works in the Middle East. After Najeeb Ahmed, a student of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, suddenly went missing from his hostel room in October 2016, Amir’s father has become increasingly paranoid. He wants Amir to join him in the Gulf but his son likes his life in Delhi too much to leave. Amir sees

himself as definitively Indian; he has great hopes for the Indian economy and intends to share its prosperity when it booms.

This is also the dilemma 24-year-old Hira faces. Now that her MBA is over, she prefers staying on in India to joining her parents in the Gulf. Hira grew up in Saudi Arabia and loves the freedom she experiences in India. She believes that her cultural roots are embedded in India, that the fusion that is her inherited memory is unique and defines her as an Indian in no uncertain terms.

Amir has a large friend circle that is mostly non-Muslim. They are his gym or work buddies and they hardly ever discuss politics or religion when they meet. He says he is not too perturbed by the hysterical discussions on TV, and has made it a point to avoid watching certain channels. Nothing substantial has changed on the work front: his clients still like him and see him as hardworking, and someone who meets his commitments. He feels that there is a positive aspect to the stereotyping of Muslims as well. Most people around him assume that he does not drink, and consequently tend to think of him as more dependable than his peers.

Amir sees himself as definitively Indian; he has great hopes for the Indian economy and intends to share its prosperity when it booms.

Thirty-year-old Shoaib, born and brought up in Delhi, agrees that a teetotaler image helps. He barely scraped through his 12th class, and managed an entry-level job in an export firm. However, he has been able to rise up the ranks quickly and now, two years later, he holds a fairly senior position and handles procurement: a job that involves a lot of responsibility and travelling, but has also nearly tripled his salary. His boss, a Hindu, believes him to be extremely honest and trusts him implicitly, and Shoaib makes sure that he lives up to the image.

He wanted to live close to his office, but struggled to find a place to rent in the area as most people did not want a Muslim tenant...his supervisor, a Hindu from Maharashtra, stepped in and ensured that a house was rented on behalf of the company.

The non-drinking image also helps while negotiating with landlords. Rehan was all of 22 years when he left his small town to take up a job in Delhi some 10 years ago. He wanted to live close to his office, but struggled to find a place to rent in the area as most people did not want a Muslim tenant. This continued for six months till his supervisor, a Hindu from Maharashtra, stepped in and ensured that a place was rented on behalf of the company. Despite the company lease, at first his landlord was hesitant, but now is openly appreciative of Rehan and his roommate's quiet lifestyle. Neighbourhood "aunties" too seem to be pretty fond of these young men and often ply them with homemade achaar and other delicious food.

News of lynchings and mobs running amok keeps filtering in, and parents, their friends, and extended families constantly advise young Muslims to be extra cautious and vigilant. What to cook, what to eat, and who to share it with form the subject matter of most phone calls with parents. But according to 32-year-old Faraz, what has really changed in the last five years is the language. Faraz came to Delhi from Bijnour as a student, and then went on to find a job. Even as a young executive, he had been refused an apartment, but then the rejection had been couched in euphemisms. Today, his broker tells him baldly that the landlord will not rent to a Muslim. Bigotry is no longer a guilty secret to be shared with close friends in drawing rooms; it is now a badge of honour that is proudly displayed in public.

Thankfully, MNCs still have fairly strict rules about hate speech and Faraz has recently threatened to report one of his colleagues to the human resource manager for calling him a Pakistani. Despite the strict rules and the evidence available in CCTV recordings, some of his Muslim colleagues prefer to ignore Islamophobic comments, an attitude that disgusts Faraz. He feels that it is this that emboldens bigots and allows them to enjoy impunity.

Hira, a Shia, has always been a minority wherever she has lived. She has faced her share of obnoxious comments from Muslims as well as non-Muslims and feels that reacting to hate is a waste of time. She would rather ignore people who dislike her or her community and focus on her own life. She is aware that her hijab makes her stand out and proclaims her identity, but she feels no need to be apologetic about it.

The last time Hira went to Saudi for her vacations, airport officials in Delhi stopped her and asked her to remove her hijab for checking. She got into a heated argument with them at first, but when she realised that a delay may mean her missing her flight, she pragmatically decided to remove her hijab. At the time it did make her angry, but she now shrugs it off as a bad experience. There are other good experiences too, like impressing the panel at her first job interview and getting a cushy job she begins next month.

Twenty-six-year-old Abid, puny and bearded, has had some worrying encounters. Abid runs a tiny hotel in Mumbai's Dadar area, a Shiv Sena citadel. His business had been doing moderately well and word of mouth publicity had ensured that it had a steady stream of mostly Muslim patrons. Then, Abid and his brother got a little more ambitious and decided to put their hotel on a booking app. Since then, they sometimes get guests with links to the Shiv Sena. As a hotel owner, Abid is used to dealing with irate customers but when a guest threatens him with the Sena, it can get scary. Abid feels that sometimes a guest's aggression rises exponentially when he see his name.

Reacting to Reactionaries

May 2014 was a tsunami that devastated the social landscape of many Muslims: old friends with whom we had shared secrets, traumas and sometimes even rooms and flats suddenly seemed like strangers. But destruction and creation go hand in hand. New social networks emerged from this destruction. As the need for acceptance grew, Muslims reached out to each other, forming groups in real life as well as social media.

Muslim millennials, a social group so far focused on bettering their selves were suddenly forced to acknowledge the rather hostile world outside. And they responded with typical millennial bravado: finding solutions through social media, making memes, and running parody accounts. It was easier said than done, everywhere around them was a fractured community divided into not just Shias and Sunni, but Barelvis, Deobandis, and sundry others.

People with links to the Gulf were turning Wahabi, young Muslims were exposed to Western scholars: mullahs could no longer be found only in local mosques but were available in well-groomed and progressive avatars on mobile phones. Debates raged amongst Muslims about the finer points of the religion, but people did come together when attacked by Hindu hardliners who quoted chapter and verse from the Quran. The need for a unified stand introduced movements like "Shoulder-to-Shoulder," an initiative encouraging Shias and Sunnis to pray together.

Muslim millennials, a social group so far focused on bettering their selves were suddenly forced to acknowledge the rather hostile world outside. And they responded with typical millennial bravado: finding solutions through social media, making memes, and running parody accounts.

Loose networks of community influencers were put together, they shared information about what was happening on the ground and discussed the appropriate response. Curated spaces like Karvaan tried to set up cultural hubs within Muslim ghettos where all kinds of people could meet for talks, movies and other cultural activities. Several curated Muslim handles came up to bust myths and stereotypes, to set a narrative and defend Islam and Muslim history. Others used social media platforms to vent some of the anger they were suppressing.

Shoaib, who had had a rather strained relationship with books and reading, now spouts Urdu poetry and freely quotes Rumi; all a result of obsessively following prominent Muslim influencers on social media. However, his own views are only shared in person with a select bunch of friends. On social media, he prefers to be observant but silent. Amir and Rehan have quietly unfriended several people on their friend list and have made their accounts private. Faraz has an anonymous handle from which he makes insightful commentaries and often sarcastic comments. Others go out of their way to project their goodness.

As Faraz puts it, Muslims are under pressure to be extra nice in public places, and several Muslim handles have taken it upon themselves to project any and every good deed performed by Muslims on social media. Social media also provides a means by which saner, more educated and more progressive Muslim faces are presented to the world. Issues like Triple Talaq are no longer left to frothing-at-the-mouth mullahs who grace TV stations, but are discussed on social media by scholars and lawyers, feminists, and political scientists. Till recently, however, the approach was cautious, even subservient. Slowly, the tide is turning and Muslims are increasingly dropping their apologetic demeanour and speaking up for themselves.

Issues like Triple Talaq are no longer left to frothing-at-the-mouth Mullahs who grace TV stations, but are discussed on social media by scholars and lawyers, feminists, and political scientists

Speaking up means getting into arguments and fights. But it also means getting support from unexpected quarters. Hate, which had been suffocating the atmosphere for the last few years is dissipating a little, and glimmers of hope in the form of inter-personal and political solidarities are appearing on the horizon. Young Muslims today are navigating a minefield of prejudice, suspicion and hate,

and are figuring out ways around it. Whichever strategy they use to cope—denial, confrontation or lamentation— it would not work without the quiet solidarity extended by friends from all walks of life.

Amir has two companies; one with a Sikh sounding name which he runs with his Sikh partner who is also a fellow gym enthusiast. When he runs into a bigot, he pitches and executes the project through the Sikh-named company, and projects himself as merely a representative of the firm. The visiting card carries only the name of his Sikh partner as proprietor.

|| **Whichever strategy they use to cope—denial, confrontation or lamentation— it would not work without the quiet solidarity extended by friends from all walks of life.**

When Abid feels the situation is getting ugly, he calls in a Hindu friend to man the front desk. Shoaib is a foodie and shares his passion with his Bengali Hindu boss, who not only bonds with him over fish fry but also mentors and guides him and is helping him plan his career. Shoaib has now enrolled at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for a degree and his boss ensures he gets time off to attend classes and prepare for his exams. Faraz is followed by several non-Muslim handles who amplify his voice.

Identities are complex phenomena; people tend to connect and bond through different identities. For Amir it is sports and fitness, for Shoaib it is food, and for Rehan it is his abhorrence for alcohol that makes for a bond stronger than religious or political affiliations.

The personal is not always the political. Sometimes the personal trumps everything, handing people the lifeline of hope, and at the same time tempering their reactions. There are only two kinds of people in the world—the humane and the inhumane—and both exist across every kind of divide. And the tribe of the humane will always grow. As young Hira puts it, hate gives very poor returns on investment.