

March 2, 2022

The Shattering of the Muslim Hope in India

By: Salik Ahmad

A young Muslim reflects on the collapse of constitutional promises and on the everyday fears and dilemmas faced by the minorities.

A few days ago, a friend and I were sitting on my terrace's moss-blackened floor, having stolen an evening from Delhi life, looking at the fractals of a bare tree against an anaemic sky. He worked in one of those menacingly big MNCs, and was talking about how, as a Muslim, the office felt so alien to him.

“Everybody is so oblivious to the persecution of Muslims. I wake up to a new video of lynching, or another hate speech, or a genocide-enabling cartoon, but I go to office and find people discussing what place makes the best sushis and what place makes the best cheesecakes. There's Secret Santa happening and there are people chalking out their growth trajectories, and I just look around the office, wondering what this place is, or if I've come to a different age,” he said.

But then we worried about other friends who worked in outright communal workspaces, with colleagues needling them every now and then over their religious beliefs, and deduced that even an apathetic space was a privilege. And of course, we shuddered at the thought of what Muslims, especially the ones visibly so, in the informal sector—street vendors, rickshaw-pullers, etc.—might be facing every day.

Being a print journalist who has worked in English newsrooms, I have been largely saved from such experiences. I worked under some truly secular editors, and others, who, I later realised, were secular only because of the prevailing office culture—they turned out to be surprisingly footloose in terms of ideology.

As the skies turned dark and the chatter of kids from the streets below petered out, my friend and I got up to take a walk. The conversation then turned towards what has become the staple of every conversation between young, privileged Muslims: Should we leave India?

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Even as I begin to write my thoughts, I feel a gush of anger, closely followed by an impulse to moderate my expression. This is exerted either by a fear of the law or the anxiety to express an ‘acceptable’ shade of opinion. This is the first mark of control and oppression, for it limits my voice, pre-setting the range of my vocabulary, and, thus, diminishes upon its very birth, the cry for my rights. It is almost incredible how the law and the discourse-setters work together to sanitise testimonies and, subsequently, erode justice.

There was a time when I believed in the promises of the Indian state, but over the years and many painful reckonings later I began to see it for what it was. When it came into being, it was certainly a child with considerable potential. But what it allowed itself to become, a lot of times with wilful transgressions, pausing but never really atoning for its crimes, only suggested that the initial assessments were erroneous and premised perhaps on an unfounded optimism. Despite the progressive Constitution giving it nearly all the thrust it needed to become a secular state, it could never become that. On the contrary, it has now become quite a majoritarian state.

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If there was a metaphor for what the Indian state does to its Muslim citizens, it is that of the police torturing the 23-year-old Faizan during the violence that broke out in Delhi in February 2020. The man is lying on the ground, along with other Muslim men, writhing

in pain, and the cops are forcing him to sing the national anthem while prodding him with sticks. Faizan dies later, quite apparently killed by the state. More than two years later, there is not a flower of justice on his grave. Writing in 1962 for *The New Yorker*, in an essay titled “[Letter From a Region in My Mind](#)”, the Black American writer James Baldwin noted, “They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law—in a word, power. But it was criminal power, to be feared, but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever.”

I see and remember the face of Faizan’s mother. I see and remember the horror and the plea for mercy in the eyes of Qutbuddin Ansari from 2002; the tears in the eyes of the lady in Karnataka, who was forced to take off her burqa to enter the school where she had been teaching for years; the faces of the Muslims who have spent their entire youth in prison because of wrongful incarceration; and the pain in the eyes of fellow Muslims, every time I see them raise their hands in supplication.

|| I also see how the state failed so miserably on the single biggest question of justice for Muslims in independent India—Babri 1992.

From Nellie to Hashimpura, Bhagalpur to Gujarat, I see, and I remember. I see the state’s inaction on Dharam Sansad and Bulli Bai, and its curbs on Friday prayers in Gurgaon, and its hounding of Tablighi Jamat members. I see how the police forces rioted in my alma maters, Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Millia Islamia, maiming and [blinding students](#), turning spaces that once echoed with life and laughter into haunting reminders of violence and rampage. And I also see how the state failed so miserably on the single biggest question of justice for Muslims in independent India — Babri Masjid in 1992. I felt so cheated when the verdict came.

For me, the Indian judiciary, the supposed sentinel of my rights and freedoms, has been the biggest let down among all the country’s institutions. The pen of the judge moves with great alacrity to sign the bail orders of those who have shot at Muslims, bombed them, and called for a genocide against them, but so rarely to protect Muslims from the state’s or the majority’s harm, or to dispense justice for the atrocities committed against them. And the words spun by the lordships — way of life, preponderance of probabilities, collective conscience — have gone on to become the mainstay of the tall structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression.

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Justice is a basic human need; the lack of it can be so deeply unsettling. The lordships need to realise that it can’t be offered in crumbs here and there; it needs to be absolute and abundant. I, for one, am not big on speedy justice. It can take its own sweet time to arrive, but when it does it should make the heart full. And that is what makes you love a place; you can never truly love a place that doesn’t give you justice. With that realisation, came the explanation to why I had felt so conflicted all these years.

Through NCERT textbooks, through cinema, through newspapers — now though the sophistry that comes in 50-word edits so it is easier to discern — what was reinforced was a notion that this country was a just place. But it was something I did not feel. The whole ecosystem was trying to force me to see something which was not there and that was messing with my head all the time, all through my formative years. Had it been an out and out oppressive framework, I would have seen it sooner. But it was the crumbs that confused me, muddling my thoughts for so long.

The whole elaborate gaslighting effort turned me, like millions of other Muslims, into a person inherently apologetic about my religious identity—trying ever so hard to distinguish myself from the rest of the Muslims, rarely missing a chance to bash mullahs, dressing overly neatly, finding subtle ways to tell people that I came from an educated family, nailing my secular colours to the mast, professing my love for the idea of India so often, and never criticising the BJP without adding a rider that Owaisi was as bad. This constant scrutiny of the self and the worry of how I was being perceived, was, at the very least, tiring.

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In the fullness of time, I began realising how hard I was trying to please. But please whom? The majority, a big chunk of which has clearly endorsed my persecution, electorally, socially, politically. I do not want to live a life fighting stereotypes erected by them, conforming to the template of ‘good Muslim’ fashioned by them, and constantly throwing fellow Muslims under the bus to earn their approval. I even figured that it was not my labour to educate those who came to me with their soft bigotry dressed as innocent questions. If they want their life not to be consumed by hate, they should put in the effort themselves.

Honestly though, I do not care. I do not care about which direction India is headed. I do not want to preach brotherhood or try to salvage the country's composite culture, as some of the Muslim elite would want me to do. I don't see any merit in the proposition either. The Muslim bureaucrat and the general and the buzzy author, the new-age zamindars, are all free to try all they want. They have my very best wishes — but I feel the motivation to do that is not born out of a keen understanding of and concern for the community, but from the desire to preserve their own position and cultural estate and their teensy share of state power.

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In the decades after Independence, a friend's grandfather narrated how even ordinary demands by a Muslim in his office were met with a jibe that would be along these lines: *Abhi to diya tha Pakistan. Phir aa gaye maangne?* ("We just gave you Pakistan. You want something again?") A reductionist, even malafide, reading of Partition fuelled this narrative even in the most liberal spaces. It is this that makes the majority so uneasy when they see an unapologetic Muslim asking for their rights and equal citizenship. My grandparents and parents might have felt a sense of guilt in demanding equal access to justice, but I do not. I want what is mine by right, and I want it in entirety.

Sometimes, just sometimes, I wonder if I should just leave. Will I be running away? What about those who can't leave? Should I stay and do my bit in the fight? Isn't the pursuit of security a legitimate pursuit? Friends who have kids worry about the hate their children might face in schools, let alone the kind of country they will grow up to live in. They also think of their parents, who might not be able to go or might not want to go. There are some in their 40s, who say their biggest regret is that they did not leave India when they had the chance.

|| I just hope that one morning I will wake up to a long and roaring shower of justice.

I want to stay back simply because I belong here. I have lived 30 years of my life here, and it's only this place that satiates my social appetite. I have seen how painful migrations can be, both forced and voluntary. Everyone I know lives here, my kin, my friends, the people I admire, the people I hate; this is my world. I know how it feels when it's sunny, I know how it feels when it rains. To uproot myself from here and move to a place where I don't even know how I'd feel upon waking up, is a frightening thought. I really don't think I'll be dazzled by litter-free roads and state-of-the-art drainages. I don't look at the world through the eyes of a sanitary inspector.

It's going to be a long night. I don't know where I'll wake up. But I just hope that one morning I will wake up to a long and roaring shower of justice.