THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

January 28, 2026

A Politics Yet to Come: On the Significance of Sharjeel Imam

By: Intzar Saifi

Sharjeel Imam's ideas were built upon his critique of the dominant narrative of Partition being the 'original sin' of Indian Muslims, against which he argued that the community ought to shed this burden that kept it anxiously self-restrained politically.

Sharjeel Imam has been in prison for six years, without trial. Much has been written about him and his journey from a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay to a scholar of modern history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, to his incarceration under India's notorious anti-terror laws. He has emerged as a polarising figure within Indian public discourse and has been the subject of both media attention and political controversy. A quick Google search returns a slew of articles, op-eds, and social media threads-written by his advocates and detractors-attempting to define, defend, or discredit him.

> Imam pivots the community-through a sober appreciation of the limits of elite politics-towards a more agentic version of Muslim politics.

The Supreme Court order on his bail earlier in January only betrays the political nature of his incarceration and the communal grammar of India's supposedly liberal institutions that see any assertion of Muslim identity beyond the confines of their prescribed juridical and ghettoised existence as an assault on the sovereignty of the nation. The routine subjugation and killing of Muslim bodies by Hindu mobs, the punitive destruction of Muslim homes, and the measured legislative assaults on the rights of Muslims have turned the Indian Republic into a theatre of Hindu parochialism and intolerance.

In that backdrop, Iman's continued imprisonment even as trial has not begun has only further vindicated a grim view he held of Indian history and his searing assessment of the character of Indian polity as inherently confessional. The banality of violence has proved him prescient.

All the more reason to seriously engage Imam's ideas. Their development into a mature body of work has been cut short by his long incarceration. Yet his public speeches-available online on YouTube-and a handful of articles that he had written for different news outlets give us a sense of what was to come.

Particularly relevant are four themes that emerge. First, Imam critiques a specific strand of postcolonial Indian historiography, which, with Partition as its backdrop, pivoted heavily toward nationalist mythmaking and a narrative around Congress's supposed golden age during the first three decades after independence. Second, building on this critique, Imam challenges the dominant interpretation of Partition itself, which continues to attribute its violence and disintegration primarily to Muslim political aspirations. Third, Imam's confronts a standard left-liberal consensus-especially within university spaces-on the role Muslims ought to play in broader struggles against political repression. Fourth, and most importantly, he pivots the community-through a sober appreciation of the limits of elite politics-towards a more agentic version of Muslim politics.

Unmasking the Congress Consensus

In dominant accounts of post-partition Indian historiography, history seems to have ended for Indian Muslims at the stroke of midnight on 14th August 1947. At least that is the impression one comes away with on the reading of popular accounts of early post-colonial history of the Republic: that the relationship between the state (read Congress) and its largest confessional minority was an entirely amicable affair. The Congress emerged as the foremost advocate of Muslim interest and, under a charismatic postcolonial leadership, undertook a secularisation process, into which every self-respecting Muslim threw in their lot-securing, in turn, both state protection and societal endorsement (Hasan 1997; Khalidi 1995). This is the traditional narrative, repeated and regurgitated so often and with such force, both in academia and outside of it, that despite considerable literature having developed in opposition to it in the past three decades, it still serves as the starting point of most academic discussions around the issue.

> In his speeches ... Imam comes off as a deeply compassionate man, visibly hurt by the abuse and violence that have been heaped upon his community by the state and its various institutions since independence.

This particular strand of post-colonial Indian historiography has been overdetermined by Partition. The blame, without saying so explicitly, is placed squarely upon the heads of Muslims. In the Indian public sphere, this socially constructed orthodoxy has been elevated to the status of the mythical. Any form of opposition to it is deplored as an attack on the very 'idea of India'; an assault on the supposedly 'inherently syncretic, multiethnic, and multi-religious nature of the polity'. Its now near-intuitive appeal and almost self-referential nature is evident from the fact that in popular discourse it is employed by every side of the political aisle to discredit the demands Muslims might make or have been making. The progressive camp simply denounces the community's wishes as communal, while the Right harps on the string of appeasement. Both, in their own bizarre ways, are haunted by an '*Islamism*' almost deemed immanent to the community's every desire that, if fulfilled, will end in the demand for another separate homeland by the Muslim masses.

By drawing attention to the bloodstained record of the Indian Republic during the first three decades of Congress hegemony, Imam questioned the prevailing historical narrative. He foregrounded episodes of communal riots, targeted massacres, and organised pogroms that left thousands of Muslims dead or displaced in their aftermath; the systematic exclusion of Muslim administrators from the civil and administrative services; the steady erosion of Urdu from public life; and the broader dismantling of Muslim cultural institutions. Together, these processes left the community politically marginalised and culturally estranged-a virtual orphan in the postcolonial sociopolitical landscape.

Imam consistently placed a premium on state *practice* over state *rhetoric*, and accordingly, one of the most salient aspects of his critique was his collapsing of the conventional dichotomy between the Congress and the BJP. In his public speeches, he regularly invoked the Congress's record of communal violence and warned against the reflexive tendency among Muslims to distinguish it-or other so-called progressive formations-from overtly majoritarian parties like the BJP. He argued that such illusions were politically dangerous, since the Congress, behind its ecumenical facade, had historically subscribed to the same unofficial state policy of marginalising and dispossessing Muslims through constitutional, bureaucratic, and legal mechanisms. Indeed, one could argue-and empirically demonstrate-that it was the Congress that built and institutionalised much of the repressive state machinery that has long operated with a structural bias against India's marginalised communities (Pandey 2006; Jaffrelot 2010; Hasan 2009; Hansen 1999).

This, then, was Imam's first significant achievement as a scholar: to help the community realise that the grim political reality they now face has, in fact, always been their only reality. The difference over the years, he argued, was one of appearance rather than substance. By virtue of having been born in a discursive imaginary shaped by Hindu majoritarian norms, the Indian Republic-both in its ideological foundation and practical governance-has historically exhibited a structural bias and a latent hostility toward its Muslim minority.

It is to this effect that he told a gathering of students at Aligarh Muslim University: "We need to write our history. Our history has not been written; writing our history will take fifty more years. But that will only happen if we realise that we must write our history."

Sharjeel Imam and The Weight of History

In the opening line of the previous section, I have deliberately used the phrase post-Partition instead of the word postcolonial. It is the fact of Partition, more than the end of colonialism, that has governed, defined, and dictated the thought-worlds of Indian Muslims-and of non-Muslims with regard to Muslims, albeit they are often unaware of the fact. This singular event has bequeathed a particularly heavy burden to the community, one under the weight of which their entire collective will has been buried. The arc of what is often called 'Muslim politics' in India is marked less by substantive agendas than by a posture of guilt and anxious self-restraint.

> We need to write our history. Our history has not been written; writing our history will take fifty more years. But that will only happen if we realise that we must write our history.

It is little surprise, then, that the terms of the social contract of Muslims with the Indian state have been implicitly understood in an essentially feudal or paternalistic sense-turning them, at a very fundamental level, into the state's objects and playthings. This historically constructed orthodoxy has become the paradigm that seems to have cast almost the entirety of postcolonial Muslim politics in a renunciatory mould for perpetuity. Its total hold over the imagination of the Republic's Muslim body politic is evident from the

fact that even after the routine brutalities, partisan violence, and structural marginalisation, the community has been subjected to in the past seven decades, its only response to these has been to further forswear any form of politics altogether (Jaffrelot and Gayer 2012; Hansen 1999).

Imam contested the validity of this view. One of the primary aims of his M.Phil thesis, *Exodus Before Partition: The Attacks on Muslims of Bihar in 1946*, was to problematise these dominant narratives of nationalism and communalism around Partition in late colonial India by taking up as the counterpoint a regional study. Bihar's unique socio-political, linguistic, and economic context, in Imam's view, complicated the simplistic binary narratives of elite politics and pan-Indian movements popularised by historians like Ayesha Jalal and Venkat Dhulipala.

Imam situated violence against Muslims in Bihar within broader debates on identity formation and highlights how communal identities were constructed not only through elite discourses but also via localised socio-economic struggles, caste dynamics, and agrarian conflicts. His framing shows that communal polarisation emerged from complex local interactions rather than merely from elite political manoeuvring. The dissertation argued that the violence in Bihar was not an isolated or aberrant incident. Instead, it was part of a larger process in which political, economic, and cultural factors converged to prefigure mass communal ruptures of partition (Imam 2019).

In one of the articles written for *The Wire* and provocatively titled *It's time we absolve Jinnah*, Imam recalled that "the most important points on which there was contention between Congress and Muslim League were about Muslim representation, electorates and Centre-province relations." In his reading, it was not an essentialist and communal vision espoused by Jinnah that led to Partition, but rather the Congress's unwillingness-especially on the part of figures like Nehru-to accommodate Muslim constitutional demands within a pluralistic federal framework. For Imam, if blame had to be assigned, it would be to the incorrigibility on the part of Congress and its leadership and not with the imaginary bugbear of Jinnah's 'communalism'.

By reframing the terms of debate around Partition in this way, Imam gave much-needed breathing room to the Muslim community-whose members in its aftermath have come to be the bearers of an ineradicable stigma, one which has made them a victim of socially accepted sadism; violence upon and subjugation of their bodies deemed purificatory; and lust for whose blood now seems to breathe life into large swathes of India's increasingly militant Hindu body politic.

Performative Politics and the Denial of Muslim Agency

In one of his articles for *Firstpost*, Imam recounts his experiences of religious discrimination as an undergraduate at IIT Bombay. He recalls how, owing to the near-total absence of Muslims on campus, "many rumours and prejudices against Muslims were propagated and taken as truth by many ill-informed Hindu students, as there were no Muslims to debunk them." What he encountered was not just passive ignorance but an active circulation of stereotypes-something he would later recognise as a structural feature of elite, secular educational institutions in India.

> Muslim exclusion and dispossession, Imam concluded, have been legalised and given the force of law by the framers of the Constitution-embedding inequality into the very architecture of the nation-state.

Against this backdrop, Imam was initially drawn to leftist organisations in Jawaharlal Nehru University, where "the posters and sloganeering by these parties gave" him the impression that "the youth of this nation is finally waking up to the miseries of the marginalized people." He joined the All India Students' Association (AISA), affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), and remained a member for two years. However, following internal controversies-including sexual harassment allegations against senior leadership-and deeper disillusionment with the cultural alienation Muslims continued to face within Left circles, he parted ways with the group. As Imam put it, he had to spend "no less time than I did in IIT debating against people who had practically no knowledge of Islamic faith, figures, and practices, yet could abuse these with impunity."

When it came to his faith, then, the 'fortress of secularism' fared only a touch better than a shakha. Behind their cover of avowed atheism, people in progressive circles seemed to nourish the same prejudices for Islam and Muslims that pervade the lifeworld of the common Hindu masses in general. Despite their revolutionary rhetoric, their thinking, Imam observed, remained deeply informed by dominant Hindu-Hindi discourse.

In another co-written article, Imam noted how over 34 years of Communist rule in West Bengal, instead of improving the condition of Muslims in the state, had rendered them even more destitute than they were before. Imam's indictment echoes the findings of multiple

empirical studies, including the Sachar Committee Report, which documented the acute deprivation of Muslims in Communist-ruled Bengal (Government of India 2006; Fazal 2015, ch 4).

What Imam realised through these experiences was the impossibility of ever forming any genuine alliance with the left, since their principal demand from Muslims, to be admitted into their fold, is that they cease to be one in any meaningful way. Since any self-respecting Muslim would baulk at the suggestion, it is precisely the presence of these progressive groups in the university spaces that has hamstrung the emergence of organic Muslim leadership that could speak for the community without placing a premium on their Muslimness. For independent Muslim political formations to emerge, the community must abandon its almost reflexive posture of self-effacement and mental subordination to progressive groups-regardless of the ideology they espouse. Delegating the task of resisting political tyranny to others, instead of claiming that struggle as its own, has proven to be a fatal strategy for the *qaum*. It has stunted the development of autonomous political thought, distorted communal expectations, and mutilated the very horizons of Muslim political imagination.

Imam's disillusionment, then, was not simply with party positions or ideological inconsistencies-it was with the very cultural and institutional grammar of progressive spaces. Over the past decade and a half, elite liberal arts institutions like JNU and Delhi University have increasingly become sites not of rigorous scholarship, but of activist-brand manufacturing. Many of the most visible student leaders-such as Shehla Rashid and Kanhaiya Kumar-have, without hesitation, aligned themselves with the very political establishment they once appeared to oppose. Their ideological malleability is not an exception but a feature of contemporary campus politics, which disproportionately rewards an upper-caste, urban, upper-middle-class demographic (Deshpande 2003; Subramanian 2019). This group, having the most to gain from the status quo, is often more invested in symbolic performance than in structural transformation. When it came time to stand beside a Muslim intellectual who had truly challenged state power, most within these spaces chose silence or soft disavowal. Imam's political trajectory, then, laid bare the fault lines in progressive student politics-its caste-class exclusivity, performative solidarity, and the conditionality of its embrace of Muslim identity. His incarceration-and the lack of a substantive response-exposed the limits of the left's universalism and the bankruptcy of its solidarity.

Elite Complicity and the Struggle for Muslim Self-Assertion

The path to genuine emancipatory politics, Imam insisted-through both critique and example-did not lie in delegated resistance or elite endorsement. It begins when those with skin in the game-Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, and other structurally oppressed groups-recognise that what is truly at stake is not reputation or ideology, but their life and liberty itself. It is only then that the lineaments of a true liberatory politics would begin to emerge, with the possibility of a shared political future, grounded in dignity rather than pity.

> The terms of the social contract of Muslims with the Indian state have been implicitly understood in an essentially feudal or paternalistic sense-turning them, at a very fundamental level, into the state's objects and playthings.

In the backdrop of Partition-the 'Original Sin' of Muslims-the postcolonial Muslim political class had to contend with an unforgiving socio-political terrain. A suspicious majority was wary of every Muslim aspiration. The regime was seemingly accommodative in its ideology of thought but actively hostile in its ideology of action. The constitutional arrangement did away with almost all the political safeguards-reservations, separate electorates, proportional representation-that Muslims would need to secure their political future in the nascent Republic. Given this situation, it is true that this class of people had only limited leeway in what they could say and do.

Be that as it may, this should not preclude us from a sober appreciation of the choices they made and the actions they undertook, and asking some difficult questions about what use they made of the little freedom they had.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's counsel to minorities to "totally give up politics" (Azad 1988: 221-223) pithily captures the peculiar sentiment of the postcolonial Muslim elite concerning everything political. A convergence of factors like structural constraints, historical guilt, and class interests gave birth to a unique sensibility amongst this class-of being singularly anti-political, self-effacing-almost slavish-with a pure contempt for agency. Drawn as they were from a class of people who were a world removed from the quotidian realities of an average Muslim-patricians, landlords, clerics, lawyers, career politicians, and other members of the Muslim nobility-they were naturally focused on elite concerns over majority struggles. What really passes for Muslim politics in India, then, is a narrow constellation of cultural grievances ventriloquised by the community's upper-caste religious-political-cultural elite as Muslim issues at large. This emphasis on the cultural, to the total exclusion of the political and the economical is what the historian Pratinav Anil has called an "ashraf betrayal"(Anil 2023: chapter 4).

Making short work of things like reservations, proportional representation, and parliamentary quotas-mere redundancies to the aristocratic mind that were better discarded in the spirit of secularism-Muslim elites instead decided to singularly focus on preserving and maintaining the hallowed ground of personal laws. Cultural sovereignty was the Ashraf elite's motto. There was no room for trade unions, mass protests, anti-discrimination legislation, and broad-based coalitions with other subaltern groups in this brand of Muslim politics. While Dalits secured reservations at independence and Backward Class movements gained momentum in the post-Mandal era, Muslims fell behind on nearly every metric of educational, economic, and political progress.

Thus it was that a scandalised Muslim clerical class could successfully lobby the Rajiv Gandhi government to overturn the Supreme Court's Shah Bano judgement that they deemed to be a most flagrant assault on the community's religious identity, but no community leader-clerical or otherwise-has had any effective response to the recurring pogroms, progressive ghettoisation, and gradual marginalisation that, more than anything else, have defined, shaped, and dictated the collective Muslim experience in post-independence India.

Imam blew a hole in this fatalistic postcolonial consensus-the Shaheen Bagh protest being the clearest manifestation of this breach. What started as a simple peaceful sit-in protest transformed into one of the most significant civil society mobilisations by an educated class of Muslim youth like Sharjeel and other scholars from Jamia, JNU, IITs, and AMU, that, in the span of a few weeks, evolved into one of the largest decentralised participatory protest movements in recent South Asian history. The sheer scale and scope of the mobilisation and its overt articulation of Muslim grievances through the creation of a unique religious and political idiom was a radical shift from the self-effacing and depoliticised approach of the religious-political elite who, since independence, have relied on an ineffective mixture of lawfare, lobbying and backdoor deals to navigate the troubled waters of the postcolonial Indian Republic. Shaheen Bagh was the brainchild of an emergent educated Muslim middle-class that is far more percipient of the precarious position that it occupies in the Indian political order, but nonetheless feels far less inhibited in taking to task all those who seek to disenfranchise them.

The critics of this assessment of events might rightly point to the failure of Shaheen Bagh in putting a stop to the implementation of the CAA-NRC and the subsequent government crackdown on Muslim leaders and activists like Sharjeel, Gulfisha Fatima, Umar Khalid, and many others, that followed in the aftermath of the northeast Delhi pogrom. One response to such a cynical interpretation of the whole affair could be the following: Shaheen Bagh was an originary moment whose importance and effects, as of yet, are more symbolic than material. As such, it is too early to tell the true magnitude of change it has effected in the habitual attitude of perpetual Muslim catatonia. Its true origin is yet to come.

There certainly are intimations, though, that it has shifted the Overton window in favour of a more agentic form of Muslim politics. In that sense, Shaheen Bagh was the overcoming of Muslim aversion to politics proper. In its aftermath, a significant portion of educated and broad-minded Muslims are less beholden to the obscurantism of their clerical establishment and more conscious of the ossified nature of their religio-political institutions that serve as sites of elite privilege-replication and hoarding of prerogatives by a select few to the detriment of many.

What does Sharjeel Imam mean?

In French political philosopher Jacques Rancière's conception, politics doesn't mean what people demand or receive, or even the creation of just social arrangements but-acting under the presupposition of their own equality-what they actually do that challenges the hierarchical order of a given set of social structures (May 2008: chapter 1). Imam's politics-although still in its embryonic stage-perfectly fits this bill. Unencumbered by the deadweight of popular assumptions and anxieties that had long stifled collective Muslim agency before him, he refused to be beaten by the proverbial stick of Partition. Imam took it for granted that he and his community deserved a far better hand than the one they had been dealt-a belief that would be utterly inconceivable for a petrified ashraf mind.

> For Muslims, Imam means a definitive break from the past-at least from a particular iteration of it-whose telos seemed to be to condemn the whole of the community to a sense of perpetual helplessness in the face of naked cruelty.

The reason for the deep resonance of Imam's words with Muslims is that his politics represents no less than a total shift in the perceptual and conceptual underpinnings of Muslim political thought: a reformulation of the terms of the social contract between Muslims and the Indian state. The older contract was premised on deference in exchange for toleration: Muslims could remain

culturally distinct, but only at the price of political silence, legal compromise, and strategic invisibility.

Imam rejects this Faustian bargain in its entirety. His politics is not about being included in a broken system, but about dismantling the hierarchy on which that system rests. He reimagines the social contract not as a framework of risk-avoidance, but as a stage for rightful and equal participation-where Muslim identity does not need to be apologised for, obscured, or selectively presented to be considered legitimate. In place of negotiated marginality, he asserts non-negotiable dignity.

The radicality of Imam's thought bears out most prominently in his questioning of the Indian Constitution itself-a book deemed outside the pale of any form of criticism by anyone. Muslim exclusion and dispossession, he concluded, have been legalised and given the force of law by the framers of the Constitution-embedding inequality into the very architecture of the nation-state. What is needed to rectify this state of affairs, Imam noted, was no less than a total transformation of the political framework itself, which had made all of this possible in the first place.

The new byword is substantive equality-legal, social, political, economic, and representational. No more, no less. It is a vision grounded in moral clarity: that citizenship without equality is hollow, and any social order that demands one to suppress their historical experience, religious identity, or political agency in order to be accepted is not one worth upholding. Imam's articulation of this vision marks a clean break from the politics of consolation and enters the terrain of equal authorship of the republic.

In his emotive speeches, which were delivered against the backdrop of the CAA-NRC protests, Imam comes off as a deeply compassionate man, visibly hurt by the abuse and violence that have been heaped upon his community by the state and its various institutions since independence. The simmering sense of anger, injustice, and hurt notwithstanding, he speaks from a position of power. Before even justice and equal rights, what he seems to be demanding for his people is dignity. Through Imam, what his listeners felt above all was a sense of being affirmed. Through his words, they felt vindicated. They could always feel the sense of uneasiness under their skin; of being constantly weighed down by the violent and disciplinary gaze of the other; of being the Other. But before Imam, they couldn't articulate it, and thus, couldn't make it manifest.

For Muslims, then, Imam means a definitive break from the past-at least from a particular iteration of it-whose telos seemed to be to condemn the whole of the community to a sense of perpetual helplessness in the face of naked cruelty. He stands as the repudiation of a sick present that continues to live at the expense of a brighter future. Sharjeel Imam is the echo of an unrealised collective potential, the incipient future that the present represses but cannot entirely erase, and in his person, Muslims see a glimpse of a better future, longing to be realised.

Intzar Saifi is studying for a master's degree in French and Francophone studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

References:

Anil, Pratinav (2023). *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947-77*. Hurst

Azad, Maulana Abul Kalam (1988). *India Wins Freedom.* Orient Blackswan

Deshpande, Satish (2003). 'The Problem of Caste' *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(40).

Fazal, Tanweer (2015). *Nation-State and Minority Rights in India: Comparative Perspectives on Muslim and Sikh Identities.* Routledge.

Government of India (2006). *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report* (Sachar Committee Report).

Hansen, Thomas Blom (1999). *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton University Press.

Hasan, Mushirul (1997). *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence.* Oxford University Press.

Hasan, Zoya (2009). *Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities and Affirmative Action.* Oxford University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe (2016). *Religion, Caste and Politics in India.* Primus Books.

Jaffrelot, Christophe and Laurent Gayer (eds) (2012). *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation.* Hurst.

Khalidi, Omar (1995). *Muslims in Indian Political Process.* Vikas Publishing House.

May, Todd (2008). *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality.* Edinburgh University Press.

Pandey, Gyanendra (2006). *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories.* Permanent Black.

Subramanian, Ajantha (2019). *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India.* Harvard University Press