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**Situating the Indian Muslim:  
A Quest for the Vampiric “Other” in Globalized India**

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In the post 9/11 North American and European contexts, essentialist views positioning Islam in opposition to the West, as epitomized in Samuel Huntington’s (1993) Clash of Civilization argument, have become excessively virulent and hostile towards the racialized “Muslim Other”. According to Mahmood Mamdani (2004), the power of these discourses is such that they have coalesced world opinion around the use of force, and legitimized American wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine to quarantine the evil represented by Islam. In the light of the overwhelming salience of these discourses, this paper explores the manner in which they often intersect with and augment localized animosities towards Islam and even authorize

unprecedented and unwarranted violence to be committed against Muslims. Focusing on the riots which broke out in the Indian state of Gujarat, a few months after 9/11, it argues that the riots present an instance whence Muslims were excessively demonized as the “vampiric other”. The analogy of “vampiric other” not only highlighted the remorseless malevolence of the Islamic subject, it also rendered large sections of Gujarati population incapable of regarding Muslims as humans, and permitted the most heinous of crimes—including brutal rape and sexual assault of Muslim women, burning alive of Muslim men, women, and even children, and also torture, decapitation and piecemeal hacking of victims. However, even if the riots, which continued unabated from March to May of 2002, were finally contained, the paper argues that there has been a subtle shift in media’s construction of Indian Muslims as an abhorred “other” given the Indian government’s explicit support for the war against terror. Not only are Muslims increasingly represented as menacing and despicable, but also there is a tendency to ascribe guilty even before facts are established. Combining discourse analysis with ethnographic research, the paper explores the implications of the processes of “interpellation” (see Hall, 1996), which stereotype and marginalize, for a religious minority population’s quest for citizenship and justice within what is ostensibly the world’s largest democracy.

### **Muslims as “Vampiric Other”**

Every culture and every time has known the preying and form-changing ‘vampire’, because perhaps it is a residual memory deeply imbedded in the subconscious of the ghoulish times when early men battled monstrous realities day and night (Frost, 1989, p. 3- 9). However, the vampire, which emerges from 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, and which permeates contemporary

imagination, is a symbol of the inscrutable and the impenetrable “other” (Frayling, 1991; Khair, 2009). The vampire’s representations combine danger and glamour, but its “othering” is a construct of stigmatization associated with the living dead, who neither contribute to this world, nor peacefully pass into the netherworlds, but stay on to deplete life force by literally sucking life-sustaining blood. The vampire is thus imagined as an enervating presence—being caught between two worlds while sustaining neither. I argue that the vampire’s denunciation as a parasitic entity lacking allegiance to either worlds parallels the existence of the castigated Muslim body in postcolonial and post partition Indian society. The Indian Muslims, like the vampiric “other” are also calumniated for lurking in the in-between worlds of the nation and the larger Muslim *ummah* (community), and for failing to claim their rightful place in the mainstream Indian society, while being incapable of finding any meaningful community in the *ummah*.

According to historians like Barbara Metcalf (1995), the antecedents for the “othering” of Indian Islam can be traced to the exigencies of British colonial rule that cast Muslims as marauders, invaders, and outsiders, because such negative portrayals of Islam in India made the British excesses and invasion look like a comparative blessing. However, representations of Muslim as foreigners and of their culture and ethos as being antithetical to Indian way of life have not only continued to persist in independent India, but Muslims are also being depicted as disloyal national subjects. They are held responsible for the partition of territory into India and Pakistan. I argue that the detrimental portrayals of Muslims continue to endure, because just as their negative representation had helped to present the British in a positive light, ascribing blame to Muslims alone for the tragedy of Partition deflects attention away from the embedded injustices experienced by India’s largest minority population. Hence, while the Muslims carry

the guilt of depleting the embodied nation's vitality by cutting off its limbs and replacing its flanks by the splinter still-born states of Pakistan and then Bangladesh, the rising toxicity of Hindu right-wing propaganda against Muslims is neither contained nor accounted for.

The Muslim citizens' assumed disloyalty and their implicit "otherness" serves a purpose similar to the "non-self" propagated in colonial literatures. Postcolonial scholars like Said (1979) have argued that the colonized "non-self" was consciously resurrected in colonial discourses and literature only to be negated, denied, and rejected, because the vehement negation helped to legitimize the dominant colonizing "self" and to sanction the colonized "other's" utter subjugation through conquest and war. In Indian society the Muslim "non-self" has been evoked, historians point out, as early as, the incipient stages of anti-colonial struggle. It was the explicit Muslims "otherness", and not just the injustices of British colonial rule, against which a national identity was located, created, and maintained, and which served as the agglutinating force sustaining the nationalist movement and feeding its rhetoric (see Deshpande, 2000; Hasan, 2002; Misra, 2004). Today, the Muslim "non-self" continues to be deployed to sanctify the dominant Hindu identity. The alleged Muslim laziness, lasciviousness, and aggressiveness are contrasted against the industriousness, discipline, and vegetarianism of the Hindus. According to Fazila-Yacoobali (2002), popular cultural texts, especially Indian cinema, represent Indian national identity as emanating from "spiritual dedication and fortitude" of the Hindu middle class family, which is conjoined to a "territorially distinct, efficient, benevolent, reasonable, forward looking, military-vigilant nation state". And it is positioned against the Muslim *quam* (community), which is seen as the very "anti-theses of this Indian modernity" and imbued with wholly negative

“feudal and decadent values” which make Muslims an “embittered, irrational, sentimental, somewhat deranged, criminal and, ultimately dangerous” community (p. 196).

However, what is interesting is that though the Indian Muslim presence at (135 million strong) and their very explicit “otherness” have been essential to authenticating the hegemony of the Hindu identity, Muslims and their cultural legacy are also expected to remain invisible and not only subservient. This is because, even as the imbedded Persian and Central Asian Islamic cultures and a thousand years of Islam’s history in India indicate the country’s inherent diversity, they also destabilize the myth of an uninterrupted Hindu civilization. The material and non-material reminders of Muslim as being part of the ruling classes for several hundred years also undermine the singularity and dominance of the Hindu identity (Alam, 2007). The negation of Muslim identity takes place at many levels, but the case of the most celebrated monument in India, the *Taj Mahal*, is particularly noteworthy. The monument, which is clearly informed by Islamic, Central Asian, and Persian architectural and cultural norms and is an irrefutable evidence of the “other” culture, is seamlessly ingested within the Indian ethos through an act of what bell hooks (1992) describes as “symbolic cannibalism”. The nationalist literatures and especially the Indian Ministry of Tourism’s brochures of “Incredible India” proudly feature the *Taj Mahal* as an Indian emblem, but in such a fashion that all references to Muslim high art or culture as epitomized in the *Taj Mahal* are effaced. Instead, the monument is commodified as symbolizing eternal love (not unlike De Beer’s advertising campaign for a precious diamond wedding ring), because the dominant identity demands that the “other” avoid arch lights and remain hidden in the proverbial cellars.

The insistence on erasure of Muslim identity, as well as their explicit “othering”, have both gathered greater conviction by drawing on the post 9/11 censuring of Islam and Muslims. However, the silencing of Muslim identity is more problematic because it forestalls any open discussion of the Muslim condition in India thereby denying the Muslim community access to ameliorative measures for improving their situation. For example, in year 2004, when the Government of India set up the Sachar Committee to examine and report the state of affairs of Indian Muslims, the move was fiercely opposed by the BJP (see BJP expresses concern, 2006). The mere mention of Muslim distinctiveness in a fact checking exercise upset the equilibrium of the Hindu right wings forces to such an extent that they construed the formation of the Sachar Committee as being a threat to the unity of the country. The government’s most superficial concern towards its marginalized and impoverished population flared such extreme anxiety as if the vampire himself was being welcomed into the fold and rehabilitated (see BJP to launch stir, 2006). But the Hindu right wing party sought to justify its intense resentment by highlighting the threat posed by Muslims, not only to the national fabric but also to global peace.

The discourses and strategies of “othering” that evoke the parasitical nature of the vampire and project the Muslims as a drain on the nation’s energy have such a salience because they have the tacit support of political and state power. The strategies of “othering” serve political ends and purposes, especially the Hindu right-wing factions’ interest in securing their electoral base. The Gujarat riots exemplify an extremely tragic example of the way political exigencies are implicitly imbedded in the construction of the Muslim “other” and the manner in which state institutions and political power are deployed in expunging or exorcising the Muslim evil. It has been well documented that the violence unleashed during the Gujarat riots was

preceded by a zealous misinformation campaign. The RSS (bedrock organization for right wing BJP party) printed and distributed pamphlets with messages like: “Muslims do not pay taxes and live at our expense in the country”, “The Muslim population has grown from 7 per cent to 32 per cent since 1947”. Many pamphlets even openly propagated violent action and exhorted Hindus to: “Deform new born babies of Muslims”, “Have irregular relations with Muslim women. . .to increase the Hindu population” and “We do not want to see a single Muslim alive in Gujarat” (taken from *Communalism Combat* report as quoted in Sirnate, 2007, p. 240). Scholars and human rights activists have also argued that construction of the demonic Muslim presence was essential to BJP’s electoral strategy in Gujarat, and Chief Minister Modi exploited the fear psychosis to ensure his reelection a few months after the pogrom in Gujarat (Shani, 2011). He even insinuated, despite the horrific bloodletting for more than 3 months, that the threat posed by the Muslims was yet to be contained. In one of his winning speech he supposedly said: “you may have *gaadi*, *waadi* and *laddi* (car, land and wife), but what if your son doesn’t return home in the evening?”(as quoted in Desai, 2004, p. 231). However, the deployment of the Muslim as “other” to consolidate the fracturing Hindu electorate, as during the Gujarat riots, has happened on many previous occasions. For example, during the early nineties when the majority Hindu position was deeply compromised by strained relationships between upper and lower caste Hindus, “ the minority Muslim community represented an expedient “other” against which the BJP an ultra-right-wing organizations successfully worked to mobilize a pro-Hindu/Hindutave ideology” (Williams 2011, p. 244). The only difference that the Gujarat riots represent is that the Muslim “otherness” in the post 9/11 scenarios is being presented as a threat of unimagined proportions, almost like the vampire’s addiction to blood, and which demands exorcism through immediate and extreme force. The condemnation and targeting of Islam in the Western worlds in many

ways sanctioned the fanatical fervor of right-wing Hindu nationalism to expunge the vampiric evil from Indian soil. It led to a pogrom in Gujarat marked by grotesque brutalities ever to be experienced in India, and almost dismantled Indian Muslim population's faith in India as a secular nation (see Hasan, 2004, p. 9-19).

In the contexts of the discriminatory regimes arrayed against them, the Indian Muslims as a minority and a largely impoverished population have hitherto been neither able to assert their identity nor successfully discredit their demonization. Their response to their divestment from India's express destiny has been a tactic withdrawal into ghettoized communities, where they live with their coreligionists to avoid the bitterness of their exclusion. However, their retrenchment has only further buttressed the prejudicial viewpoints. Muslim existence within the congested enclaves is constructed a matter of perverse choice and a requirement of their unnatural and evil nature, which helps to hide sustained practices and policies of discrimination isolating Muslim population and delegitimizing their status within their own country (see Hasan, 2002 and Sachar Committee, 2006). However, my ethnographic research among the Muslim youth concerned with situating them within the larger changes in Indian economy and society following globalization and liberalization, leads me to understand that the youth are chaffing against their cloistered existence. They are eager to participate in the growing economy as competent consumer citizens, and to cast-off the darkness and hopelessness of their impoverishment. And given the context of youth's growing aspirations, I am interested in understanding how do they respond to the process of "interpellation" (Hall, 1996), which hail Muslims into place as transgressive, destructive, and immoral and the manner in which these "interpellations" impinge on their sense of citizenship and belonging.



However, I cannot proceed with this task before acknowledging that as a Muslim researcher and academic, I, myself am implicated in these discourses. In the post 9/11 scenario, there is a tendency to frame all Muslims in India, irrespective of their historic, ethnic, sectarian, or political situatedness and class affiliations as fundamentalists and terrorists, when earlier only the poor had been seen as disaffected citizens. Hence, it is from the perspective of a native ethnographer that I explore the role that dominant discourses play in hailing a community into place. My research while foregrounding questions of internal differences within what are perceived to be homogenous and monolithic communities, also questions a native ethnographer's a priori authority.

### **The Ethnographer's Authority and Mediated Resurrections of the Vampire "other"**

My fieldwork had started at a very eventful junction of summer of 2007 when global and local hostilities towards Islam were being conflated to invoke most vicious avatar of the "vampiric other". That summer ricocheting off television screens and newspaper headlines were reports bristling with self-righteousness as well as breathless excitement (almost akin to that preceding Hollywood's latest vampire film release), of three different concomitant events, which cast Muslims in particularly lurid light. Setting off panic alarms and distress signals was the bomb blast at Glasgow airport followed by the arrest of a Muslim doctor in Australia on terror charges, the seige of *Lal Masjid* in Lahore Pakistan by dissent students of the *madrasa*, and the pronouncement of judgment in 1993 Mumbai bomb blast case.

The mediated and discursive baying for the blood of the vampire "other" was at such high decibels that it started to overpower and engulf my informants' and my own consciousness

and interfere with efforts to establish ethnographic work routines. The discourses, which elicited the dominant view about the threat of fundamentalist Islam, and promoted a strategy of shock and awe to defeat it, boxed the community within artificially imposed but fixed identification as potential terrorists and perpetrators of violence. The exhaustive marking of the entire community as deviant and culpable created a diffused and inexplicable fear among us Muslims of the state surveillance and security forces, and it impinged upon and restructured my relationships with my informants. I could not have immediate access to them as their heightened sense of caution to avert any personal danger made all relationship and ties suspect. And yet the pall of gloom hanging over the community at once bonded us together, even as the factors of class and opportunity that separated us were brought into sharp relief. Hence, as we worked with our differences and tried to establish a rapport within fieldwork settings, notions of our cohesiveness were being imposed on us by dominant views about Islam and Muslims circulating in the media.

The one event which most vividly evoked the imminent danger posed by Islamic forces, and raised the urgency levels for rebutting the vampiric terror to the highest degree, was the siege of the *Lal Masjid* in Lahore by its stridently fundamentalist resident student population, much to the embarrassment of Pakistan's President Parwaiz Musharaff. The images of women clad in black *burqas* and waving batons had made headlines a few weeks earlier when the female students of the *madrasa* housed within the *masjid* had attacked, with the intention of closing down, a beauty salon in the posh district of Lahore. These very same women were now inside the mosque and supporting their male colleagues as they wielded more lethal weapons and battled with the security forces surrounding the mosque. In the mediated representations, the blackness of their attire which engulfed their entire bodies seemed to bespeak of the blackness of their

souls; even as inchoate demands of the *madrassa*'s students sounded to the world audiences, tuned into this bizarre drama, as not only unreasonable but as macabre as the vampire's desire for blood. Moreover, the bitter battle, which was being staged between the *madrassa*'s students led by fundamentalist Islamic hardliners and the Pakistani state forces, alerted the world audiences to the perils of ignoring the danger of Islam. The images also vindicated the strong-arm tactics, which were being deployed in dealing with them. A chorus of voices from world leaders strongly endorsed the fatal rebuttal to the defiant posturing of the vampire "other" and containing its threat at all costs, including high mortalities on both sides (see Mehkri & Agencies, 2007).

However, despite the highly dramatic confrontation unfolding in Lahore, I, as an Indian Muslim, was more affected by events closer to home. The madness spewing in *Lal Masjid* could be explained and even dismissed away as part of the fractured politics of Pakistani society. We, as Indian Muslims, could even console ourselves that such an event would never happen in India. Therefore, the images and their connotative associations need not concern us at all. But, the arrest of an Indian Muslim doctor in Australia, following the failed attempt at bombing the Glasgow airport, sucked the air out of our solar plexus. My informants and I closely followed the fate of Dr. Haneef, arrested in Australia, just as he was about to board a plane to India, to meet his newborn daughter. This young professional from Bangalore was implicated in a terror plot after his cousin, a PhD student in the UK, rammed a jeep full of explosives into the Glasgow airport; and though he failed in his attempt to blow up the airport, this act unleashed an explosive backlash against Islam and its followers (see Raman, 2007). In India, the media went hoarse crying that the involvement of a middle class Muslim from the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore would be the proverbial last straw to break the camel's back. The incident contradicted prevalent

beliefs that only the poor and the dispossessed among Muslims were prone to disaffection and involvement in terrorist activities. And the media claimed that after Glasgow, no Indian Muslim could be considered as being above suspicion (see Kodkani, 2007; Roshan Lal, 2007; Swami, 2007). Day in and day out, the 24-hour news channels and newspapers in India were rife with speculative reports on the antecedents of the middle class Muslim youth from Bangalore who had taken the nation by surprise. Key columnists, journalists, and television commentators dissected the history, lifestyle, and beliefs of the Muslim professionals who had taken to the path of terror (see Jayaprakash & Shiv Kumar, 2007). They juxtaposed photographs of their very ordinary Indian faces with headlines such as “New faces of terror” and insets that read “upper class and upwardly mobile in Britain’s terror plot” to express their outrage at duplicity of Indian Muslims (A. 15). Roshan Lal writes in almost hysterical terms; “Suspend the disbelief and suck back the collective gasp of horror at the emerging profile of the modern Muslim terrorist— average age 26; married; middle-class; white-collar professional” (Roshan Lal, 2007, p. A.8). The import of the collective gasps of horror, as evinced in the sensational reportage, was to rationalize increased surveillance of the Indian Muslim population. And reports with headlines such as “New age terrorist is a techie to boot” argued that the roots of global jihad may be much deeper than previously imagined, because the Muslim professionals implicated in the terror plot were not dupes of Al-Qaida, but were eager and willing participants (see Raman 2007, A. 16; Swami 2007, A.10).

Part of the angst expressed in these reports can be read as an expression of renewed anxiety about the vampiric “other” who had moved out from the dark, subterranean (read subaltern) spaces, and claimed a place under the sun. And as in the highly popular Hollywood

constructions like *Buffy the Vampire* and the *Twilight series*, the vampire was no longer the mythical, mystical “other” (Zanger, 1997), but in the guise of the average Beverly Hill teenager, he/she mingled freely with the lay population and inhabited familiar places. The vampire’s resurrection within highly recognizable trope of perpetual youth domesticated it as an object and a subject of consumption. (Latham, 2002, p. 3-19). However, unlike Hollywood’s purported rehabilitation of the vampire within categories of idealized consumption and desire, the emergence of the Muslim vampire “others” within familiar spheres as regular doctors, engineers, PhD students, and ideal consumer citizens has not mitigated but enhanced their menace. The involvement of middle class educated Muslims in a global terror plot was seen as a reaffirmation of their increased capacity to wreck havoc. Therefore, it evoked an extremely hostile reaction, not calling for a reassessment of the general impressions about Indian Muslims but also severely rebuking those who had been lax in ascertaining the extent of the potential threat by them. This included the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who in a statement issued two years earlier had said that he was very proud of the fact that no Indian Muslim had been associated with the nefarious activities of Al Qaida. Following the Glasgow attack, the *Times of India’s* (July 9, 2007) editorial, severely upbraided the Prime Minister for his naïve faith, while lambasting him for sympathizing with Haneef’s distraught mother. It’s pointed query to the Prime Minister, “Why are so many terrorists Muslims, even as most Muslims are not terrorists?” implied that now no leeway was to be given to the Muslims, and that they must all pay the price for the errant behavior of their coreligionists (Dasgupta, 2007, A. 8).

But to the Indian Muslims, the price, which they would have to pay, appeared inordinately high. And the picture released by Australian authorities of Haneef ’s hunched figure, bent over with grief and shame in his shoebox prison, where he was being held in solitary

confinement, was an unnerving indicator. The image's power to induce a chill in our bones and numb the spine was all the more potent because Haneef's involvement in the bombing was only circumstantial. He had not been in Glasgow when the bombing occurred, but far away in Australia, where he was a resident doctor in a Gold Coast hospital. His only crime had been that he had lent the SIM card of his mobile phone to his cousin Sabeer, whose brother Kafeel had been the main accused. But as Kafeel lay dying with over 80% burns on his body, his distant cousin in Australia was being interrogated by the Australian police. Haneef's case was particularly poignant because it was his generosity to his extended family that had landed him in this quandary, and cost him his career and his life. The image of his body manacled, shackled, and doubled up was not easy to forget. It hung heavily over the collective consciousness of most middle class Indian Muslims, who have struggled against many odds to seek their class privileges. The picture only reiterated the precariousness of our existence and indicated to the rest of the Muslim community that more doors would be closing on them, perpetuating their economic and social disempowerment, and prolonging their confinement to impoverished netherworlds.

The other news story with portentous consequences for Muslims announced the deliverance of the death sentence to Yakub Memom in the Mumbai bomb blast case in bold headlines that read "Justice at home and away" (see Deshpande 2007, A. 1). Mumbai the financial capital of India had been hit by a series of bomb blasts in 1993, which had killed and maimed hundreds and destroyed property worth millions of Indian rupees. The blasts, which were seen as a retaliation, had followed the demolition of a historic mosque (*The Babri Masjid*) in December 1992 and ensuing riots in which thousands of Muslims lost their lives. In July 2007,

the Muslim accused in the Mumbai blasts had been brought to trial and served severe sentences, but, even after nearly 15 years, none of those who had incited and committed violence against Muslims (including senior members of the Hindu right wing nationalist party) had been apprehended and punished with the same rigor (see Deshapande 2007b). According to Jyoti Punwani (2007), “these double standards are now part of being a Muslim in India’s ‘vibrant’ democracy” because while Muslim transgressions would be severely reprimanded, violations against them would proceed with impunity. In many ways Yakub Memon’s case was similar to Haneef’s, especially since Yakub like Haneef was also an educated middle class professional and had found himself in dire straits because of his family ties. As a certified chartered accountant, Yakub had looked after the family’s finances, and he had been charged for arranging finances to execute the blasts. But, even as his family left the country following the incident, Yakub had returned to surrender to the Indian Government to prove his innocence. He had hoped for a fair trial, but the harshest of punishments was meted out to him to serve as a warning to the entire Muslim community (see, Balakrishnan 2007). The image that accompanied the news story of Yakub Memom’s distraught wife and of her father waiting outside the court in pouring rain, like that of Haneef’s in solitary confinement, not only drew attention to the personal and human costs of the systemic injustices, but also indicated that Muslims would find it hard to expect sympathy let alone secure justice in India.

In the contexts of the highly charged defamatory discourses Muslims have emerged as the “new untouchables” of Indian society (see Nomani, 2008). After the historically disadvantaged *dalit* community, they are the new subjects who must face acute social ostracism. But I argue that the term “untouchables” has deeper significance in describing the Muslim experience in India today. It is not only because Muslim social status has fallen to even lower

than that of the untouchables or the *dalits* from being among the ruling classes a century ago (Sachar Committee, 2006). But the reason is that even as the *dalits* move forward taking advantage of constitutional guarantees for their upliftment, Muslim are consistently held back by being both excluded from affirmative action initiatives and by being actively discriminated against. The unjust conditions, which lead Muslims to occupy a position at the lowest rung of Indian society, draw attention to the role played by social and institutional structures and practices in the shaping of communal identity. Muslim experiences, as Slavoj Zizek (1997) and Lisa Duggan (2003) would argue, highlight questions of access and equity and point to issues beyond race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation in the construction of identities. However, it is not as if the social and cultural markers of identity have been dismantled. The Muslim body stridently announces its “otherness” and its distinct existence by Persianized and Arabic names, as well as, via cultural symbols of the *naquab* (the face veil), the beard, and/or the forehead bruise (created by the act of prostration during *namaz*). This “otherness” when highlighted in media images works to immediately condemn and criminalize the Muslim body and preclude any sympathetic reception. Therefore, the front-page image Yakub Menon’s wife weeping wife was unlikely to draw any compassionate reactions, despite the fact that pain clearly wrecked her tear soaked face as she waited in the pouring rain, when the death sentence was being delivered by the Mumbai High Court. Her veiled persona had already very perceptibly marked her as unworthy and incriminated her as the “vampiric other”.

Over a thousand years of Muslim presence has not created a more nuanced understanding of the Islamic culture, raising questions whether India’s famed pluralism and multiculturalism is truly representative of India’s ethos or if it is a “convenient construct of India’s nationalist



demand” (Roy, 2005, p. 9)? But in the current contexts, when rising chauvinism of Hindutva forces gains respectability by drawing on global Islamophobia, the relationship between religious denominations of Hinduism and Islam in India has only become more embittered. Today global examples are drawn on to ascribe moral turpitude to Muslims and to validate their persecution. The hounding of Muslims in Western society also provides Indian authorities an excuse for their excesses. For example, in the case of Haneef, it was not difficult for many to infer that if it took only a mere hint of suspicion for the Australian government to severely penalize a Muslim, then the Indian government with its greatly over-burdened administration and judiciary, could be forgiven for its lapses. And these failures could be especially overlooked as the involvement of middle class Indians like Haneef in the global terror plot damaged the prospects of other Indians seeking employment in the Western markets. (Karkaria, 2007; Roshan Lal, 2007b). Muslims had to be contained, as they were becoming roadblocks in India’s journey to progress; and in the firmament of “India Shinning”, they represented “the dark side of the moon” (Roshan Lal, 2007c, A11).

Media’s pronouncements on Muslims and their indignant denouncement of Muslim position supported and sanctioned the intense scrutiny which had come to bear on Muslims from the state’s security forces. But within the contexts constrained by fear of surveillance, the question that I was grappling was how do Muslim youth who are so eager to participate in the mainstream Indian society, given their rising materialist aspirations, dealing with the blatant and exaggerated “othering” which was becoming more normalized in post 9/11 contexts.

## **Deflection and Not Critique: Strategies for Survival**

I had entered my field of investigation anticipating few difficulties in situating the Muslim community and myself within the community because all-pervasive discursive unity of the Muslim “other” in the era of the global war on terror had invoked a false promise of an unproblematic entry into a homogenized space. I had counted on our shared religious identity to establish my authority, even as a native ethnographer’s sensitivity to differentiating factors of class, caste, and education had been dulled. However, even as the dominant pronouncements which have defined, contained, isolated, and stigmatized Muslim body and soul as an abhorred “other” were particularly heightened during my fieldwork in summer of 2007, I was stumped by the impossibility of finding this monolithic “other”. I had the task of reestablishing my contacts in the Jamia Nagar area, when I knew that the entire neighborhood would be crawling with secret police. The fear of surveillance not only bothered me but it made my informants equally wary. I found it difficult to even reach out those whom I thought were close to me, having spent a great deal of time with them over previous stints of fieldwork. My phone calls were ignored, my text messages were not returned, and the few who were too polite to do either and agreed to meet me, would often forget to keep the appointment. I understood that they were exercising caution because as we Muslims in our role as potential terrorists ratified vampiric horror’s most recent apparition, we even became fearsome to each other. Nobody seemed to know whom to trust. The tension between my informants and me was palpable across the barriers of silence that they erected against me. But it was my mother, who, in expressing her strong opposition to my research project, most clearly articulated how fear can tear a community apart.

My mother had always rebuked me for my interest in the state of affairs of the Muslims. She had often suggested that I should change my research focus and explore the experiences of other minorities or any other population but the Muslims. And, following Haneef's arrest in Australia, she became adamant. Referring to the surrounding conditions and discourses, which implicated Muslims in most unlawful activities, she went so far as to say, "look at how they are hated, why do you want to get involved?" (personal communication June, 23, 2007). She was deeply fearful that my associations with Muslims, no matter how innocuous, would bring harm to my life and my career in the same tortuous manner as Haneef had been hurt. In my mother's concern, the voice of an upper middle-class Muslim is clearly discernible. Its unspoken but clear intent is that if the privileges of education, social class, and mobility have allowed me to escape the targeting that is the fate of the vast majority of underprivileged and impoverished Muslims, why then must I expose myself to this risk? But she did not realize that when the entire community had come to represent wanton bloodthirstiness, class privileges would offer little protection in a context charged with the fervor of staking and erasing the vampire's evil.

However, even as the deep chasm created by class and social prerogatives, which separated me from my less socially advantaged informants, was sharply foregrounded in this interaction with my mother, I, for once, truly understood the poignant depth of the anxiety experienced by mothers of young Muslim men. According to Sultana (2006), whenever there is violent incident anywhere in the country, the mothers of Jamia enclave spend many sleepless nights fearing the wrath state security forces that targets young Muslim men. Moreover, even as I am used to the careful inspection of my person and of my travel documents at different airports of the world; and even as I am uncomfortable with the looks, the glances, and the raised eyebrows that the mere mention of my name often evokes in global entrepots, I was acutely

aware that the fear which besieged my informants was much sharper than mine. They were far more vulnerable to acts of aggression from the state. Hence, I patiently waited for them to reach out to me and even as days passed without any word from them, I knew it was but a matter of time.

Finally, after more than a fortnight since the bombing in Glasgow, I got a phone call from Faisal and Fahim, two of my informants, young men in their early twenties, and students at Jamia University, who worked part time in a courier company. I scheduled to meet them in the nearby coffee shop when they returned from work. The conversation I am about to describe is an example of how the ethnographer's own vulnerability and exposure to risk when shared with the informants, as is the case in ethnographies of violence and war, makes redundant questions of objectivity and subjectivity in field observations (see Robben & Nordstrom, 1995; Winkler & Hanke, 1995). The inability to discern the boundaries between whether one is a participant or an observer, as is poignantly but incisively argued in Winkler's and Hanke's account of a rape victim's self ethnography, invalidate criticisms of native ethnographer's a priori authority. Hence, while my research agenda demanded that I understand my informants' imbrication in the discourses of terror, my reality was that I too was affected by them.

It was 17 July, and in the previous two weeks the newspapers had focused on little else but the various incidents mentioned above. However, as we sat around sipping our coffee, I could not help but notice that all of us hesitated to address any of the highly controversial events that had put the Muslims in the spotlight. We talked about everything and anything—discussing at length the SMS (or text messaging) campaign to include *Taj Mahal* among the eight wonders of world, the duplicity of the mobile phone companies, the exploitation of nationalist sentiments

by levying high charges on subscribers and many other trivial issues. But we hedged around the events that deeply troubled us. The circuitous dance of our conversation indicates that each one of us was too afraid to trust the other. Perhaps my mother's fears resonated within me and perhaps my informants, despite my long association with them, felt uneasy with my research agenda. Green (1995) says that anthropologists working on the battlefield often find it difficult to describe in words the intense and pervasive fear that they experience. It is difficult for me to express how each one of us was aware of the gnawing unease that other was experiencing and how despite the keen awareness of the other person's unease we were unable to be honest with each other. Perhaps, the knowledge of our stigmatized "otherness", lay so heavy on our consciousness that any reference to it would make the intangible psychosis real and unbearable. The only way that we could deal with it was by avoiding a confrontation with its reality. Moreover, in a public space we restrained ourselves from dwelling on our anguish as we each knew that if others in the coffee house were to overhear us, we would immediately be slated as the "other" and we did not wish to be marked and alienated by quizzical glances. The coffee house was a microcosm of the larger world we lived in and each one of us was apprehensive of the consequences of being "othered" in different but identifiable ways. Hence, in full awareness that our fellow other shared our reticence, we continued with our charade of polite banter, circumventing the real issues, which hung heavily on our minds.

At last, the tension became too much for me. After an hour and more of coffee and meandering conversations, I, very obliquely, in very few words, in a very public place, said very quietly, "Look at what is happening around us". This was like a cue for a dam to burst. Faisal responded quietly but fervently, "*Karta koi hai bharta koi hai*" [Someone else's misdeeds and someone else has to bear the consequences]. Fahim added, "*Agar yahan naukri karni hai to*

*bahut sabar se*” [If you want to work here, earn a living, then you must exercise a lot of patience]. Faisal uttered almost under his breath, “*Sabar, sabar*” [Patience, patience] (personal communication, July 17, 2007). In a few words they told me that they condemned Kafeel’s actions for endangering the future of the whole community. They were acutely worried about the fallouts of the incident on their job prospects. They were anxious that their religious identity would prevent them from being part of the burgeoning Indian economy. It was a variation of the fear that I experienced as I crossed the border under watchful eyes, afraid of any eventuality that might prevent me from pursuing my doctoral studies.

At this moment, three Muslims from very different backgrounds (as defined by our class, education, social mobility, gender and age) were completely in communion, united by our fear of state surveillance forces combined with anxieties about our personal safety and future prospects. Speaking as if in unison, we could express our deepest concerns in a few words. The crucial communication lasted but a few minutes, a mere fraction in the two hour long conversation, but the shared religious, cultural, social and political affinities, heightened by general hostilities towards Muslims, allowed me the perspicacity to discern the desolate core that lay within each of us. It was a moment when I could unequivocally lay claim to my identity as an insider. I knew without a doubt that Fahim and Faisal understood that I identified with their plight, just as they comprehended my own apprehensions as a Muslim student in the age of Islamophobia in the West. Our differences notwithstanding, we were acutely aware of our common identity as Indian Muslims, as a minority community, and as a people who are marginalized and stigmatized in the larger public sphere. The discourses and conditions that choose to frame us one undifferentiated population, indeed facilitated new understanding by creating common causes for concern.

Though it may be difficult as mentioned earlier to pin down in words the shadow of darkness that I encountered in a flash of a moment, but with the subtle understanding of its existence I proceed to explore all summer its presence in the individual and communal identity of a people demonized as the “other” and to reflect on its corrosive effects on national politics in a plural democracy.

### **Conclusion**

My research experiences indicate that processes of “interpellation” that hail a people into place influence communal inner dynamics. It draws attention to how relationships within the community are shaped by the forces outside and that the implication there of can be best discerned by those situated within shared contexts of history, language, and social-political circumstances. According to Bourdieu (1977), native ethnographers bring to the table a more nuanced understanding of the realms of everyday life structured by language, practices, and ideology that would escape non-members. For example, the long conversation with Fahim and Faisal might have presented a dead-lock to a non-native ethnographer, but in our collective reticence, I, as a native ethnographer could read a wealth of information illuminating how experiences of discrimination, segregation, and political and social isolation bear on our common consciousness. My experiences problematize Narayan’s (1993) assertions that native ethnographers highlight the weakest links to their community, and underplay distances created by disparities in education, class and attendant social milieus. The differences between us created by indices of class, education, gender and social mobility were real, but the contexts of mass hysteria about the “vampire Muslims” created new and unexpected sympathies overcoming

boundaries of gender and class. Our fear of persecution may have made trust based on common cultural ties a scarce commodity, but the ensuing silent and unstated sympathy validated that the experiences of the vampiric “other” can only be effectively rendered by one, who too faces and fears the stigma of the corrosive labeling and “othering”. Therefore, my fieldwork points to the fact that while native ethnographers must negotiate and contend with what Murphy (1999) refers to “productive discomforts of field encounters”, very much in the same manner as non-native ethnographers; and that their authority is not automatically conferred by qualities of race, ethnicity, religion but must be slowly and carefully negotiated (see Aguilar, 1981; Ganiel & Mitchell, 2006; Kusow, 2003; Merton, 1972; Naples, 1996; Narayan, 1993; Sherif, 2001), this does not detract from native ethnographer’s unique contribution to the understanding of the research community to which they belong.



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