

Indian Muslims and the Media

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The sudden wave of interest in Islam across the world seemed to commence just after September 11, 2001. The Indian as well as the Western media, television as well as print, devoted reams of paper and time slots to report incidents ranging from stories of conversion to Islam and the booming sales of copies of the Quran. Somewhere along this line, Muslims and the media became a hot topic of discussion at various forums.

In this context of growing media attention given to Islam and Muslims, a critical issue is that of the role that the media plays in reinforcing certain negative stereotypical images of the community. Of particular importance also is the role that the Indian Muslim media is playing, and can play, in both combating these negative stereotypes and disinformation about Islam and Muslims in the 'mainstream' media, as well as helping in the process of the overall empowerment of the Muslim community.

Muslim representation in the Indian media is dismal, while Muslims' share in media ownership is even more pathetic. Muslims do not have any considerable hold over the media. In northern India, several Urdu newspapers owned by Muslims have gradually closed down or rapidly lost circulation. In contrast, Urdu dailies from centres like Mumbai, Hyderabad, Aurangabad, Kolkata and even Bangalore are doing well and look professional. Muslims are yet to have any major presence in TV channel ownership, though the two or three that exist today devote a large share of time to religious issues, rather than on other social-economic issues facing the community. Some success stories of Muslim-owned newspapers in languages other than Urdu and English are the daily *Madhyamam* in Malayalam, *Gujarat Today* in Gujarati and *Vaaritha Bharti* in Kannada, published from Mangalore. *Madhyamam* started in 1991 from Kozhikode and is now published from eight centres, including two in the Gulf. 'Gujarat Today' started nearly 20 years ago and has now achieved a circulation of around 30,000. 'Vaaritha Bharti' is three years old, and is now going in for its second edition from Bangalore. Another publication called *Tejas* from Kerala is believed to be making waves and has acquired popularity within a year of its launch. As for news and features agencies, some attempts were made in the past and FANA (Features and News Alliance) from New Delhi seemed like a trend-setter, but it unfortunately wound up.

There exist just a few Muslim magazines in English, but their circulation is small and they are read almost entirely by Muslims only. Several Muslim-owned magazines exist in languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Kannada, and Bengali.

The launch of an Urdu service of UNI, the Urdu channel of Doordarshan on August 15, 2006, and completion of six years of the Urdu channel 'ETV Urdu' from Hyderabad are distinct milestones of success as regards the Indian Muslim media. Urdu journalism courses have been started in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia, in New Delhi and the Osmania University, Hyderabad.

The quality of Urdu journalism improved in Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Aurangabad from the late 1980s and the survival of magazines like *Urdu Mein Science*, *ghayar*, *Jgagan*, *Sanaat-o-Harafat* from Kolkata and *Khatoon-e-Mashriq* from Delhi is worth mentioning. *Islamic Voice*, *Radiance*, *Milli Gazette*, *Nation and the World*, *Afkar-e-Milli* and *Al-Harmony* are a few, English magazines known nationally and run by Muslims.

Muslims often complain that the national media is biased in its coverage of issues and events pertaining to the community. The word “journalism” or “journalist” used to raise quite a few eyebrows some years ago in the Muslim community.

The media is considered a struggling profession with not particularly lucrative monetary returns. Most high-scoring students choose engineering, medicine, management, etc. as careers. Media and journalism are not on top of their mind. There are not enough takers for media scholarships among Muslim students.

A Report (June 20*06) by Anil Chamaria, Freelance Journalist; Jitendra Kumar, Independent Researcher; Yogendra Yadav, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, recently examined the social profile of media-persons working in 40 media organizations. These findings are based on a survey of the social background of 315 key decision makers from these media organizations. Its key findings reflect the sources of bias:

1. India's 'national' media lacks social diversity-It does not reflect the country's social profile.
2. Hindu 'upper' caste men dominate the media. They are about 8% of India's population but among the key decision makers of the national media their share is as high as 71%.
3. Gender bias rules: only 17 % of the key decision makers in the media are women. Their representation is better in the English Electronic media (32 %).
4. The media's caste profile is equally unrepresentative. 'Twice born Hindus (dwijas or 'twice-born' 'upper' caste Hindus, comprising Brahmins, Kayasths, Rajputs, Vaishyas and Khatri) are about 16 % of India's population, but they are about 86 % of the key media decision makers in this survey. Brahmins (including Bhumihars and Tyagis) alone constitute 49% of the key media personnel.
5. Dalits and Adivasis are conspicuous by their absence among the decision makers in the media. Not even one of the 315 key decision makers belonged to the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes.
6. The proportion of OBCs is abysmally low among the key decision makers in the national media: they are only 4 % compared to their population of around 40 % in the country.
7. Muslims are severely under-represented in the national media: they are only 3 % among the key decision makers, compared to 134% in the country's population.
8. Social groups that suffer 'double disadvantage' are also nearly absent among the key decision makers: there are no women among the few OBC decision makers and negligible 'backwards' among the Muslims and Christians.

Another most often-discussed topic in Muslim media circles is how to correct or combat the media distortion of or disinformation on Muslims and Islam in the

Indian or Western media. What role can the Muslim media, as well as other Muslim community organizations, play in addressing this very serious issue?

On December 7, 1986, the *Deccan Herald*, based in Bangalore, published a defamatory story on the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). The Muslim reaction to this began with a 10,000 strong crowd protesting before the office of *Deccan Herald* and this gradually took a violent turn. It can be asked whether this was an appropriate way for Muslims to register their protest. Whenever the media indulges in disinformation or demonstrates bias, a careful, systematic approach should be adopted:

In order to enable the Muslim media to play a more effective role in empowering the community, the following suggestions could be seriously considered :

1. Career counselling of Muslim students should be arranged by Muslim community organizations, seeking to attract them to take up a career in the media.
2. More media scholarships should be instituted by Muslim community organizations and business houses.
3. Centres for media documentation should be set up in different parts of the country, where special emphasis should be placed on documenting material related to Muslims and Islam, that appears in the press. These institutions can play a vital role as resource centres for the Muslim press and for scholars and journalists writing on Muslim or Islamic issues as well as for social activists.
4. Efforts should be made to place trained Muslim journalists in key places through a network of contacts.
5. Adequate and immediate responses should be developed to issues that the biased press uses to malign Muslims. Myths about Islam and Muslims should be debunked by a variety of means. This requires proper research..
6. Efforts should be made to seek a fair representation of Muslims, and other marginalized communities, in the already established media. This requires lobbying with agencies of the state, with social movements and with NGOs.
7. Orientation workshops should be held frequently to develop informed discussion on a range of issues, from new media technologies to issues relating specifically to Muslims. Invitees can be both Muslim and non-Muslim media persons.
8. Muslim writers and journalists who write on Islam and community-related issues should be encouraged and appreciated by the community, though the fact remains that most of them write for the cause for the community and do not really crave for fame or glory. Awards recognizing the contribution of Muslim journalists can go a long way in motivating them.
9. A network of Muslim journalists and writers in different parts of India should be formed—a forum where writers can share views, exchange ideas, plan collective efforts, etc.. This can take various forms, from a simple online discussion group to a website to a more formal organization, like an All-India Muslim Journalists' Association that holds an annual meeting, publishes a newsletter, etc..
10. Muslim organizations need to develop proper media policies. As of now, this vital issue is woefully neglected. Often, media cells in the few Muslim

organizations that have them are limited in their work to culling out articles from newspapers and filing and documenting them. Muslim organizations need to be professional in their public relations, something that few of them actually are. They need to have staff who are able to properly interact with non-Muslim media organizations and present them a proper and convincing Muslim perspective on a range of issues. The intention should be to interact cordially with the 'mainline' media and thereby help articulate the Muslim voice and to counter anti-Muslim stereotypes and disinformation.

11. Frequent meetings of leaders of Muslim community organizations with the editorial chiefs of non-Muslim newspapers and television channels will help develop a healthy rapport with them. It is often the case that whenever a Muslim group organizes a press meet, it is only Muslim journalists who are invited, leaving out the non-Muslim journalists. This ghetto mentality has to be changed.
12. Publications owned by Muslims often tend to focus more on issues pertaining to the elites or the middle-classes in the community as most of their correspondents are based in the metros. It is important to explore and report on sensitive issues and problems of Muslims in remote villages and rural areas, as well as those Muslims who live in urban slums. After all, this is where the bulk of the Muslims of India live. Sometimes, publications focus only on the metros, leaving out even major states like North-East India altogether, although some of these states have a very high proportion of Muslims. Again, a strong network of reporters in these areas is the need of the hour. Reporters need to supply news and stories not just relating to the cities and larger towns (as is often the case) but also to include within their ambit issues pertaining to the marginalized sections within the Muslim community.

Most Muslim-run publications circulate within the Muslims. They never reach the corridors of power, probably because they do not resort to aggressive marketing. They are also hardly read by non-Muslims, which means that the Muslim point of view is hardly ever heard outside the community. This is a crucial issue that needs to be seriously addressed. It is clear that the Muslim opinion or voice must indeed be heard outside the community as well, by influential non-Muslim opinion-makers, agencies of the state and by the wider, including non-Muslim, society at large. □