



CURRENTS: INDIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

## Researching India's Muslims

### Identities, methods, politics

Hilal AHMED, *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies*

This article maps out the relationship between the academic/intellectual work and political positioning of a Muslim researcher in contemporary India. It is divided into three parts. In the first part, I raise conceptual and methodological questions, especially in relation to my ongoing research on the politics of Muslim political representation. Through these questions I make an attempt to share my own anxieties and the problems that I encounter while engaging with the issues of Muslim identity. In the second part of the article, I discuss the methodological moves which I make or intend to make to deal with these questions. These moves are primarily organized as self-clarifications. In the final section, I make a broad argument for what I call *intellectual politics*.

Keywords: Muslims, Islam, intellectual politics, Citizenship Amendment Act, Hindutva

The recent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA)—a law passed by the Indian Parliament that offers citizenship to non-Muslim religious communities from three Muslim-majority states (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan)—have posed a serious intellectual dilemma for researchers and academics like me. A segment of the protesters argue, in fact quite stridently, that Muslims (including scholars and academics with Muslim names) should come forward and reclaim their Muslim identity as an affected minority. Irena Akbar, for instance writes:

If Muslims are asserting their religious identity with their religious slogans, it is because they have been targeted on account of their religion. If the state wants to bully me because of my faith, I will only publicly assert it. Hannah Arendt, the Jewish political philosopher who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, wrote, “If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man.” A democracy allows you to protest from your standpoint. An unaffected majority can protest solely as an Indian. An affected minority has the right to protest as an Indian and as a minority.<sup>1</sup>

Arguments of this kind led to a short-lived yet highly controversial debate. It began in January 2020 when the anti-CAA protests were going on throughout the country and Delhi's Shaheen Bagh had emerged as the epicenter of this new politics of resistance. A prominent Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) leader shared a video clip of a speech delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student Sharjeel Imam.<sup>2</sup> The police took swift action and Sharjeel Imam was arrested under the National Security Act. The pro-BJP media described the student as the mastermind of the anti-CAA protests. *The Organizer*, the mouthpiece of the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), published a detailed cover story on the “separatist” anti-national politics of Imam in its February 2020 print edition.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-CAA protesters were confused on this issue. There were two rather conflicting responses. The organizers of the Shaheen Bagh protest took a very clear position. In order to provide an inclusive character to the anti-CAA protests, the Shaheen Bagh Committee issued

1. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/why-i-protest-as-a-muslim-citizenship-act-lucknow-6197041/>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

2. <https://www.boomlive.in/politics/sharjeel-imams-amu-speech-sparks-row-assam-police-slaps-sedition-6662>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

3. <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-02-01&page=5>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.





a statement asserting that “no one individual’s videos, statements or articles can represent the movement.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, a segment of the protesters supported Sharjeel Imam’s freedom of expression. Some of them, in fact, recognized him as the “voice of young Indian Muslims.”<sup>5</sup>

I did not intervene in this debate directly (though I had written a few articles in newspapers and web portals on the overtly communal nature of the CAA).<sup>6</sup> I was not in India and did not have sufficient information to make any substantive comment or argument on this episode. Nevertheless, I gave an interview to the television station, NDTV, underlining the nature of BJP’s CAA politics and its keenness to appropriate the figure of Sharjeel Imam for transforming the anti-CAA protest into a Hindu-Muslim conflict. I also made it clear that although I was not fully aware of the contents of Imam’s controversial speech, I found his views objectionable and counterproductive. This minor comment was taken very seriously by pro-Imam intellectuals and activists.<sup>7</sup> I was criticized for being a passive, inactive, self-contented, arm-chaired liberal-secular intellectual, who would not dare to speak as a *Muslim*. My professional affiliations were also invoked to describe me as intellectual *elite*, who would intentionally make an unclear, tentative, less political critique of the CAA in the name of “nuanced” analysis.

I do not respond to these kinds of allegations. I find them extremely essentialist, polemical, intellectually inadequate, and politically rhetorical in nature. This type of criticism is deeply rooted in the cultural universe of Indian academic and public life. However, I do not underestimate a serious intellectual question that emerges from these criticisms: do I need to speak *only* as a Muslim? If yes, how should I deal with my professional identity as a researcher? If no, how to justify my deep cultural-philosophical associations with the version of Islam I recognize as my religion?

4. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/shaheen-bagh-sharjeel-imam-organiser-protest-assam-agitate-video-1640170-2020-01-25>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

5. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzH2RGS\\_oq8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzH2RGS_oq8). Accessed on June 4, 2020.

6. <https://theprint.in/opinion/who-represents-indias-muslims-thanks-to-caa-protests-we-now-know-the-answer/350709/>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct8pPxKZQGs>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

This short article is a modest attempt to unpack this poser. It is divided into three parts. In the first part I raise a few conceptual problems and methodological questions, especially in relation to my ongoing research on the politics of Muslim political representation in post-colonial India. Through these questions I make an attempt to share my own anxieties and the problems that I encounter while engaging with issues of Muslim identity. In the second part of this article, I discuss the methodological moves which I make or intend to make to deal with these questions. These moves are primarily organized as self-clarifications and I do not wish to present them in an instructive way. In final section, I make a broad argument on what I call *intellectual politics*.

## I. Some questions

The conceptual/political category called “Indian Muslims” poses the first kind of challenge. The Muslimness of an individual or of a group as a lived experience and the Muslim identity of a social/cultural group as an object of analysis introduce us to two very different formulations. A Muslim who lives in India may accommodate various social, cultural, linguistic, and even religious affiliations as lived experiences, without classifying them as either Indian or Islamic. However, when such lived experiences are transformed into the object of analyses, the notions of identity or identities emerge as conceptual tools by which we try to make sense of the multifaceted cultural engagements and religious-ideological commitments of an individual or a group. Thus, a number of groups and communities who live in different regions of India and in fact practice various forms of Islam invariably become “Indian Muslims” (see Faisal, this issue).

Legal-constitutional discourse in India, which recognizes Muslims as a religious minority, is another important source that provides a legal homogeneity to a pan-Indian identity of Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Indian Muslims are

8. It is worth noting that the Constitution of India introduces the terms such as *minority*, *Schedule Caste* (SC), and *Scheduled Tribe* (ST) as secular administrative categories. However, this schema changed in the 1990s. In 1992, the National Commission for Minorities Act was passed, which led to the establishment of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) in May 1993. Following this mandate, the Government of India notified five religious communities, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians (Parsis), as national religious minorities in



to be recognized not merely as individual citizens but also as members of a nationally recognized religious minority. This legal duality—secular citizenship versus minority rights as a religious community—has been one of the most contentious aspects of postcolonial Indian politics. Indian Muslims are often called a “pampered community” and the minority rights given to them are described as a sign of “Muslim appeasement” by the Hindu right wing.<sup>9</sup>

It does not, however, mean that Muslim individuals or groups do not assert their collective Islamic identity. They prefer to describe themselves as Muslims in a variety of ways. These diverse expressions of Muslimness introduce us to the ever-changing collective self-perceptions of Muslim social groups and their imagined meanings of the “Islamic *ummah*” in the Indian context.<sup>10</sup> Indian Muslim identity, in this sense, is not something that we merely discover through our research on concerned Muslim communities; rather, it has a cultural-sociological career of its own.

The Muslim identity of a researcher is another aspect of this Muslim identity poser.<sup>11</sup> The Muslim identity of a researcher helps the researcher to use his or her own experiences as a Muslim in forming the appropriate questions for respondents. Researchers’ cultural locations also give them an unprecedented access to what

may be called the innermost domain of the concerned Muslim community. However, the Muslim identity of a researcher has its own limitations. Many a time, it becomes very difficult to draw a clear dividing line between the research questions and the cultural practices and affiliations which one shares with the group or community. This becomes more complicated when Muslim researchers are asked to respond as some kind of representative of a Muslim community. In such cases, a researcher may somehow ignore the professional ethics of research and the thin dividing line between research and praxis can be compromised.

Thus, as a researcher on Muslim identity, I encounter three overlapping formulations:

- (1) There is a difference between identities as lived experiences and identities as objects of analysis.
- (2) The objectivization of identities could have many forms. Thus, there is a difference between the constitution of identities in public political discourses and the study of identities in academic discourses.
- (3) The identity of a researcher is an important element, which should not be taken as “given,” especially while doing social and political analysis.

## II. Methodological moves

### *Lived identities and research objects*

The distinction I make between identities as lived experiences and identities as objects of analysis underlines a productive tension between the research exercise and everydayness.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, we need not think of resolving this tension; rather, if we recognize it, we will be able to understand the discursive-ever-changing forms by which Islamic religiosities and imaginations of

---

October 1993. This list was amended in 2014, when Jains were notified as a national minority. For a detailed discussion, see DeSouza, Ahmed, and Alam 2019.

9. Broadly speaking, Muslim appeasement refers to at least two aspects of politics with regard to Muslims: biased institutional apparatus and unfair political practices. I have discussed the conceptual contours of the idea of Muslim appeasement in my book *Siyasi Muslims*. I argue that Muslim appeasement is not a description of an objective, sociopolitical condition of Muslims. Rather, it is a metaphor of politics, which is invoked primarily to underline the privileged position of Muslims in India. See Ahmed 2019: 185–86.
10. For an excellent discussion of Muslim self-perceptions as Muslims in the South Asian context, see Jeffrey and Sen 2014.
11. I intentionally do not wish to go into some of the stereotypical questions, such as are Muslim researchers either encouraged to work on Muslims most of the time, or do they themselves prefer to work on Muslims? Although I recognize the polemical values of such assertions, I would prefer to approach this question from a more operational point of view of research.

12. Akeel Bilgrami’s distinction between subjective and objective aspects of the concepts of identity is very useful to elaborate this point. Bilgrami rightly points out that “which of these two aspects we emphasize in our study of the concept will be a matter of theoretical decision. . . . This is to be expected . . . because our notion of identity gains so much of its interest from the fact that identities get mobilized in politics under conditions of oppression” (Bilgrami 2018: 166). Gerd Baumann’s work is also relevant to making the distinction between self-perception and a popular discourse on identities. See Bauman 1996.

collective past are constituted.<sup>13</sup> I would like to take two examples, changing mosque architecture and the language of Islam in postcolonial Delhi, to elaborate this point.

The religious demographics and sociological profile of Muslims of Delhi changed very rapidly in the 1990s. Economic liberalization, educational mobility, and the migration of middle-class Muslims from neighboring states played an important role in this regard. These changes also had a direct impact on the class configuration of Muslims. A new Muslim middle class has emerged, which is economically influential and religiously more practicing. This new middle class has embraced the Tablighi Jamaat, a religious reform movement that began in the 1930s, as its preferred form of religiosity (Ahmed 2019). The idea that Muslims should give up the ritualistic aspects of religion as well as this-worldly considerations have been quite attractive for this class. Since Tablighi Jamaat is a mosque-centric movement, it has become inevitable that this new middle class redefine the mosque space.

In last two decades, almost all the functioning mosques in Delhi have been rebuilt quite extensively—not only in terms of size but also in terms of design and architectural features. The minaret, which had never been treated as an essential or fundamental component of the built structure of a mosque, has found a new symbolic status. A considerable amount of money is now spent to provide greater visibility to minarets. In fact, there are ready-made minarets available in the market that can be installed to mark the symbolic presence of a mosque (see fig. 1).

The design and architectural features are the most interesting aspects of these new minarets. One finds that Middle Eastern Islamic architectural symbols are preferred over the conventional Indo-Islamic architectural forms of minarets and domes (fig. 2).

The most significant change is the increasing use of Hindi in religious discourses. This trend goes against the conventional view that Urdu has a deep connection with Islamic identity formation, especially in north India. The Muslim middle classes are employing Hindi for mass religious mobilization. Notice boards in mosques, on signposts, and even in epitaphs in Muslim graveyards are now being written in Devanagari script (see fig. 3). One can find Hindi versions of the Quran and Tablighi Jamaat's text *Fazae-le Amal* in almost ev-



Figure 1: “Taj Ready-made Minar”: an advertisement for ready-made minarets. Source: Author.

ery mosque. In fact, the Hindi translations of all the known commentaries of the Quran written by Indian ulama (religious scholars) are easily available.<sup>14</sup>

The use of sanskritized Hindi in the inner domains and the adoption of global Islamic architectural features in the outer domains of mosques draw our attention to a complex Muslim identity. Obviously, we cannot say that reading the Quran in Hindi would Indianize Delhi's Muslims, or that installing a green minaret would make them global jihadis! These seemingly contradictory trends, I suggest, underline the making of a particular Muslim identity, which has not yet been fully conceptualized. What is important, from our point of view, is that we must acknowledge the fact that people who recognize themselves as Muslims do not find any contradiction within their self-perception as a religious ethnic group. But, when we put these experiences into a framework of research, their everydayness turns out to be a highly complicated phenomenon. Therefore, it is imperative for us to recognize the overlap between identity as a lived experience and identity as an object of analysis and as an intellectually productive vantage point.

#### *Academic/political*

Let us move to the second distinction that I make between the constitution of Muslim identities in public and political discourses and the study of Muslim identities in academic discourses. This distinction is quite

13. For a similar and elaborated discussion on this point, see Sökefeld 2001.

14. Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind's commissioned translation of the Quran was sent to some Hindi experts, including Kanhaiya Lal Mishr “Prabhakar,” for their approval so that an “authentic” Hindi version could be produced (Madani and Mohammad 1992).



**Figure 2:** Mosques and minarets of Delhi. Source: Author.

problematic. Theoretically, it is almost impossible to detach political discourses from academic discourses. Instead of proposing any definitional logic for such a distinction, at least theoretically, I suggest that the elusiveness of the boundaries between the academic and political needs to be taken seriously not as a problem of definition rather as a point of departure to examine the intellectual processes by which the academic and the political are constituted in postcolonial India, especially in relation to Muslim identity.

It is important to note that Indian nationalism produced an interesting category called “public intellectuals” (Thapar 2015). Political elites not merely act as politicians in a conventional sense of the term but also functioned as intellectuals. They produced politically logical and intellectually persuasive arguments to mobilize people to their cause. There are many examples of this intellectual tradition. For instance, philosopher Muhammad Iqbal’s famous poem “Shikwa” (“A complaint,” 1909) which questions Allah’s promise to protect Muslims and B. R. Ambedkar’s celebrated lecture “Annihilation of caste” were not meant for any academic public. Iqbal recited his controversial poem in a *mu-shaira* (symposium of poets), while Ambedkar was supposed to deliver his lecture at a public function (Ambedkar, 1936).

Post-Partition Indian political realities posed challenges of very different kinds. Muslim identity, especially

in the 1950s and 1960s, was either seen in the framework of nationalism vs. separatism, or in the framework of tradition vs. modernity. In fact, in 1964 when so-called nationalist/modernist Muslims mainly associated with the Congress party attempted to form a pan-Indian Muslim consultative body called the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushwarat, they were criticized for encouraging separatism.

This kind of Muslim identity formation in public discourse evoked very interesting intellectual responses. The people who started conducting research on Muslim communities argued that the study of non-Hindu societies in India could only illuminate the unity-in-diversity principle in the true sense of the term. Imtiaz Ahmad, for example, wrote in 1972 that “Greater attention must be paid to non-Hindu societies if our aim is to build a comprehensive sociology of India . . . [otherwise] . . . we may have Hindu, Muslim or Christian sociology, but hardly a sociology of India” (Ahmad 1972: 177).

This argument is simply a clear reflection of what may be called an agenda to bring non-Hindus (read Muslims) into the mainstream of academics. This quest for theoretically informed and empirically rich ethnographic work on Muslims paved the way for an intellectual position that is often called the “assimilation thesis” (Ahmed 2014). This thesis draws our attention to the diversity of Muslim communities intersected by religious, regional, linguistic, class, clan/caste, and gendered differences.

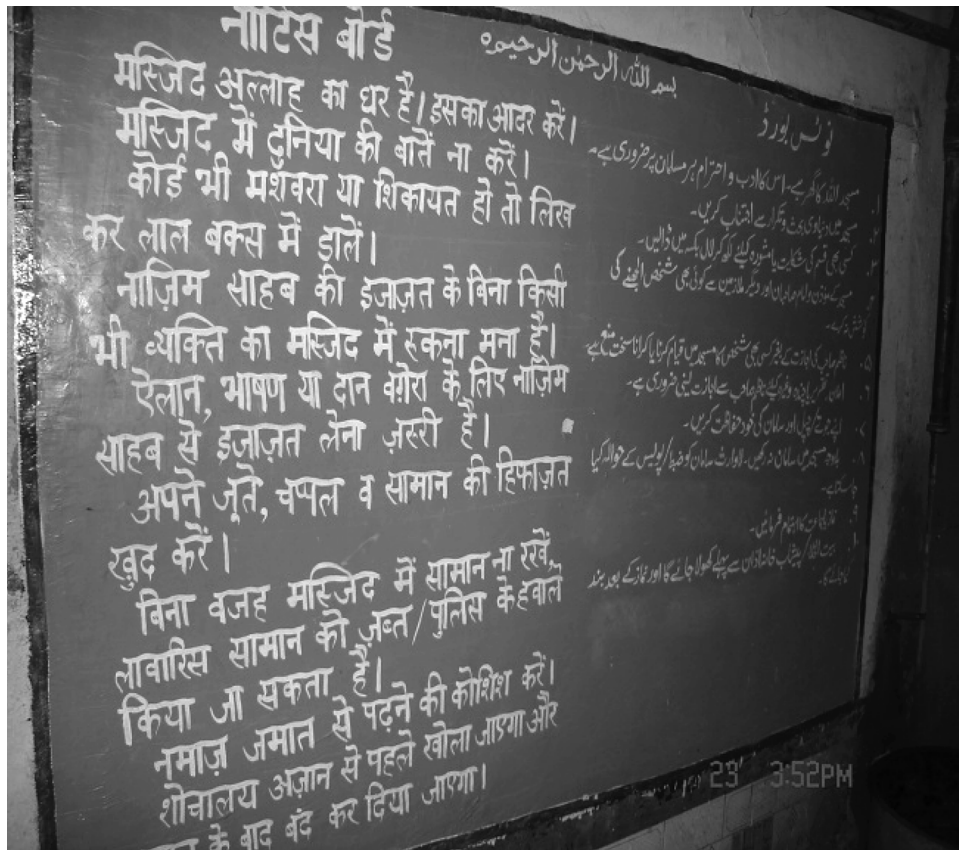


Figure 3: “Notice Board: Masjid Allah ka ghar hai”: Hindi notice board in an Old Delhi mosque.

This intellectual position was invoked not merely to respond to the primordialists like Francis Robinson, who claimed that Islam would remain the dominant source of Muslim politics, but also to communal leaders of all kinds.<sup>15</sup> Ahmad wrote in 1981:

Muslim fundamentalists may assert and maintain that there is one, only one version of what is orthodox from the Islamic point of view and whatever does not conform to it is to be dismissed as heterodox. . . . Clearly it seems to me that Islamists’ vision has tended to obscure the inherent and underlying pluralism within Indian Islam as a practised religion. (Ahmad 1981: 18)

15. Robinson writes, “there would appear to be a tendency amongst Muslims to organize in politics on the basis of their faith . . . where Muslims form a minority. There frequently springs up a demand that Muslims should be organized as a separate political community” (Robinson 1979: 78).

The strength of Ahmad and others’ argument was that they responded to the public debates on Muslim identity as well as the certain academic stereotypes in intellectually sophisticated and methodologically rigorous ways. In fact they developed a *political* position and provided logical intellectual arguments in favor of it.

Ahmad’s thesis on Muslim diversity, which was the outcome of a serious intellectual engagement with Muslim communities in a particular context, transformed into a dominant intellectual paradigm in later years. The debate on secularism in India revived this paradigm in an interesting manner in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> After the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, Indian politics was divided into two identifiable fractions: a dominant coalition of political parties, groups, and intellectuals who described themselves as secular. And, an emerging coalition of Hindutva forces that claimed to represent

16. For an excellent discussion on this point, see Kaviraj 2013.

Hindu nationalist interests.<sup>17</sup> This political divide also had a direct impact on intellectual discourses, especially with regard to Muslims. The intellectual arguments that were produced mainly in relation to Muslim social stratifications and diversity were extended to justify an extremely vague and politically correct notion of secularism.

Mushirul Hasan's book *Legacy of a divided nation: India's Muslims since Independence* (1997) is a relevant example in this regard. Criticizing Muslim politics of "minorityism" practiced by Muslim politicians and religious elites, Hasan talks about Muslim liberal-modernist intelligentsia, who according to him, represent a truly secular Muslim culture. He writes:

. . . the intelligentsia—artist and intellectual—creates mirrors through which we see ourselves and *windows* through which we perceive reality. It is these mirrors and windows that define the boundaries of ideas and institutions. The intelligentsia's role—both as creators of a cultural outlook and the product of the milieu—is central to this writer's view of what happened in India in general and among certain Muslim groups in particular. (Hasan 1997: 227)

Hasan identifies three broad characteristics of these secular Muslims: they fight to protect the basic Nehruvian model of Indian democracy; they believe that communalism and Hindu-Muslim strife need not imply the failure

of secular experiments; and finally they inherit these values from their nationalist-secular-progressive families.

The third characteristic of secular Muslim intelligentsia is very interesting. Hasan discusses the family background of these secular-modernists to highlight an "Indian Muslim secular tradition." Emphasizing the secular contribution of a few progressive Muslim families, Hasan talks about the family of Mohammad Habib (an Aligarh historian), his brother Mohammad Mujeeb, and Habib's son Irfan Habib, who contributed a lot to the secularization of India; the family of journalist Seema Mustafa, "who is a part of the Kidwai clan, the home of Rafi Ahmad Kidwai. Her grandmother was a freedom fighter and social activist; the family of Hasan Suroor, a London based journalist, whose father, despite being a British civil servant, was a sympathiser of Congress and whose mother gave up her *burqa* (veil) to participate in social activities" (Hasan 1997: 320). Hasan concludes that these progressive Muslim secular intellectuals inherited secular values from their families and upheld the cause of secularism in India.

This description of secular-progressive Muslim intelligentsia as representative of Muslim secularism is highly problematic. It seems that Hasan wants a few professional, English-educated individuals and families to speak on behalf of Muslim communities of India—primarily because of their expressed commitment to Nehruvian secularism. An argument of this kind goes well with the good Muslim/bad Muslim framework—an established template of Muslim politics in India.<sup>18</sup> In my view, Hasan seems to deviate from the established procedure of research; instead, he relies heavily on the dominant political rhetoric of secularism to justify his intellectual position as a Muslim secularist.<sup>19</sup>

17. This political divide was deeply associated with the Ayodhya controversy. This legal dispute originated in the nineteenth century when it was claimed that the Babri Masjid—a sixteenth-century mosque built by the first Mughal emperor Babar in the north Indian city of Ayodhya—was actually constructed on the site where Hindu God Lord Rama was born. In December 1949, the mosque was illegally occupied by the local Hindu crowd. This Hindu mob installed idols of lord Ram in the mosque and transformed it into a temple. The mosque was taken over by the administration and was closed to both communities. However, the idols were not removed from the mosque. A Hindu priest was officially appointed to worship these idols. This led to a series of legal cases over the ownership of site. In 1986, a local court allowed the Hindus unrestricted worship of the idols. The Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, officially launched a movement for constructing a Hindu temple on this site in 1987. The structure of the mosque was demolished by a Hindu mob led by a few BJP leaders in 1992. The Supreme Court of India finally gave its verdict in favour of Hindus on a few technical grounds in 2019. For detailed discussion, see Ahmed 2014.

18. For a conceptual discussion of the idea of good Muslims and bad Muslims in Indian politics, see Ahmed 2019.

19. In an interview, Rajni Kothari elaborates this point. He said: 'the task of intellectuals is not limited to the study of the critical role played by politics at various levels; they also have to develop various critiques of existing politics. I also suggest that intellectuals must intervene in the political process by linking critical ideas to political debates. In this framework, intellectual intervention finds a legitimate space. I also believe that there should be a space for criticism and self-criticism in our thinking. If we close the possibility of criticism, the gap between ideas and processes will increase. It will restrict our role as intellectuals in society' (Ahmed, Vijaisri, and Dubey 2012).



Unlike Ahmad, Hasan's political position remains elusive, vague, and overtly rhetorical.

*The identity of the researcher*

This discussion brings us to the third issue: the question of researchers' identity. It is important to note that the positionality of a researcher is not a new question in anthropology and sociology (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). However, in political analysis, especially in India, we have not yet given adequate attention to this issue, even in those cases where ethnographic methods are used to collect data and information. In any case, this is a highly complicated question, with many ifs and buts. Furthermore, I do think that I am competent enough to answer this question in this paper. For this reason, I try to reformulate it and ask: how does the identity of a researcher affect the operational and inter-actional aspects of research?

In 2001–2002, Syed Ali, a US-based researcher, conducted an ethnographic study of the Muslim caste in Hyderabad. At the end of his article he shared his field-work experience. He wrote:

As a Muslim studying Muslims, I was privy to certain types of information that other ethnographers may not have had access to. But as a Syed, I was perhaps excluded from certain types of information, since respondents may have assumed that I held some factional affiliation. I did not feel that my being a Syed excluded me, as no one I interacted with asked about my caste until I inquired about his or hers, which usually did not occur until well into the interviews. My caste was never a factor with people I interacted with more closely. I also had to fight the assumptions that because I am Hyderabad (or at least my parents are), I understood the rituals and underlying social meaning of different events. Usually this was not the case. I became jealous of white, Western ethnographers I met during field research because they often were treated better than I under the assumption that they were ignorant and needed to be instructed in detail. However, there were many things that I was privileged to be told or shown from which they were led away. (Ali 2002: 616)

Ali's statement underlines the point that I made at the beginning of this article, that the Muslim identity of a researcher really matters in ethnographic fieldwork. But what is interesting in this account is the manner in which researcher's own Muslim identity is reconstituted by the people, who were identified by him as the subject of analysis. It shows that the "object" of research also reshapes the identity of a researcher.

This valuable inference, however, should not be taken as a ready-to-use formula. One must be aware of an inherent theoretical problem associated with it, which may be called the "experience syndrome." There is a strong possibility that one begins to invoke his or her personal experiences as a Muslim researcher working on Muslim communities in an overtly autobiographical manner. A claim can be made that such Muslim experiences are unique and argumentatively justifiable. Although this position is fairly convincing, I find such assertions analytically unhelpful in two ways. First, the individual experiences cannot be generalized. For instance, experiences of a Muslim male researcher are going to be very different from a Muslim female researcher. They both can certainly draw insights from each other's experiences. Yet, we cannot ignore the significance of factors like caste, class, or educational status of a researcher in determining the actual research encounters. The experience of being a Muslim and a Muslim researcher, hence, has its own limits. There is a second and more profound problem, as well. If Muslim experiences are recognized as a legitimate intellectual form to provide analytical coherence to research narratives, why cannot this privilege be given to a Hindu researcher working on Hindu communities? After all, the Indian academic and political discourses have been suffering from the problem of competing victimhood for a long time.

### III. Intellectual politics

Peter DeSouza offers us an insightful argument to go beyond the experience syndrome. Problematizing the nature of intellectual work in the Indian context, he writes:

The public intellectual has to carry both the persona of the autonomous intellectual and the advocate of social causes equally within himself or herself, sometimes allowing the one to dominate, sometimes the other. It is the tipping point that will determine when one yields to the other, when one recognizes in the political context the need for a particular persona to be in the foreground. (DeSouza 2015: 79)

The idea of a tipping point, in my view, needs to be elaborated. I find three possible expressions of it. First, we must distance ourselves from the people and communities we research. This creative and critical distancing is important because as researchers we are always in a privileged position. Our research output often gives us public visibility, professional gains, and upward mobility. At the same





time, we also have access to different sets of information, which are not easily available to the communities we work in and participants we work with. Our academic and professional location, in this sense, must be acknowledged; and precisely for this reason, a creative-critical distance is always required to practice what is often described as the research ethics.

Second, we must pay close attention to the descriptive aspects of our academic narratives. It is important to emphasize that researchers interpret communities, groups, and phenomena by employing various hermeneutic strategies. These interpretive exercises are not based on what a researcher discovers in his or her research encounter; rather they are an outcome of his or her analytical investment in the subject of research. Thus, one must spell out the nature of these interpretative schemes for the sake of intellectual transparency.

Finally, the nature of arguments and the conclusions we draw from our research encounter are also very important. There is a commonsensical view that intellectual and academic arguments are delicate, tentative, and open-ended, while political arguments and positions are concrete and inflexible.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is superficial and unhelpful. Deep engagement with any phenomenon—intellectual or political—is bound to produce argumentative openness. Gandhi's defense of his political inconsistencies, for example, underlines the context-specific nature of his intellectual arguments.<sup>21</sup> A researcher, therefore, is expected to produce intellectually informed and politically driven arguments in such a manner that his or her readers may be able to draw their own political inferences.

This brings us back to the assertion of Irena Akbar: a Muslim must speak as a Muslim. As a Muslim researcher, my answer is simple: I do not want to give up my identity as a Muslim; yet, at the same time, I do not want to speak only as a Muslim. I practice an intellectual politics that encourages me to take a political position without compromising the established protocols, procedures, and ethics of my profession as an academic.<sup>22</sup>

20. For a detailed discussion on this point, see Ahmed 2012.

21. Gandhi wrote: "I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. . . . therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject" (Gandhi 1938: 2).

22. For a detailed discussion on the idea of intellectual politics in the Indian context, see Ahmed 2013.

## References:

- Ahmad, Imtiaz. 1972. "A sociology of India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* New Series, 6.
- Ahmad, Imtiaz, ed. 1981. *Ritual and religion among Muslims in India*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Ahmed, Hilal. 2012. "Fictions of intellectual politics: Manto." *Social Scientist* 472–473: 31–41.
- . 2013. "Asghar Ali engineer: Emancipatory intellectual politics." *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII (22): 20–22.
- . 2014. *Muslim political discourse in India: Monuments, memory, contestation*. London, New Delhi: Routledge.
- . 2019. *Siyasi Muslims: A story of political Islams in India*. New Delhi: Penguin-Random House.
- Ahmed, Hilal, Priyadarshini Vijaisri, and Abhay Kumar Dubey. 2012. "The centre and Indian realities: Interview with Rajni Kothari." *Seminar* 639, November 2012.
- Ali, Syed. 2002. "Collective and elective ethnicity: Caste among urban Muslims in India." *Sociological Forum* 17 (4): 593–620.
- Ambedkar, B.R. 1936. *Annihilation of Caste*. [https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc\\_print\\_2004.pdf](https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf).
- Baumann, Gerd. 1996. *Contesting culture: Discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. 2018. "Identity." In *Political concepts: A critical lexicon*, edited by J. M. Bernstein, Adi Ophir, and Ann Laura Stoler, 159–66. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DeSouza, Peter R. 2015. "Living between thought and action." In *The public intellectual in India*, edited by Romina Thapar, 79–100. New Delhi: Aleph.
- DeSouza, Peter R., Hilal Ahmed, and Mohamad Sanjeer Alam. 2019. *Democratic accommodations: Minorities in contemporary India*. New Delhi and London: Bloomsbury.
- Gandhi, M.K. 1938. *Hind Swaraj*. Ahmadabad: Niavjivan Trust.
- Hasan, Mushirul. 1997. *Legacy of a divided nation: India's Muslims since Independence*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Iqbal, Muhammad. 2006 (1909). Shikwa. English Translation: <http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/30200>.



- Jeffrey, Robin, and Ronojoy Sen, eds. 2014. *Being Muslim in South Asia: Diversity and daily life*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta. 2013. "Languages of secularity." *Economic and Political Weekly* 48 (50): 93–102.
- Madani, Arshad, and Sulaiman Mohammad. 1992. *Preface to the Quaran Sharif: Anuwad and Vyakhya* (Hindi. *Holy Quran: Translation and Explanation*) Delhi: Jamiat Ulama-e-Hindi.
- Robinson, Francis. 1979. "Islam and Muslim separatism." In *Political identity in South Asia*, edited by David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp, 78–112. London: Curzon Press.
- Sökefeld, Martin. 2001. "Reconsidering identity." *Anthropos* 96 (2): 527–44.
- Thapar, Romina, ed. 2015. *The public intellectual in India*. New Delhi: Aleph.

Hilal AHMED is Associate Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, in India, and Fellow at the Nantes Institute for Advanced Studies, in France. He works on political Islam, Muslim politics of representation, and politics of symbols in South Asia. His first book, *Muslim political discourse in postcolonial India: Monuments, memory, contestation* (Routledge, 2014), explores these thematic concerns to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Muslim politics. His recent works, *Siyasi Muslims: A story of political Islam in India* (Penguin-Random House [New Delhi], 2019) and *Democratic accommodations: Minorities in contemporary India* (with Peter R. DeSouza and Sanjeer Alam; Bloomsbury, 2019) further elaborate these themes and make a modest attempt to explain the discursively constituted contemporary Muslim political discourse in India.

Hilal Ahmed  
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies  
29 Rajpur Road  
New Delhi 110054  
India  
[ahmed.hilal@csds.in](mailto:ahmed.hilal@csds.in); [ahmed.hilal@gmail.com](mailto:ahmed.hilal@gmail.com)

