



A Fast of Dedication and Defiance: The Politicisation of Ramadan

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rātoñ ko chalne vaale rah jaa. eñ thak ke jis dam

ummīd un kī merā TuuTā huā diyā ho

bijlī chamak ke un ko kuTiyā mirī dikhā de

jab āsmāñ pe har sū bādal ghirā huā ho

pichhle pahr kī koyal vo sub.h kī mo. azzin

maiñ us kā ham-navā huuñ vo merī ham-navā hoⁱ

[When night's travellers falter behind with fatigue

Their only hope my broken earthenware lamp may be;

May the lightning lead them to my hut

When clouds hovering over the whole sky be;

The early dawn's cuckoo, that morning's mu'adhdhin

May my confidante he be, and may his confidante I be.]ⁱⁱ

In Sir Muhammad Iqbal's poem, *A Longing*, even something as small as a broken lamp can serve as a beacon for weary travellers. Even a flash of lightning violently striking the ground can point

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the direction towards shelter. When the dawn heralds the night, the cuckoo, like the morning's mu'adhdhin, announces the arrival of a new day, and provides faith and renewed hope.

For millions of Muslims scattered across the Indian subcontinent, the occasion of Ramadan is a time symbolising devotion and unified discipline. Yet, for just as many, be it in mosques, city streets or even their homes history shows that it has manifested as a period riddled with hostility towards the Muslim community.

Like the broken lamp in Iqbal's *Longing*, Ramadan has always been a guiding force for the society, especially for Muslims. The systematic antagonization of Muslims and their religious practices is not about enforcing any form of safety but power; the power over who gets to practice their faith freely and who must seek permission. The lightning that cracks through the storm, though fierce, has never meant to destroy, but to brighten the world before us. And those who truly listen, like the mu'adhdhin and the dawn's cuckoo, will understand that the call to prayer is never a call for division, but for harmony.

This piece aims to explore the politicisation of Ramadan, how it has been regulated and restricted across history. Drawing from Iqbal's ideals of self-determination and contemporary accounts of discrimination, this article seeks to unravel the weaponization of religious identity and how we must move towards ensuring justice, equity, and true religious freedom for all Muslims.

The Past: A History of Islam, Colonialism, and Suppression of Ramadan

During the colonial rule of the British over present-day India, the act of fasting, such as the many fasts undertaken by M.K. Gandhi against a variety of sociological struggles,ⁱⁱⁱ was interpreted as an act of defiance. Fearing that such festive congregations served as potential rallying points for nationalist movements, colonial authorities closely conducted surveillance of mosques and madrasas. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 led to restrictions imposed on public religious assemblies, with fasting Muslims often suspected to harbour revolutionary ideas against the colonial state^{iv}. The British's imposition of heavy taxation made it difficult for many Muslims^v to afford the necessary provisions to abide by their fasting and for the subsequent preparation of iftar. Although the British never banned the observance of Ramadan, they enforced policies that prompted the suppression of Islamic traditions and culture by restricting the usage of Islamic symbols.

As one of the leading influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Iqbal rejected the colonial framing of Islam as a passive faith. He instead advocated for its role in encouraging social justice by viewing Ramadan as a signal for a political awakening within the country. Even today, Iqbal's ideals remain deeply relevant, as Ramadan continues to be probed by governments seeking to suppress Muslim identity under the guise of national security.

The Present: Contemporary Surveillance and Discrimination

Over the recent years, Ramadan festivities have grown increasingly politicised, with mosques being metamorphosed into a hub for surveillance activity conducted by authorities^{vi}. Communal slogans are chanted against Muslim prayers, restrictions are placed on mosque loudspeakers, citing noise pollution concerns, as against Hindu religious congregations, which go on uninterrupted even after midnight^{vii}. Authorities have disrupted gatherings facilitating Taraweeh prayers by terming such assemblages as “unauthorised” under the pretext of maintaining “law and order.”

Vigilante groups have used Ramadan as an opportunity to harass and attack Muslim food vendors. Calls for boycotting Muslim-owned businesses driven by majoritarian communal rhetoric^{viii} threaten the vendors' financial stability, offered by increased sales during the festive period. Right-wing groups assert a form of “Hindu economic nationalism”^{ix} as justification to reinforce anti-Muslim sentiment during a time meant for spiritual reflection and communal bonding. The demolition of Muslim-owned properties and prayer sites under the guise of anti-encroachment drives are activities that have also disproportionately affected Muslims^x during Ramadan.^{xi} Social media algorithms are weaponised to portray fasting Muslims as plotting outright separatist behaviour.^{xii} Educational institutions have also emerged as sites of contention- Muslim students have reported facing pressure to break their fasts, with some schools prohibiting fasting programmes under claims of health concerns^{xiii}.

In the past decade, the criminalization of visible Muslim identity markers-hijab, taqiyah, beards-have extended into Ramadan observances, reinforcing the polarizing notion that Islamic religious observances are incompatible with national identity.^{xiv} Such a degree of invasiveness of a sacred observance not only alienates the Muslim community but also fuels larger debates about India's secularism, particularly state apathy in addressing anti-Muslim aggression.

The Future: Legal and Sociological Approaches Towards Justice

Despite the religious autonomy promised by India's constitutional framework, Muslims live in a hostile climate of alienation, and targeted violence^{xv}, especially during Ramadan. Sociological policy interventions must address systemic discrimination faced by Muslims whilst ensuring religious freedoms remain protected.

India lacks a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation explicitly protecting religious minorities in public spaces. Firstly, a Religious Freedoms' Protection and Redressal Act can criminalize violent activities conducted on communal grounds. Secondly, arbitrary restrictions on iftar gatherings and targeted anti-encroachment drives can be contested through Public Interest Litigations (PILs) by leveraging Articles 14 (Right to Equality)^{xvi}, 19 (Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression)^{xvii}, and 25-28 (Religious Rights)^{xviii} of the Indian Constitution^{xix}. Thirdly, while, Rule 3(1)(b)(ii) of the Information Technology Rules, 2021 outlines requirements for "intermediaries" to ensure that they do not spread information that promotes religious hostilities,^{xx} as well as the law's Appendix II (a)(c) instructing publishers to "exercise due caution"^{xxi} regarding content about religious groups, the procedure of disseminating intent-a requirement which exists in the rules, becomes tricky as platforms censor such disinformation using algorithms^{xxii}. As content regulation within these platforms remains inconsistent, this complication is taken to the next level by the *modus operandi* of the Fact-Checking Unit (FCU) that was struck down by the Bombay High Court in 2024 as it constituted unreasonable restrictions upon the freedoms of speech and expression^{xxiii}.

Therefore, a revised strategy must be implemented to focus on combating religion-based and hate-driven falsehoods, such as the propagation of Islamophobic tropes. Solutions can involve establishing a registry of certified independent fact-checking organisations vetted by a committee comprising multiple stakeholders such as civil societies and press guilds, fostering a system of checks and balances to evaluate information posing contextual risk that remains outside of executive influence and control. These platforms can also be mandated to transparently report quarterly data on takedowns flagged as religion-targeted disinformation, thus deterring misuse of media platforms and enforcing systemic fairness in addressing hate speech within the mainstream media.

Often the law enforcement turns a blind eye to Ramadan-related hate crimes. Therefore, instituting a Religious Rights Grievance Cell under the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) could facilitate swift legal recourse and encourage the judiciary to remain proactive vis-à-vis combating mob rhetoric. To counter economic-based discrimination, Indian Muslims can build stronger cooperative business networks by investing in their own businesses and thus, protecting their financial autonomy^{xxiv}.

Finally, conducting public legal awareness drives, such as the campaigns conducted for the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, can inform Muslims of legal remedies available under sections 196 (Promoting Enmity Between Groups)^{xxv}, and 299 (Deliberate Acts to Outrage Religious Feelings)^{xxvi} of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. These solutions, if implemented, would serve vitally in preserving India's pluralistic ethos.

A deep sense of marginalization is reflected in India's struggle to freely observe Ramadan. However, protecting religious freedoms must always be an active, collective effort. Just as Iqbal believed in faith as a force for liberation, Indian Muslims and their allies can reclaim Ramadan as a symbol of perseverance and dedication.

ⁱ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, 'Ek Aarzu' <<https://www.rekhta.org/nazms/ek-aarzuu-duniyaa-kii-mahfilon-se-uktaa-gayaa-huun-yaa-rab-allama-iqbal-nazms>> accessed 10 May 2025.

ⁱⁱ Sir Muhammed Iqbal, 'A Longing' (3 March 2004) <<https://allpoetry.com/A-longing>> accessed 4 April 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anindita Basu, 'Gandhi and His Fasts' (*Swarajiya*, 2 October 2015) <<https://swarajyamag.com/politics/gandhi-and-his-fasts>> accessed 7 April 2025.

^{iv} Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press 1982), 86.

^v David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (University of California Press 1988), 112-113.

^{vi} Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Muslim Communities of India: Representation, Identity, and Marginalization* (Manohar Publishers 2003), 74.

^{vii} Rajesh Kumar, *Religious Politics in Contemporary India* (Routledge 2019), 151.

^{viii} Patralekha Chatterjee, 'Economic Boycott of Muslims: All of Us Lose in the Long Run' (*Deccan Herald*, 15 April 2022) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/economic-boycott-of-muslims-all-of-us-lose-in-the-long-run-1100994.html>> accessed 7 April 2025.

^{ix} Akshita Prasad, 'Economic Violence: How Hindutva Hurt India's Muslims By Targeting Livelihoods' (*Maktoob Media*, 18 November 2024) <<https://maktoobmedia.com/features/economic-violence-how-hindutva-hurt-indias-muslims-by-targeting-livelihood/>> accessed 6 April 2025; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press 2022), 237.

^x Al Jazeera, 'Why is Amnesty Urging India to Halt Bulldozing of Muslim Properties?' (*Al Jazeera*, 7 February 2024) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/7/why-is-amnesty-urging-india-to-halt-bulldozing-of-muslim-properties>> accessed 7 April 2025.

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- ^{xi} Iqbal Ansari, *Communal Riots and Civil Liberties: The Case of Post-Partition India* (Orient Blackswan 2021), 198.
- ^{xii} Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg, 'Muslims in Social Media Discourse: Combining Topic Modelling and Critical Discourse Analysis' (2016) 13 Science Direct 132; Sabina Civila, Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez and Amparo Civila, 'The Demonization of Islam through Social Media: A Case Study of #StopIslam in Instagram' (2020) 8(4) Publications 52.
- ^{xiii} Ghazala Khan, *Muslim Identity in Contemporary India: Challenges and Aspirations* (Sage Publications 2023), 48.
- ^{xiv} Dr. Naved Bakali, 'Islamophobia and the Law: Unpacking Structural Islamophobia' (*Yaqeen Institute*, 19 November 2019) <<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/post/islamophobia-and-the-law-unpacking-structural-islamophobia>> accessed 5 April 2025; Swaliha Asiya, 'From Banning Hijabs in Colleges to Arresting People for Offering Namaz, The Criminalisation of Islam and Muslim Identity in Public Spaces in India' (*The Cognate*, 31 July 2022) <<https://thecognate.com/from-banning-hijab-in-colleges-to-arresting-people-for-offering-namaz-india-is-criminalizing-islam-and-muslim-identity-in-public-spaces/>> accessed 5 April 2025.
- ^{xv} Sara Ather, 'This Eid, Muslims in India Face Repression and Erasure of Their Cultural Identity' (*Middle East Eye*, 11 April 2024) <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/india-muslim-eid-repression-erasure-cultural-identity>> accessed 5 April 2025; The New Arab Staff, 'Hindu Nationalist Mob' Attacks Muslim Students During Ramadan Prayers' (*New Arab*, 18 March 2024) <<https://www.newarab.com/news/india-mob-attacks-muslim-students-during-ramadan-prayers>> accessed 5 April 2025.
- ^{xvi} Constitution of India, art. 14, (1950)
- ^{xvii} Ibid., art. 19.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., art. 25-30.
- ^{xix} Gautam Bhatia, *The Transformative Constitution: A Radical Biography in Nine Acts* (HarperCollins, 2022), 89.
- ^{xx} The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021, Rule 3(1)(b)(ii).
- ^{xxi} Ibid., Appendix II (a)(c).
- ^{xxii} Liberation, 'New IT Rules 2021: An Agenda of Surveillance, Control and Manipulation of Public Discourse' (*Liberation*, 25 July 2021) <<https://liberation.org.in/detail/new-it-rules-2021-an-agenda-of-surveillance-control-and-manipulation-of-public-discourse>> accessed 4 April 2025.
- ^{xxiii} The Hindu, 'Unwarranted curbs: On the Centre's move on a 'fact-checking unit'' (*The Hindu*, 25 September 2024) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/unwarranted-curbs-on-the-centres-move-on-a-fact-checking-unit/article68670842.ece>> accessed 4 April 2025.
- ^{xxiv} Ghazala Khan, *Muslim Identity in Contemporary India: Challenges and Aspirations* (Sage Publications 2023); 112, 127, 138.
- ^{xxv} Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, Section 196.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid., Section 299.