Different kinds of difference

Being Muslim in South Asia: Diversity and Daily Life

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HILAL AHMED

Let us locate these ideas in the wider intellectual context of what is called the Muslim diversity thesis. We must note that as a self-conscious intellectual and metropolitan, the Muslim diversity thesis emerged in the 1900s. It was actually a reaction to the oversimplified colonial definitions of South Asian Muslim identity, which dominated the academic discussions on Pan-Islamism and/or South Asian Muslim identity. The pithy breaking words of Imtiaz Ahmad and TN Madan and the famous Paul Briss-Francis Robinson debate on South Asian Muslim identity contributed to the discussions on Muslim diversity in a significant way. The rise of religious politics in South Asia legitimised the Muslim diversity thesis as a "secular-liberal position." Hindu politics in India and various forms of radical Islamic politics in Pakistan and Bangladesh reinforced religious homogeneity as a preferred mode for doing mobilisation politics. The Muslim diversity thesis, in such a scenario, was capable of deconstructing, at least intellectually, the logic of imposed homogeneity on all those communities, which do not fully subscribe to the political project of radical religious politics. In this, the famous Fazal and Forstner Tschacher in this book are quite significant in this regard. These two essays give new directions to the Muslim diversity thesis. Fazal, for instance, brings in the issue of caste diversity for questioning the established image of a single Indian Muslim community. Tschacher, on the other hand, problematises the given north-India-centric analytical models and sketches out a broad argument for making sense of the distinctiveness of South Indian (Tamil) Muslim communities.

The creative articulations of "being Muslim" in different contexts is the second significant idea that emerges from the book. Dennis McGlennon, Salim Lakhia, Arif Nasul, Mathew J Nelison and Muhammad Hassen under the facets of Muslim experiences. These creative articulations, it is suggested, stem from concrete social-cultural realities. Arif Nasul, in his essay argues that the "ordinary Muslims simply 'become' Muslim in variety of sites and contexts. They draw upon the ideological diversity of their own educational landscape and, then having done so, they go on to reframe that landscape according to their own circumstances." (p 180)

Finally, the essays by Irshad Ahmad and Khaled Ahmed problemata the discourse and metadiscourse of political Islam. (One may put Romanjay Sen's essay in this category, though he focuses critically on the story of the famous football club, the Mohammades Sporting Club.) Ahmad, for instance, argues that "terrorism or the phenomenon of law and more of culture." He further suggests that the "dialectic of media's visibility and invisibility" of the terrorism and terrorism that are common to both media and terrorists." (p 271)

The overarching intellectual acceptability of Muslim diversity as an explanatory model has somehow transformed the notion of diversity into a "scholarly common sense." As a result, the binaries such as liberal Muslims, radical Muslims, and lived experience 'Islamic' etc have turned into "ready-to-use" templates. This tendency has its own side-effects.

Many essays in this volume actually force us to look at these different kinds of difference which not only produce many meanings of Muslim diversity but also bring up equally diverse meanings of Muslim diversity. However, the introductory essay does not pay any serious attention to any such meaningful interconnection. The place of religion in South Asia. The editors do not provide any adequate explanation of Muslim diversity in secularism. The concise and very sweeping generalisation in this regard. They note, "some Muslims hold that diversity is wrong, that where it exists it should be eliminated, and that to emphasize diversity represents a malicious attempt to divide believers. For the scholars represented in this book, however, diversity is undeniable, and it is a diversity that exists under the broad mantle of the secular state." (p 52)

'Muslim diversity,' I argue, is a methodologically valid antithesis to this claim of the diversities that are often presented as a threat to secularism. However, celebrating diversity as a precondition for, or even symbolising the potential for, secularism does not make it analytically self-evident. 'Muslim diversity,' in any case, must have to be conceptualised and, to a greater extent, to be understood as the changing collective self-perceptions of particular Muslim social groups and to a greater extent, to be understood as the ways in which these social groups work out their own imagined meanings of 'Islamic community.'