

Terror beneath the Veil: The Subjugation of Muslim Women in India

by Ankur Betageri (December 2014)



Painting by Shamsia Hassani

Translation of words on wall: Water will return to some dry river, but what about the dead fish?

Secularists in India think that by being silent about the horrendous practices in Islam they are protecting Muslims and 'minority interests.' This explains their deafening silence over [the recent case](#) of a young Muslim woman in Muzzafarnagar who, on being raped by her own father-in-law, was asked by clerics following the shariat law, to accept her husband as her son, and her father-in-law as her husband. Given how feudal and patriarchal Northern India is this utter disregard for the suffering of women can easily be understood. Ultimately what matters here is the honour of men, be they Muslim or Hindu, and the fundamentalist among these, fascistic by temperament, use religion to give themselves the right to oppress and exploit. The Islamic fundamentalists especially have never hesitated to use religious ideology to crush any sane voice of dissent. Women for them are servants and sex slaves; they use them and discard them; they will not allow them to "create problems" for men even if the source of the problem is man, his religion and his religious law.

Islam: a Totalitarian Political System

My own reading of the Qur'an has convinced me that Islam, more than a 'religion', is a *totalitarian political system* and an ideology which declares war on the non-Muslims. As a political and social ideology it is tribal, militant, misogynistic, patriarchal, homophobic, xenophobic and imbued with the death instinct. And because Islam functions as a totalitarian political ideology, its power to stifle the voice of science and reason is greater than that of any other religion.

The Qur'an declares emphatically – and *in almost every sura* – that the non-believers should be killed and burned and tormented. And whether you are a literalist or not, there is no way this could be 'interpreted' to mean something else. So, frankly, one is tempted to doubt the sanity

of any religious person who feels it is okay to follow its teachings. Many people who have read the Qur'an have had similar feelings but they have been afraid to speak about them openly and publicly for the fear of being accused of inciting communal sentiments and of indulging in hate speech. This kind of indirect censorship to prevent every attempt to curb the influence of religion in public life, and to protect the sacred values of secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution will only stop when Indians realise that though the constitution gives every citizen the right to follow a religion of his choice, it does not give anyone the right to use religion as a political ideology – or as an alternative to democracy – or to use religious texts and law-codes in the place of the Constitution and the legal codes.

Since Islam is a totalitarian political system it imposes a 'way of life' through the Qur'an and its traditional law code, shariat. And this totalitarian Islamic political system, or Islamism, is against the rights of the individual, the rights of women and democracy. Islam only cares about the 'natural rights' that the 'stronger' men have over the 'weaker' women, and more than that about the supremacy of the ummah, or the Islamic community. The individual has no place in the Islamic worldview. Man is conceived as a creature of the pack. It is the will of the 'pack', or the community, which is supreme, and man is just an agent realizing the will of the Islamic ummah. This sidelining of the individual means the rejection of the thinking subject as the conscience of the society; it also means the rejection of elected representatives in a democracy. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Islamic thinker who deeply influenced the al-Qaeda, and its precursor Islamic Jihad, was quite emphatic about this: Islam is against democracy because democracy, by giving supreme powers of state to the elected representatives, undermines the authority of the Qur'an. The Qutbis, as the followers of Qutb are called, are therefore firm in their opposition to the 'western degeneracy' of democracy. Democracy, according to them, causes jahiliyyah, ignorant barbarism, something that has already poisoned, and ruined, western democracies like the USA. The individual and his aspirations thus relegated to the margins, the ultimate aim of the ummah remains expansion and takeover of the state: turning the Dar al-harb, the house of war, into Dar al-Islam, the house of Islam. So every Islamist, that is, every Muslim who has read the Qur'an and the Hadith and 'acts upon them', is against democracy. Islam and democracy are irreconcilables. If, by chance, they do come together, as they have in Indonesia, democracy itself becomes perverted into something else: a democracy in form and theory but totalitarian and fascistic in practice. Many apologists of Islam, including scholars like Reza Aslan, cite the example of Turkey as a progressive 'Islamic' country: but Turkey, thanks to the reforms and visionary leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, had totally constrained Islam, and embraced modern, secular values. So there can be no two thoughts about this: Islam is against democracy, modern human rights and values.

Shariat Law and the Degradation of Muslim Women

It is extremely unfortunate that personal laws have been passed in India on the pretext of retaining the diversity and uniqueness of religious practices. This has allowed Muslims to follow, in certain cases, the primitive shariat law, the most important fallout of which is the social degradation of Muslim women. Shariat law follows the precepts laid out in the Qur'an and the Sunnah and also codifies certain practices – like women covering their body with the burqa – which are said to be part of the Islamic tradition. Since the Qur'an and Sunnah do not consider woman the equal of man, shariat law's treatment of women is often extremely harsh and unfair. That women are stoned to death and accused of adultery when they are actually victims of rape, unable to produce four witnesses required by the law, is widely known but these deadly laws are only practiced in Islamic countries like Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia where shariat is the state law. In India, shariat is practiced and is legally binding only in matters relating to marriage, divorce and sexual relationships, but this limited use of shariat is enough to put the Muslim woman in a position of extreme disadvantage and helplessness, forcing her to suffer silently, and without protest, the injustices committed against her by men. There are innumerable cases of domestic rape, for example, routinely committed by the relatives of the woman's husband, which are not reported, as reporting them successfully under shariat law would require the victim to produce four witnesses. There are many issues such as these which make the life of an Indian Muslim woman in a Muslim household one vulnerable to brutal violations of human rights and one fated to silent suffering. This treatment of the Muslim woman in the 21st century, which can only be described as barbaric, is having a lot of negative repercussions on the rest of the Indian society. It is undeniable that it is having a retrograde influence on the status of women in the still very much backward and patriarchal Indian society.

It is therefore important to stand by the Muslim man and the Muslim woman oppressed by, and oppressed because of, Islam. There is indeed something sick about the politically correct stand of not speaking against the oppressive influence of Islam and its horrendous treatment of women. This conspiracy of silence must end. Shariat law in the form of Muslim Personal Law which encourages and validates polygamy, triple-talakh, sexual oppression and the deliberate cretinization of the Muslim woman must be challenged and opposed. It is true that with right-wing National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in power Muslims are being harassed and needlessly victimized in India but, clearly, one cannot support an oppressive regime just because one is against a bigger oppressive regime. This kind of fascistic politics rewards the oppressor, destroys the oppressed, and fills the society with a 'molecular fascism' where the more powerful oppresses the less powerful as a matter of rule.

Uniform Civil Code

When the Hindus have given up the primitive dharmashastras, the traditional Hindu law codes, why can't the Muslims give up the equally primitive shariat? Why make a regressive law code part of one's identity and fight for things like child marriage? Which educated Muslim man or woman in today's India would like to have child marriage legalized? Yet sadly this is one of the things that the Muslim Personal Law Board is fighting for in the name of Islam. Honestly this institution is a disgrace to modern human values and it is unfortunate that it is perceived as the voice of Muslims in India.

We are living in the 21st century, in a high risk, accident-prone technological society. This technological system, built by men of reason and men of science, can't be handed over to religious hooligans and barbarians who neither understand it nor appreciate it. We cannot, in short, allow the fate of our technological society to be decided by irrational and militant fundamentalists. Religious fundamentalism and aggression poses one of the greatest threats to human survival on this planet and we cannot promote killing-manuals like the Qur'an, and the Bhagavad Gita—no matter how important they are as religious texts or how beautiful and ineffable their poetry. We must learn our lessons from history, of how the Nazis used the Bhagavad Gita to justify their killings, and how the Islamofascists to this day use the teachings of the Qur'an to kill, rape, brutalize and oppress. Also, it is important to understand how religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita and Qur'an are read and internalized by the fundamentalists. They are not read like the newspaper – the way secularists read them and declare that there is nothing wrong with them – but as the sacred word of God which gives them the right to act 'against time' (to use a phrase by the Nazi ideologue, Savitri Devi) with absolute disregard for human life and the laws of the land. Internalizing the tenets of these texts ('One neither kills nor is killed' etc of the Bhagavad Gita and the innumerable ayas of Qur'an which call for the killing of non-believers) not only gives the militant the religious sanction to kill, it also fills his head with a perverted sense of martyrdom making his horrendous suicidal acts heroic.

So it is extremely important to reduce the influence of Islam on modern life: it is in the interest of Muslims, and in the interest of the rest of the humanity. I was made to believe by the 'secular' media that the source of Islamic terror was a certain extreme interpretation of Islam (as exemplified in extremist-militant manifestoes like [The Absent Obligation](#)) but after reading the Qur'an and excerpts from the life of Prophet Muhammad, I am convinced that all the atrocities committed in the name of Islam are, in fact, a direct result of adhering strictly to the teachings of Qur'an and following the life of Prophet Muhammad, who was basically a tribal warlord. Instead of expressing outrage at this statement, which has unfortunately

become the preferred, and accepted, mode of response to any criticism of Islam, one would do well to verify the veracity of this claim by reading the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad.

I think the time has come when we non-Muslims asked ourselves what or who we stand with: Islam or Muslims? Islam has no regard for life, it asks Muslims to kill or be killed, for the sake of spreading Islam. Muslims are human beings like us who have been born to Muslim parents, some of whom, indoctrinated with Islamist ideology, have become fanatical Islamists. I don't think we can continue to close our eyes to the systematic and deliberate degradation of the life of the Indian Muslim woman. Let us ask ourselves: Is it ethical to support a legal system which allows a man to humiliate and spiritually destroy his wife by marrying another woman? Is it okay to give a man the right to discard his wife like a piece of garment by uttering the word talakh (divorce) three times? Is it alright to put the onus of proving rape on the victim and ask her to produce four witnesses or be persecuted for the crime of adultery? Is it okay for a Muslim woman in the 21st century to be told that paradise lies at the foot of her husband? Is it alright to brainwash Muslim women to think that they are mentally unfit to take care of themselves and their children? Is it alright to impose religious injunctions to prevent Muslim women from dressing, moving about and living in a way they choose? Is it okay for Muslim clerics to impose [fatwas](#) preventing school girls from studying, singing and making music because they pose a 'threat to moral order'?

In short, is it alright to allow injustice in the name of religion? If not, we must act. The primitive shariat law imposed as Muslim Personal Law in India must be scrapped and a uniform civil code must be passed. Muslims in India are Indian citizens living in the modern world, we cannot have them follow a 1400-year-old law code, and pretend that everything would be okay after that. As a secular country India must protect the interests of Muslim women and treat all its citizens equally regardless of their religious affiliation and it is only by passing the uniform civil code that such an equal treatment can be ensured.

People in India have always been divided on the uniform civil code but I hope the Indian citizen of today recognizes the right of the Muslim woman to live a life of dignity over the right of a religion to preserve an oppressive and outmoded way of life. I hope everybody speaks out and works towards putting to an end the injustices committed against the Muslim woman in the name of religion. The passing of a uniform civil code would be the first and most decisive step in that direction.

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