Islamophobia and the Struggle for Mainstreaming: An Enquiry into the Project of Building Islamophobia from West to East and Politics of Muslim Autonomy

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Abstract

Islamophobia is gradually impinging on the life of common Muslims who live in non European societies. Though it came up in Europe as threat to the European values, yet the reach of Islamophobia went beyond European civil life. Islamophobia is a threat to Muslim life rather than any other society and community. Rising Islamophobia take out the individual autonomy of Muslims to defend the religion and it limits all possible engagement of Islam with other philosophies and practices. Islamophobia restricts the very epistemic autonomy of Muslims even in secular democracy. This paper discusses this critical issue by drawing examples from Mumbai and Kerala.

*Keywords:* *Islamophobia, Secular Democracy, State, Kerala, Mumbai*

Introduction

Islamophobia is one of the widely discussed terms associated with Muslims, perhaps equal to 'Islamic terrorism'. Islamphobia does not regularly appear in the Muslim countries in the East. It is a European product, in fact, a Eurocentric product. It came out of the consciousness of European modernity vis a vis 'Aboriginal Islam'. This paper attempts to discuss the impact of widening Islamophobia on individual autonomy of Muslims. This paper discusses this critical concern by drawing cases from Kerala and Mumbai. There are different views on the origin of the term. The most popular among them is the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1997. It is the most quoted report in the Islamophobia research. According to the Commission (1997:6), "*claims that Islam is totally different and others often involve stereotypes and claims about 'us' (Non-Muslims) as well as about 'them' (Muslims), and the notion that 'we' are superior. 'We' are civilized, reasonable, generous, efficient, sophisticated, enlightened, non-sexist. 'They' are primitive, violent, irrational, scheming, disorganized, and oppressive.*

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An open view rejects such simplifications both about 'us' and about 'them'. It acknowledges that Islam is distinctively different in significant respects from other religions and from 'the West', but does not see it as deficient or as less worthy of esteem. Us / them contrasts with 'them' seen as inferior, gossip, jokes and news items as well as grand narratives." The observations of the Commission on Islamophobia in Britain are strictly close to the binary of *we* and *them*. This binary is a product of cultural hegemony and social power. Here is the case of British supremacy and it believes that Islam does not fit into British culture. It puts in place a binary which well fits into the ethos of European modernity. The Commission further explains about how Islamophobia operates. The Commission (1997:10) further explains that *"the expression of anti-Muslim ideas and sentiments is becoming increasingly seen as respectable. It is natural, taken-for-granted ingredient of the commonsense world of millions of people every day"*. Hence, it is a part of civilized behavior to comment on the religious life of Muslims and even their everyday life. The Commission gives graphic narratives of Islamophobia. See the graph below.
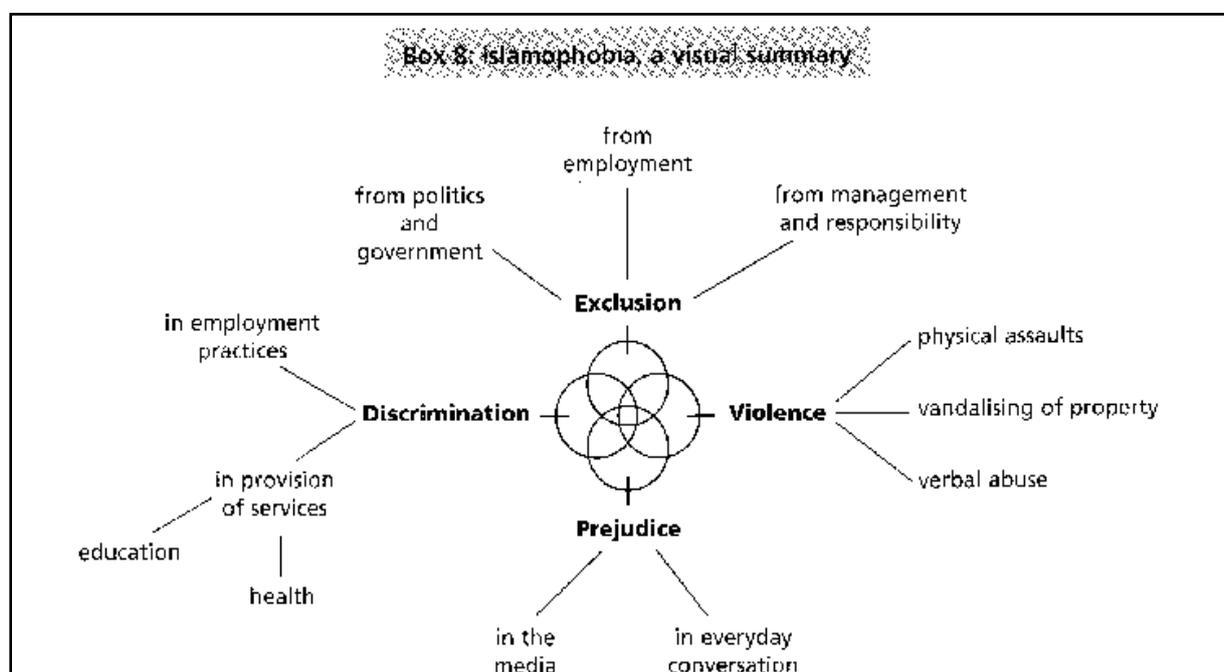
Source: Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1997

It reflects on the larger British public understanding of Islam and religious practices of Muslims. One can read the elements of 'otherness' in the report. Essentially, Islamophobia is a product inheren to the weakness of European modernity. However, the matter of fact is that

the European modernity never matches with the rest of the world. Still the epistemic understanding of modernity is specifically attached with European experiences. Hence, the oriental understandings of history and life world are completely neglected from the global public sphere.

2. Chasing Islamophobia

Understanding Islamophobia itself is an epistemic project. The primary concern is the evolution of a critical perspective to validate the existing perception of the term. The European critiques of Islamophobia intentionally put it under the larger perspective of racism. As Bleich (2011) observed, Islamophobia is '*indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims'*. He observed that Islamophobia represents a larger percentage of negative attitudes and sentiments towards individuals or groups, since their given membership in a religion. So, it could be a kind of *racism, sexism*, or *anti-Semitism.* This perspective is evolving from the secular view of the society and also close to the perspective of an anti-Eurocentric view on other societies and people. Halliday (1999) argued that, in contrast to what the term Islamophobia suggests, "*the enemy is not a faith or a culture but a people*". Halliday explains the very process of building and legitimizing the idea of Islamophobia. It also helps locate the same project in Eastern societies. It is a project of legitimizing hegemony of knowledge and social power. Imhoff and Recker (2012) had conducted an in-depth research on peoples' attitude towards Islam. According to them, there is a consistent pattern of prejudices against Muslims. in general. and also against the ethnic groups like Turks. This is the critical question around Islamophobia debate. It evolves out of fear of Muslim practices and the resultant hatred against them. Stolz (2005) asserts that "*Islamophobia is a rejection of Islam, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes. It may have emotional, cognitive, evaluative as well as action-oriented elements (e.g., discrimination, violence)"*. The very hatred against Muslims is attributed to the violence and terrorism in the name of religion. So, critical insider views from Muslims are very much relevant for building a counter argument against the very rationale of Islamophobia. It is a natural outcome of the increasing presence of decolonization in the West. People from the colonized countries started moving into their masters' land which is the root cause of Islamophobia in the Western societies. Sayyid (2014) argued that prejudice against Muslims is equal to racial discrimination, which does not have any particular

concepts. According to him, Islamophobia is a form of racialized governmentality. It is not just prejudice or ignorance; instead, it is well-defined intervention, which affects the well-being of the Muslims. It results into physical annihilation of Muslims or the process called de-Islamization, which wants to remove the Muslim identity. It is the very religious identity that is the matter of concern. It is evident in the case of public debate on Islamic State (IS).

It was Mr. Obama who first said that IS is not Islam; however, nobody gives much importance to this observation. It is quite easy to oppose IS's ideology and act; however, it is too difficult to establish that IS is not Islam. It is precisely because IS uses all the Islamic symbols and language of Islam. For instance, Caliphate was one of the most powerful political institutions in the history of Islam, which had offered a most powerful rule in the Islamic history. However, the Kalifa of IS was not ruling any territory with justice; instead, it was engaged in unparalleled killing of people. Innocent people lost life just because of denying a religious dogma, which IS promoted. IS claim of Islam often gives a wrong interpretation of Quran, and in fact, this is the most thorny project about denying IS's claim of Islam. Either give a straight forward definition of each and every word of the Quran or prove IS does not adhere to any principles of Islam. The public would accept those justifications, which completely deny Islam by Muslims. If a Muslim says Islam promotes terrorism, it gets wider acceptance and such comments are well appreciated rather than saying Islam does not promote IS. This is the dilemma of majority of Muslims in the world.

2.1 Islamophobia as Racism

A close observation of Islamophobia practice gives it linkages with the very idea of racism and racial discrimination. As Rana (2007) analyzed, 'race-ing' of Islam (considering Islamophobia as racism) does not evolve in a vacuum; instead, it is a project focused on specific historical events. Racialising Islam have taken new turn by adding new definitions to Islam such as war, conquest, terror, fear, and the new crusades. The mainstream discussion on Islam often associates it with either terrorism or conservativism. Such wider public debate on Islam and Terror results in global public reason against Muslims and it, thus, legitimizes Islamophobia. Another scholar, Grosfoguel (2010) explains Islamophobia within the context of epistemic racism; according to him, it considers non-Western knowledge as inferior to Western knowledge system. According to him "*Epistemic racism in the form of epistemic*

Islamophobia is a foundational and constitutive logic of the modern/colonial world and of its legitimate forms of knowledge production. European humanists and scholars since the 16th century have argued that Islamic knowledge is inferior to the West. The debate about Moriscos in 16th century Spain were full of epistemic Islamophobic conceptions". He further explained that considering such Islamic thoughts as inferior helps the Eurocentric thinkers to reject all theoretical contributions of Islam to knowledge systems. It also leads to the conclusion that Islam does not have anything to contribute to human rights and democracy. And it puts onus on Muslims that they can be part of the debate if they *"stop thinking as Muslims and anybody who think these questions from within the Islamic tradition are immediately suspicious of fundamentalism"*. This is the fundamental challenge ahead of Muslims when being part of public debate. It was evident in the media (social media) debate around *Manavasangamam[1] and Amanavasangamam[2]* in Kerala, India. The very idea of *Manavasangamam* needs public appreciation. It questions the very moral of fascism in designing the nature of public debate in the country. The festivity of the meet attracts wider support from liberal, secular and left intellectuals in Kerala. It was a good gathering and the deliberations were against the rising fascism of Indian politics. It prevents any religious symbols getting visible in the meeting. There were Muslims attending the meeting not as representatives of Muslim organizations or movements. *Amanavasangamam* questioned this position and conducted a parallel meeting, which invited people who were part of various identity based movements, and many Muslim organizations were part of the festival too. Responding to *Amanavasangamam,* the organizers, *Manavasangamam,* claimed that Muslims can attend the meeting if they give up their religious identity. Their idea was to keep all religious symbols out of the meeting and that is, in fact, one of the classical definitions of secularism. Indirectly, the organizers of *Manavasangamam* reiterated the idea of epistemic Islamophobia. Epistemic Islamophobia is widely getting intruded into the public reasons; so, it is becoming a tool for value judgment. It legitimizes the public and often random criticism of Islam based on subjectivity of the critique. Any non-Islamic practices could act as binary

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[1] A cultural movement to protest the rising right wing upper caste hindu fascism in India. The ruling party's open supports to such movements were the target of this movement. Civil Society activists were forefront in mobilizing the people for the movement. The movements become controversial when the organizers decided to exclude Muslim organization and movements from the meeting.

[2] Amanavasangamam was a response to Manavasangamam. Amanavasangamam was organized by muslim organization and Dalit intellectuals. The very slogan of the meet was the position of Manavasangama on Islam.

in such criticism. Özyürek (2005) made a critical observation of the practices of Islam, such as veiling, circumcision and ritual slaughtering of animals. The critics of such practices argued that these practices should be prevented not because these are not Christian, but these are part of total submission of Muslims to God and prevent the evolution of secular values. The threat of Islam comes from such independent binaries of criticism. The very religious practices of Muslims have eventually got the identity of violence. It is evident from the life of ordinary Muslims. The life of ordinary Muslims in the economic capital of India, Mumbai proves this.

2.2 Life of Common Muslims in Mumbai City

The 1992 communal violence in Mumbai has resulted in Ghettoisation of Muslims in the suburban areas of the city. Number of Muslim Ghettos were created in a short span of time and those were ending up with final asylum for thousands of deprived Muslims. Gradually, these Ghettos and colonies force to bear the brunt of the new identity of the inherent violence. Police surveillance is common and it often interferes in the community life. The urban amenities are absent in these areas. Garbage collection by the city corporation is quite irregular; it often excludes these areas from their sanitation and waste collection. Importantly, people from these areas are not welcome in the malls and other public spaces in the city. People who eat mutton on a regular basis, often turn against the animal sacrifice during Eidul Azha by Muslims. Muslims who carry goat are getting public humiliation during these days. There are extra police persons on duty in the shopping malls and public parks during Muslims' festival days. Unusual and selective security checking of Muslims is very much acted in city life. Surprisingly, no Muslim dares to question this extra 'care of the State'. In fact, there is fear among the common folks about it. It is a challenge for every day life. Khan (2014) analyzed the daily struggle of Muslim youth in Mumbai. The life of Muslims who live in Ghettos are subjected to multiple kind of humiliation in the public spaces. The struggle to cover up the identity and cope with the general youth in the city often push them into their own community activities and organizations rather than move with general community. The coming part discusses it in detail.

3. Political Islam and Islamophobia

The critical underpinning of Islamophobia is the disguised identity of Political Islam. Politics is an inherent practice of Islam; however, the debate around political Islam in the West excluded the innate practice of politics in Islam. The Western understanding of Islam and its politics considerably influences discourse on political Islam. Interestingly, the path breaking work of Edward Said, *Orientalism* published in 1978 had proved that the West has negative idea and views on Islam and which had critically influenced the global public sphere on Islam. However, still the public understanding of political Islam is influenced by this negative image. Crooke (2009) has quoted a Shia Muslim clergy who comments on the revolution in Islam in associated with Iranian revolution. His observations give a critical insight of politics of Islam. According to him, *"In face of this, how can Islam and the Islamic revolution describe man and his values, and what is the message of the Islamic revolution?" First of all, the human being is part of the reality of existence, and there is no separation between him and existence. The system of existence, of which we are a part, is a moral one. Moral values are a part of this existence, and of this world. The ethical values within the order of existence are also real. Values such as justice, love and freedom are things within existence, and no one has the right to transgress or breach them. When Islam talks about God and the values of existence – an existence that is dependent on God, God is no abstract concept"*. Political Islam accepts God as the centre of governance. In the non-Islamic world, political Islam is considered as project of building Islamic State (do not equate it with IS of the time). As Asad (1980:4) observed, *"organization of an Islamic State or States is an indispensable condition of Islamic life in the true sense of the word"*. The politics of Islam derives from this critical juncture. It emphasizes the capability of Islam in governing its subject and the need for a political structure to legitimize this capability. Such an interpretation of Islamic State can never be compatible with the modern secular democracy. In principle, the secular ethics never put religion as the governing principles for the citizens. However, it does not mean that the Islamic state which Asad emphasis legitimize present day Islamic State terrorism in across the globe. Asad's observation focuses on seeking a political rationale to integrate the totality of Islam within the State apparatus. The reason for the integration is the practice of Islam, which never excludes polity from personal life. This is, in fact, the critical challenge of legitimizing political Islam. Political Islam demands a total surrender to the government, which rules in the name of God and his Prophet. Asad (1980:70) observed that "*A government ruling in the name of God and His Prophet and in the*

*obedience to the Law of Islam ha*s the *right to call upon all the resources of the citizens - including their personal possessions and even their lives - whenever the interest of the community and the security of the State demand such an effort"*. Asad explains the Islamic understanding of State and Government, which in fact, is a moral State and it hardly exists in the present day world.

4. State, Politics and Islam

The geopolitical crisis in the Islamic world and resistance movements in the Islamic countries are often put under the label of political Islam. Therefore, it is quite possible to list out the names of the movements as the carriers of political Islam. For instance, Hamas and PLO - these movements were evolved out of political crisis. Politics of liberation was the propelling force of these movements. It was a historical necessity, and not necessarily inspired by Islam alone. These movements were aiming at a government and an economy; and hence, the strategies were derived from the challenges of building a modern State. Modern State was the aim, and of course, Islamic values were instrumental. The Iranian revolution was also against a corrupt and puppet government and again an inevitable one. These movements were not evolved to save Islam and Muslims; rather it was a struggle of political independency. It was logical to have such movements; however, movement to save Islam and Muslims is quite illogical. It is primarily due to the heterogeneity of Muslims as political subject. Religion is common; however, the geo-political identity varies. It is evident in the case of Syrian refugees. The burning issue of Muslims in Syria was the absence of governance and when they become refugees in Europe, their identity got changed. They were not treated as refugees from the disturbed territory including political instability. In Europe, the Syrian refugees were treated as victims of failed religion. The religious identity of the Syrian refugees overshadowed their political and country identity. The right wing political forces in Europe took into consideration only the religious identity of the refugees and not the political subjectivity. The religious identity is more problematic and it is believed to a great extent that it does not fit into the European values. Such narratives offer huge political opportunity for the right wing political parties in Europe. It is not just in Europe alone, the president elect of U.S., Mr. Ronald Trump, categorically used the refugees issue as a threat to US value system. However, he was silent on role of U.S. in making refugees and failure of US democracy in the global scenario. So, the argument is that Muslim identity is more close

to their religious identity and all other political subjectivity is getting sidelined. This is another definition of Islamophobia i.e., to redefine the political subjectivity and geo-political identity. Large numbers of Muslims are subject to this crisis since they are living in Islamic countries or countries, which follow Islamic governance system.

4.1 Secular Democracy and Muslims

Religion and secularism has been a matter of debate for long. It is a matter of critical debate even now. Islamic scholars have also made objective criticism on the idea of secularism. Their idea was on the binary, which Western secular principles engage with i.e., the binary of right versus wrong. Keeping the Church away from political affairs was the focus of Western secular principles. It is not the religion per se which was excluded from public affair; instead, the institution of religion was set aside. The Islamic scholars who believe in total religion often questioned the secular principle as anti-Islamic. It is true that Christianity never ever confronts with Western secularism. It does not ignore the Catholic-Protestant conflict in the UK and the political aspirations of Northern Island. Interestingly, the movement for separate Statehood in the Island and East Timor was never put under the religious Identity of Christianity. Moreover, they never put the Christian identity upfront and they can still keep Churches out from governance. It would not lead to any conflict of interests. The UN had no hesitation in involving the movement to free East Timor from Indonesia, though it was propelled by Christian value system and political aspirations. Christianity evolved in such a way can accept secularism without much confrontation. It is true that there is not much critical enquiry that exists in the theoretical debate on secularism and Islam. That is, in fact, a huge gap in the Islamic thinking. This is the right time to evolve scholarship to revisit some of the practical norms of the religion. The most important among them is the distinction between *Islamic* and *Islamist*. Bokhari and Senzai (2013:20) observed that considering *Islamic* and *Islamist* as synonyms creates an impression that it is the Islamist who are the true followers of Islam and they keep Islam safe. Accruing to them, it is a debatable issue, since there are considerable numbers of Muslims who respond to Western understanding of secularism and often participate in the political forces to defend Islam through non-Islamist methods. As Alastair (2009:30) observed, *"one view – the Western one – privileges 'individuality', and defines this 'individuality' as the appropriate organizing*

principle around which society should be shaped. The other view – the Islamist vision – sees the human to be integral to a wider existence; intractably linked, and not separated, as 'an individual', from others and the world that surrounds him or her; which sees the human as a multi-dimensional creature – larger than the sum of his or her desires and appetites, whose ability to access innate moral values, as the basis of his or her responsibility to the community, becomes the organizational principle for economics, society and politics". Alastair's observation of secular values is based on the individuality of the society. It put individual freedom as the propelling idea of modern secularism. It is true that individual freedom is absent in a society, which focuses on religious value system. Islamism requires a total surrender of the social process to almighty and provide theoretical legitimization of the decision. Muslims living in non-Islamic countries demand for secular democracy for their religious security. In India, Islamism is completely a private affair of Muslims for the political existence and in the public life, Muslims seek secularism. The rising of right wing politics shattered the fundamental values of secularism and it wanted to wipe out every idea of secularism from public sphere in India. The majority of communalism is the byproduct of it. Negating secular values are very much imperative for the rise of majority communalism. So, it becomes essential for the Muslims to stand for secular values in the country. It is a political position of the Muslims to prefer secular values over other Islamic principles in the public life. Coming part discusses it in detail.

4.2 Islamophobia in India

India has a history of communal violence. Hindu-Muslim conflict took hundreds of lives. Interestingly, impact of communal violence on Muslims is long term in nature. The crimes associated with recent issue of banning cow slaughter alone prove how Islamophobia impinges on Indian society. The beef ban politics started in Maharashtra right after the assembly elections of 2014. The media and politicians of the country put it under the binary of Muslim versus beef ban as if Muslims are the only beef eaters in the country. It took lives of Muslims. Dadri lynching was the example. Man called Mohammed Aquilaq was lynched to death by right wing mob accusing him of keeping beef in the house. Right after the lynching, a lab test proved that it was goat meat and not cow meat. The politics of evidence gathered went beyond all sense and another lab test again said it was cow meat. T They also legitimize the mob by giving them support that if it is beef such killings are not contemptible.

5. Islamophobia in the Everyday Life

As said in the outset, Islamophobia, as a principle, signifies the conflict with the Western societies and Islam. However, the matter of fact is that it impinges on the community life of Muslims across the world. The character and intensity may vary, yet it is acting up on even the common-practicing Muslims. Garner and Selod (2014) attempted to assess the impact of Islamophobia as radicalization on Muslims. It shows that Muslims are homogenized by these practices.It is true that Islamophobia puts a homogeneous identity on Muslims and forces them to accept or internalize the socio-political impact of it. The socio-political impact, in fact. varies according to the political system in which it operates. For instance, in France, where the government strictly restricts the use of religious symbols in the public place, it included Cross and Jews' skull cap. It gradually put Muslim women in a defensive position. Wearing hijab becomes violation of law; however, Islam permits Muslims to obey the rule of law of the nation where they live. It became a conflict between the French society and Muslims. The French citizenship of Muslims was ignored and their religious identity was put upfront in the debate. The recent issue of wearing Burkini (swim suit of Muslim women) again put the Muslims under focus. It could not be put under the idea of radicalization of Muslims; in fact, this is the reflection of internal impact of Islamophobia. Interestingly, one can understand why it is a problem in France, yet, it is still not clear why certain private management schools in Kerala do not permit girl students wearing hijab. From France to Kerala, hijab becomes a symbol of radical Islam. It set aside the fundamental geopolitical difference and culture of Islam, and homogeneity was imposed on Muslims. The global society reads Islam through Hijab, Beard, Gun and Terrorism. In a country like India, it added two more attributes to it - Beef and Triple talaq.

The Runnymede Trust (1997:10) made an important observation on the impact of Islamophobia on Muslims. According to the Trust, "*Islamophobia prevents Muslims from being invited or encouraged to take a full part in society's moral deliberations and debates, and prevent their view from finding resonance*". The most important among them is the difficulty in engaging with the modern values and not able to defend even the very fundamental ethos of the religion. For instance, every scholar of Islam and common Muslims often communicate with the society by saying that Islam is a religion of peace. Every Muslim scholar and even common Muslims often use this phrase to defend the core value of Islam;

however, at present the general public often declines to accept or listen to this view. Nobody would accept it prima facie, if so it is just because of some concern on the preliminary values of democracy. This is a threat on Islam. This has also created or given space for the rising of fundamentalist activities within the community. Such activities and groups are not in large number; however, even a single person who propagates such ideas is attributed to the religion. Decisions to take part in fundamental activities are quite personal; however, if Muslims are found in extremism, it is attributed to Islam and Islamic movements. The Muslim's autonomy in personal choice has been attributed to collective religiosity. Therefore, everything Muslims do is Islamic!

6. Concluding Observations

Islamophobia has moved out from Europe to other countries. The global politics and the rising extremism in the name of Islam are taking away the individual autonomy of Muslims to defend or to critique Islamophobia and extremism within the community. Muslims are forced to embrace global Islamic identity and loose the native national identity. This is the reason why nationalism and patriotism of Muslims often gets questioned in India. Muslims carrying national flag or tattoo flag on face are getting media attention and no one is able to see the natural process in it. The social mobility of Muslims is badly hit by Islamophobia and there is less emphasis on such social exclusion of Muslims across the world.

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