

Muslims and Media Images: News Versus Views

Ather Farouqi, ed.

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Ather Farouqi's edited book *Muslims and Media Images: News Versus Views* examines the Hindi and Urdu press as well as Hindi and regional language films. The uniqueness of the collection lies in the grounded approach taken to study the topic of media images of Indian Muslims. Along with an introduction and two appendices, this volume consists of nineteen mainly short chapters organized in four sections that highlight the experiences of media practitioners, who provide their own accounts and testimonies. Consisting of journalists, newspaper editors, filmmakers, and academics – the contributors to this volume are writing from the field, while incorporating historical components in a tone embedded in a storytelling style. Although certain generalizations and scattered links between chapters might distract readers, such grounded conversations are valuable to academics interested in generating theory from the practice of making media. Most authors provided vivid examples here from their own involvement in the process of writing or editing news, while relying on a minimal use of citations, which presents an interesting alternative format to standard academic studies. This book offers relevant reading to scholars of Islamic studies, communication, journalism, cinema, political science, and readers interested in Indian media and Muslim representations.

The first part of the book, “English Media: Image and Perception,” provides a contextual overview of some of the main issues, including the constraints within which Indian media operates, such as the imperative to make a profit that effectively dilutes social responsibility (Vinod Mehta). In this context, fringe extremist voices present particularly saleable material, and “liberal/moderate” voices are not as easily available and often not as media savvy as the voices of conservatives. In addition, television producers operate under the assumption that a polarized dialogue of the deaf improves television ratings (this relates more generally to the talk show debate genre in television). Other contributions provide a useful historical grounding, such as explanations of the role of the Partition in shaping the Urdu press in India (Kuldip Nayar, Siddharth Varadarajan). In this light, Varadarajan describes how the process of nation building in the aftermath of colonialism strengthened cultural and religious identities – and intensified communal politics from the 1970s onwards, as exemplified in the reporting of riots in the country that invariably placed the blame on Muslim Indians.

From a gender-centric perspective, Mrinal Pande denounces the chauvinism and failure of the English language media in India to be a watchdog to protect the rights of minorities and women – something English-language journalists here describe to be far removed from the everyday concerns of the majority of Indians. Chandan Mitra similarly contends that the English language media of India negatively portrays Islam. From making connections to Muslim representations in the global media by looking at the Australian press' construction of Islam (Howard Brasted) to looking at the national Indian press (Rajni Kothari), the first part of the volume outlines the main issues and challenges currently facing the Muslim press, while historicizing and contextualizing media images of Indian Muslims.

Part 2, "Transcending Boundaries," explores regional specificities in order to explore the topic of the representation of religious minorities and of the Muslim Indian press. Writers examine the formation of the regional identity within Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities after the Partition – particularly exacerbated by limited access to civic spaces and quality housing for Bengali Muslims (**Sabya Sachi**), and the coverage of Muslim issues in the Goan press (Charles Borges). Dagmar Markova and Susan Maitra's contributions, on the other hand, shift the attention toward how Western representations of Muslims influence local media productions.

This section of the book includes divergent explanations concerning the contemporary state of Indian mediated affairs. For example, whereas Maitra links the negative portrayals of Muslims in the Western press to geopolitical interests and historical antecedents such as the Iranian revolution, Estelle Dryland seems to contend that Muslims' location "in the past" negatively impacts their media images – an argument that also surfaces in the writings of other non-Muslim writers of this collection, who appear to not have cultivated a sensibility to heavily loaded terms such as civilization and modernity. For example, Sachi's analysis simply links civilization to such material acquisitions as electricity and the telephone, while Dryland speaks of Muslim reticence to embrace modernity, which depicts Muslims as inherently less "civilized" than other communities. Moreover, the omnipresent notion of the "backwardness" of Indian Muslims appears in many parts of this collection. These notions and generalizations carry particular connotations and are the hallmarks of colonial discourse, although meaning can always be shifted (given that one is conversant with the preferred readings and interpretations).

The third part, "Muslim Journalism: A Phenomenal Dichotomy," outlines the challenges facing the contemporary Urdu Press in India. Robin Jeffrey highlights the problem of the limited circulation of Urdu newspa-

pers and links it to the lack of state support for the Urdu language (predominantly spoken by Muslims) and the advertising investment, since advertisers regard Muslims to constitute one of the poorest segments of Indian society. However, he maintains that the popular desire and religious-based incentives have helped maintain the language alive within Muslim communities. Wahiduddin Khan further highlights the precariousness of this press, as he explains its dependence on the international press for news coverage – although his analysis launches with some broad and potentially troubling generalizations and statements regarding the superior “model” of the Western press, here juxtaposed to descriptions of Muslim “inabilities.” This type of rhetoric can readily be associated with anti-Muslim hate speech. Nonetheless, reading between the lines of this analysis offers useful insights into how the Muslim press can convert itself into a medium of protest (by becoming reactionary), or about how professional journalism does not currently represent an attractive career choice in India.

Extending on some of the shortcomings of Urdu journalism in post-independent India, Ather Farouqui contends that it failed to assist Muslims to adjust as a large minority group because it put the emphasis on “provocative” writing and sentimentality, leading to the reinforcement of communal leadership. This section of the book ends on a hopeful note as Arshad Amanullah predicts that Urdu journalism in India will eventually attract the interest of large media houses.

The last section, “Popular Images and the Story of Stereotypes,” takes interest in the realm of the popular, with a particular focus on vernacular cinematic productions. Whereas Moinuddin Jinabade examines Bollywood films, John Hood tackles the topic of independent Indian art cinema. Nonetheless, the two contributions denounce Muslim underrepresentation. As Jinabade emphasizes the superficial inclusion of one or two Muslim characters to hastily quench the demand of viewers thirsty for such representation, Hood points out the lack of Muslim filmmakers and the insufficient interest (and support) for “provocative” themes for films. Jinabade details the limited representations and caricatures of Indian Muslims in Bollywood productions, characters who often appear as a devout ‘ālim (Muslim scholar trained in Islam and Islamic law), a threatening gangster, or an Urdu poet. However, Hood describes how some exceptional independent films, which revolve around Muslim characters and/or issues, have been made, in spite of the overall climate of lack of support.

In conclusion, what this volume lacks in nuanced language it makes up for in a grounded contribution to the area of media images of Islam, with a particular focus on representations of Indian Muslims. This volume

incorporates a wealth of detailed accounts and testimonies of media practitioners invested in the work of making news and creating media. Since it is written in English and addresses Western academics, readers with a postcolonial and critical race orientation could notice some broad generalizations and loaded terms used to qualify Indian Muslims. Nonetheless, this volume constitutes an innovative collection, which inspires interest in the everyday challenges of making media and of being invested in the long-term project of gaining some control over the dominant north-south flow of information.

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