**Inside a Mosque**

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In the Ramadan preceding the pandemic, I attended Taraweeh and Eid prayers at a sectarian mosque, which, in a microcosm, reflected the state of the ummah.

With its sectarian identification, the mosque started on the wrong foot. Allah SWT told Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that such people were not of him.

“Verily, as for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects – thou hast nothing to do with them…” (Quran 6:159)

In Islam, there is no official clergy and anyone can give the call to prayer as well as lead the prayers. This liberating facet of Islam ironically often serves as the raison d’etre of chaos within the community and its sacred spaces.

Everywhere on earth, Allah SWT is the central authority figure, who is to be feared, loved, worshipped and obeyed unconditionally by a Muslim. A mosque is the house of Allah, where one should enter with only one purpose in mind, i.e to worship Him. It is not an ordinary communal space. There is a strict protocol for conduct inside the mosque, and violating that protocol means disregarding and disobeying Allah SWT.

Purifying the nafs or soul is an ardent task, so the Ramadan khutbas or sermons focus on the political instead.

A mosque has a code of silence, which can only be broken for essential but minimal communication. A mosque is a place where a sermon instructs us to be better humans and better Muslims. A mosque is meant to bring people together to obliterate differences of race, class, language, colour, size and age, to worship the one true God in harmony. It is a place where compassion and brotherhood must be practised with all other Muslims to establish God-consciousness. It is a place where integration, assimilation and social inclusion is taught via the commandment of aligning one’s shoulders with the others. It is a place where order and cleanliness are to be maintained in reverence of the Creator. It is a place to feel safe and tranquil, away from the struggles, diversions and stresses of daily life. It is a place for making personal and collective prayers, asking for forgiveness, salvation and the fulfilment of worldly needs and wants.

This textbook description of a mosque reads like a fairy tale in the face of the reality I witnessed.

Murphy’s Law could be seen in action viz-a-viz religion amongst the women attendees in the mosque.

Women were oblivious of the Omniscient Allah SWT in His own house. Wasting water and dirtying the pathway with it, yelling at people, reserving spaces for friends and refusing to make space for others, judging the prayer postures of others, talking incessantly even as the congregation was engaged in prayers, spying on others, physically violating others, insulting others and generally acting as trashy human beings, was the norm among a mostly-educated crowd.

In the last 10 sacred nights, bigwigs amongst the so-called scholars delivered their midnight sermons on the odd nights. Their sermons established sectarian divides, discussed the technicalities of divorce and the clothing of women. A lone mufti talked about the importance of daily prayers.

The ultimate job of every Muslim is to achieve Taqwa or piety. As for garments, the Quran says that the best garment is libas-ut-taqwa or the garment of piety. Taqwa is the righteousness of the heart. It is the core of Islam.

A Chinese proverb says, “if there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in character, if there is beauty in character, there will be harmony in the home, when there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation, when there is order in the nation there will be peace in the world.”

Taqwa was never discussed even remotely. Purifying the nafs or soul is an ardent task, so the Ramadan khutbas or sermons focus on the political instead.

This was very palatable for the female attendees, many of whom were observing Eitikaaf. Technically, it is living in the mosque for secluded and devoted worship observing a strict code of silence. However, the nuisance value of this group was very high. They avoided praying the Taraweeh prayers, possibly due to lethargy arising from the greasy meat curries and naans they had consumed in Iftar. The group also had regular visitors bringing extra food for them to enjoy together. Small children were seen spending the night with their grandmothers. They were enjoying a free staycation with friends, chatting, feasting on rich food and lazing in the air-conditioned atmosphere-passing it off as devoted worship.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “The son of Adam does not fill any vessel worse than his stomach…” (Jamia Al-Tirmidhi 2380)

The Messenger of Allah [SAW] also said: “The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe” (Sunan An Nasai 4995)

It is paramount that inside the sacred communal space of the mosque, evil deeds are not committed against other worshippers by one’s hands and one’s tongue.

Since Islam clearly defines the etiquettes for social conduct, these toxic behaviours were not blind spots.

Had the khateebs (preachers) preached proper social conduct, they would have had to practice it themselves too. Clearly, that was not on their agenda.

It dawned on me that regular mosque attendance cannot reform uncouth, hateful and wicked behaviour. It can only exacerbate it by giving it religious sanctions.

In my utter naivety, I had high hopes for the Eid sermon. Little did I know that it would take the cake.

Virtue signalling was not on the agenda. There was no mention of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): Remembering the poor on Eid; greeting people; beautifying ourselves; being generous; avoiding extravagance in private luxuries; and building better relations with one’s family, neighbours and the community.

The sermon was hate speech against the non-Muslims, whom the khateeb unjustly referred to, as the kuffar. Instead of making dua (prayer), the khateeb cursed the Jewish people. He prayed for their women and children to become widows and orphans and for Jewish men to lose their hands.

It was surreal in its sheer evil. The khateeb hijacked the joyous occasion of Eid to spread fear and teach hatred. This prayer session left me demoralized. Such hate speech is the reason Pakistan has become the breeding ground of bigots, fanatics and terrorists.

The khateeb was using bulbs, fans, watches, cell phones, laptops, cars, bikes, Air conditioning, Coca-cola, chocolate, pizza, chips, disposable plastic utensils, plastic dining sheets and loudspeakers inside the sacred space of the mosque. Non-Muslim technology is used to make all these things. The dates and water distributed inside the mosque use western packaging. Religious text-which is printed and gifted for earning religious merit-is printed on western printing presses. Such is the political, financial, social and technological realities of a globalized world. The khateeb, despite taking full advantage of globalization, hypocritically told the congregation not to follow the ways of the kuffar. The westerners he speaks of, are leading the world, practising ethical conduct-raising the bar on it every day.

Ethics are our clergy’s Achilles heel. The hate monger pulpit preacher is showing envy and schadenfreude when he denounces the makers of the worldly objects he covetously owns, and whose language he desires to master. These so-called scholars fit their Quranic description to a T.

“The hypocrites, both men and women. are all of a kind: they enjoin the doing of what is wrong and forbid the doing of what is right and withhold their hands [from doing good].” (Quran 9:67)

And a fate worse than that of the kafir, befittingly awaits the hypocrite.

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