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November 7, 2020

**The visibility problem**

Islamophobia is now a real problem in the West and it has far-reaching consequences for the global order and peace.

The West, comprising predominantly the Anglo-Saxon countries, feels threatened by the growing visibility of Muslims there. To try to snatch away the Muslims’ occupied ‘space’ and to send them back into obscurity, some leaders in Europe and elsewhere have been employing tactics that undermine the very foundations of Western civilization characterized by pluralism and liberalism.

For centuries, countries like France and the US boasted of preserving and promoting values such as liberty, equality, and human dignity as the basis of social harmony and economic prosperity. Racial, religious and gender discrimination in the public sphere continued to recede over time, until 9/11 when religious identity and race resurfaced as vital issues in politics and in the public discourse. Focus shifted subtly from ‘what you do and how you behave’ to ‘who you are and how you look’ and created a phenomenon of ‘us versus them’ within communities that had lived together for quite some time celebrating diversity.

The events of 9/11 and subsequent developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria changed the course of history in profound ways. A new world order emerged with new friends and foes under a new theme of “the West and the rest”. Instead of fighting individual terrorists or groups using violent means for political change, the West (led by the US) projected Islam as posing a bigger threat than communism did.

And the biased media played a key role in demonising Islam and Muslims in the West so much so that common people started believing in the most absurd and crazy stories about an entire civilization. Headscarves, beards, mosques, holy scripture, and other sacred symbols/practices were associated with obscurantism and terrorism.

But there is a method to this madness! The sudden influx of Muslim immigrants in European countries (thanks to external interference in Syria, Libya, and Iraq) was viewed as an economic and cultural threat. Populist leaders have found a very attractive market niche in a largely xenophobic social environment. The loss of jobs, which in reality is the outcome of globalization, automation, and outsourcing, is attributed to immigration. Brexit was one manifestation of how populism can fuel economic anger as a means of political change.

The scapegoating of Muslims, however, will prove to be counter-productive in the long run. Communal tensions and polarization provide the seedbed for radicalization and other social/political problems. Muslims, who constitute a sizable minority across Europe and the US, cannot be wished or forced away by insulting their religion or instituting discriminating laws in the name of social integration. Continued surveillance of emails and phone calls in the garb of security has already alienated the Muslim community.

How Muslims can and should respond to Islamophobia and growing hatred is to learn from the way the Jews behaved during and after the Holocaust. Instead of resorting to violence, they not only used all communication channels to convey their sufferings to friends and foes alike but also converted their pain into strength by forging unity and winning politicians, intellectuals, and leaders of other faiths.

Today, Holocaust denial is a punishable offence throughout Europe and no one can write or speak against it under any pretext including freedom of speech. Muslims can protect their identity and faith more effectively by using non-violent means.

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