

**Name of the Book: Muslims and Media Images—News versus Views**

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That Muslims and Islam suffer from a bad press is a widely accepted fact. But the reasons advanced for this are varied, and often conflicting. For many people, including in the non-Muslim media, Islam and its adherents stand as fundamentally opposed to what they consider as their cherished values. This owes not simply to prejudice and misunderstandings about Islam, as many Muslims would argue. The historical and present conditions of Muslim societies world-wide, particularly continuing religious intolerance and gross violations of human rights in the name of Islam, have played no small role in sustaining sternly negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. These attitudes are reflected in, and further reinforced by, large sections of the non-Muslim media.

On the other hand, many Muslims believe that much of the non-Muslim media is impelled by what they regard as a 'conspiracy' against Islam and Muslims. The undeniable fact that both in India and elsewhere, particularly in the West, much of the press is blatantly Islamophobic lends some weight to their argument.

The unenviable media image of Islam and those who claim to follow it is thus a result of a combination of a variety of factors. It cannot be pinned down to a single cause, contrary to what many Muslims and their detractors would simplistically argue. There is a bit of truth in the arguments of both, but these explanations are partial and do not tell the whole story.

This book attempts to explore the projection of Muslims and Islam in the media while also seeking to account for the ways in which these images are created and sustained. Many of the contributors to this book are non-Muslim journalists and academics, some of them leading names in their respective fields. They provide valuable clues as to how key non-Muslim media professionals look at Muslim-related issues. Several other contributors to the volume are of Muslim background and possess an intimate knowledge of the Indian Muslim press. They offer readers a critical insider's perspective that is often lacking in discussions about Islam, Muslims and the media.

*Muslims and Media Images: Where Things Go Wrong* is the title of the opening essay by Vinod Mehta, editor-in-chief of the New Delhi-based *Outlook* magazine. He claims, somewhat tendentiously, that the principal cause for the negative image of Muslims in the non-Muslim Indian media is what he considers to be the Muslims' own lack of understanding of the nature of the media. In turn, he says, this is related to what he claims is the absence of any 'forward movement in general amongst Muslims [...] especially in north India, towards social transformation and modernization.' (p.26).

Mehta appears to argue that the bad press that Muslims enjoy is largely of their own making—a

partial and limited claim that can easily be challenged. It is true that much of the blame for the slow pace of what Mehta calls 'modernization' among large sections of the north Indian Muslims rests on their shoulders—particularly of those who claim to be their leaders. However, Mehta misses out another undeniable fact—that the opportunities for such 'modernization' for many Indian Muslims are severely limited, or even denied, by pervasive discrimination at the hands of organs of the state and by the mounting challenge of Hindutva fascist groups who, as many have convincingly argued, seek to consign the Muslims of India to the status of the new 'untouchables'.

Mehta's advocacy of 'modernization' as the key to improving the Muslim media image is well-taken, although, lamentably, he does not explain what he exactly means by the term. 'Modernization' is a value-loaded concept, and can mean different things to different people. The dominant form of 'modernity' is, of course, that represented by the Western capitalist model, based on individualism, consumerism—indeed hedonism—and the total privatization, if not outright denial, of religion. While many of those who identify themselves as Muslims might buy into this logic, numerous others would stoutly refuse to do so, based on their own understanding of Islam that forcefully challenges the 'moneytheism' of capitalism—a useful and provocative term coined by the noted Malaysian public intellectual Chandra Muzaffar.

The point, thus, is not, as Mehta seems to suggest, an alleged refusal on the part of most Muslims to 'modernize'. Rather, it is a question of what sort of 'modernization' Mehta advocates—and this is something that he conveniently leaves undefined.

It is, of course, undeniable that much is wrong with Muslim society, including in the ways in which many Muslims understand their religion (particularly in relation to women and people of other faiths). All this is in urgent need of reform, as many Muslims will themselves admit. But blindly following the Western liberal model is no solution at all—contrary to what ardent advocates of Western-style liberalism would insist. It is something that Muslims who take their faith seriously would refuse to consider.

Fierce competition and drive for profit maximization are defining features of the media, Mehta points out, and so, he frankly admits, it is naive to expect the Indian media to be extra-sympathetic to Muslims. The media, he says, is a business, and although this does not mean that it should be exclusively devoted to money making, it is not feasible for it to be idealistic either. Most Indian media houses, he notes, are run by businessmen and business houses. Their primary interest is in making profits, and they 'have little understanding of what the media's role vis-à-vis the Muslim community should be.' (p.26). Gone, it might then appear, is the illusion of the media as a crusader for truth and justice.

Mehta raises some crucial questions about the ways in which Muslims are generally presented by the so-called 'national' or 'mainstream' media. Has the Indian media portrayed Indian Muslims with sensitivity and objectivity, particularly given the many problems that they face? Or, has it given 'undue prominence to what Mehta terms the 'lunatic fringe', and suppressed and ignored 'liberal' or 'moderate' voices'? Has it projected obscurantist mullahs as the spokesmen and representatives of the community and thereby given all the Muslims of India a bad press, depicting them all as 'rabid fundamentalists'?

These are questions central to the issue of media projections of Muslims. Mehta's answers to them will, clearly, not satisfy many Muslims as well as sensitive others. 'Journalists', he writes—and this is could well be construed as a specious excuse for both prejudice and ineptitude—'are fundamentally extremely lazy people. The assumption that we are very industrious and will do a

lot of groundwork for stories is an erroneous one.' So, he asks, 'If a sound-byte is readily available from the Imam of the Jama Masjid, for example, why should a TV reporter go looking for the not-so-easily-available moderate voice, which anyway makes for dull copy?'

Needless to say, Mehta's excuse does not impress. Is it simply some sort of congenital laziness—as Mehta appears to argue—that impels the media to highlight, and push from obscurity into notoriety, sundry obscurantist mullahs? Or is the reason, as one suspects, definitely less benign and forgivable—a refusal to recognize any voice other than the most reactionary as 'authentically Muslim' simply because that would defy the deeply-rooted stereotypical image of Muslims that a large section of the non-Muslim media shares and has consistently played a key role in promoting and reinforcing?

Mehta admits that another reason why the media tends to project rabidly communal and obscurantist figures—both among the Hindus as well as the Muslims—is simply because, as he puts it, they are more 'saleable'. He dismisses the complaint of 'liberal' Muslims that their voices are never highlighted in the media. He appears to circumvent the issue by raising the apparent problem he says that the media faces of locating, identifying and accessing 'liberal' Muslims. He claims that 'there are too few liberal Muslims who can be called upon to speak' (p.30). Only a few 'usual suspects' exist, or so he claims, and among them are many who simply use the Muslim cause for self-promotion and media publicity.

Just as Mehta leaves the notion of the 'modernized' Muslim (referred to earlier) undefined, so too with the term 'liberal Muslim'. Is a 'liberal' Muslim one who has abandoned Islam altogether, or chooses to conceal his faith in order to 'integrate' into what is arbitrarily defined as the Indian 'mainstream'? Does a Muslim become 'liberal' only when he ceases to pray five times a day or regards the Islamic prohibition on consuming alcohol an embarrassing rule that has no relevance in today's 'modern' age? Is a liberal Muslim one who thinks that sporting a beard or protesting against American imperialism and Zionist oppression is rank obscurantism, and that demanding the legitimate rights of Muslims is akin to 'fundamentalism' or 'communalism'?

Sadly, that is precisely how the notion of a 'liberal Muslim' is understood by many people. Needless to say, Muslims of this sort enjoy little support within the community and can in no way be said to represent it. And so their voices cannot count for much in the media. But if by a 'liberal' Muslim Mehta means someone who, while deeply rooted to and connected to his or her faith, is passionate about universal human rights, equality, democracy and secularism, he should find no difficulty at all in locating any number of such specimens. If there is a will, as the tired cliché goes, there is most definitely a way. Most of my friends, for instance, are Muslims and they would almost all fall into the category of 'liberal Muslims' if the term is understood in precisely this liberal way.

That said, Mehta's point that improving the image of Muslims in the media is linked to the question of accelerating the process of social change within the community is well-taken. He also rightly notes that it is for 'progressive' Muslims to demand to be heard, and for that they would need to create organizations of their own and network with the media. As of now, however, their voices are scattered and they have little or no organic links with the Muslim masses. This is in contrast to ultra-conservative groups among the ulema and their well-funded, media-savvy organizations, which make them much more easily accessible to the media.

In this regard Mehta justifiably critiques the role of north Indian Muslim religious and political elites, who claim to speak for all the Muslims of India but really do not speak for more than themselves, raking up divisive and controversial issues to win the loyal following of the Muslim

masses. The media, he advises, should desist from giving undue attention to such figures. Instead, it should seek out other voices, particularly among the younger generation of Muslims who probably relate to the contemporary Indian context in a more meaningful way.

Mehta stoutly denies the charge that the English-language media is biased against Muslims (although later in the essay he seems to contradict himself when he admits that ‘there is no doubt that [...] images of Muslims [are] generally projected in a distorted form’ (p.33)). His denial of bias can easily be contested, of course. Surely, it is bias, as much as anything else, that accounts for the fact that Muslims are invariably discussed in the media (including the English press, which Mehta seeks to exonerate) only in the context of some negative event, whether real or imaginary. Surely, it is bias, among other factors, which causes the immense social, economic, educational and cultural problems and concerns that most Indian Muslims face to be almost completely elided in the media, Mehta’s English press included. How can the existence of anti-Muslim bias be denied when numerous fiercely Islamophobic writers have regular access to several English papers? Surely Mehta cannot claim to be unaware of numerous editors and regular columnists of English papers in India who make no bones about their pro-Hindutva and fiercely anti-Muslim proclivities?

As befits his status as a known advocate of Hindutva, Chandan Mitra, editor of the New Delhi-based *The Pioneer*, makes numerous dubious claims in his rather shoddy paper in this volume. At the outset, he observes that ‘the reality is that the image of Indian Muslims projected by the Indian media varies vastly’, thus seeming to acknowledge the fact that at least some sections of the media do not give Muslims a fair deal. However, instead of critiquing those sections of the media that are guilty of this, he lays down, ‘The expectations among Muslims [regarding the media] are unfair in the given circumstances’. He provides no explanation at all to back his judgment.

Indeed, he even argues that Muslims are themselves mainly to blame for their bad media image, claiming that the Urdu press and ‘has done more damage to the Muslim image in India than any other language media’. Given his known ideological proclivities, it is hardly surprising that Mitra makes no mention at all of the enormously influential and rabidly anti-Muslim Hindutva-oriented press—including his own *The Pioneer*—that continues to play a major role in magnifying and further sustaining anti-Muslim prejudices and Islamophobia.

Mitra is of the view that the Urdu media is ‘negative and least interested in propagating and encouraging positive Muslim images in a plural society such as India’. He also contends that the Urdu press is simply ‘not interested in playing the role of making Muslims a part of [...] social change and modernization’. Instead, all it does, so he claims, is to provoke Muslim sentiments and bolster a narrow, communal-minded leadership.

There is, undeniably, some substance in what Mitra claims, although the generalizations that he makes are perhaps excessively broad. Most crucially, he ignores the fact that the persistent insularity of the Urdu press, and what might be called its obsession with issues of religious identity—narrowly defined—is itself a reflection of the Indian Muslim predicament that stems from the Muslims being a marginalized and increasingly threatened minority. Although Mitra would probably not care to acknowledge this, the Muslim ‘insularity’, as reflected in the Urdu press, and which he so passionately laments, has much to do with deeply-entrenched anti-Muslim prejudices and the mounting attacks on the community—and organized anti-Muslim pogroms are just one of the many forms that they take—by agencies of the state and the Hindutva lobby. Muslim ‘insularity’ is not entirely of the Muslims’ own making, contrary to what Mitra might like us to believe.

All that Mitra has to say is not without merit, though. He convincingly argues that until the state arranges for Urdu to be included in the curriculum of general schools, in most places Muslim parents who want their children to learn the language will have no alternative but to enroll them in madrasas. Because Urdu has now, for all practical purposes, been reduced to the language of the madrasas, Urdu papers are today geared to a readership that is mainly madrasa-educated. This is reflected in their contents and their narrow focus on religion and community identity.

No one familiar with the madrasas can deny that there is some merit in Mitra's claims. But where he errs is in making wild generalizations about the madrasas, branding them as a whole as 'a parallel system dangerous not only for the nation but even more for Muslims themselves.' (p.94). He claims, without adducing any convincing evidence whatsoever, that 50 million Indian Muslim students study in full-time madrasas that number half a million throughout the country. Besides these, he says, are many other children who study in part-time madrasas. Needless to say, these are wildly exaggerated figures, and indicate a profound ignorance of Muslim social realities at the same time as they powerfully resonate with and reflect the relentless anti-madrasa propaganda of the Hindutva lobby.

Like Mehta before him, Mitra piously claims that the English media has no conscious anti-Muslim bias—an assertion that can easily be contested, especially in the case of some papers like the one Mitra edits. He candidly admits that the English media is elitist, and professionals employed in this sector often have few or no Muslim contacts. Since the vast majority of the Indian Muslims are poor and do not know English or read English papers, he points out that there is a tendency in the English press to ignore Muslim issues.

This argument can, of course, be easily challenged and rebutted. Far from hardly mentioning issues related to Muslims, as Mitra claims, the Indian media—including the English press—can be said to at times give inordinate coverage to invariably negative sensational stories and events involving Muslims—riots, wars, mistreatment of women, bizarre fatwas issued by obscurantist mullahs and so on. Hardly ever does one hear about anything positive about Muslims in the media. Are we to imagine, then, that Muslims are congenitally unable to produce or do anything positive that might be considered newsworthy? Of course, no one can or should deny the frightening reality of fundamentalist reaction, obscurantist 'religiosity' and deep-rooted patriarchy associated with some Muslims, but surely it can be no one's case that these are a Muslim monopoly. Given this, one is tempted to believe that the obsessive delight that the media takes in bombarding us with Muslim-related horror stories does indeed reflect a deep-rooted anti-Muslim bias. Consequently, one cannot but profoundly disagree with Mitra's pious proclamation that 'It is time for common Muslims to come out of the paranoid feeling that the media has been consciously seeking to victimize or portray them as villains in Indian society' (p.97).

At the same time, Mitra is right in suggesting that the Muslim intelligentsia should not shut themselves from engaging with the English media. Instead, he says, they should seek to enhance their space within it. He rightly laments the fact that 'issues that are not really germane to the genuine problems of the Muslim community get undue attention from the media as well as from Muslim writers' (p.98), and that these only further intensify negative stereotypes. Likewise, his plea to the media to shift its focus in reporting on Muslim matters by focusing more on issues that will bring about fundamental changes in Muslim social, economic and educational conditions and empowerment is also unexceptionable.

In his article, the veteran journalist Kuldip Nayyar reflects on his personal experiences of

working with a Muslim paper and what it meant to be a Hindu employed in such an establishment. He started his journalistic career, he writes, in October 1947 with Anjam, then a popular Delhi-based Urdu paper owned by a Muslim. This was shortly after the Partition of India, a traumatic time for many north Indian Muslims who chose not to migrate to Pakistan and now found themselves as a hapless and beleaguered minority in India.

The Muslims of Old Delhi, where the offices of Anjam were located, lived in constant fear, but, Nayyar remarks, the Muslim-owned Urdu press provided them little succor. Many owners of such papers had once been ardent advocates of the Partition and the creation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. However, since they decided to remain in India, they suddenly did what Nayyar terms as a 'volte-face overnight', without explaining why they had so passionately supported the Pakistan demand all along. They had little or no guidance to offer the Indian Muslims, who were faced with immense Hindu hostility. The Muslims felt that they were at the mercy of the Hindus, and this was even reflected, Nayyar writes, in the attitude of his Muslim colleagues in the Anjam. 'They treated me', he says, 'as if I were a privileged citizen and they a second-class lot. Their dependence on the generosity of the majority community was tragic; they behaved like somebody with a hat perpetually in hand' (p.40).

The pathetic predicament which the post-Partition north Indian Muslims found themselves faced with is still reflected in many ways in the Urdu press, Nayyar remarks. The Urdu press today, like its counterpart in the immediate post-Partition period, has, he comments, not provided Muslims the direction and leadership that they require for living as a marginalized minority in a religiously diverse society. It gives exaggerated importance to religious issues, narrowly defined, thus ensnaring Muslims in 'a vicious circle'. It has also, as Nayyar puts it, 'somewhat distanced the Muslims from the Indian mainstream' and made them even more 'inward looking'.

At the same time, Nayyar does not hesitate to critique what he terms as the 'national press' for not projecting Muslim-related issues in a fair and balanced manner. This media, he indicates, generally 'oversimplifies' Muslim problems and concerns and displays a marked and erroneous tendency to interpret their issues in religious terms while ignoring their numerous social and economic issues. Nayyar is right, of course, although he does not mention that the same complaint can be leveled against those who claim to be the leaders and representatives of the Muslims, including, and particularly, the madrasa-trained ulema.

Nayyar critiques the media's habit of tarring all Muslims with the same brush, of making wild and completely unwarranted generalizations about Muslims and projecting them as inherently violent, fanatic, obscurantist and so on. Thus, although Muslims suffer immensely more than Hindus in what are euphemistically termed as 'communal riots', the media generally depicts Muslims as culprits even if this is not true at all. While this is the case with some sections of the English media, anti-Muslim biases are, Nayyar notes, even more widespread in the vernacular press, large sections of which are now unabashed supporters of the Hindutva ideology and agenda.

A major cause of such prejudice is wrong information, or the lack of any information at all, regarding Islam among most Hindus—and the same is true about Muslims with regard to knowledge of Hinduism. Nayyar bemoans the fact that the Indian media has played no worthwhile role at all in promoting inter-religious dialogue, although this is something that India cannot survive without. While Muslim-owned Urdu papers are awash with articles—indeed, whole pages—about Islam, they provide Muslim readers with no understanding at all about the religion of the other peoples in whose midst they live. Likewise, while the Hindi press routinely publishes stories about Hinduism, it offers its readers nothing at all about Islam. Inevitably, then,

in significant sections of both the Urdu and Hindi media, Hinduism and Islam are projected as polar opposites that allegedly have nothing at all in common, and that, therefore, are supposedly viscerally opposed to each other.

Of all the papers included in this volume Siddharth Vardarajan's is the most clearly argued and convincing. He contends that the Indian print media mirrors the biases of 'mainstream' political parties and generally follows their imperatives. He explains that the so-called representatives of the Muslims affiliated to these parties, whose major task is to garner the Muslim vote for their political patrons, are mostly 'backward in their approach to the socio-economic issues' of the country in general, and of the Muslims, in particular. This indelibly influences media discourses about Muslims.

In north India, at least, where the bulk of the Indian Muslims is concentrated, these self-styled Muslim political 'representatives', drawn principally from the erstwhile aristocratic elite and conservative madrasa-trained ulema, share a 'backward-looking mentality', which is generally projected by the media to apply to all Muslims as such. Negative portrayals of Muslims in the media have also been compounded, Vardarajan writes, by the infiltration of pro-Hindutva elements in large sections of the media, including RSS activists who are 'trained in sensational propaganda-mongering' (p.103) that is geared specifically to whipping up anti-Muslim hatred.

Several contributors to this volume insist that the world of the English media that they inhabit is free from any anti-Muslim bias, for which they congratulate themselves while expressing dismay at the vernacular press for fanning anti-Muslim prejudices. Vardarajan does not buy this duplicitous argument. Instead, he frankly confesses the existence of anti-Muslim prejudices in significant sections of the English-media. He notes, for instance, media biases in reporting about 'communal riots', which, in his words, reflect an 'extremely distorted picture' (p.105) of this sort of violence as allegedly being between two equals and as generally the result of Muslim provocation. In most cases of such violence, this is simply not true at all.

In this regard Vardarajan asks, why, 'despite overwhelming evidence that Muslims are the main victims of communal violence', does the 'standard riot narrative as propounded by the bulk of the media continue to revolve around the alleged aggressiveness of the Muslims?'. He offers some explanations for this distorted media reporting. Firstly, what he calls the media's 'over-reliance' on police sources for news and information about communal violence. That anti-Muslim prejudices are deeply-rooted in the police forces, which have only a bare Muslim presence, is well-known, and this is often reflected in their version of incidents of communal violence. The element of police bias is further exacerbated because many such 'riots' are not riots at all but actually indiscriminate killings of Muslims by the police themselves. In the majority of 'riots', most of the dead are Muslims slain at the hands of the police, and so, Vardarajan writes, 'the police narrative often tends to be aimed at sanitizing the role of the police and painting a portrait of Muslims as aggressors in order to justify whatever the police does' (p.106).

A second reason, Vardarajan suggests, for biased reporting of 'communal riots' is the high financial and logistical cost of news gathering. Most papers cannot afford to have bureaus all over India or send reporters to far-flung areas where 'communal riots' might occur. They are often forced to rely on underpaid stringers in small towns who are generally locally very influential. Many of these characters use their status as journalists to get close to local bigwigs, which means that the integrity of the news-gathering process at the local level can easily get compromised. Often, the local bigwigs are the ones behind cases of 'communal violence', and local stringers and underpaid staffers do not find it easy to send the real story because of blandishments by the

bigwigs or threats—even to their lives—from them.

The third reason Vardarajan suggests for biased reporting of ‘communal violence’ in the English (and other) media has to do with anti-Muslim bias as well as lack of professionalism in the news-desks of papers. For instance, he notes that several newspapers received funds from the BJP during its rule at the Centre, and in this period ‘many English journalists and editors officially joined the party or flirted with it’. In this background, what Vardarajan terms as ‘the subtle show of disregard towards the plight of Muslims’ (p.110) among large sections of the English media is thus hardly surprising.

Vardarajan critiques the dominant discourse on what are called ‘communal riots’, pointing out how this itself tends to be heavily biased against marginalized communities such as Muslims, who are often victims of pogroms organized by the Hindu Right and elements of the state. ‘The term “communal riots”’, he notes, ‘is an infelicitous term to describe what is essentially organized and targeted violence in which the law enforcement machinery is fully implicated, either through omission or commission’ in selective killings of minorities. ‘The very discourse and notion of the communal riot’, he explains, ‘is problematic because it posits one community fighting another’, which is very often not the case at all. Once a riot is presented in this manner, he comments, ‘media reports are invariably going to be biased in way or the other. Typically, the reports tend to be biased, giving the impression that Muslims are killing Hindus’ (p.108).

Related to this is a pronounced tendency to project every case of Muslim mobilization and assertion, even in defence of their legitimate rights, as menacingly threatening, as ‘fundamentalist’ and even ‘terroristic’. Vardarajan cites a telling example about a group of Muslims in the town of Malegaon who went around the town distributing leaflets titled ‘Be Indian, Buy Indian’ and appealing to people to boycott goods made by foreign companies whose countries had aligned with the USA in waging a deadly war against Afghanistan. The leaflets were banned by the police, who fired on the group of Muslims, resulting in the tragic death of some of the demonstrators. When the news of the demonstration reached Bombay and Delhi, newspapers there reported it in very predictable terms—as a rally in support of Osama bin Laden—although it was nothing of the sort.

Vardarajan clarifies that anti-Muslim prejudice in some sections of the English-media does not necessarily indicate a conscious and deliberate bias. It could also be attributed to the subtle influence of anti-Muslim sentiments in society at large, whose influence journalists, as members of their societies, may not remain immune from. He suggests that this could be reduced by encouraging diversity in the workplace and employing more Muslims in the media. However, he also notes that this might not greatly improve media representation of Muslims, for many Muslim journalists suffer from a self-imposed censorship, fearing to raise issues of denial and violation of Muslim rights for fear of being branded by others, including their editors, colleagues and readers, as being ‘communal’, ‘pro-Muslim’ and even ‘fundamentalist’ simply for doing so.

Vardarajan laments the fact that the media is now run on market principles, lacking any progressive social agenda at all. It is, he notes, heavily biased in favour of the elites and loaded against the poor. The vast majority of the Indian Muslims are poor, and the elitist bias of the Indian media hits them badly. That, however, Vardarajan says, is an unfortunate fact that has to be accepted for the moment for lack of any immediate solution. In the meanwhile, he advises, it would not be proper to write-off the media as a whole as fiercely anti-Muslim. There are, he says, a number of Indian journalists who are committed to social justice, democracy and minority rights, and Muslims concerned about how the media treats them must seek these people out and provide them the support they need.

Mrinal Pande, editor of the Hindi daily *Hindustan*, echoes several of Vardarajan's remarks in her paper. She laments that the Indian media often overlooks the truth in reporting about minorities, particularly Muslims, and abandons the professional norms that are supposed to guide it. This, she warns, constitutes a grave threat to democracy, liberty and equality. The problem is enormously magnified, she says, because of the tendency of large sections of the press to go along with political parties whose principal tool of mobilization is spewing anti-Muslim hatred. As Pande puts it, 'The media [...] often becomes a pawn in the aggressive sabre-rattling game of politicians. And when that happens, an exaggerated fear about national security makes it view events not objectively, as professionals and humane citizens, but as Indian nationals threatened by a colossal tide of Islamic belligerence' (p.47).

Pande locates the deep-rooted anti-Muslim biases in significant sections of the Indian media in the wider context of what she believes is the alarming growth of corruption and sycophancy in media and what she describes as a 'near total erosion of professional objectivity and a humane sense of justice' (p.57). Some intrepid journalists who have dared to challenge the powers-that-be and raise their voices against oppression have even had to pay for this with their lives, she notes. Given that Islamophobia is being consciously cultivated in influential circles in the West to justify Western hegemonic and imperialist designs, the excessive and growing reliance on Western news sources is another cause for mounting anti-Muslim prejudice in sections of the Indian media. It is thus no surprise, Pande remarks, that anti-Muslim Indian columnists such as Arun Shourie, Swapan Dasgupta and M.V. Kamath are often cited by the Western media. Islamophobia shapes media discourse on Muslims in a highly skewed manner, resulting in all issues related to Islam and Muslims being viewed through a 'security' lens or solely within the framework of religion and secularism.

The problem is further compounded in the Indian vernacular press, says Pande, to which few, if any, progressive writers contribute, preferring to write for what are generally considered as the more 'prestigious' English papers. This vacuum has been filled by journalists who make no effort to conceal their passionate support for the Hindu Right. Numerous Hindi papers, for instance, she says, are now controlled by RSS sympathizers and activists, who use their papers to spew anti-Muslim venom and even wholly false propaganda against Muslims. Lamentably, little or no legal action has been taken by the state authorities against such papers.

Ironically, Pande points out, Hindi communal papers as well as most Urdu papers both tend to ignore stories of positive achievements of Muslims, as well as their manifold economic, social and educational problems, while focusing on negative and sensational events and stories. Thus, both work in tandem to lending further weight to negative stereotypical images of Muslims as 'backward' and 'illiterate'. Both tend to project conservative ulema as the authoritative spokesmen of the community, in the process reinforcing the misleading notion of Muslims as blind followers of obscurantist mullahs.

Several chapters of the book are devoted to the state of the now almost wholly Muslim-owned Urdu press in India. Robin Jeffrey remarks that owing principally to discriminatory policies of the state vis-à-vis Urdu and the loss of the economic linkages that the language once enjoyed, Urdu is now regarded as the language of the mainly madrasa-educated, north Indian Muslim poor. He notes how, ironically, the Government has systematically destroyed Urdu by removing it from the school system but, at the same time, seeks to appear to be generously patronizing the language in order to gain Muslim votes. One way in which it does so is by providing advertisements to Urdu papers in a bid to buy their loyalty. Jeffrey dwells in detail on this sinister nexus between the state and sections of the Urdu press.

While Government sources claim that both the number of Urdu papers and their circulation figures are steadily increasing, facts speak otherwise, Jeffrey claims. Several editors of Urdu (and other) papers deliberately hike their circulation figures in order to procure more advertisement revenue from the Government; and there might also be evidence of smaller papers hiking up circulation figures in order to get higher quotas of newsprint than they actually need and then selling the excess in the black market.

Jeffrey indicates some other disturbing features of the Indian Urdu press. Because most Urdu readers are poor and lack purchasing power, Urdu papers get few, if any, commercial advertisements. This inevitably impacts on their quality. Further, many Urdu papers suffer from outdated equipment, unprofessionalism, low staff salaries, poor working conditions and unscrupulous owners. Most Urdu papers also thrive on promoting narrow sectarianism and 'emotionalism', deliberately highlighting provocative and anti-Muslim news, for that is what sells. And since a very significant proportion of the readers of Urdu papers are madrasa-educated, these papers pander to their tastes and prejudices and their conservative, even reactionary, stances.

An incisive essay by the editor of the volume, Ather Farouqui, further highlights some of the unsavoury aspects of contemporary Urdu journalism. Right since 1947, Farouqui contends, albeit with a few stray exceptions, Urdu papers have failed to play a constructive role in shaping Muslim sensibilities to help the community face the enormous challenge of adjusting as minority in India. This, he argues, has to do with the nature of the Urdu readership and the political and economic proclivities of Urdu journalists. Urdu papers, he laments, have further reinforced a fiercely sectarian and 'emotional' outlook and a 'ghetto mentality' among Muslims. Urdu journalism has remained largely static and its ethos and subject matter have hardly changed with the times. In fact, in significant respects they have become worse, he remarks, with several Urdu papers brazenly fanning religious obscurantism for petty gains.

In this regard, Farouqui approvingly quotes the Urdu critic Masoom Moradabadi, editor of *Khabardar Jadid*, as pathetically lamenting that:

'The majority of Urdu newspapers wish to keep their readers buried under grief and pessimism and [...] mentally retarded so that they may be rendered inactive in practical life. Since Independence, the majority of Urdu newspapers have done nothing except lamentation. They deliberately search [for] and compile such material as would push Muslims into pessimism and hopelessness. These newspapers publish stories of the tyranny [unleashed] on the community with renewed vigour, but they never care to educate [Muslims] and tell them that there are ways and means to come out from these circumstances and live a respectable life. They [...] are scared that [if Muslims are] adequately guided [...] no one will buy their blood-drenched newspapers' (pp.244-45).

Instead of providing Muslim with positive role-models and inspiration, Urdu papers, Farouqui points out, constantly dwell on the fact of anti-Muslim discrimination, claiming that all the woes of the community are a result of such discrimination at the hands of the state or various other forces that are said to be engaged in a 'conspiracy' against them. Farouqui does not deny the obvious reality of anti-Muslim discrimination. At the same time, he remarks that this is just one part of a larger story.

Muslim marginalization owes also to the unenviable post-Partition fears and insecurities and anti-Muslim violence as well as a host of other factors internal to the Muslim community, including misplaced priorities of the Muslim political leadership. However, the Urdu press conveniently

ignores these internal factors. This denial, instead of helping Muslims, only further complicates and exacerbates their 'backwardness'. In this regard, Farouqui opines that if anti-Muslim violence were to cease and if the state took a genuine interest in helping solve the manifold economic and social problems of the Muslims, it is likely that the Urdu press 'would not be able to misguide and exploit innocent Muslims' (p.245).

Another major lacuna of the Urdu press, Farouqui writes, is that it continues to ignore the changing social realities of the Muslim community and the country as a whole. For instance, it does not give adequate space to the voices of a small but emerging 'modern' educated middle-class among north Indian Muslims. It provides little information or guidance on issues related to educational and job opportunities for Muslim youth. It is also geographically limited in its appeal. While claiming to speak for all the Muslims of India, the north Indian Urdu press actually reflects the interests, concerns and worldviews of many north Indian Muslims, mostly madrasa-educated people.

The communal rhetoric of the Muslim press and political leaders of north India, which they seek to export to the rest of the country, does not, Farouqui notes, strike a sympathetic chord in several other parts of the country where inter-communal relations are more harmonious and where numbers of Muslims have witnessed considerable economic and educational progress.

Farouqui also dwells on unethical practices that he considers fairly widespread in the Urdu press. For instance, he remarks that government advertisements to Urdu newspapers—an effort to 'appease' vocal and influential Muslim opinion-makers and, through them, to garner Muslim votes—are readily exploited by some Muslims who are not really journalists but who obtain a registration number for setting up an Urdu paper, publish a few dozen copies and grossly exaggerate their circulation figures in order to get government advertisements and a quota of newsprint. In this regard, Farouqui points out, the Registrar for Newspapers of India often plays a passive role and does not properly check the authenticity of these figures. In this way, he says, the vast majority of the registered Urdu publications do not reach the public at all.

Another serious allegation that Farouqui levels against Urdu papers is that most of them enjoy patronage of conservative Muslim politicians of north India. He claims that 'It is widely known that they receive their funding from the same sources which finance the activities of fundamentalist Muslim leaders' (p.242). He also points out that because Urdu papers fail to get commercial advertisements they feel compelled to boost their sales by thriving on sensationalism and religious bigotry and stories about 'conspiracies'—real, but also imaginary—against Islam and Muslims. This, in turn, also works to the advantage of Muslim religious and political elites, who rely on such issues to gain the support of the Muslim public. Not surprisingly, then, Farouqui observes, 'modern' educated middle class Muslims who are interested in national and international issues rarely read Urdu papers, and patronize English or vernacular papers instead.

Urdu papers also generally suffer from a high degree of unprofessionalism, Farouqui observes. They usually have a skeleton, poorly qualified and pathetically-paid staff, who face poor working conditions and are constantly at the mercy of the editors and owners of the papers (these two roles are generally combined in one person). They also suffer from a serious lack of originality. Typically, they simply collect news and stories that have already been published elsewhere and mould them according to own policy and ideology so that they appear provocative and anti-Muslim, thereby boosting their sales. They have little or no role for proof readers and copy editors. Most subeditors in Urdu papers, Farouqui tells us, are not well-educated—few know English or have a good grasp of developments in the world around them, because most of them are madrasa graduates. Urdu papers also generally have no space for intellectuals. Nor do they

commission articles. In all then, Farouqui argues, the Urdu press is now in an advanced state of decay.

A similar argument is made by the noted Delhi-based Islamic scholar Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. He laments what he sees as the pathetic condition of the Muslim press—not just in India but globally—an indication of which, he contentiously argues, is that this press is not even an accepted source of Muslim news. The Muslim media, he contends, reflects the alarming lack of social awareness among Muslims as a community and only further reinforces it. It actively discourages good writers and thinkers from engaging in and with it.

Berating Muslim papers for their obsessive concern with controversial matters that involve strife with other communities, the Maulana advises them follow the Quran in avoiding conflict with others as far as possible and in seeking dialogue as a way out instead. He claims that the Muslim media, as a whole, does not abide by Quranic injunctions in this matter. Hence, he contends, ‘Judged by Koranic standards, Muslim journalism falls far below that of others.’ While the Quran encourages a positive attitude and stresses dialogue with others, ‘the entire Muslim press of the present-day’, he bemoans, ‘is plunged in negativism.’ ‘Where the Koran stressed the importance of action and the avoidance of reaction, present-day Muslim journalism as a whole is oriented towards and motivated by reaction’. Harsh words, but they ring true.

The Indian Muslim media, the Maulana insists, ‘presents no model of excellence’ to young Muslims. Instead, he says, it is packed with ‘amateur journalists who resort to yellow journalism’ and ‘unscrupulous sensationalism’ (p.260). In part, he indicates, this is because it is regarded by some as the only way to survive in the absence of a substantial Muslim presence in the industrial and finance sectors that could have otherwise been a source of funds for the Muslim media. In line with Quranic teachings, the Maulana suggests, Muslims—and this includes the Muslim media—should ignore the difficulties that they face and, instead, seek out and make proper use of the opportunities that are available to them. He minces no words in arguing that the Muslim press, in general, rarely abides by the Quran in this respect.

‘Today,’ he says, ‘Muslim journalism has devoted itself entirely to ferreting out difficulties, mainly plots and conspiracies of others against them’. ‘Hundreds and thousands of newspapers and periodicals’, he notes, ‘are brought out by Muslims but although they all appear under different titles, they might well be lumped together under the single title of “protest”. If we substituted “Protest Daily”, “Protest Weekly” or “Protest Monthly” for their original titles this would in no way be inappropriate to their contents.’

This, he insists, bodes ill for the Muslims rather than helping their cause as many of them might fondly imagine. ‘In the light of Koranic wisdom’, he says, ‘nothing but negative reaction with constant repetition builds up a paranoid mentality’. This leads to constant protest and strife, which is hardly conducive to ‘positive, practical struggle’ and ‘constructive thinking’. ‘Regeneration can come only through self-construction,’ he goes on. ‘It can never result from the mere lodging of protests against others’ (p.256).

The Maulana spares no words in berating what he regards as Muslim self-righteousness. He insists—though here, of course, one could differ with him to some extent—that it is completely erroneous to blame non-Muslims (as much of the Muslim media does) for Muslim woes. But he is absolutely right when he points out that several of the manifold problems of the Muslims are of their own making. Equally valid is his critique of the marked tendency of many Muslims, as well as much of the Muslim press, to refuse to engage in any meaningful introspection. He expresses his profound disgust with what he regards as the obsessive focus of the Muslim press with

Muslim issues alone and its indifference to the plight of others. He is equally scathing in his criticism of what he refers to as ‘the image the Muslims cherish of themselves as being faultless and above reproach’, as allegedly ‘absolutely perfect, but ill-treated human beings, and as ‘entirely virtuous and innocent of all wrongdoing’.

‘It is on the basis of this kind of one-sided and partial news-reporting’, the Maulana laments, that many Muslims want to create their own media which, they hope, can counter the biased non-Muslim press. The Maulana sagely comments thus: ‘What they do not realize is that the world for which they want to create such a press has neither any need nor any interest in it. Such papers issued by Muslims are destined to be read by Muslims alone.’ Furthermore, he caustically remarks, this sort of journalism ‘will only lull the community to sleep by providing it with doses of opium: it cannot become the means of its regeneration’ (p.259).

This does not mean that the Maulana sees absolutely no hope at all for the Muslim media. He advises young Muslims to seek out a career in the media and suggests that Muslim organizations take an active role in promoting this.

Winding up this long list of well-justified complaints against the Urdu media is an incisive overview of the Urdu press by Arshad Amanullah, a madrasa graduate and now a documentary film-maker based in Delhi. Among other factors, he argues, the hostility of political parties to Urdu has been responsible for blocking the emergence of a new generation of Urdu-speaking Muslims with a ‘secular’ outlook. This void in Urdu journalism, he contends, has been filled largely by graduates of conservative madrasas. In turn, this has ‘culminated the process of the transformation of Urdu journalism into Islamist journalism’ (p.264).

But there is, Amanullah tells us, at least some cause for cheer. For instance, he says, South Indian Urdu papers are not marred—at least not to the same degree—by the ‘emotionalism’ of their north Indian counterparts. One reason for this, he suggests, is that the former are generally better funded and so, unlike the latter, do not need to resort to ‘sensationalism’ in order to attract readers and their money.

There have also been significant technological developments in the Urdu media of late, Amanullah writes. Several Urdu papers have launched electronic editions, and some years ago India’s first Urdu language news service was started, with a staff that includes a number of women—a rarity for the Urdu media. The Lucknow-based daily Aaj, established some years ago by the noted reformist Shia scholar Maulana Kalbe Sadiq, is, Amanullah writes, charting a new course in Urdu journalism. In terms of variety of content and presentation, he says, it has no parallel in the rest of the north Indian Urdu press. Interestingly, he notes, it has pages for literary writings, economics and science, unlike most other Urdu papers.

At the same time, Amanullah says, most Urdu papers, including the largest circulated Urdu daily in India—Rashtriya Sahara Urdu, which comes out in nine editions—continue to thrive on sensational stories of anti-Muslim ‘conspiracies’ while ignoring basic issues of economics and education of the Muslims. This is, in a sense, a reflection of the fact that most Urdu journalists are graduates of conservative madrasas. According to Amanullah, they lack any training whatsoever in the social sciences and are generally bereft of the ‘interrogative spirit that is an essential quality in journalism’. Matters are only made worse by the fact that, so Amanullah says, the main criterion for being a journalist in an Urdu paper is the ability to write ‘flowery language’(p.277).

A couple of pieces, in the form of general observations about portrayals of Muslims in the media rather than detailed analyses, are also included in this volume. In his contribution, political

scientist Rajni Kothari expounds on what he feels is the urgent for Muslims to view themselves 'not communally but socially, as part of a larger struggle for social justice, equity and democracy in society as a whole'—an accurate suggestion, but this is, of course, easier said than done, given the relentless threats that many Muslims face precisely because of being Muslim. Kothari also rightly stresses the urgent need for democracy within Muslim community, besides in Indian society as a whole. However, some might regard his prediction that as Muslims join hand with democratic forces among Hindus 'the press will follow suit and become more constructive' (p.39) as somewhat naïve and overly optimistic.

Besides lamenting the fact that media reporting about Muslims is greatly shaped by discourses about 'Islamic fundamentalism' and stressing the need for Muslims to take to the media in a more proactive way, the piece by the late K.M.A.Munim, former editor of the Bangladesh Observer, tells us very little. Charles Borges' article takes up the specific case of Goa and examines how Muslims are projected in the Goan press. Not surprisingly, he concludes that anti-Muslim prejudice is rife and that the Goan media generally portrays and reinforces stereotypically negative images of Muslims, as alleged 'terrorists', 'fundamentalists' and so on. A rather shoddy piece by Eselle Dryland, titled 'Indian Muslims and the Free Press', purports to examine how what the author calls the Indian 'free press' (she uses the term without the mandatory inverted commas) portrays Muslims. She tells us little that other contributors to this volume do not say, but usefully adds that the point that the Indian Muslim press is rife with pious platitudes and constant evocations of a glorious past, and is, on the whole, devoid of the skills and expertise needed to compete with the non-Muslim press.

Two articles in the book deal with the representation of Muslims in the Western media. In her piece, titled 'Islam and the West—Ominous Misunderstandings', Susan Maitra berates the Western media for deliberately seeking to create and cultivate the image of Islam and Muslims as the new public enemy. Taking advantage of deep-rooted Islamophobic sentiments as well as ignorance about Islam among many Westerners, she says significant sections of the Western media are deploying Islamophobia as a cover-up to justify Western imperialism and wars against Muslim states.

Howard Brasted's analysis of the Australian press reveals similar biases against Islam and Muslims. Invariably, he writes, Muslims are presented in the Australian media in stereotypical and extremely negative terms that are sensationalist and simplistic. To an extent, he says, this is a reflection of latent Christian prejudices against Islam. In addition to this is the lingering legacy of Orientalism, although recent acts of heinous violence by self-styled Islamists in the name of Islam have further strengthened anti-Muslim sentiments in Australia, and, indeed, over much of the rest of the world. In this regard, Brasted rightly notes that Muslims have a major responsibility in working to promote a better media image of themselves and the religion they claim to follow. He approvingly quotes the American Muslim scholar Siraj Wahhaj as insisting that if Muslims want Islam to be promoted in the media as a religion of tolerance, and not terror, they will need to demonstrate this by their own actions.

In his article on the portrayal of Muslims in Indian movies, Moinuddin Jinabade points out that Muslim characters in Bollywood movies are rarely presented as 'normal' people. Rather, they are made to abide by a stereotype and this reinforces the notion of Muslim 'difference' and 'exceptionalism'. In Bollywood movies, a Muslim is invariably a north Indian who spouts Urdu poetry, and sports a beard or a tawiz. He is often portrayed as a decadent pan-chewing, hukkah-puffing feudal lord wallowing in wanton luxury. He is generally presented as overtly and 'excessively' religious. Muslim women are invariably depicted as hapless, veiled creatures, perpetual objects of allegedly uncontrollable male Muslim lust.

In many films Muslims occupy such roles as smugglers, butchers, gangsters and beggars. The latest, and most dangerous, stereotype of the Muslim to inhabit Bollywood is that of the Muslim-as-terrorist, and several movies have been produced in recent years centering on this theme. Muslims thus come to be cruelly caricatured in Bollywood. Rarely, if ever, do Bollywood movies reflect Muslims as 'ordinary' people unmarked by their community or religious affiliations, contrary to the Hindu case. But this, Jinabde perceptively adds, is by no means limited to Bollywood alone—even soap operas broadcast on Indian television channels are invariably set in comfortably upper-middle class and 'high' caste Hindu homes.

This book cannot afford to be missed by anyone interested in Indian Muslim affairs and in media projections of Muslims. One will not, of course, agree entirely with everything that the various authors have to say. Admittedly, the book also suffers from serious limitations, probably inherent in an edited volume of this type. There are, for instance, no contributions by editors or others working in the Urdu media. Nor are there any contributions dealing with the crucial issue of Muslim women and their representation in the media. Likewise, voices from south India, where the Muslim experience differs considerably from the north, are entirely absent. Certain chapters are plainly shoddy and could well have been kept out. Yet, and despite all of this, this book excels.