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Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship

By: Muhammad Nadeem

Debates amongst 18th and 19th century Muslim scholars on appropriate boundaries for friendship and intimacy with Hindus were sparked by the new political realities of colonial rule and fears of assimilation.

As the Mughal empire waned and colonial shadows lengthened in the late 19th century, South Asian Muslim scholars embarked on rethinking their communitarian identity in the face of political upheaval. In his work *Perilous Intimacies*, SherAli Tareen explores one key debate: deciding the appropriate boundaries for friendship and intimacy with Hindus, which would guard against assimilation in an age when Muslims had lost political power.

Some scholars emphasised commonalities between Hindu and Islamic ideas, advocating friendship, while others stressed differences to maintain communal distinctions. Within this diversity, tensions persisted between desires for closeness and the preservation of communal boundaries and hierarchy. In doing so, he emphasises that intra-Muslim diversity resists facile binaries of secular and non-secular, ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

Concerns about friendship were sparked by the colonial moment’s relegation of Muslims as disadvantaged minorities and by ascendant ideas of cultural assimilation. Friendship became a site of these debates because it signified an intimate encounter, challenging claims to purity and sovereignty. The Arabic term for close friendship *muwalat* – emerging in these discourses – suggested the intricate relationship between friendship and power. Its root, *wali*, could mean both friend and a guardian with authority.

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Tareen emphasises the promise and peril across diverse registers of friendship, from everyday encounters to political collaborations, translation projects, and ritual imitations. As such, these debates circled around questions over the appropriateness of embodying practices seen as contravening Islamic jurisprudential norms: ranging from sartorial styles, cultural customs, and linguistic habits to culinary tastes.

Modern reconfigurations of *tashabbuh* – cultural ‘resemblance’ – became a key conceptual instrument mobilised for renegotiating Hindu-Muslim differences. Islamic legal philosophy had warned against ‘imitating’ non-Muslims to preserve communal identity boundaries. Tareen shows how the original prophetic command against untethered assimilation evolved over centuries of scholastic interpretation into a flexible juridical category to enforce theological sanctions and police ‘heterodox’ dissent.

That was before it explosively transformed once into an urgent modern polemic invoked by leaders like Ahmad Raza Khan to doctrinally regulate everyday practices. Sartorial styles, modes of ritual conduct, lexicographical and linguistic usage, as well as gesture, etiquette and deportment were now marshalled to dramatise threats posed by colonial modernity to embodied enactments of communal distinction.

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There were dissenting, though marginalised, opinions. Shah Waliullah’s Sufi-scholastic scepticism extended towards these pedantic invocations of *tashabbuh* to tar everyday cultural practices as betrayals of Muslim identity. The Sufi and rationalist modernist Maulana Shibli Nu’mani’s would legitimise selective cultural borrowing by remembering instances of past adaptation when expedient for consolidating Muslim communal integrity. Maulana Azad would advance the possibility of egalitarian friendship bonds between communities untethered from considerations of religious difference. But Tareen points out that Azad remained an embattled and controversial outlier out of sync with overwhelmingly cautious attitudes.

Tareen's analysis also points to the limits in the efforts of 19th century Indian Muslim intellectuals to foster friendship with Hindus. Despite exhibiting outward tolerance, these gestures implicitly framed Hindu thought and practice through registers of lacks, gaps, and absences. Rather than embodying genuine pluralism, respect, or reciprocal dialogue, these reinscribed a logic of reforming Hinduism to achieve proximity with Islam. Intellectual quests to identify similarities between Islamic and Hindu philosophical traditions ultimately diminished the latter by portraying it as merely echoing Abrahamic revelation and as devoid of doctrinal originality.

When thinkers like Chiragh Ali and scholars affiliated with Aligarh Muslim University declared Hindu theological workings and social customs consonant with the rationalist spirit of Islam, they also saw Hinduism as a lesser 'Other' fated for doctrinal reconfiguration and reform towards Islam's unsurpassed philosophical truth. By taking doctrinal distance from Islam as the parameter requiring correction, they failed to interrogate Islamic philosophy's own normative assumptions.

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Intra-ulama contestations on the cow sacrifice and Hindu-Muslim relations provided a potent location where these debates played out. Against the backdrop of Hindu campaigns for cow protection, Muslim intellectuals sought to chart out an appropriately pious response.

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For Ahmad Raza Khan, the leader of the Barelwi school, cow sacrifice constituted a vital and non-negotiable ritual obligation and identity marker. Hence acquiescence in cow protection amounted to unthinkable communal humiliation and portended further dissolution of boundaries. The Deobandi mufti Abdul Bari articulated a more conciliatory posture. However, Bari's logic too was ultimately grounded in jurisprudential adherence, articulating precise legal conditions and limitations for this tactical concession. It did not discard legalistic communal difference or embrace an egalitarian collapse of any civilizational hierarchy.

The pattern was visible in debates on whether Indian Muslims should abstain from cow sacrifice and beef consumption to unite with Hindus against the British and save the Ottoman Caliphate. Contrasting views came from two prominent South Asian Muslim traditionalist scholars, Ahmad Raza Khan and Qiyamuddin 'Abdul Bari. Khan saw that Muslim sovereignty located in ritual practices like cow sacrifice and considered it a crucial marker of Muslim identity. On the other hand, 'Abdul Bari prioritised the Caliphate, seeing it as the true locus of sovereignty. Despite their differences, both scholars emphasised the non-negotiable imperative of Sharia for maintaining Muslim dominance over non-Muslims. Where their interpretations diverged was on *how* to preserve and protect the normativity of political theology.

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Modern South Asia's Islamic religious scholars have done little to reform the imperialist underpinnings of dominant theological and legal discourses. Such assumptions deeply influenced colonial-era debates on whether India was an 'abode of war' or an 'abode of Islam'. Yet, religious scholars of the 19th century could display an ambivalence: commit to preserving Islamic distinction and moral superiority vis-à-vis Hindus, perceive Hindus as foes, and simultaneously show hospitality to Hindus.

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These calculations of difference paled in comparison to the far more rigorous calculations of colonialism and the modern nation-state. The legacy of these contestations over friendship and identity continue to shape contestations between conservative Islamic activism and secular-liberal state authorities over governing and representing non-Muslims in Pakistan and India. In Pakistan, state policy towards religious minorities has been a point of contention between conservative Islamic activists and secular-liberal state authorities. Blasphemy laws have been used to target religious minorities, leading to violence and discrimination. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community, considered non-Muslim by the state, faces severe persecution and restrictions on their religious practices. In India, the contestations have been around the role of religion in governance and representation at a time when Hindu nationalist groups have pushed for laws and policies that promote a majoritarian agenda and target Muslims excluding them from citizenship rights. And while Tareen's focus is on Islamic perspectives, his approach hints at the possibility of uncovering parallel Hindu grammars that underlie modern tensions.

Tareen argues that by relooking at 19th and 20th century debates, merely rehearsing the past's pluralism is insufficient for addressing present contexts. Tareen highlights the need for imagining emancipatory political vocabularies, going beyond the assimilative violence within dominant Islamic discursive traditions and the erasures of authoritarian secular nationalisms. He pushes towards more pluralistic scripts explicitly grounded in egalitarian principles rather than conditional accommodation of difference.

The author sees debates about friendship as aiding the question of political vocabularies by challenging reductive classification schemes and binary oppositions that are often used to understand Islamic thought and practice. By examining the complexities and ambiguities within theological and legal traditions, the author argues for a more nuanced understanding of religious identity and difference.

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