Anthropology of Islam and Muslim Societies: Changing Face of 'Lived Islam' in South Asia

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Abstract: Anthropology of Islam and Muslim Societies in India is a neglected area of study despite the fact that the Muslim population in South Asia constitutes around forty per cent of the total Muslim population of the world. One of the reasons why Islam and Muslims have been depicted the world over in a stereotyped manner and largely in negative image has been the lack of 'field studies' in various social science disciplines. The depiction of Islam and Muslims in a largely monolithic framework is mainly based on the 'book view' of Muslims or textual interpretations. It is only during the last 3-4 decades that some sociologists and anthropologists have done some fieldwork among the Muslim communities in different parts of the world. That is how such terms as 'Living Islam', 'Lived Islam', 'Folk Islam', 'Popular Islam', 'People's Islam', and 'Islam in Practice' have come into being.

The present paper is based on field research through the ethnographic mode and it takes a close view of some aspects of change coming into the 'Lived Islam' in the Awadh region of North India but these changes may be observed in different parts of South Asia.

Keywords: Anthropology of Islam, South Asia, Textual Islam, Wahabism

To understand the 'Lived Islam' or 'Islam in Practice' and the way it is being contested and challenged everywhere by the radical, fundamentalists or Islamists, we have to take a look at different shades of Islam – liberal or moderate, customary, revivalist and the fringe elements called *takfiri*.

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Though there have been multiple interpretations of Islam and its schools of jurisprudence, it did not result, in most cases, in such bitter polemics and bloodshed as we witness today. Islam is at war today as much with itself as with the outside forces. It is no longer confined to the historical Sunni-Shia schism any more. Thus, it may be said to be grappling with the existential problem, the gravest in its history. There is a bitter conflict over these various interpretations. From the Middle East and Gulf region, it has spilled over to Southeast Asia and entire South Asia, more to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and, to a lesser extent, to India.

These various interpretations may loosely be classified into three broad categories or shades of Islam (Kurzman, 1998):

- Customary Islam
- Revivalist Islam
- Liberal Islam

Almost all regions inhabited by Muslims have witnessed debates over these three traditions of socio-religious interpretations and the resultant social-religious life of Muslims.

Customary Islam

In loose and broad terms, it may be described as a combination of regional or local beliefs and practices and those common throughout the Muslim/Islamic world. Some most common ones are the reverence of Sufi saints, visiting their tombs, invoking their blessing, auspicious and un-auspicious days/dates, omens, amulets, caste-like social hierarchies as in South Asian Islam, etc. Moreover, Indian Muslims are not a 'cultural community' in the sense that they do not have a common culture including language or common ethnicity and hence they may be seen through layers and layers of identities. They may be seen through a provincial/linguistic/ethnic category as in Ladakh (J & K), tribal *biradari*/kinship group as in Lakshadweep, through such scheduled tribal communities as Bakriwal and Gaddi, through sectarian perspectives such as Sunni, Shia, Khoja, Bohra and Ahmadia, through various Islamic schools/*Maslaks* such as Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahle Hadees, through a larger stratification system as *Ashraf* (higher castes or nobility) and *Ajlaf* (commoners or lower caste groups mostly Muslim OBCs). Thus, they are not a monolithic community and hence should not and cannot be stereotyped. Muslims coming under the category of customary Islam occupy a shared cultural space with the non-Muslims and there has been some sort of 'symbiotic relationship'

expressed through syncretic culture and traditions. The vast majority of Indian Muslims, in most places and times, come under this category.

Revivalist Islam

Revivalist Islam is popularly described as Islamism, fundamentalism, and *Wahabism/Salafism*. It is now impacting the Muslims of virtually all regions of the world to varying degrees. Some of the features based on which it may be understood are:

- It uncompromisingly believes that everything about Islam is eternal. Everything that the Prophet did, the *sharia* and the right of the ulema to interpret the Quran, that all human problems may be solved through the Quran; Islam has all the answers. Ironically, as Ziauddin Sardar (2008), a highly respected scholar of Islam, says, "…it is from a people who have forgotten how to ask questions. Islam cannot survive as a static faith buried in history and Muslim societies must discover a contemporary meaning of Islam. Wahabism, now, is the dominant religious tradition of Saudi Arabia". Sardar further maintains that the *Wahabis/Salafis* are opposed to the preservation of old heritage especially those related to the Prophet so the followers are not able to relate to the history of the Prophet so that he should not be seen as a man living in a particular time and space that placed particular demands on him and forced him to act in particular ways. They (Wahabis) want to universalise and eternalise every act of the Prophet. For them, the context is not only irrelevant but dangerous. It has to be expunged.

- It thinks that the way Islam is being practised today is the corrupted and distorted form carrying many 'impurities' and its 'purification' should be their top priority. That is why they want to go back to the earliest years of Islam as the earliest followers, *aslaf* (forefathers) were the true believers and practitioners. The later generations, it is believed by them, have strayed from the 'pure Islam'. The ideologues of Salafi Islam strongly believe that "our practices should be based on Quran and *hadis/hadith,* not on any *fiqhi mazhab* or schools of jurisprudence like Hanafi, Shafii" etc. Hence, they are also known as *Ahle-e-Hadis* as they base all their juristic decisions on Quran and *hadis* only.

They have become the self-appointed guardians of 'pure Islam' and thus think they have a right to declare any Muslim as apostate. Several extremist *takfiri* groups are violently targeting the Shias, the Sufis, and several sub-sects and thus punish them for deviating from 'pure Islam'.

Liberal Islam

It critiques both customary as well as revivalist types of Islam. Its important features may be summarised below:

- It emphasises modernity, democracy, legal rights, gender justice, economic progress, etc.
- Fresh thinking in the light of new ideas and discoveries is required because Islam was rational and in consonance with the times and progress. Religion needs to be reinterpreted in accordance with the modern times. Some go to the extent of giving a call to vehemently oppose the *ulema* (clerics) responsible for the stagnation in Muslim religious thinking. As Tariq Ramadan (2009) comments, "…to be believers and pragmatic is the first liberation that is hoped for".
- It also argues that, if properly understood/interpreted, Islam is compatible with Western liberalism and modernity. *Ijtihad* (analogical reasoning, an important concept in Islam) is also emphasised. *Taqleed* (blindly following a religious authority) is an anathema to liberals of the 20th century. The expansion of the right to practice *Ijtihad* directly threatened the authority of both revivalist and customary Islamic leaders. It urged all Muslims to study Islam to become their authority. *Ijtihad* allowed Islam to be interpreted in accordance with the perceived needs of the modern age" (Kurzman, ibid)
- Carrying the argument further the exponents of liberal Islam maintain that since the Quran emphasises a 'just' society rather than an ideological state, the form the state takes is *not* mandated. Further, the Quran refers to *Sharia* as a path, not as a readymade system of law waiting to be put into practice.
- It stands for freedom of thought and expression. Thus, the introduction of modern/western subjects into the traditional curriculum is the intellectual contribution of 'liberals'.
- *Shura* (consultation) is not confined to a few. It should be left to the community to determine. This means that the participative democracy or one man one vote principle should be followed and that the democracy is absolutely compatible with Islam.

Three Models of South Asian/Indian Islam

Akbar Ahmed (1993) an American anthropologist and scholar of Islam has come out with an interesting but significant scheme of classification of South

Asian Islam. Using three towns of India as metaphors he puts forward three streams/models of South Asian Islam:

- Deoband
- Ajmer
- Aligarh

In this scheme, **Deoband** (a town in western Uttar Pradesh where an internationally known Islamic seminary is located) stands for orthodox, textual and revivalist Islam which is largely exclusive in nature and emphasises on purity. Significantly, despite its extreme orthodoxy and regressive attitude in social and religious matters, it has been staunchly 'nationalist'. The ulema of Deoband followed Mahatma Gandhi, took an active part in freedom struggle and through its organ Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind has been closely aligned with the Indian National Congress. Their Ulema opposed the demand for the creation of Pakistan and preferred to go with a Hindu Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru and not with the Muslim Muhammad Ali Jinnah who was spearheading the movement through the Muslim League.

Here, **Ajmer** stands for Sufi mystical tradition, and love for all human beings irrespective of caste, race, religion or any other boundary. It respects diversity and is inclusive by its very nature. That is why even today a large number of non-Muslims continue to show their reverence to the *mazaars/ durgaahs* of Sufi Saints and visit these for peace of mind and to get their wishes fulfilled.

Aligarh represents the modernist Muslim response to the world and its problems. Aligarh Movement led by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan promoted modern education, science and technology and exhorted the Muslims of the undivided India to go for modern education and knowledge along with the religious (Islamic) teachings and knowledge.

Thus, South Asian (Indian) Islam has never been homogenous but presently the second model (Ajmer) is now under attack by the revivalist Islamists in the name of purging Islam of 'impurities'. Many progressive Muslims who are not necessarily adherents of the Sufi school of thought maintain that some Sufi practices may or may not be a part of the legitimate 'Islamic' practices yet they would continue to respect Sufism for its lofty humanism, peace and values of love and harmony and its role in serving as a bridge between different religious communities.

South Asian Islam is the best example of indigenisation. This indigenisation gives a distinct colour to Islam and its practices in different regions of South Asia, mainly India. Under the onslaught of the 'purists' and 'reformists' several

indigenous practices (which are not necessarily violation/deviation of the fundamentals of Islamic faith) have been given up or eliminated. Lukens Bull (2007) adds a significant point to this whole discourse when she brings in the anthropological tradition of 'salvage ethnography' in which the anthropologist records preserve the "way things were.

Indigenisation of Islam in India/South Asia

Of the three agencies responsible for the spread of Islam in South Asia viz. Invaders, Merchants/Traders and Sufi saints, the first two had minimal influence and role in the spread of Islam in South Asia. The dominant message of these Sufi saints was love and the oneness of humanity. They provided a healing touch to the oppressed and marginalised sections of Indian society and that is why the lower caste groups of Hindu populations suffering under the oppressive caste system accompanied by all sorts of social, economic and political disabilities looked towards the abode of these saints as shelter. The Muslim mystic or Sufi saints played a significant role in the spread of Islam through the process of indigenisation even though most of them came from outside India- Iran, Central Asia and other regions. A sociologist A R Momin (1977) while writing on the Indo-Islamic tradition says that these mystics "maintained that Islam should be prescribed to the people in their own cultural medium. They had an attitude of tolerance and understanding towards Hindus and Hinduism. They also adopted many Hindu customs and ceremonies (Nizami, 1961)." Of all the Sufi *silsilah*/orders the Chistiya order played the most prominent role and was most popular among the masses. Some of these Sufis took to the peasantry, dressed like the local peasants and took to vegetarianism. The Sufis learnt the local languages. This provided the local context of Islam in the Indian sub-continent and led to several syncretic traditions, and composite culture and served as a bridge between Hindus and Muslims. In a way, it may also be described as the 'parochialisation of great tradition' as the anthropologists and sociologists may like to describe it.'

'Everyday life anthropology' is now an established tradition like 'Everyday life sociology'. Its interest is to understand the socio-cultural life in the day-to-day world. Sociological approaches to everyday life attempt to capture and recognise the mundane, the routine in (and of) social relations and practices. As Diana P. Mines & Sarah Lamb (2002) rightly point out, the everyday life practices and experiences of particular people cannot be solely explained through abstract theoretical accounts or generalities. Some theorists such as Decerteau (1984) have argued that everyday life is where we can see

the actual production and transformations of structures and cultures, whereas generalising, analyses and abstract theories tend to "freeze" or "freeze frame" cultures as well as places and concepts. In other words, culture *is* as culture *does*. And culture only does through active, living human beings. In the present study the popular 'lived Islam' (everyday popular Islam) confronts the 'Textual Islam' (elite's Islam) espoused as an ideal by the revivalist Islamists. They fail to understand that people do not live by their *Books* alone. Largely because of the rise of 'puritanism' in the name of 'purity' being promoted by the Wahabi version of Islam patronised by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, the face of 'Lived Islam' is changing. Following are some of the changes coming into the everyday life of Muslims.

Food and Dress

Muslims have always been particular about their food preference, especially in terms of *halaal* and *haraam* (legitimate and forbidden). Alcohol and pork have always been a taboo. Even those Muslims who drink still avoid it in public especially if some fellow non-drinking Muslims are also there. Of late, they have become very fussy about what they eat. In larger numbers, they are showing concern for *halal* meat meaning the way the animal has been slaughtered. It is *halaal* only when it was slaughtered according to the prescribed Islamic way and should not be *Jhatka* meaning slaughter in one stroke without invoking the blessing of Allah in Arabic. Perhaps, that is why a number of them are now reluctant to eat outside- at marriage feasts, parties, restaurants, etc. It is contrary to the earlier attitude when pork was the only no-go area. Such of them are virtually paranoiac and prefer to turn vegetarian outside. However, they may lower the guards when eating in a Muslim-managed restaurant or a party thrown by a 'devout' Muslim. It provokes disdain and ridicule from the 'liberal Muslims' making such comments as "look at this hypocrisy of trying to locate a *halal* meat shop carrying earnings through *haraam* means such as bribe money". The same attitude is shown by the Indo-Pak Muslim Diaspora in the US and Europe. The attitude of hypersensitivity towards the so-called *haraam* things has been rationally and brilliantly portrayed in the much-acclaimed Pakistani movie *Khuda ke liye* also released in India's cinema halls some time back. Lakhs of viewers have watched it and many continue to watch it on YouTube.

Distinct changes in terms of their physical appearance, in a growing number of people, may be witnessed. Though the practice of not wearing a *burqa* has not increased but *hejab* (head scarf covering hair carefully and extending to

cover the bosom too) has been adopted by a larger number of women, old and young and surprisingly younger ones in larger numbers. Now a substantial number of young women in *salwar* suits or trousers/jeans may be seen walking on the roads or driving scooters and sometimes cars with *hejab*. The rapidly rising popularity of *hejab* has surprised many as most scholars of Islam agree that the provision of *hejab* was only for Prophet Muhammad's wives and was proposed to maintain their inviolability and that during his lifetime it was not enforced and no other women of the Muslim community observed *hejab*. They are emphatic that *hejab* is not a religious obligation and there was no dress code except the stipulation that both males and females should dress 'modestly'.

A large number of men, young and old, may be seen with long beards. Previously, even those maintaining beards used to have shorter, trimmed beards. Now the length has increased and the moustache shaved. Even outside India one may find the same tendency. Who fails to notice the unusually long, untrimmed, flying beards of two-star cricketers of England and South African cricket teams- Moeen Ali and Hashim Amla? This is a most unusual appearance for sports persons. Moreover, for those wearing *Kurta-pajama*, the length of the *Kurta* has increased and the length of the *pajama* (trouser) has decreased; it barely reaches the ankles. This is just to avoid any impurities lying on the ground to pollute the clothes. This is directly related to the increased religiosity and ritualism. Some jokingly describe it as 'long kurta-short pyjama syndrome' and jokes such as the comments- *Bade bhai ka kurta, chote bhai ka pyjama'* (wearing the kurta of elder brother and *pajama* of younger one).

Music, Cinema, Games, Sports, and other Spheres

Though music has always been an integral part of Sufi Islam because of the rendition of Qawwali on the graves of the Sufi saints, it was not frowned upon even by those who were not necessarily subscribing to the veneration of Sufi saints. At the same time, music and singing were never glorified or received warmly by the conservative sections of Muslim society who constituted a small minority. The same was the case with cinema. The ultra-conservatives who were in a microscopic minority looked at music contemptuously and equated it with Satan (*shaitani*) and rape. On the contrary, a large number of experts and maestros in *Shastriye Sangeet* (Indian classical music) have always been Muslims, both in vocal as well as instrumental music, and many of them have been devout Muslims. But their passion for music did not dilute their Islam. Slowly and slowly the repulsion for all types of music, singing and cinema has been increasing mainly because of preaching by the conservative *wahabi/*

salafi oriented preachers. Even the traditional practice of inviting *mirasins* (female singers of the *mirasi* caste group), a familiar feature of marriages in North India where these professional singers carry *dholak* (traditional drum) singing, in folk style, with gusto and all the people enjoy it, is declining. Now in several households, silence prevails with no music and singing. Previously the normal practice being followed was to stop music, film songs and *mirasin*'s singing when the cleric arrived to supervise *nikah* and the moment he left the scene, it was resumed. The cleric also knew it but never interfered. Though this growing trend is common to both the Sunnis as well as the Shias, it is still minimal in the Shia marriages.

Some indoor games such as ludo, cards, chess, and carrom have been the favourite pastimes. Card playing with money stakes was always frowned upon as gambling is considered *haraam* but it was never the case with chess. During the past couple of decades, chess too has become *haraam* and 'un-Islamic' for a growing number of people. Recently, a former Muslim test player of cricket uploaded a picture on FaceBook showing him and his young son playing chess. The reaction was surprising. The poor cricketer was immediately trolled by some conservative Muslims and 'advised' to stop this practice. The same thing, perhaps worse, happened in the case of a prominent female Muslim tennis player from Hyderabad. Her dress, the usual one for any sports person, shorts and sports shirt, invited the unsolicited advice from several Muslims to dress 'decently'. This advice and adverse reaction were ignored by the tennis champion and the critics made themselves a laughing stock. A similar incident happened recently in the case of another Muslim cricketer of India's national team who posted a picture of his pleasant family- he, his wife and their little cute daughter, on FaceBook. His wife, in a decent sari-blouse, wore merely a sleeveless blouse and the poor cricketer was admonished and shamed by several 'self-appointed guardians' of 'Islamic morality' for this 'Unislamic' dress of his wife. He retaliated by posting some more such pictures.

On Women

Women visiting mosques and performing prayers or any other ritual were always discouraged but no strict curbs were enforced. On the contrary, Shia women have been entering mosques without any curbs and performing some rituals too. Groups of women performing marriage-related rituals in mosques are still in vogue in several localities. Moreover, the women were also visiting, though in smaller numbers, graveyards as well as *durgahs* of Sufi saints. Now, new curbs are being enforced on their entry into the mosques as well

as graveyards. Even on *Shab-e-Barat* when large number of people visit the graves of their kin to light candles, offer flowers and perform *fatiha*, women, usually are conspicuous by their absence among the Sunni Muslims. This is not the case with Shia women who may be seen there in large numbers in their graveyards. During the fieldwork, I came across some interesting beliefs and superstitions. One of these is about the reason the women do not visit graveyards. According to this, if females visit the graveyards the males buried there may see through their (women's) clothes and they may appear naked to them. Therefore, they (women) should not disturb them. The *mazaars* of the Sufi saints never practised any gender-based discrimination. In recent years some of the well-known and popular *mazaars* have tried to enforce a ban on the entry of women into the sanctum sanctorum of the *mazaar* complex.

Another new trend related to women is a relatively new practice of *dars-e-Quran* (lessons on the Quran). Now several groups of women are organised into groups and a senior woman or the most knowledgeable in the group or sometimes a male cleric talks about the Quran and other religious texts and gives instructions either thematically or part-wise at a mutually convenient place or in the homes of the group thus organised, by rotation. This may be described as the women counterpart of the *Tablighi* groups (preaching group) of Tablighi Jama'at. Some of the women attending these informal classes have expressed the view that the explanations and interpretations being given even by women are male-oriented and patriarchal. Moreover, during recent years some *madarsa* like institutions for girls have also been opened imparting Islamic theology and training them to become clerics, exclusively for women, among both Sunnis and the Shias.

Religious Symbols, Language, Names and Naming

Though some houses with some religious lines or symbols have always been there, but of late the fashion of hanging a framed picture or a line or two from the Quran just on the entrance of an independent house or flat/apartment or on the walls of the drawing rooms has increased sharply both among the Sunnis and the Shias. 'It is like wearing your religion on your sleeve'. In several Sunni houses, some *ayat* or *dua* from the Quran in beautiful calligraphy may be seen decorating a wall in the drawing room. This is yet another manifestation of increasing religiosity among the different sections of people. With the rise of Ayotallah Khomeini in 1979, several Shia houses began hanging his framed portrait in the drawing rooms along with some lines from the Quran or the calligraphic names of the *Panjatan* (five most

revered personalities in the exclusively Shia pantheon- Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husain).

Perhaps, the more important change of far-reaching importance is the adoption of unusual names in the style of Arabs. As Muhammad Masud (2009) rightly points out, "names in any culture may entail links to social, political, economic and religious institutions..." The naming ceremony is performed in a variety of ways among the Muslims of South Asia. The *Aqiqa* ceremony is most common for this purpose. The usual practice of choosing a name to be given to the child has been to go for an adjective of Allah, Muhammad, Caliphs, *Sahaba* (Muhammad's companions) and for the Shias, their twelve Imams, all of the above except the names or titles of the Caliphs and those *Sahaba* who were hostile to Ali. The Shia Saiyyeds trace their lineage to one of these Imams and the popular titles/surnames are Husaini, Abidi, Taqvi, Rizvi, Naqvi, etc. Now among a section of people naming is being done in typical Arab style-Yaseen bin Zuhair, Anab bint Siraj, etc. This is something unprecedented. Such a style and names were never there. This is yet another instance of the 'Arabisation' of South Asian Islam in the direction of severing religio-cultural ties with South Asia.

Moreover, such names as Ghulam Ali or Kaneez Fatima are being rejected and frowned upon among Sunni Muslims on two grounds- first, these are grammatically wrong and second, they also suggest the superiority of Ali and Fatima and similarly of other revered personalities because only Allah is great. But those who follow this line are still a small minority but the 'fringe' is gradually moving to the 'centre stage'. It is to be noted that simultaneously there is a section of people who are using literary Hindi/Sanskrit words as the first name of their children. This may be a reaction or response of such people to the socially and religiously retrograde people in their midst, attempting to cut the roots of Islam from its indigenous moorings.

'Arabisation' of South Asian/Indian Islam

Though it requires an independent paper to closely deal with this trend, some glaring examples shall suffice to have an idea of this cultural change creeping silently into syncretic South Asian Islam. The quest for the Islamic/Muslim identity involves a gradual process of transformation from an inclusive and adaptive Islam to a more ritualistic and exclusionary Islam.

Though the annual Haj pilgrimage has been a regular feature, its impact on the socio-cultural and religious life of the local Muslim society was minimal. The substantial and real impact could be seen after a large number of Muslims

began going to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for jobs in the 1980s and staying there for long periods. Returning to their homes and families, at least annually on paid vacations, resulted in the beginning of the process of Arabisation/Saudisation/Gulfisation as a number of my respondents described. The Arab-style *Burqa* and *Hejab* gained a lot of popularity. It may be seen in any market located in Muslim-dominated localities of towns and cities of the Awadh region as well as in the entire North India as well as in South India.

Though the process of 'Arabisation' had begun much earlier in South India, especially Kerala, its advance to coastal Karnataka and Telengana- Andhra region especially Hyderabad was a later phenomenon. On the one hand, it was largely due to some Muslim workers, doctors, engineers, management personnel, and businessmen going to this region and spending years in the socio-cultural-religious environment of Saudi Gulf and on the other the relentless preaching and sermons in the mosques. During the fieldwork, it was observed that except for a small minority. who read and try to understand Islam themselves, the majority of people especially from the lower socio-economic educational strata go by the explanations and interpretations imparted by the clerics in sermons during Friday congregations in mosques, mainly non-Barelvi dominated mosques. The children going to *madarsas* get these lessons from their instructors.

Khuda Hafiz becomes 'Allah Hafiz' and Ramzan, 'Ramadan'

Another form of 'social engineering' may be seen in terms of language and mannerisms. The commonest way of saying goodbye has been *Khuda Hafiz* (be secure with the blessing of God). It is being shunned and discarded by the majority of Muslims. In the name of 'purification', *Khuda* has been replaced by *Allah*. Many educated Muslims may be seen justifying it by saying that *Khuda* is nowhere mentioned in Quran, it is *Allah* in Arabic. When confronted by the argument that for centuries when the word *Khuda* was being used did it mean or signify any other God, they become defensive. The fact remains that *Khuda* is Persian and is associated with Shia Iran. It is said that even *Allah Hafiz* is not properly Arabised.

If we leave aside Kerala, the Indian Islam, primarily has come from Central Asia and Iran. Indian Islam is largely rooted in 'Persian Culture' and the Persian language remained the main/state language for a long time. Many Persian words may be found in several Indian languages such as Bengali and Marathi. Interestingly but significantly even the word 'Hindi' for the language Hindi has been given by the Persians who described Indians as *Hindi* or *Hindwi*.

Namaaz (prayer) and *Roza* (fasting) also come from the Persian language which is called *Salaah* and *Soum* respectively in the Arabic language. This is how Indo-Islamic Culture has evolved in India.

The latest development in this context is *Ramzan* becoming *Ramadan*. In the entire sub-continent, this month has been pronounced and written as *Ramzan*. Coming from the Persian language this word has been used in the entire Hindi/Urdu belt along with Bengali-speaking Muslims. In the last two decades or so *Ramzan* has been discarded and *Ramadan* has been adopted but significantly the masses continue to say *Ramzan* and it is 'purists' who have 'purified' the word. However, through the process of 'Ashrafisation', elite emulation and persistent calls by the Imams of mosques and media-based preachers such as Zakir Naik, *Ramzan* is gradually being pushed out. It has been a common practice among Muslims to greet each other, after sighting of Ramzan moon, with *Ramzan Mubarak*. Now attempt is being made to replace it with *Ramadan Karim*. Several other examples may be cited where the popular Persian words are being replaced with Arabic words. Take, for instance, the popular word *Shariat* (Islamic law) which is being replaced by *Sharia* and *Wuzoo* (washing face and hands before prayers) by *Wudoo*. Similarly, *jannat* (paradise) is being transformed into *jannah, ibadat* to *ibadah* and so on.

All such changes have far-reaching implications. Altering some words from the point of view of usage for religious purposes may not make much of a difference. But, when such words are purged/altered which have been the byproduct of religious and cultural fusion, between a religion not originating in India and the local culture, it is alarming. It may also be said that a new cultural tradition from outside is being planted in the native soil. The composite culture has been a part of our common/shared culture. Moreover, historically India and other South Asian countries were never culturally connected with the Arabian Peninsula. The ultra-conservative Wahabis/Salafis are advocating several other cultural norms and practices from Arabia which have never been a part of local culture. Why did the Wahabi ideology, backed fully by Saudi Arabia, motivating these changes, become so active during the past few decades? S. Irfan Habib (2012) writes that "one factor may be the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s, which was perceived as a threat by Wahabism that had begun to look outdated by then. It therefore had to reinvent itself to remain relevant". For that matter, even Shia Islam is changing.

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