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A sensible Muslim movement which needs public support

- [Rasheed Kidwai](#)



A.Faizur Rahman, an Urdu-speaking native of Chennai, is an executive committee member of Harmony India, an organisation to promote secularism and communal harmony which is headed by Mr. N. Ram, the Editor-in-Chief of The Hindu. He is also the founding secretary of Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought in Islam.

Sharing his experiences with this writer, Rahman says, he has lost count of the number of public forums (and private discussions) he has used in the last two decades to speak out against baseless ritualism and extravagance (*israaf*) in Islam.

Dr.M. Aslam Parvaiz, author and scholar, is the Vice Chancellor of the Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. Both Rahman and Parvaiz have been traveling all-round the country, interacting with Muslim community leaders with a plea to cut down spending on lavish marriages and Umrah.

Umrah is a “minor pilgrimage” undertaken by Muslims whenever they enter the holy city of Makkah. In Islam, it is optional for Muslims to perform *Umrah*. Its similarity to the major and obligatory Islamic pilgrimage “*Haj*” has made some fusion of the two natural, though pilgrims have the choice of performing the *Umrah* separately or in combination with the haj.

These scholars are self-confessed practising Muslims and not against *Umrah* per se. They say they only wish to create awareness among Muslims that *Umrah* not being an obligatory ritual in Islam one need not perform

it every year. Instead that money may be used for the socio-economic development of our community at a time when it desperately needs it.

As per the National Commission for Enterprises in Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) report of 2007, 84% of the Muslim population of India lives on a daily income of less than Rs. 20. Now, 12 twelve years later, this figure may have gone above Rs. 20.

According to the Socio Economic Caste Census 2011, there are 24.39 crore households in India, and 17.91 crore of them are in rural areas where the main earning member makes less than Rs. 5000 a month. Only 8% of the rural households have a member earning more than Rs. 10000 a month.

Put differently, if a household has four members the amount available for each member (at an average of Rs.8000 per month) is just about 67 rupees!

For the Muslims in India, this would mean that more than 120 million of them are forced to live on less than 70 rupees a day! Therefore, is it not the duty of wealthy Muslims to remedy this situation? they ask.

Rahman says he has received a mixed response from national level organizations such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) who have maintained a stoic silence on these issues. However, some Muslim organizations and moulvis (priests) in Chennai, have expressed outrage against Rahman's liberal and philanthropic interpretation of Islam. "In their blinkered view, asking Muslims to stop spending money on non-obligatory pilgrimages amounts to a blasphemous denial of Islamic practices," Rahman said.

Rahman says he has also received quiet support from a few madrasa-based religious scholars. One such 'maulana' went on to write an article in an Urdu magazine against wasting money on umrahs and multiple Haj. Maulana Hafizur Rahman Azami Omeri wrote a piece in Two Circles, a prominent web portal addressing Muslim community issues. Omeri argues that as per Hadees (sayings of Prophet) in Bukhari when Hazrat Bibi Aisha (Prophet's wife) asked as to which among two neighbours deserves our benefaction when resources are limited, the Prophet answered: "The one whose door is nearest to you."

Omeri insists that in Islam Huqooqul ibaad (humanitarianism) has been given precedence over Huqooqullah (duties towards God). He quotes an "eye-opening" statement from Imam Ghazali on multiple Haj wherein the Imam laments, "These rich people are very fond of spending their money on the Hajj. They perform the Hajj again and again sometimes even at the cost of their neighbours suffering in hunger. Abdullah ibn Mas'ud was absolutely right when he said: 'During the last days of the world there will be a surfeit of people performing the Hajj unnecessarily. The journey will appear easy to them and there will be no shortage of funds. But they will return from the Hajj poorer without any real benefit. They will be travelling over deserts and open ground while their neighbour will be suffering deprivation. Neither will they empathise with him nor will they display civility.'"

As per records, 4,48,268 Muslims applied for Haj in 2017. Rahman takes this as a sign of 450,000 Muslims having the capacity to spend around 250,000 rupees every year on pilgrimage. This works out to more than 10,000 crore rupees. "If we add to this amount the money Muslims annually spend on non-obligatory Umrah, we get the figure of almost 15,000 crores! Even if a small portion of this amount is to be diverted for humanitarian causes, it will come under the definition of effective altruism which, by the way, is not out of sync with the egalitarian teachings of Islam," insists Rahman.

He argues that if any Muslim is asked for his reasons for performing Umrah and the reply will invariably be, 'for sawaab' (divine reward). But more 'sawaab' can be gathered right here in India by helping a needy person at half the price of an *Umrah*, pleads Rahman.

As per a conservative estimate, over 250,000 Muslims travel to Makkah and Madina for Umrah every year. And the average cost of the entire trip is around Rs. 140,000-2,00,000. Therefore, the annual amount spent by Indian Muslims on *Umrah* alone works out to a whopping Rs. 4100 crores! In comparison, the amount allocated in the 2017-18 budget by the Government of India to the Ministry of Minority Affairs was Rs 4535 crores.

Faizur Rahman says as of now, the only beneficiaries of this expenditure are the tour operators, the airline companies and the oil-rich Saudi economy. It is beyond

comprehension that such huge sums could be spent every year at a time when the socio-economic conditions of the Muslims in India are in a pathetically hopeless state as brought out by the Sachar Committee Report.

Muslims spend a lot of money on marriages every year. In fact, a lot more than what they spend on the annual *Umrah*. Just look at statistics given below.

Minimum guests from the Bride's side — 300

Minimum guests from the Groom's side — 300

Minimum cost of the Nikah feast for 600 guests @ Rs. 200 per guest — 1.5 lakhs

Minimum cost of the Valima feast for 600 guests at the same rate — 1.5 lakhs

Average money spent on jewellery by bride's side — two lakhs

Average money spent on jewellery by groom's side — 1 lakh

Cost of renting the function hall for *Nikah* — One lakh

Cost of renting the function hall for *Valima* — one lakh

Misc. expenditure on decoration etc — 0.50 lakh

Total average expenditure of one wedding comes to eight lakh rupees.

In a total Muslim population of about 180 millions, assuming that at least 150,000 (less than 0.001 percent of 180 million) middle class weddings take place in a year in India, the total money spent by the Muslim community per year on weddings is: 150,000 weddings multiplied by 6.4 lakh rupees which equals Rs. 12000 crores. Add to this the 4100 crore rupees spent on Umrahs and another 1000 crores on multiple Haj. In other words, Muslims in India spend a minimum of Rs. 17100 crores per year on extravagant weddings, non-obligatory pilgrimages.

Let us now see how much it costs to educate a child.

At an average annual fees of Rs. 10,000, the cost of educating a child from LKG to 12th standard is 14 years x 10,000 = Rs. 140,000. For 4 years of technical education @ Rs. 100,000 per year = Rs. 400,000. Total cost is Rs. 540,000.

Dividing 17000 crores by 540,000 we get 314814. This means, more than three lakh poor Muslim children can be educated for 18 years on the money spent in just one year by the rich Muslims on nonobligatory pilgrimages.

Dr. Parvaiz, an accomplished scientist who has been editing and publishing a monthly journal in Urdu, *Science*, for the last over 25 years, has been relentlessly speaking at various forums requesting the Muslims to concentrate on Huqooqul ibaad for the moment as the condition of Muslim community is very bad. Allah is not in need of our Umrahs or multiple Hajs. But our Ummah (community) is in desperate need of humanitarian help, Dr. Parvaiz argues. He quotes that one who does not take care of orphans and does not arrange and motivates others also to feed displaced people has belied his *Deen* Islam (Qur'an 107:2-3). Any contribution towards this would be worth several hundred times the sawaab of an Umrah or a second Haj. In this context, Dr. Parvaiz draws attention of Muslims towards a hadith in Bukhari in which the Prophet said; "One who strives for the widows and the poor is like the one who strives in the way of Allah. I shall regard him as one who stands up for prayer without rest and as one who fasts without break."

This section of Muslim scholars feel the present Muslim attitude is on one of 'trepidant.' "The fear of divine retribution has been instilled in Muslim minds to such as extent that it is considered a sin to even to discuss ideas that question prevailing religious notions.

For ages Muslims have been shielded from new ideas in the name of taqleed (sectarian conformism), and ijthihad (liberal interpretation of Islam) is discouraged," argues Rahman adding, "In my view, Muslims will be certainly be open to religious liberalism if they are not burdened with the fear of a clerical backlash. It is not that Muslims do not realise the need for pulling their community out of poverty and illiteracy. They do, and also have the money to embark on such a mission.

Going by this school of thought, it is not because of a lack of viable models of philanthropy among Muslims that money is not reaching the genuinely deprived. Rahman states: "It is the lack of a philanthropic mind-set

which is the cause. If anything can change this mind-set it is the widespread dissemination of a counter-narrative that can challenge and neutralise the anachronistic sermons emanating from most Muslim pulpits.”

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