

**D**isturbing as it may sound, much of our biases and prejudices about the people of certain communities or gender come from the kind of stereotypical images we see everyday in our popular media and mass visual culture. Among the various forms of popular art found in urban India's public spaces - advertisements, print magazines, television, cinema hoardings, or popular cinema itself - an important category is that of religious posters and calendars depicting deities, saints, and places of worship, sold at shops or roadside stalls near temples, mosques, and *dargahs*, and adorning the walls inside homes, shops, or in worship-corners.

While one can easily find in India religious posters for a Hindu devotee in large numbers and variety, it is also not difficult to buy posters depicting Muslim themes and folklore.

Though a majority of Muslim posters available in India portray the shrines at Mecca and Medina, or Quranic verses in calligraphy, it is also common to find the portraits of local saints, their tombs, miracles, and other folklore, represented as vividly as in a typical Hindu mythological scene.

### Muslim Religious Posters

These popular prints are probably the strongest influence in creating stereotypical images within the Indian Muslim communities. The images of the shrines at Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, the primary religious centers of Islam, are the most widely used sacred icons of popular culture amongst Muslim communities the world over. While Mecca is characterized by a cube-shaped shrine, draped in black, to which Muslims everywhere turn for prayers, Medina, housing the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, is identified by a green dome. The two structures, often flanked by minarets, are also superimposed or

# Breaking Boundaries

## Devotional Iconography in Popular Muslim Posters in India

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surrounded by the names Allah and Muhammad in large Arabic calligraphy, and possibly, a crescent and star. These icons can be found in almost every Muslim household in

Mecca/Medina, or may not necessarily be a Muslim. It is important to explore how an Indian artist improvises or adds local hues to these images.

Interestingly, the artists, the manufacturers, and the sellers of these images are not all necessarily Muslims. The publishers are often those business-owners who deal with posters/calendars of almost all religions irrespective of their own faith. One can easily spot the byline of the printing press/manufacturer in the corner of most posters. A 'Brijbasi' or a 'Khanna', for instance, print many of the Muslim posters available in north India.

Many paintings have been signed by artists such as a 'Balkrishna', a 'Raja' or a 'Swarup'. But the pathos and the devotion portrayed in some of them could not have been drawn by someone other than a 'true devotee'. It seems that most of these publishers do not really care which religion they cater to, as long as their product augments their client's devotion, and gets them a good price.

Many buyers of the Muslim posters seem to be devout pilgrims visiting large shrines from small towns and villages. They embark on these pilgrimages, covering in one trip many tombs of saints such as Nizamuddin Aulia at Delhi or Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, especially during the *Urs* (death anniversary) celebrations,

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some form or the other - either in a photo realistic painting or in the creative adaptation of an artist, who probably may not have ever visited



and seek to take home some souvenirs from these places. What better gift than a religious poster that is bright and colourful, has religious as well as decorative value, and helps them (and other local devotees) relate to the big shrine and its fervour when back at home? Some people buy the posters at the time of major festivals such as Eid or Ramzan, to decorate a newly painted house or a shop (as many Hindus do around Diwali).

### Devotional Iconography

While one may debate whether use of images, especially of human figures, is allowed in Islam or not, the popular posters and devotional iconography continues to remain important for most devotees. The traditional practice of treating or solving day-to-day problems of health, business, family, security and so on, through the use of talisman, amulets, *wazaif* (invoking the divine through special incantations), and even shaman-like rituals, have existed in Muslim societies for ages, despite being disapproved of by some sects within orthodox Islam. When all possible efforts fail to solve a



Tirupati; I have got you some holy water from Bibi ka Roza; here take this cross from Velankanni, put it under the pillow; take this *taweez* from Nizamuddin for your son – it will bring him a job.”

Since a poster or calendar is meant to decorate the walls of a home, its imagery should not be morbid, repulsive or unattractive, even if the subject demands it look that way. Young women or children, if depicted anywhere, are shown as embodiments of perfect innocence and beauty. A plentiful dose of greenery, flowers, hills, waterfalls, and other scenic elements is always thrown in as the backdrop, even in some depictions of desert stories! It is easy to find in the posters artistic inspiration derived from many styles, including Indian miniature painting, film hoardings, and even photo-realism.

To explore how these images help in building popular stereotypes about the Muslim community, we need to first examine some broad differences between the content of various types of posters. Most Hindu posters portray deities, gods, and goddesses, their attributes and myths – utilizing narratives that have been followed since the ancient times, even though the painting/art styles may have changed. In practice, a two-dimensional image of a Hindu god or deity serves the same purpose for an

average devotee an idol or statue does, that is, for worship or *dhyana*. There are specific day-to-day purposes – goddess Lakshmi brings wealth, Saraswati bestows knowledge, and so on. In a Hindu devotional image, there is absolutely no hesitation about the use of figurative icons of deities, as well as acknowledgments of the plurality of gods. In fact, iconography and polytheism are the most important sources of a Hindu devotee’s religiosity. Hence, an artist’s liberty to interpret and use the representative icons results in Hindu devotional images that candidly reflect her/his own specific faith, as well as a collective/folk memory about the myth.

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particular problem in the people’s lives, they are ready to go to any extreme – any god, deity, priest or house of worship that may resolve their crisis (the reason why they are also exploited by some god-men). Women in distress often help each other with a little talisman. “I prayed for you...take this *prasad* from

While some artists/producers of the Muslim posters are extremely sensitive about Islam’s iconoclasm, and consider it a taboo to portray any figurative image (humans, living organisms), some others have less inhibition and draw freely the portraits of saints and holy men. But on the whole, one does notice a sense of reluctance in the iconography in most Muslim devotional images – this does not mean that there is a lack of diversity of visuals or that the iconographic ideas are limited in them.

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Since the making of pictures, other than that of Mecca and Medina, was frowned upon in Islam, the written word acquired utmost importance. The calligraphy of Quranic verses and other sacred texts, for decorative value, became a favourite of Muslim artists. Interestingly, many of the posters using calligraphy are not meant for the unlettered, since they demand a fairly high degree of knowledge and comprehension of Arabic and Islamic narrative. However, the calligraphic images do evoke a certain veneration from all, since Muslims from every corner of the world revere Arabic script as sacred. For centuries, the Perso-Arabic calligraphists have also been experimenting with the 'pictorialization' of the text (mostly Quranic), turning words into shapes of animals, birds, human postures, minarets, and other inanimate objects. One creative example of this calligraphy shows the sitting posture of prayer (*namaz*), also depicted as accurately as required by the calligraphic text of the book, including a raised forefinger of the right hand by which the faithful are supposed to testify to the oneness of God during *namaz*. So far, such images have been appreciated in the Muslim world as a novelty, but no one knows when someone would declare them icon-worship.

An absolute (or partial) iconoclasm forces an artist to find more

creative ways to illustrate a religious concept or folklore, without representing the taboo figures. It also provides (a Muslim iconographer) an almost unlimited scope for choosing the subject matter and innovative symbols. One cautious poster, for instance, simply shows a large dense knot of a rope, with a Qur'anic text at the bottom saying, "Hold on tight to the rope of God's message...and do not disperse..." It also has other icons, such as a rosary, a rose plant, a setting sun and some flying birds in the backdrop, probably to enhance the mundane image of a knotted rope. Another poster shows six *namazis*



(praying men) standing in a row (presumably inside a mosque) saying a collective *namaz*, wearing a wide variety of attire – some in fine expensive robes, others in soiled rags – stressing human equality in Islam. A broad range of illustrations, ranging from iconoclasm to iconography, exists, probably, due to devotee preference and consequent market demand.

When a Muslim iconographer (not necessarily a Muslim by faith), explores new subject matters to draw a poster, or to make innovative variations of Mecca, Medina or the Qur'an, the first thing he/she recalls are the clichéd images of the community itself – cute little girls with scarves reading the Qur'an, innocent boys in skullcaps hugging each other after the Eid prayers, beautiful and pious young women with raised hands from which a translucent *dupatta* (scarf) cascades down, all

this with the essential backdrop of the Kaaba and the green dome of Medina.

One poster that epitomizes the stereotyped image of the community in popular parlance has a little boy sitting cross-legged, about to turn the page of a Qur'an, wearing a white sleeveless vest (*banian*), a green check *lungi* or *mundu* (printed loin-cloth), a little metallic talisman case in a necklace, and the embroidered skullcap. The viewer is not meant to miss the rosary, the incense-sticks, the prayer mat, and the crescent-instar encircling Mecca and Medina in the backdrop. This child may just walk out, one imagines, into a noisy Muslim *mohalla* (locality) and chew a *paan* (betel) or enter a butcher's shop.

While examining these stereotypes in popular art, one cannot ignore the non-religious posters and calendars of the early print era, especially the ones depicting India's freedom fighters, nationalism, patriotism, agrarian reforms, and other secular themes, which evolved along with the devotional images. While the 'national integration' calendars show the representatives of all faiths in their characteristic costumes under the shadow of mother India, certain other posters distinguish various professions by assigning them different genders. So, if men and women have different roles in the family and society, they would also practice their religious faith differently. While most men follow the rituals rigidly by the book – sticking to the

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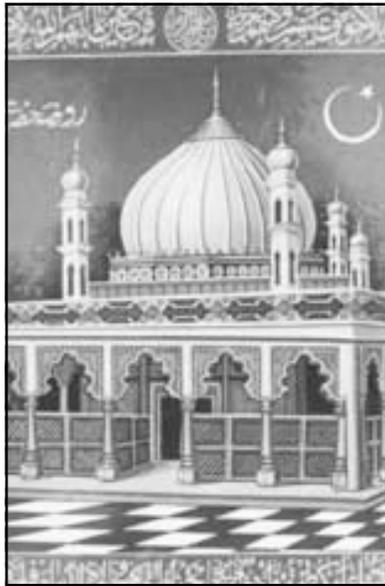
code of conduct or prayer as given in the *Shari'at* or the *Shastras*, women often are depicted stressing more a more private and emotional relationship with the divine, and engaging in many superstitions.

Such role models often come across, albeit often unintentionally, in the devotional posters. Men offer their *namaz* in a military like row, while women are shown cloistered in their scarves, in a more intimate encounter with the Qur'an and the Kaaba. A typical devotee to a saint's tomb is usually a woman, with her *jholi* (scarf) held out in a posture of 'asking'. Thus a line from a Qawwali *Bhar do jholi meri ya Muhammad/Laut kar mein na jaaonga khaali* (Do fill my sack Oh Muhammad/I Will not return

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empty handed) perfectly characterizes this scenario. In one poster, the mausoleum of Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jeelani in Iraq is visited by a beautiful female devotee wearing a distinct Punjabi dress and facial features. While the women are an embodiment of extraordinary beauty, stuffed with gold jewelry and expensive clothes, the portrayal of men (except the saints) is realistic and stiff. Indian men of importance are shown dressed in long embroidered robes and turbans, whereas the ordinary men wear white *kurta* pajamas and Gandhi caps as seen in other nationalistic calendar art.

The 'pious women' depicted in some posters seem to come straight from the community stereotypes that were sowed in the public memory by the 20th century Hindi cinema - *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Chaudhvin-ka-*



*chand*, *Mere Mehboob*, and so on. The big chunk of moviegoers, the crowd that likes to see a blockbuster several times, and revels in its images and music, also happens to buy the devotional posters – no wonder a cinema genre called the 'Muslim Social' pervaded the Bombay film industry for almost three decades in the 20th century, and contributed largely to the stereotyping of the Muslim community.

It would not be surprising if the artists who drew the roadside hoardings for such films were also the



original iconographers of some of the Muslim religious art. Some of the printing presses churning out the movie posters, no doubt, also produced the cheap religious images. Some (amongst Muslims) who may have hesitated putting up the poster of a film actress on their wall due to family or social pressure found legitimacy in a picture that combined the Kaaba or the Qur'an with an attractive lady who looks like Madhubala or Surayya. This twin purpose of providing the religious

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devotion with the sensuous pleasure seems to be a selling point of most successful popular and bazaar art.

Indian cinema and television continue to strengthen the community stereotypes in the popular culture. Many film producers wait for the Eid or Diwali to release their blockbusters, not so much for the auspicious day, but for the holiday and the savings the working class would spend on cinema. On last Eid in a Muslim locality, I found a surprise at a poster shop – a colour photograph of the film star Salman Khan in typical Muslim attire, doing a courteous *aadab* (Muslim salutation) with his naughty smile, and Eid mubarak printed at the bottom - it was obviously a movie poster, but selling briskly among the religious ones. Need one explain how many genres of popular culture and stereotyping it represents? □

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