

# The Islamic State as an excuse

Too many decent, religious people believe their faith assigns them a position of moral superiority



## THE CONTROVERSIAL INDIAN

**TABISH KHAIR**  
is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark

Three men drove a van into a crowd in London on June 3, 2017, and then ran about stabbing people until efficiently shot down by British policemen. Immediately, the Islamic State (IS) claimed the attack – though, as yet, there is no proof that the IS was directly involved.

But of course the IS will claim any monstrous act in ‘the name of Allah’ committed by morons anywhere in the world. It suits the IS. And in some ways, such a claim suits almost everyone else too.

### It suits many people

It suits people like Donald Trump. It enabled him to send out inane tweets, seeking to use this tragedy to further his

xenophobic, undemocratic and unlikely-to-be-effective policy options in the U.S.

The IS claim also enabled British politicians, who (it has to be said to their credit) basically reacted with calm and restraint, to suggest international conspiracies (highly unlikely) and remedies (such as curbing Internet), which are unlikely to work and will probably have more drawbacks than advantages. It is nice to have a Dr. No version of the IS to blame, when you know that your own neo-liberal and post-Brexit actions – such as laying off policemen in London – probably contributed to the casualties.

Finally, it enabled peaceful religious Muslims – many of whom will be angry at me for saying this – from facing up to their responsibility in the matter. Do not misunderstand me: these religious Muslims hate what the IS stands for: this fact was brought home by the sad but necessary decision by 130 Muslim imams and leaders in U.K. not to perform the compulsory funeral prayers over the bodies of the three London attackers.

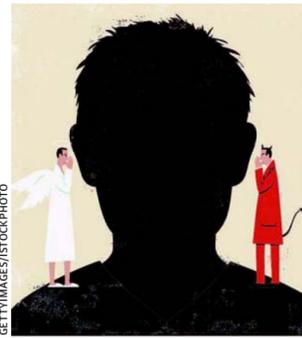
Yes, most religious Muslims have no

sympathy for the IS. Such religious Muslims often castigate people like me for describing IS-murderers as Islamists. They are not Islamists because they have nothing to do with Islam, I am consistently told. I agree – but I also point out that the IS and such terrorists think that they have everything to do with Islam. Sheer repudiation does not suffice. It especially does not suffice if you are yourself Muslim.

The IS enables peaceful, religious Muslims – the vast majority – to shirk their inadvertent complicity in such violence. It is time to face up to this, instead of expressing surprise and horror when some nephew or son mimics the IS and kills innocent people in the name of Islam.

I have written a lot about the ‘us-them’ binarism that had undergirded colonial Western atrocities against the rest, and still dominates the thinking of people like Mr. Trump. But it has to be added: peaceful, religious Muslims harbour a similar ‘us-them’ binarism.

Many decent religious Muslims believe that their faith assigns them a position of moral superiority over others. This is a feeling other very religious



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people – Hindus, Christians, etc. – might tend to have too. However, many religious Muslims also believe that their faith will prevail on Earth in the future and at least assure them (and only them) of paradise after death.

I have met Christians and Jews with similar beliefs of being a kind of ‘chosen people’, but their ratio is far lower. For every Christian I have met who believed that I would go to hell because I do not

believe in Jesus as the son of God, I have met a hundred who would laugh at the notion.

Unfortunately, I have met too many religious Muslims who believe that they are specially chosen, and anyone who does not share their faith is condemned to an eternity of hellfire.

Most religious Muslims do not act on this conviction; they do not even utter it in front of non-Muslims. They are decent people. But it lurks in the depths of their minds.

It can also be flaunted indirectly: for instance, recently a major Indian Muslim leader dismissed another Muslim for not being a ‘true Muslim’ because he read the Bhagavad Gita! Or, during the holy month of Ramadan, many religious Muslims give charity only to the Muslim needy. Us and them. Them and us.

### Facing up to a flaw

This is the germ that runs through much of contemporary religious Muslim thinking, and drives the more confused of our Muslim children into mimicking the monstrosities of the IS. This germ makes Muslim youth vulnerable to ex-

tremist ideologies. To think that you are so special can very easily turn into a dismissal of the equivalent humanity of others, as casteist Hindus do with Dalits and as colonial Europeans did with the colonised at times.

Until more religious Muslims face up to this flaw in their thinking, their children will be vulnerable to such detestable ideologues as those of the IS – and Islam, as a faith, will be the target of hatred from at least some of those who are excluded from the category of being ‘chosen’.

The IS is not some Hollywood supervillain, an Islamic Dr. No, with highly trained agents present everywhere. It does not have that sort of clout outside the regions it controls and some neighbouring spaces.

But it is actually more dangerous because it can capitalise on the flaws in our thinking, those cracks in the floor of ordinary family homes, Muslim and non-Muslim. I have written about the cracks in the floors of ordinary European or American homes, with their ‘civilisational’ hubris. But it is time for religious Muslims to face up to the cracks in their own homes too.

# In the heat of climatic terror

It's 45°C at seven in the morning and the ACs give up, much like the Opposition



## ALLEGEDLY

**G. SAMPATH**  
is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu

This week, dear reader, you must excuse me. It's the heat. My brain melted into hot fudge about half an hour ago. Luckily, I had the presence of mind to collect it in a non-stick, copper-bottom *kadhai* and put it in the freezer. But I can no longer remember what I wanted to write about when I began this column.

It's so hot in Delhi it's not funny. I get positively enraged when I hear someone trying to joke about it. It's no laughing matter when it is 45°C at seven in the morning and all your ACs have given up, much like the Opposition, without even trying. No need to visit Twitter or Facebook for your daily fix of outrage. Just lying in bed and breathing in and out is enough to make your blood boil.

And breathing, as you may have noticed, involves air. In case you've ever wanted to find out what it's like to have Daenerys Targaryen's pets flying around, raining fire upon the city, I suggest you take a flight to Delhi. Delhi air is dragon breath. In June, as a famous poet may have written if he weren't already in cold storage, the Delhi evening is spread out against the sky like a patient dehydrated upon a table.

### Leaves you seething

Last Sunday it was 47°C on my balcony. The clothes I'd put out to dry – including a fire-proof, Pakistan-green silk kurta a friend had got for me from Benaras – burst into flames. When I rushed out with a bucket of water, I burnt my feet so badly the doctor asked me if I'd tried to immolate myself. This is nothing but climatic terrorism. Like traditional terrorism, which makes you angry enough to want to bomb a country – any country – to dust, it leaves you permanently seething. As most of you may have guessed by now, I was born a non-violent person. But if a mob of vigilantes were to



call me right now and invite me to a panel discussion followed by lynching, I can't predict what my response would be. I'm aware that, purely in temperature terms, there are other places in the country that rank above the national capital. Bathinda, I am told, has crossed 48°C. But Delhi is the only place I know where the minimum temperature consistently surpasses the maximum temperature.

This morning, for instance, I woke up from a nightmare in which I was drowning. Only, it wasn't just a nightmare. I really was drowning – in a two-foot-deep puddle of my own sweat. I couldn't help but wonder: how did people in these parts manage in the times gone by? How did Indians in the Vedic era beat the heat? Did they wrap their heads in towels soaked in peacock tears? Or drink chilled cow sweat from terracotta goblets? Do cows even sweat? And if they do, why is their skin so dry?

A colleague tells me that summers in Delhi may not have been so hot in the Vedic age since it preceded industrialisation. According to him, global warming is caused by fossil-fuel guzzling, industrial societies. The Earth's temperature rose by one degree in the last century because that's when the whole world embraced fossil fuels. I don't buy this argument because it fails to answer some simple questions: if Vedic Indians weren't using fossil

fuels, what did the *Pushpak Viman* run on? If ancient Hindu society wasn't industrialised, how did they build nuclear power plants and do plastic surgery?

In fact, there is now overwhelming evidence, documented in multiple WhatsApp forwards, that even the word ‘industry’ came from the root ‘ind’ of India. So to claim that Vedic India was cooler than modern India because it wasn't industrialised and didn't use fossil fuels is nothing but pure cow dung. I'll be honest. I compare that on most days of the year I'm too busy leaving carbon footprints all over the floor to worry about climate change. But the extreme rage generated by Delhi's extreme heat needs a scapegoat, if not an explanation.

So let me try and collect some thoughts before they evaporate. Here's one: the Paris Climate Agreement. I know it's got something to do with what an idiot cricketer recently referred to as ‘global warning’. And that an idiot politician has sabotaged it by pulling his continent-size country out of it. Now the stage is set for an idiot species to wreck the planet and commit mass murder on millions of life forms whose only mistake was to not kill off this terroristic species before it began to threaten their and their planet's existence. And here's my second and final thought: it better rain, or else...

# A bastion of women nawabs

The erstwhile princely state of Bhopal has many distinctions



## WHERE STONES SPEAK

**RANA SAFVI**  
is a historian, author and blogger documenting India's syncretic culture

As the Mughal Empire started disintegrating after the death of Aurangzeb, many local chiefs and governors declared independence. Many others, finding the empire weakened, seized land and carved an empire for themselves. One of these was an Afghan-origin soldier named Dost Mohammad Khan who captured the Gond kingdom of Jagdishpur and established his hold over it. His new capital, near present-day Bhopal, was called Islamnagar, and he set about fortifying it. The foundation of a fort named Fatehgarh was laid in 1723 on the northern bank of the Upper Lake. Dost Mohammad Khan named it after his wife Fateh Bibi.

It is said that the idea of this fort was conceived by both of them during a *shikar* (hunting) expedition, and Dost Mohammad selected the site on that very moonlit night. Remains of the fortification wall can be seen from a neighbourhood mosque. Despite fierce attacks by enemies inside and outside, Bhopal managed to hold on to its own even after Dost Mohammed's death and became famous as ‘Bhopal state’ which had the distinction of being ruled for 100 years by women nawabs.

Though Bhopal is no longer a state, it still has the distinction of hosting both India's biggest mosque and the world's smallest mosque!

The Dhai Seedhi ki Masjid (mosque of two and a half steps) is one of the city's highest points which offers a commanding view of the city.

As the construction of Fatehgarh fort progressed, the mosque was built as a makeshift structure for the guards to pray. The mosque has stayed intact, albeit many recent additions have been made to increase capacity.

The bastion itself stands strong and resolute, as during the days when it



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must have withstood enemy attacks. The holes in the turret walls of the tiny mosque were built for positioning guns. They are a reminder of the constant danger the soldiers would have faced even while performing prayers.

### A tale of two mosques

Daniel McCrohan of ‘Lonely Planet’ paced the floor of the mosque and estimated its interior area to be 16 sq. m, which makes it smaller than the 25-sq. m structure built in 2002 at Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia, in honour of those who fought Ivan the Terrible. The mosque is plain inside, the two and half steps leading to the prayer hall giving the monument its name. The corresponding bastion on the other side of the wall has a water tank in it.

Fatehgarh fort no longer exists except for its walls. It has been replaced by a medical college instead.

The construction of Taj-ul-Masjid (the crown of mosques) was started by Nawab Shah Jahan Begum (1838-1901) in the 19th century and continued by her daughter Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum. It remained incomplete for long due to a paucity of funds but construction was resumed in 1971 due to the efforts of two Muslim clerics – Maulana Syed Hashmat Ali and Allama Mohammad Imran Khan Nadwi Azhari – and completed in 1985.

Most people mistakenly assume that Jama Masjid of Delhi is the largest mosque of the country; in fact, it is the Taj-ul-Masjid (in picture) with an interior area of 4,00,000 sq. m and seating capacity of 1,75,000 people.

A flight of steps leads to a lofty gateway, clearly inspired by Fatehpur Sikri's Buland Darwaza.

Like Delhi's Jama Masjid, it is built of red sandstone, with two lofty 206-foot-high octagonal minarets soaring from each end, and crowned by three beautiful marble domes. As in all mosques, there is a huge tank for ablution before prayers and a big courtyard to take on the overspill of the faithful during congregational prayers.

Eleven beautiful *mihrabs*, with the central one set in the western wall of the mosque inside the main hall, denote the *qibla* (the direction of Kaaba in Mecca) for the prayers. As a madarsa runs here during the day, I found many young children in their kurta-pyjamas and topis running around the courtyard trying to reach their classes in time. It is situated on the side of a lake, Motia Talab, which adds to its out-of-the-world charm.

From the nearby Taj Mahal, a palace complex built by Nawab Shah Jahan Begum, I saw a reflection of the mosque and it inspired a sense of piety and devotion, as I'm sure it was meant to.

# A nation is a people in conversation

So anyone stopping this conversation, in the name of managing or resolving conflict, is damaging it



## THE PUBLIC EYE

**RAJEEV BHARGAVA**  
is a political theorist with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi

What is a nation? Above all, it is a people self-consciously bound together by common or overlapping concerns about their past, present and future. This self-conscious awareness of commonality is not genetically encoded. Nor does it drop from the sky. It grows when people talk and listen to one another and, through oral and written communication, understand each other. This is easy among families and in villages concentrated in a small territory where people meet face-to-face, but how do common concerns develop amongst an entire people, virtual strangers to one another, and spread over a large territory?

The short answer is that without a public culture forged first by print and then an electronic media, there would

be no conversation amongst a whole people, no development of common concerns and therefore no nation. So, it is entirely apt to say that a nation exists only as long as there is a continuous conversation among its members about what it was, is, will and should be. A disruption of this conversation is the undoing of a nation.

### Matters of common concern

This conversation is also about what the nation should do. This is an unprecedented achievement of our own age. For conversations now are not just passive and contemplative, mere post-facto reflections, but can yield decisions on which a people may act.

A modern nation is a collective agent; its members can together strive to realise goals they have set for themselves. For example, India together must discuss and find ways to reduce unemployment, resolve the conflict in Kashmir and alleviate the distress of its farmers. This was impossible in earlier societies where decisions about the future of society were taken by a small band of elites, notably chieftains and kings, largely to protect their own interests and only secondarily for the people.

To be sure, such conversations and



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interconnected action could have existed in the past.

Some elites dispersed across large territories may well have had a conversation about things in common. How else does one explain the spread of

Bhakti or Vedantic ideas across large swathes of India? Yet, what is new in our time is that in principle any Indian can begin a conversation on any matter and turn it into an issue of common and pervasive concern. An issue of a particular community, say, ‘triple talaq’ adversely affects only Muslim women and is primarily a matter between Muslim men and women, but can be viewed, at least secondarily, as a matter of common concern. Likewise, the exclusion of Hindu women from some temples may not affect non-Hindus but can be raised by them as a matter of more general concern.

The philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, says somewhere that the distinguishing mark of an intellectual is that he sticks his nose into every other person's business. However, in the age of democracy and modern nations, this trait is widespread; provided he empathetically understands it in all its complexity and nuance, virtually anyone can make another person's interest a matter of his and common concern.

If this is so, an important implication ensues for the ethics of nationhood: No one should be prevented from turning a particular matter into an issue of common concern, excluded from this con-

versation, not even those with whom one profoundly disagrees. For having a conversation is not the same as agreement. When a very large group begins a conversation, different voices, interests, ideas about the common good participate in it.

Some of these differences go deep, and surface for the first time only during conversation and cause dissonance. For example, currently, issues pertaining to Kashmir are so fraught that even an academic argument by a professor causes intense heat.

Not surprisingly, the public arenas where such conversations take place are a frequent site of conflict. Both the expression of conflict and its artful management (ensuring that it does not blow up) are crucial for a productive conversation.

If a nation is a people in conversation, then anyone stopping this conversation is damaging it. Such ‘conversation-stoppers’ act in two ways. First, under the illusion that they are managing or resolving conflict, they forcibly remove some groups from the public arena, depriving them of means of expressing their particular concerns and arguments.

Some violent extremists even do so

for more pernicious reasons; for instance, it is the avowed aim of terrorists to terminate this conversation. Such suppression of disagreement or conflict undoes a nation.

Second, after allowing differing voices to enter the arena, they adopt disruptive tactics – shout down, abuse, and troll them, making participation so unpleasant and fearful that interlocutors are compelled to give it up. This too contributes to the unravelling of a nation.

### For the sake of the nation

One final point: A nation – a people in conversation on common issues – is not the same thing as a state, i.e. public power concentrated in specific institutions such as the parliament, government, judiciary, army, police and bureaucracy.

Nations may exist without states and states without nations. Moreover, the nation is ethically prior to the state; the state exists for the sake of the nation. At no point must the state hijack the conversation, dictate its agenda or control it. It is a part of the conversation, not its permanent leader. Indeed, it is its duty to rein in those who disrupt or block conversation. The nation expects it.