

## Danish Caricatures: Freedom of Provocation

*Alok Rashmi Mukhopadhyay*

The unprecedented worldwide protests and street demonstrations against the publication of a series of satirical cartoons by a Danish newspaper have become a topic of intense debate over the limits of free speech and what has been described as the 'place' of Muslims in the West. On September 30, 2005 the major Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* from Aarhus printed a set of 12 caricatures depicting Prophet Mohammad, which Muslims believe is blasphemous. Islam forbids the human representation of the Prophet and the Muslims were grieved and angered as some of the images published clearly ridiculed the Prophet. While on the one hand the contents of the cartoons have put the spotlight on the role of the media, on the other, particularly from a global security perspective, has reinforced the thesis of the clash of civilization. Violent armed demonstrations were staged against the Danish, European Union (EU) and other European diplomatic missions abroad, for example, in Gaza, Beirut, Afghanistan, Pakistan and even in far-flung Indonesia. As fallout of the controversy, the Danish government had to close down its diplomatic representations in various capitals. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Danish Prime Minister, was compelled to cancel his official visits to countries, including India, apprehending violent protests. In effect Denmark has been facing the worst diplomatic crisis in its history. While some parallels between the present cartoon controversies can be drawn to that of "The Satanic Verses" in 1989, it is the contrast that merits attention. Today the European politico-socio space is less divided and more sensitive – an awakening transformation – then the times of Satanic Verses. A critical perspective on the controversy needs to be studied in the backdrop of the changing European political and religious landscape particularly after the end of Cold War.

The European society with their liberal tradition has been noted for defending the rights and culture of the growing number of Muslim immigrants. But with the recent spate of terrorist attacks, Europe's acclaimed multiculturalism and tolerance is being increasingly challenged.

Attacks in Madrid in March 2004, the killing of the controversial Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh on November 2 in the same year in Amsterdam, the terrorist attacks on July 7, 2005 and the subsequent foiled attacks on July 21 in London along with the presence of European armed forces in Afghanistan and Iraq are useful guideposts to comprehend the prevailing nervousness of the majority community in Europe, which otherwise has been a relatively safe continent.

From a socio-political dynamic it is important to configure the religious and ethnic composition of the Danish society. It is equally important to evaluate the role of the European media, the prevailing social undercurrents in the European societies, the current European discourse on Islam, and the future of integration and peaceful coexistence of Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds in the European societies. Finally, it remains intriguing as to why the cartoon controversy has taken more than three months to shape into a full-blown global debate with violent outbursts specifically outside Europe.

### **Denmark: A racial profile**

Denmark has a population of approximately 5.5 million with a very small Jewish community of around 6,500. However, in conformity with the general European feature, the actual population of the Muslims residing in Denmark is contested. For instance, Jørgen Bæk Simonsen in his study of 2002 and a database named Euro-Islam have come to the findings that the total Muslim population in Denmark is roughly 150,000.<sup>1</sup> Jocelyne Cesari and Ann-Sofie Roald in their respective studies of 2004 put the number around 170,000, which is about 3 to 3.2 per cent of the total population.<sup>2</sup> However, Jytte Klausen in her book (2005) estimates the Muslim population to be about 250,000.<sup>3</sup> While Simonsen estimates the number of local mosques in Denmark by early 2000 to be 60, as per Klausen's estimate of 2005 it is 150. The statistical inconsistency points out the absence of an updated acceptable census. In the European context the population of religious minorities is crucial because without any authentic survey the 'number game' can be misused by both the European far-right and the radical Islamist organisations.

Besides the statistical debate there exists in Denmark undercurrents of racial tensions between the mainstream society and the immigrants. Reports confirm to a series of Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and xenophobic incidents

in Denmark particularly post-9/11. For years the far-right Danish People's Party has been blatantly propagating Muslims as enemies.<sup>4</sup> International incidents like the Israel-Palestine conflict have left a telling mark on the Danish social landscape. Verbal and physical attacks against the Jews by some younger members of the Palestinian community residing in Denmark have been reported. Discriminations of Muslims and immigrants in private and public employment sectors and racism and Islamophobia in the Danish society are clearly visible.<sup>5</sup> Explicit inter-community tensions have not only been limited to the public domain; Islam as a threat to Denmark has been articulated at the highest level also. In April 2005, the Danish Queen in her official biography underscored Islam as a challenge. In this complex dynamics the mainstream societies have to confront their own stereotypes and images about non-European and non-Christian societies as well as to review their traditions.<sup>6</sup> In fact the publications of the Danish caricatures should be seen against this backdrop. Even if it is assumed that the *Jyllands-Posten* might apparently have attempted to experiment the elasticity of the freedom of press within the European space<sup>7</sup> or to provoke a debate, the experiment was, to say the least, most ill-conceived. The decision-makers at *Jyllands-Posten* failed to take into consideration the religious sentiments of the Muslims in Denmark and abroad. Moreover they were quite clearly oblivious to the aftermath of the publications.

### **The Role of the European Media**

During the peak of the controversy, the mainstream European media supported *Jyllands-Posten* as a gesture in defence of free speech. Major European publishing houses like *Die Welt* and *Berliner Zeitung* from Germany, *France Soir* and *Charlie-Hebdo* from France and a number of other newspapers from Spain, Hungary, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Italy reprinted the original cartoons. British newspapers, on the other hand, did not reproduce the caricatures but in their editorials and leaders stood by *Jyllands-Posten*. The BBC after some deliberation showed the pictures and justified its decision as "responsibly and in full context to give audiences an understanding of the strong feelings evoked by the story." Though there has been a difference of opinion amongst the European media over the cartoons, for example, the managing editor of *France Soir* was sacked after the paper printed the drawings but in contrast, the Swedish Foreign Minister, Laila Freivalds, had to resign after one of her advisers reportedly attempted to stop the reproduction of the

cartoons in a Swedish website. The majority of the European publishing houses have projected the controversy as a conflict between the freedom of press and 'Islamic intolerance'. One of the lessons unattended by the European media, excluding the British press, from the days of the Satanic Verses is the necessity to draw the line between freedom of expression and religious bigotry.

But what the European media failed to anticipate was that the caricatures gave adequate fodder to the Europe-based Islamic hate preachers and radical Islamist organisations like the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HuT). After the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London, these organisations and individuals were discredited and were on the defensive. Some of the known radical Islamists like Sheikh Omar bin Bakri Muhammad (a Syrian refugee to UK) had to flee to Lebanon apprehending arrest after the London terrorist attacks. Similarly, the London-based HuT, whose anti-integration, anti-West rhetoric attracted media attention, had to ease its shrillness in the aftermath of the London terrorist attacks. The cartoon controversy has revitalised these radical organisations and presented them with an opportunity to return to the fore and proclaim themselves as the moral and theological guardians of the Muslims settled in Europe.

### **Repercussions in Europe and abroad**

The response of the Muslims in Europe to the controversy has been radically different from the days of the Satanic Verses. The restraint shown reflects maturity and an ability to express dissent organisationally.<sup>8</sup> Not only the number of the Muslims increased significantly in Europe after the Cold War, but Internet and electronic media have combined to increase constructive discussions between the European mainstream and the European Muslim communities. Today the Muslim organisations in Europe play a constructive role. In major European countries these organisations are the dialogue partners with their respective governments on integration or for recognition of their rights. Moreover, the second and third generations of Muslims, who were born and brought up in Europe, consider Europe as their home and have an altogether different outlook than their ancestors. The recent riots in Birmingham and in the French less-privileged areas have been expressions of the "under-achieved" Muslims and their uncertain future. However as far as the cartoon controversy is concerned, it will be fair to comment that the Muslims reactions in Europe have remained largely peaceful.

The controversy has, unexpectedly evoked strong reactions in most of the Arab countries or in such countries where Muslims are in majority or a significant minority. It can be argued that the sharp Arab reactions have actually been protests in a different form against the on-going war in Iraq and the participation of European nations. The recent win of Hamas in Palestine and electoral gain of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have also encouraged the demonstrations. Major Muslim countries worldwide have withdrawn their ambassadors from Denmark and Danish goods are facing boycott. Such diplomatic counter-measures and demonstrations against Danish representations and interests have been an outcome of the Danish government refusal to take action against the newspaper despite protests from Arab countries. It is important, at this point, to highlight some salient European traditions. Caricatures are a regular feature in the European media which as a practice question and ridicule the establishment as well as the prevailing social paradoxes. In fact, during the Cold war, the political dissidents in Eastern Europe used to have cartoons and caricatures as a form of protest. Moreover, the freedom enjoyed by the European press is incomparable to that of other countries.

## **Conclusion**

The cartoon controversy strongly underscores the role and functioning of the European media. The media (electronic and print) has become an important platform to enable the European-Muslim dialogue as well as to give space to the Muslim youth to vent out its frustration emanating from social exclusion. Therefore, any 'commissioned creativity' or frivolous experiment with the established norms of the freedom of press which overlooks religious sentiments in the name of 'enlightenment' or 'secularised atmosphere' would definitely have a negative impact on the integration, assimilation or naturalisation process of Muslims in Europe. The European mainstream should reconcile to the fact that Islam today is a European religion. Given the present demographic trend Islam will become a major religion in the coming decades. Any ill-conceived step which spark religious hatred or create divide in inter-community relations, will only provoke the young Muslims to join the camp of radical Islamists who are always eager to interpret any Islam-related event with their emblematic conspiracy theory.

## References/End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, Globalization in Reverse and the Challenge of integration: Muslims in Denmark in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (ed.) *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, Oxford University Press, Oxford et.al, 2002, p. 122;(ii) Country Profiles, Denmark, <http://www.euro-islam.info/pages/denmark.html>
- <sup>2</sup> (i) Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York & Hampshire, 2003, p. 213; (ii) Ann-Sofie Roald, 'Arab Satellite Broadcasting-The immigrants' Extended Ear to their Homelands' in Jamal Malik (ed.), *Muslims in Europe: From the Margin to the Centre*, LIT Verlag, Münster, 2004, p. 208.
- <sup>3</sup> Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford et.al, 2005, p. 109.
- <sup>4</sup> For details see, Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 200: in the EU after 11 September 2001, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), Vienna, May 2002, p.17.
- <sup>5</sup> For details see, Racism and Xenophobia in the EU Member States: trends, developments and good practice, Annual Report 2005 – Part 2, EUMC, Vienna, p.11, 27, 39.
- <sup>6</sup> Ulla Holm has discussed the effects of the cartoon controversy leading to a reconstruction of Danish identity in the long run. Ulla Holm, *The Danish Ugly Duckling and the Mohammed Cartoons*, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Brief, February 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> In fact Ahmed Akkari, a young Danish Muslim leader who was a member of the Danish Muslim delegation to Egypt with the controversial cartoons, has given an insightful description of dynamics of the controversy. For details see, "A Danish Muslim activist speaks" at <http://www.expatriate.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?view=BLOGDETAIL&grid=P30&blog=newsdesk&xml=/news/2006/02/03/bleurope03.xml>
- <sup>8</sup> "Muslim groups sue Danish newspaper", *Hindustan Times*, March 31, 2006, p.17.

Alok Rashmi Mukhopadhyay is an Associate Fellow at IDSA.