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**Challenges of Adjustment and Islamophobia: A Study of South  
Asian Migrants in Tartu**

Master's Thesis

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I have written this master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources, and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the ongoing argument on "Islamophobia," emphasizing exploring the challenges adjusted by South Asian<sup>1</sup> students and workers in Tartu amidst the global rise of Islamophobia. The research looks at South Asian students' or employees' experiences in Tartu, especially those who identify as Muslims<sup>2</sup>, and how they interact with the locals in the face of Islamophobic attitudes and actions in Europe. Two main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: (a) the development of a solid religious identity in reaction to experiences of Islamophobia and (b) the distinction between the religious society of their home country and the secular society in Estonia. The study uses qualitative methods, such as ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews, to observe how South Asians live their lives impacted by Islamophobia and how they respond by negotiating their identities. The results emphasize the relationships between Islamophobia and issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and immigration status. It also indicates how Tartu's social and cultural environment affects them. In the final analysis, the study will reflect, is the central hypothesis of this study that Islamophobia is the sole cause of adverse psychological effects such as anxiety, stress, concern, loneliness, and insecurity experienced by Muslim South Asians, or does the study consider other possible factors as well? However, the larger-scale effects of Islamophobia on this community's collective awareness and the adaptability of the Muslim South Asian population are addressed by the theories.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study among the 'South Asian' countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka mainly investigated people from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the terms "Muslim" and "Islamic" are used synonymously and interchangeably.

## INTRODUCTION

Societies are constantly changing, and we live in a time of diversity, as evidenced by ongoing migration, intercultural contact, agreements, collaboration, war, and societal, financial, and political disputes. People with different nationalities try to employ various methods in multi-ethnic societies to accomplish their objectives and encounter multiple challenges. The study's research topic and fieldwork inspired the author to learn more about the lives of South Asian Muslims in Tartu. Estonia does not have a sizable South Asian population compared to other European Union nations, despite its recent rapid population growth. Estonia has a rich history of being a meeting point for diverse cultures, languages, and religions. Globalization has constantly increased people, leading to cross-cultural interaction, agreements, cooperation, conflicts, and social, financial, and political changes. Culture and the social environment influence individuals' values, impacting their attitudes and behavior (Bowditch et al., 2008). In addition, Individuals or groups use values as guidelines or benchmarks to determine what they consider necessary or valuable (McEwan, 2003). Therefore, values and identities are present, are transmitted through social connections, and can vary among nations and cultural backgrounds (Fisher & Lovell, 2009).

It is fundamental to know that recognizing and respecting cultural values, actions, and characteristics in various regions is one of the biggest obstacles (House & Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program, 2004). According to the 2021 statistics, about 27.5% of the population of Estonia consists of non-citizens or residents with foreign status. Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians make up most of the country's minorities, with smaller people of Finns, Latvians, South Asians, and other ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

There are mainly three different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds represented in Tartu's South Asian community in this study. Therefore, this research adopts a socio-cultural perspective and focuses on Bangladeshis, Indians, and Pakistanis who practice Islam. They can often communicate with one another as their languages are similar, and most individuals are familiar with Hindi, which is widely spoken and understood in their region. There are similarities in their traditions and cultures. The South Asian community's experience of Islamophobia has not been well-documented or studied, despite extensive discussions on the topic, given the minority status

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<sup>3</sup> <https://rahvaloendus.ee/en/results/demographic-and-ethno-cultural-characteristics-of-the-population>

of South Asians in Tartu and the previous studies focusing on Tatar Muslims, Muslim women, immigrants, and refugees in Estonia. By analyzing the effects of Islamophobia on the South Asian community in Tartu, Estonia, in the context of Challenges of adjustment, this thesis attempts to resolve this investigative gap. The researcher's objective is to explore novel perspectives and encounters regarding social and cultural obstacles in contemporary society within the Tartu region. What factors determined their interest in pursuing their studies or working in Estonia? The experience of Islamophobia varies across countries depending on nationality, race, religion, and migration background. Is Estonia exhibits Islamophobic tendencies based on the experiences of the participants?

Moreover, what are the primary concerns that arose from cultural differences, ethnicity, skin color, or religion? The study investigates how Islamophobia affects the Tartu South Asian community, focusing on challenged stories using qualitative study methods, such as semi-structured interviews with people living in Tartu from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Qualitative research methods are based on humanistic, interpretive, and holistic principles, emphasizing the importance of examining the context and details of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). This study seeks to explore the dealing employed by individuals in managing their identities as Muslims and how their encounters with Islamophobia have influenced their personal and professional growth. The research findings will benefit in increasing awareness of how Islamophobia affects minority communities and make it easier to create practices and policies that encourage multiculturalism and diversity in Tartu.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Estonia, Muslims, Stereotypes, Cultural Adjustment

## **1. Literature Review**

This chapter extensively reviews the existing literature on discrimination against Muslims in the West and the Baltic region, focusing on the historical context of Islamophobia before the 9/11 attacks. The literature has two main themes: (a) the Estonian Islamic Community and (b) the increasing prevalence of Islamophobia in the West. The Islamic religion has a longstanding presence within Estonian society. Muslim communities have resided in the country since the 16th century, primarily consisting of immigrants from regions such as Tatarstan and Central Asia. Over time, Estonian Muslims have been considered a cultural minority in Estonia. As per the 2011

national census, the Islamic community in Estonia encompasses over 50 different nationalities. However, compared to the Lutheran and Orthodox congregations in the country, Muslims constitute a relatively small minority (Lepa, 2020). Islamophobia is a contemporary social issue that has received much attention internationally as incidences of bias and discrimination against the Muslim population are rising. A 2019 study on the integration of recently arrived immigrants in Estonia found a significant increase in prejudice and exclusion based on ethnic and religious factors. The report emphasizes the necessity for ongoing initiatives to lessen Estonians' unwarranted anxieties and concerns regarding migrants. For a better understanding, systematic initiatives supported by factual evidence and actively included in the educational system can give awareness (Süld, 2022).

### **1.1. Estonian Islamic community**

Muslims are considered a separate and different group. Many believe Islam is strict about uniformity and flexibility. The perception of the West is that Islam supports terrorism, violence, fear, and hostility (Süld, 2022). Islamophobia is the term for discrimination, prejudice, and irrational concern of Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia is increasing in the West caused by various reasons, including media coverage, political discourse, and world events. The media's portrayal of Muslims and Islam plays a crucial role in the rise of Islamophobia. Media coverage and entertainment often reinforce negative and stereotypical images of Muslims, affecting public views and attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. Political rhetoric is another component, especially after terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. Politicians and other public figures occasionally use polarizing language that conflates terrorism with Islam, fostering a climate of fear and mistrust toward Muslims. Social media facilitates the fast and widespread multiplication of misinformation and propaganda, which contributes to the growth of Islamophobia.

### **1.2. The Estonian Islam of the Tatar Community**

The Tatars are a Muslim ethnic group that initially lived in Estonia of modern-day Russia, known as Tatarstan. Tatar Muslims have long stood in Estonia, After World War I and Estonia's declaration of independence. Around 200 Tatar speakers, who had fled the German occupation of Russia and Finland, settled in Estonia during this period. When Russia held sway over Estonia, The Russian army recruited Tatars to fight for them, and some decided to remain in

Estonia after completing their service. In Tallinn, they constructed the first Tatar Mosque in 1902. However, the Soviet era witnessed strict repression of religion, causing significant hardship for the Tatar community in Estonia. The Tatar Mosque in Tallinn was closed in 1940, coinciding with the exile of many Tatars Muslims to Siberia (Lepa, 2020).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatar Muslims in Estonia began to rebuild their community. Since the mosque's reopening in 1991, the Tatar population in Tallinn has grown, and the Tatar population in the city has grown significantly. At present, Estonia is home to a significant number of Muslims who are of Tatar descent, numbering in the thousands. As a result, the Tatar community has gained prominence as a vital contributor to the country's diverse cultural milieu. In recent years, the Tatar community in Tallinn has faced obstacles to constructing a new mosque, leading to conflicts with the Estonian administration. The Estonian government has been reluctant to grant the Tatar community's request for approval to build a more prominent mosque to accommodate their expanding community. The Tatar population plays a significant role in Estonia's rich cultural landscape (Lepa, 2020). There are presently eight different Muslim organizations in Estonia. These groups run mosques and host various events and activities to advance Islamic tradition and culture (Mjaaland, 2019). Despite being a minority, Estonia's constitution and regulations guarantee the Muslim community legal protection and religious freedom (Ringvee, 2008).

### **1.3. The concept of Islamophobia**

The concept and term "Islamophobia" originated in Britain; Allen mentions that in a 1991 American periodical. However, the term was first used in France by Etienne Dinet. Khaleda Khan observed the grassroots situation of Muslims within the geographical area of Brent in the London 1980s and identified that this was where a distinct anti-Muslim prejudice first emerged. However, it was also where a new and unprecedented "British Muslim" identity was emerging. Muslim communities in Britain were initially politically and socially invisible because they primarily defined themselves in terms of their country of origin with a religious component. However, a first generation of British-born Muslims emerged and identified themselves differently from their parents, attributing less emotional or cultural meaning to their ancestral heritage and placing greater importance on their religion, Islam. This incident led to a shift away from a homogenous



"Asian" identity to a more prominent "Muslim" identity. Islamophobia is not a new term. From the late 1800s to early 1900s, various authors detected an attitude towards Islam and Muslims in Europe that some designated with the term 'Islamophobia.' Initially, Muslim communities primarily identified themselves in terms of their country of origin, such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Indian, and this was also how wider society saw them. During the time of late 1960s and early 1970s, an anti-racism movement emerged that focused on markers of race and color, which was not surprising given the prevalent racism surrounding immigration and immigrant communities. This emphasis on race and color led to Asian communities being politically disregarded and possibly even pushed to the sidelines in Britain (Allen, 2010).

Following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Islamophobia has been a problem in the West and worldwide (Larsson, 2005). It implies bias, exclusion, and resentment toward Muslims and the Islamic faith. Islamophobia can appear in various ways, such as abusive language and actions, hate speech, and biased laws and practices. The Muslim population suffers the most from Islamophobia in the West (Kaya & Özel Özcan, 2021). Though Islam is the world's second-most widely practiced faith, its followers comprise a sizeable fraction of the population (Lipika, 2017). However, Muslims are still the target of numerous covert and overt manifestations of Islamophobia (Bravo López, 2011). Islamophobia can be seen in various social, structural, and political contexts and on an individual level (Nadal et al., 2012). Muslims frequently experience fear, anxiety, and isolation due to media stereotypes and portrayals of Muslims as terrorists, extremists, and threats to public safety. Muslim people and groups frequently experience hate crimes and discrimination, which can have severe and lasting consequences.

Additionally, Islamophobia may have broader sociocultural effects that harm social integration and cohesion. Possible outcomes include stigmatizing Muslim communities, widening gaps between various groups, and hindering efforts to create open and diverse societies. The adverse effects of Islamophobia can hinder social, economic, and overall progress. Muslims worldwide experience these negative impacts, particularly when they are minorities residing in Western countries. (Samari, 2016). Islamophobia persists in the West for several causes. The impact of the media and political discourse, which frequently feeds stereotypes and preconceived notions, is a significant factor. A lack of information and understanding of Islam and Muslim cultures also exacerbates misunderstandings and false beliefs. It is crucial to adopt a thorough

strategy to combat Islamophobia in the West. It entails fostering a better knowledge of Islam and Muslim cultures, combating false information and unfavorable stereotypes, and developing laws and practices that support inclusion and diversity. Additionally, it entails engaging in dialogue with groups and people to build bridges of respect and understanding—furthermore, their encounters with racial and religious prejudice harm Muslims' psychological and social well-being. Muslim minorities frequently experience widespread fear and dread of hate crimes, especially after poor media portrayals of Islam (Haque et al., 2019).

#### **1.4. Islamophobia in the Baltic Region**

Islamophobia is growing in the Baltic region, particularly in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The leading cause could be to have limited exposure or understanding of Islam and Muslims, leading to misconceptions, stereotypes, and fear among people. The reason for Islamophobia in the Baltic region might be the minority population of Islam, which is predominantly Christian. Another factor contributing to this issue could be the rise of far-right and nationalist movements. Historical and cultural factors may shape the form of Islamophobia (Kriviņš, Teivāns-Treinovskis, & Tumulavičius, 2021).

There are barely about 6,000 Muslims in Lithuania (Racius, 2002). Most of the population are Tatars, who have been in the nation for many years. Nevertheless, there have been instances of bias against Muslims, mainly from far-right organizations. For instance, a nationalist organization in Vilnius protested the building of a mosque. They thought the mosque might accelerate the "Islamization" of the nation (Lederer, 1995).

Alternatively, Latvia has a low Muslim population, and unfortunately, Islamophobia has emerged as a prevalent issue fueled by anti-Muslim prejudice within the nation. A disturbing incident in 2016 saw a group of far-right radicals in Riga protesting against the construction of a mosque, citing unfounded concerns about national security (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Islamophobia was present in Latvia before 2015, but the migration crisis sparked a wave of anti-refugee and anti-Muslim protests organized by right-wing organizations. On September 22, 500 individuals attended a protest "Against Immigration" organized by Tvijas Sargi and the

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<sup>4</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2016

organization Taisngums. (Justice). A concert named "The Baltic Countries Are Ours" concluded the rally. On November 5, almost 100 individuals complied with the request made by Tvijas Sargi and Taisngums to join a picket. They emphasized the possible danger posed by Muslim immigrants, pledged to form self-defense organizations, and planned civil disobedience operations. The migrant and refugee crises were the main problem for Muslims. For Eid-ul- Adha (the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice), a carpet was spread outside the Islamic Cultural Centre in Riga on 24 September 2015, and around 30 Muslims gathered for a joint prayer. The celebration had not yet begun when the police arrived after being called by some inhabitants. The police discovered that Muslims had violated the law by organizing a public event without prior coordination with the local government. The court will decide whether to fine the Islamic Cultural Centre. According to Latvian legislation, the event organizers may a fine of up to 2,900 euros, i.e., about 10 euros for each community member. Later the wall close to the Islamic Cultural Centre was spray-painted with the inflammatory graffiti "Your Allah - your problem! " on September 27, 2015. "Go home!" is considered verbal abuse. Following this occurrence, the Muslim community in Latvia voiced its worries about the growing Islamophobia in the country (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the small proportion of Muslims in Lithuania, there are a variety of societal views on them. For instance, opinions toward "traditional minorities" like Tatars are much more favorable than those toward people seen as "recent immigrants." Public opinion polls conducted by the Institute for Ethnic Studies may help to explain this fact. Comparing working with Muslims to working with Tatars specifically, 8 out of 100 persons would prefer the latter. In this situation, the percentage rises to 26%. A public survey revealed an increase in the number of people who would agree to work with Pakistanis, Turks, Kazakhs, and Tatars, the groups of people who practice Islam in Lithuania. The social distance between coworkers of different ethnicities or religions is smaller and less pronounced than the negative social attitudes regarding living in neighbourhoods close to people of different ethnicities or religions (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2017).<sup>6</sup>

The most significant event that contributed to the rise in Islamophobia in Latvia in 2016 was a 12-minute YouTube video message by Oegs Petrovs, the director of the Latvian Islamic

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<sup>5</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2015

Culture Center, in which he expressed profound regret for having previously been forced to hide his true feelings and actions when giving interviews. Regarding this video, the TV3 program “Nothing Personal” broadcasts a story about the former head of the Latvian Islamic Culture Centre, Oļegs Petrovs, who supported terrorist attacks in France and lauded Jihad. The Baltic is for the Baltic nations, and Europe is for Europeans. Islamophobia was widely present in the media and on social media. It has also been observed that the situation involving the failed union of a Muslim guy from Turkey and Latvia functioned as the focal point of Islamophobia (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2017).<sup>7</sup> Around 45 hate crimes were reported officially in 2016, and the number of further attacks is unknown. In-depth interviews with refugees revealed that they feel insulted, exposed, and rejected due to locals' attitudes toward other ethnicities. The town of Rukla, where the refugee reception center is situated, was the scene of a significant attack that attracted much media attention. Two locals attacked a Syrian and an Iraqi lady as they walked from a nearby store to the refugee reception center. The women were shoved and grabbed by their clothing while having one of their glasses damaged. The Ministry of Interior provided information that the investigation began as a minor breach of public order. Although as a hate crime, police department representatives stated that the investigation is ongoing.<sup>8</sup>

According to the Association of Islam Culture and Education Center officials, Muslims have experienced discrimination when renting apartments, especially those who do not know Lithuanian. Both organizations emphasized that Muslim women who wore headscarves and identified as Muslims face difficulties renting apartments. The media, which portrays Muslims negatively, is how the Lithuanian society learned the most about Muslims. It is possible to spot potential instances of prejudice using the context of Lithuanian society's perspectives. The Institute for Ethnic Studies has found that social distance between coworkers of a different racial or religious background is generally lower and less evident than social views towards residing in a neighborhood with people of a different racial or religious background. In 2016, the dissemination of content relating to islamophobia persisted. The critical difference was that much less information was available on the topics mentioned above in 2016 than in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2016

<sup>9</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2016

Estonia became independent on February 24, 1918, and its initial constitution was approved in 1920. Estonia is renowned for being a country with very liberal policies regarding religion. In the aftermath of the communist era, the principles of religious freedom were enshrined in the constitution; it was approved by a referendum in 1992. In 1993, parliament passed the first law recognizing religious associations as legal entities. Estonia is known for its progressive stance on religious freedom, but its society is still highly secularized (Ringvee, 2008). According to the international religious freedom report, the Estonian constitution affirms that the state supports no official religion and guarantees the right of individuals to practice their religion. It also prohibits any act of incitement toward religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The law requires religious associations and societies to register and outline regulations for their activities. While unregistered religious groups may still engage in religious practices, they are not entitled to tax benefits.<sup>10</sup>

The Muslim community in Estonia is relatively small, with an estimated population of about 1,500 Muslims, the smallest among the Baltic states. However, despite this small presence, Islamophobia exists in the country, notably in the media and public discourse. Shockingly, a lawmaker in Estonia went so far as to label the Quran as a "manual for terrorists" and called for its prohibition in 2019, reflecting anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. There were no Islamic dress bans, and people had permission to slaughter animals according to their norms.<sup>11</sup> In the European Islamophobia Report for 2015, 2016, and 2017, there was no Estonian report. Islamophobia, or prejudice toward Muslims and Islam, has been seen in Estonia from 2018 onwards. Observers have noted discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims in Estonia, especially regarding employment, access to services, and public spaces. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reported in 2018 (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2019). According to the survey, the media frequently depicts Muslims in Estonia as outsiders to Estonian society or a threat to national security. Anti-Muslim prejudice, hate crimes, and discrimination have all occurred in Estonia. For example, in Tallinn, a pig's head was left in front of a mosque in 2017.<sup>12</sup> Since pigs are considered "Haram"<sup>13</sup> in Islam and unclean, the act appears to be an intentional attempt to upset Muslims. To prevent

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/estonia/>

<sup>11</sup> European Islamophobia Report, 2018

<sup>12</sup> European Islamophobia Report, 2018

<sup>13</sup> It is a Arabic word *ḥarām* "forbidden, unlawful, off-limits," in Islam "to be forbidden"

Islamophobia, the Estonian government has acted. The necessary actions included starting an anti-discrimination campaign and offering language and integration classes to immigrants and refugees. Due to Estonia's sizable Muslim community, reports of Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslims have surfaced. The Estonian government and society focused on combatting these stereotypes and encouraging a more inclusive and diverse society.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.5.Theoretical Framework of Islamophobia**

Various theories influence individuals' attitudes toward immigrants and other ethnic groups. Among these theories, stereotypes play a crucial role in shaping attitudes. Forming prejudices about a specific group leads to the creation of stereotypes, which can be problematic, especially when they are unfavorable since they prevent the development of constructive relationships and can serve as the basis for discrimination. Stereotypical views can build up through time, are passed down from elder to younger generations, and are shared within a group. Additionally, compared to other groups, groups tend to hold more beliefs that elevate the people of their group (Ainuar et al., 2016). The primary focus of contact theory is exposure to minorities and attitudes. Having interpersonal interaction with someone from a different group lessens prejudices, whereas just passing a connection with immigrants or those from other cultures might make people feel unfriendly and foster negative sentiments (Semyonov & Glikman, 2009). The people encountered must also be viewed as representatives of a specific group rather than as individuals to reduce unfavorable stereotypes, and the contact must be good (Druckman, 2001).

Individuals become better acquainted with the other group and stop viewing them as a threat; interactions with other groups thus increase intergroup trust and decrease generally negative sentiments (McLaren, 2003). The integrated threat hypothesis is a helpful framework for explaining Islamophobia. It highlights the tension between Western civilization and the Islamic world and the perception that Muslims' religious beliefs are incompatible with the "Western" way of life. The concept of a threat mindset is a critical factor in shaping perceptions toward immigrants. According to the threat theory, locals may perceive immigrants as literal and symbolic threats. Actual threats can take the form of competition for limited social benefits or employment opportunities. On the other hand, symbolic threats are often attributed to the differences in social,

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<sup>14</sup> Euporean Islamophobia Report, 2018

cultural, moral, behavioral, and religious traditions between the two groups. Such threats are primarily grounded in the belief that the customs of the other community pose a risk to the desired state of affairs (Ainsaar et al., 2016). Economic theory instead categorizes Muslims as belonging to a lower social class in the context of Islamophobia. Many rational economic theories attribute negative attitudes towards migration to concerns about losing past advantages and competition. The fact that low-skilled persons have more significant anti-immigration attitudes because they must compete with low-skilled workers entering the country also supports the integrity of this hypothesis (Daniels & Von Der Ruhr, 2003).

Competition for social advantages is another possibility (Ainsaar et al., 2016). Higher-educated individuals may also worry about their careers but from others directly competing with them for available positions (Bridges & Mateut, 2014). An alternative to arguments based on economic competitiveness is that organizations experiencing issues are merely searching for someone to blame (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996). The neighborhood security theory suggests that a low perception of community security is associated with a heightened sense of danger from immigrants. Islam is associated with terrorist ideologies, and Muslims should be aware of the security danger in the context of Islamophobia. Several issues are associated with immigrants, as they introduce uncertainty into society (Rustenbach, 2010).

The collective threat theory states that members of social or ethnic groups tend to agree on the essence of one group or the other. Such categorization makes the social world more understandable and makes blending groups of various types more feared. As a result, individuals tend to support the immigration of those who belong to the same ethnic group and attempt to limit the entry of those who do not share their ethnicity. (Bridges & Mateut, 2014). Therefore, Muslim religious values do not correspond to European secular or Christian ones. This risk may harm one's identity, morality, worldview, and other symbolic values (Ainuar et al., 2016). Muslims are viewed as being so different in the context of Islamophobia that they do not fit culturally and spiritually into Western civilization (Ainsaar et al., 2016).

The theory of cultural marginality may be related to cultural differences. For instance, Allport (1958) discovered that groups subject to discrimination had a larger capacity for empathy for other groups who are also subject to discrimination. Similar experiences make it easier to relate

to those struggling, encouraging the development of more optimistic views. When one finds it difficult to identify with immigrants due to differing cultural origins or experiences, attitudes toward immigrants are more negative (Rustenbach, 2010).

### **3. Research Aim and Questions:**

The research study titled "Challenges of adjustment and Islamophobia: A Study of South Asian Migrants in Tartu" aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the diverse realities Muslims encounter. The description shared by South Asians residing in Tartu expresses their experiences. To gain insight into the difficulties individuals residing in Estonia face, examining their experiences in light of the prevailing theoretical framework is crucial. The research focuses on investigating the level of integration of individuals into society, including aspects such as their identities, religious beliefs, and prospects. Additionally, the study aims to explore how their experiences may potentially impact the open society that operates in Estonia. How is Islamophobic Estonia?

As the second-largest city in Estonia and the location of the nation's oldest educational establishment, Tartu was my choice for the study's primary location. Tartu is overflowing with young people, and the university there has emerged as their top option for education and employment. Estonia is the country of choice for many South Asian students. As of September 2021, I live in Tartu and attend the University, and it is convenient for me to connect with students for their responses. Therefore, "What is the effect of Islamophobia in the lives of South Asian youth living in Tartu?" is the primary research question. The central question will be used to derive a sub-topic: "How do young individuals from South Asia actively cope with Islamophobia and face significant challenges due to religious and cultural differences?"



### **3. Methodology**

This study conducted thirteen interviews with individuals from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh who migrated to Estonia as students or labour migrants within the past five years. The interviews were conducted in person in Tartu, remotely via Zoom, and through written forms. The study focused on Muslims not originally from Estonia or who had previously migrated to the country, with a particular interest in the most marginalized members of society. The research approach combines theories to provide a "voice" to minority groups and those affected by current social issues. The researcher conducted all the interviews in English, gathered additional information in Bangla, Hindi, and Urdu, commonly spoken languages in South Asia, and then translated them into English. Two interviews were conducted in Bangla, the researcher's native language, but the recording was not done as the interviewees were unwilling to do so. However, they were interested in sharing their thoughts. The researcher ensured anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study for any quoted material. The research took place over five months, from December 2022 to April 2023.

This qualitative research examines the living conditions of South Asians in Tartu by exploring the reasons behind their migration, such as seeking better education, lifestyle, and career opportunities. The participants migrated from countries facing various issues, where they often lack the opportunities to secure a bright future. This study aims to shed light on their experiences living in Estonia and how it relates to the issue of Islamophobia. The research also investigates how this phenomenon affects their life journey in the new country.

The qualitative approach aims to develop a deeper understanding of a particular topic by generating new insights and meaning through careful observation and analysis of qualitative data. Researchers often employ this approach to delve into, comprehensively examine, and gain insight into social phenomena. This method allows researchers to unpack individuals' various meanings of activities, situations, events, or artifacts or to build a nuanced understanding of a particular aspect of social life (Blanchflower, 2018). Qualitative research is grounded in values prioritizing the significance of individuals' subjective experiences and their meaning-making processes. This approach aims to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of a particular phenomenon. The method is typically suitable when the primary objective is to explore, describe,

or explain a phenomenon or situation. To qualify for the study sample, participants had to meet several selection criteria, including self-identifying as a Muslim from India, Bangladesh, or Pakistan, being at least 20 years old, possessing literacy skills in English (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking), and being willing to discuss discriminatory experiences and the impacts of Islamophobia—the person who has been living in Tartu for at least two to five years. Before conducting interviews, individuals were contacted by phone to verify that they met the previous criteria. The questionnaire was created based on the analysis of numerous journal articles to examine the impact of Islamophobia and how it hampers human rights and makes people feel isolated. The following parts are the primary points:

- Personal information
- Daily activity
- Religious observance and living
- Studying and working
- Motivation for leaving one's home country.
- Daily challenges
- Effects of Islamophobia on their life.

One uses the snowballing strategy when it is difficult to reach the key informants (Naderifar et al., 2017). The study's participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The latter process involves individuals referring other potential participants for the study. The researcher used snowball sampling to increase the feasibility of gathering data by recruiting recommended participants. These sampling methods aimed to achieve a diverse sample of the Muslim South Asian population, with variations in racial and ethnic groups, age ranges, and experiences. In this investigation, the snowball method was the best possible choice. Conducting fieldwork in an area with few individuals and those hesitant to discuss sensitive topics was highly challenging for a researcher. Therefore, the researcher used the snowball technique to recruit the primary informants. For data collection and content analysis, the researcher employed a qualitative semi-structured interview approach involving pre-planned questions and addressing specific topics of interest.

Additionally, during the data analysis, the author remained flexible in modifying the questions' sequence and format to accommodate the interviewees' responses. The study developed a semi-structured interview model (see Annex 1) to guide the process and allow follow-up questions to facilitate this approach. Moreover, enable follow-up questions to facilitate this approach. The researcher designed the interview questions to gain insights into the social dynamics of Tartu. This study describes theory formation rather than testing (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Thus, the study focuses on how the participants' sharing was manifested in various theories. However, the experiences of the thirteen respondents cannot be generalized to the entire city. Using the qualitative technique can serve as a starting point for understanding how social behaviours change during their stay. Furthermore, the research inquiries could not be resolved through quantitative methods, using qualitative techniques.

The consent form provided a clear explanation of the research's purpose and the intended application of the study's findings, which helped to secure the participants' involvement. Contacts were gathered from the university to recruit participants, and a WhatsApp Muslim group in Tartu was used. While some students agreed to participate, they requested that participants have lived in Tartu for at least two years, and others refused to be recorded. The researcher then sought out new connections and interviewees, some of whom were willing to participate in unrecorded interviews and chose to type their responses and send them via email.

Language has a non-neutral role in the coding process (van Nes et al., 2010); therefore, conducting interviews in the same language and avoiding translating transcripts is essential to reduce potential cultural and linguistic differences among participants. As such, all interviews in this study were conducted in English and lasted between 20 to 40 minutes. The interview discussions were transcribed from oral to written form to enable the more analytical organization of the data. Data collection involved a combination of face-to-face, Zoom, and hybrid interviews (in-person, over the phone, or online with a follow-up email) and formal talks that were not recorded but noted during fieldwork. Later, the recordings and written responses were transcribed for analysis. The study ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study by conducting anonymous interviews and obtaining informed consent from volunteers to participate in discussions while following ethical guidelines (Jaap, 2021). The whole study used the names of

the participants while recording to aid in the recall and analysis of the data. The author employed the use of pseudonyms in this paper.

The names that I chose are widely used in South Asia. The researcher transcribed the interviews following the fieldwork and conducted a thematic data analysis (Bauman, 1990). The information was coded by scanning the documents broadly and emphasizing the appropriate content. The data appears relevant regarding the research questions that supported the theory-generating process; preliminary coding aims to name the parts of the evolving title. The researcher analyzed negative and positive reactions to identify specific characteristics of a phenomenon that contrasted with the prevailing understanding (Layder, 2012). Methodological choices made in this study are theoretical and not supported by empirical data. The purpose of analyse is to support or contradict theories. They may not exist in qualitative studies (Jane, 2014). This study indicates that the information was "approached" with "theory in mind" during the analysis. To increase the validity of the results, the notes and observations from the field were constructive during the connectivity analysis (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). This study aimed to interview a total of seventeen individuals who self-identify as Muslim South Asians, with a minimum target of fifteen participants. During the interviews, I used an audio phone voice and Zoom recorder to record the narrative data, and I also took notes to document observations and non-verbal expressions. Subsequently, I transcribed the interviews from the recorded device. I analyzed the data by coding it through content analysis. The collected qualitative data was then processed and organized using the open coding method, where data was systematically analyzed for themes and categorized accordingly. I identified patterns in the data to draw conclusions that would help me answer my research questions. However, due to limitations in recruitment, this target was met after the end of May 2023. As a result, I proceeded with analyzing and organizing the data collected from the thirteen interviews.

### **Strengths, Limits, and Researcher bias**

The significant strength of this study is its unique approach that enabled Muslim South Asians to share their personal experiences in response to Islamophobia. The researcher's identity as a South Asian Bangladeshi allowed her to establish an in-group identity with the participants,

fostering a higher level of trust and comfort during the interviews. This could have also encouraged the participants to be more forthcoming during the interview.

There are some limitations to the data and data analysis in this study. The main limitation is the need for more generalizability of the findings due to the small sample size of only thirteen participants. Additionally, it is vital to consider the impact of geographical location on Islamophobia. In this study, all participants lived in their home countries where Islam is dominant. Except for one participant from India, Islam is not the dominant religion. They were unaware of Islamophobia in their home countries. However, when they arrived in Estonia, they felt more conscious about other opportunities they were not getting here. During the interviews, the participants shared their experiences, which sometimes differed from the original research questions and aims. Other limitations are:

- ❖ Communicating with individuals was challenging when conducting primary research on a sensitive issue. There is a possibility that interviewees did not want to talk much about religious and political issues for their security. Some disagreed with doing the recording.
- ❖ Lack of research information available for both primary and secondary resources.
- ❖ Lack of experience with statistical data and methods.
- ❖ Prior research studies relevant to my thesis might be limited depending on the scope of the research topic.
- ❖ Methods/techniques used to collect the data: After I completed my analysis of the research findings (in the Discussion section), I realized that how I collected the data or analyzed it had limited my ability to conduct a thorough analysis of the results.

As previously stated in this study, my insight regarding the Muslim South Asian community's experiences has been utilized. As a Bangladeshi woman from the Christian faith, there is a possibility of bias from this perspective toward Islamophobia. To reduce this potential bias and enhance the reliability of the data, I engaged in a peer debriefing process with two colleagues to monitor for bias. The feedback provided by them was incorporated to enhance credibility and ensure validity. Despite these efforts, it is not feasible to eliminate researcher bias; however, I remained conscious of this aspect throughout the study.

#### 4. Discussion

South Asian Muslims residing in Tartu experience a relatively favorable environment. Nonetheless, this research explores a few areas where they encounter personal challenges. The findings reveal that students and workers in Tartu hold a range of perspectives and beliefs about religion, influenced by diverse social, political, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the findings of this study will be presented based on the participants' responses. The results indicate a broad range of perspectives and beliefs about religion among the students and workers in Tartu, which can be attributed to various factors such as social and religious, and cultural backgrounds. These factors have influenced the participants' decision to come to Tartu and adapt to life in the city. The participants predominantly attribute the spread of anti-Islamic sentiment to media propaganda.

The chapter has around seven main sections, which explore the experiences of Muslim South Asians. The chapter discusses the participants' overall experiences as Muslims, then examines their challenges. The emotional impact of Islamophobia is examined before participants reflect on broader issues affecting the Muslim South Asian community, such as 9/11, stereotypes, and the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment. Finally, the chapter considers adjusting ways participants have employed to deal with the distress caused by Islamophobia. These themes were derived from interview questions administered to participants, as detailed in Appendix 1.

**Table: Sex, Ethnicity, Occupation of the Respondents, and Other Details of Sample**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Duration of Living in Tartu</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>	<b>Format of Interview and Date of Interview</b>
Bikas	Male	Pakistan	Engineer	15 Months	28 Min 37 Sec	In-person 25th Feb
Rupok	Male	Pakistan	Professor	5 Years+	26 Min	Hybrid 15th Mar

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Duration of Living in Tartu</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>	<b>Format of Interview and Date of Interview</b>
						Mail sent 22nd Mar
Setu	Male	Pakistan	Student	21 Months	21 Min 40 Sec	Zoom 15th Mar
Urmi	Female	Pakistan	Student Researcher	21 Months	33 Min 55 Sec	In-person 25th Feb
Nodi	Female	Pakistan	Kitchen Crew	5 Years+	29 Min	Hybrid 15th Mar  Mail sent 22nd Mar
Jeni	Female	India	Engineer	2 Years+	40 Min	Hybrid 27th Feb  Mail sent 10th Mar
Subho	Male	Bangladesh	Student Officer	21 Months	23 Min 37 Sec	Zoom 3rd Mar
Arnob	Male	Bangladesh	Student	21 Months	21 Min 7 Sec	In-person 25th Mar
Milton	Male	Bangladesh	Student Officer	21 Months	23 Min 15 Sec	Zoom 16th Mar

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Duration of Living in Tartu</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>	<b>Format of Interview and Date of Interview</b>
Ripa	Female	Bangladesh	Business	4 Years+	25 Min 28 Sec	Zoom 25th Mar
Rini	Female	Bangladesh	Student	21 Months	38 Min	Hybrid 3rd Mar  Mail sent 14th Mar

Language of the Interview: English

### **Leaving the Comfort Zone**

Participants were requested to share about their background, home country, and family to understand better the Muslim traditions in which they spent their life. The paragraph outlines the factors that drove most participants to emigrate and settle in Tartu and the assistance they received from their families. There were five male and three female educational migrants and two male and three female labour migrants. Most of the thirteen participants follow the Islamic faith, while only a couple have a secular outlook. These individuals do not necessarily identify as atheists but hold a positive view of religion.

Bikas<sup>15</sup>, who worked as an electrical engineer in Saudi Arabia, moved to Tartu with his wife, who had enrolled in a university. He explains that it is common for his family to work and live abroad, and he has been interested in doing so since college. Smiling as he addressed his wife with dignity, he commented on the common practice in Pakistan of seeking employment and residence overseas.

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<sup>15</sup> Pakistani Male participant



*“My own relocation to Tartu was well-received by my family, had a history of pursuing opportunities abroad. The desire to live and work outside of Pakistan had piqued my interest since my college days.”*<sup>16</sup>

Subho's<sup>17</sup> family supported his decision to pursue higher education abroad and introduced him to Islam's core principles, as he mentioned. As a practicing Muslim, he expressed that he is not fully committed to all the laws and regulations, but his family has given him the freedom to pursue his academic and career goals.

*“My decision to practice Islam received support from my family, who introduced me to its fundamental principles. While I do not strictly adhere to all of its laws and regulations, I remain a practicing Muslim through personal choice rather than obligation. My family gave me the freedom to choose my path, and I have their complete support as I pursue my academic and professional goals.”*<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Rini<sup>19</sup>, born and raised in Bangladesh, moved to Tartu with her husband and did not feel homesick. According to her, moving to another country is common in her country, and her parents agreed with her decision, considering Bangladesh's safety concerns. Likewise, Milton<sup>20</sup>, who also hails from Bangladesh, did not face any issues in his decision to move to Estonia with his wife for academic and job opportunities. He expressed that migration is common among his generation, and there are limited opportunities in Bangladesh's academic and job sectors.

Arnob<sup>21</sup> expresses a liberal attitude and appreciates his Muslim faith despite not strictly practicing its rules and restrictions. Most participants cite the lack of career opportunities and the desire for a better future as their main reasons for leaving their home country.

*“Despite my liberal beliefs, I acknowledge the importance of my faith, which stems from being born and raised in a Muslim household. Although my parents attempted to impart Islamic teachings to me during my upbringing, I did not find it particularly engaging. They occasionally*

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Bikas

<sup>17</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Shuvo

<sup>19</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>20</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>21</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

*impose certain rules and restrictions upon me, which I may not necessarily agree with, but I always find a way to adhere to them on my terms."* <sup>22</sup>

After deciding to study overseas, Urmi<sup>23</sup> experienced a transformation in her perspective toward other religions and countries. Initially, she had limited knowledge about other religions and countries, but after reading a summary of the Bible, she discovered the similarities among different religions. She has now developed a belief that all religions preach love and peace. Urmi intends to practice all the rules and regulations of Islam to become a good Muslim in the future. She is careful about her surroundings and respects all human beings. Although leaving her country and comfort zone was difficult, she is content with her decision and feels positive.

### **Fulfilling the religious goal**

The participants were queried regarding their religious practices and how they reconcile them with the global fear of Islam. Therefore, participants shared their perspectives and personal encounters related to their Islamic faith. The participants acknowledged the influence of religion on their beliefs and practices. Collectively, this section underscores the significant role that religion plays in the lives of these Muslim individuals, shaping their principles and convictions.

Urmi<sup>24</sup> values her faith and strives to follow Islamic principles by refraining from publishing images on social media. Despite her initial concerns, she pursued higher education abroad in Estonia with the support of her family in Pakistan. She profoundly respects Islam's principles and considers Hazrat Muhammad (SAW)<sup>25</sup> as God's messenger. Before she arrived in Estonia, she held negative beliefs about the presence of music and attire for women, which contradicted Islamic teachings. However, upon her arrival, she discovered that her previous assumptions were incorrect, and she has since embraced a more positive perspective. She was delighted to find a prayer place in Tartu where they could pray on Fridays and celebrate Eid-UI-

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Arnob

<sup>23</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>24</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>25</sup> Muslims believe that Hazrat Muhammad is the last and final messenger and prophet of God who began receiving direct verbal revelations in 610 CE.

Fitr<sup>26</sup> and Eid-Ul-Adha<sup>27</sup>. Subho<sup>28</sup>, another participant, practices "Zikir"<sup>29</sup> to keep God in mind throughout his day but is currently busy with his studies and work. Jeni<sup>30</sup>, born and brought up in Bangalore, India, only started practicing Islam a few years ago after reading the Quran and being inspired by its meaning. She lives with three flat mates and feels unsafe wearing Islamic dress in her country. It is surprising that coming from a Hindu-majority country, she feels more significant liberty to observe her faith in Estonia than in her country of origin. For her, Islam is a faith that acknowledges only one God who made both the heavens and the earth. Ripa, a Bangladeshi participant, sees religion as a source of peace, guidance, and hope, which helps her during challenging times. The participants have diverse views on Western culture's impact on their faith, with some stating that it has not significantly influenced them.

Rini<sup>31</sup> is a talkative and lively woman who regards religion as a perspective that provides tranquility to her mind. She finds solace in the idea that God protects, watches, and cares for her. She views Islam as a peaceful religion with many positive aspects. On the other hand, Milton<sup>32</sup> defines religion as the belief in a Creator whom we must honour, respect, and obey. He says God is the master of our lives, and everything is part of His plan. Milton believes Islam is about living harmoniously according to its rules and regulations. Even though Islam acknowledges only one God, he feels it is somehow related to other religions with multiple beliefs. Islam acknowledges regional variations in the practice of Islam.

### **Socio-Cultural Life in Estonia**

This section elaborates on how the participants adjust to a new cultural environment and shed light on their discoveries. It delves beyond the mere act of adapting and compromising to fit into a new culture and explores the process of learning and assimilating various experiences.

Bikas<sup>33</sup> suggested that Muslims should dress modestly in Islamic attire and be adaptable in their clothing choices when living in a new environment. He emphasized that children should

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<sup>26</sup> *Eid al-Fitr* marks the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting.

<sup>27</sup> *Eid al-Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice is the second and the larger of the two main holidays celebrated in Islam.

<sup>28</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>29</sup> *Zikir* is the Arabic term for remembrance of Allah.

<sup>30</sup> Indian Female Participant

<sup>31</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>32</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>33</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

be taught modesty and adherence to the Islamic dress code early. Following the teachings of the Quran, Bikas' family members cover their faces in public spaces. Women in the family mainly observe this practice.

Similarly, Urmi<sup>34</sup> also wore a veil in Pakistan, where covering the head is a sign of respect for the religion. When she moved to Estonia, she initially felt uncomfortable being the only female student wearing a hijab and feared being excluded. However, she later realized that the hijab had become a fashion statement in her country, which was not its primary purpose. She eventually decided to stop wearing it but acknowledges that it may not be as quickly accepted in her society, where many argue against abandoning the practice.

*"At first, upon arriving in Estonia, doubt loomed over me, fearing that I may not be well-received and that students would avoid me due to my hijab, which set me apart as the only female student wearing it. As I settled in, I became aware of the hijab's contemporary trend in my country, even among my cousin sisters, which is not the primary reason for wearing it. Consequently, I decided to discontinue its use but may reconsider it in the future. In my society, it is not readily accepted or accessible for someone to discard the hijab, and many people hold opposing views. Had I been in my home country or with my in-law's family, it would likely have been more challenging to make such a decision for myself, unlike what I have done here."*<sup>35</sup>

Subho<sup>36</sup> believes that religious rituals or attire do not determine one's religiosity or piety and that spirituality comes from maintaining a pure heart. He enjoys wearing traditional attire like Punjabi<sup>37</sup> and sarees<sup>38</sup> and visited the mosque for Friday's Jumma prayer<sup>39</sup> when he was in Bangladesh. However, Tartu's climate is unsuitable for such attire, so he cannot wear this tradition. While some of his family members dress in Islamic garb, most prefer modest and conventional clothing. As a Muslim, Subho is not habitual highly to Islam's customs, traditions, and rituals but prefers modest attire. On Fridays, he wears his customary attire and dresses in Punjabi to visit the mosque for worship.

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<sup>34</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Urmi

<sup>36</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>37</sup> In Bangladesh, finer cloth, loose fitting with wide pockets and necked collar cotton dress for men is called "punjabi".

<sup>38</sup> A "saree" is an attire worn by women of all faiths all across the subcontinent - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka. It is not restricted to any faith.

<sup>39</sup> "Jumma prayer" is obligatory for communal worship on Friday. This practice is a traditional prayer where people gather in a central location.

*"The fabric commonly used to make 'Panjabi' in Bangladesh is cotton, which is ideal for its warm and humid climate. However, due to Estonia's colder weather, adhering to traditional attire is not feasible. Neither myself nor anyone in my family dressed in Islamic garments, preferring instead to wear modest and conventional clothing."*<sup>40</sup>

Bikas<sup>41</sup> expresses that despite living in a secular nation, he feels no fear, has the freedom to practice his religious beliefs, and feels safe and liberated. He follows the laws of the land and feels free in his country. As a minority in Estonia, he is more cautious regarding the legislation. Similarly, Urmi<sup>42</sup> feels free and safe in her country and more accessible and comfortable in Tartu. She values respect for personal space and the lack of interference from others.

### **Islam is a simple faith and a tradition**

This passage presents an account of how the participants practice their religion in a straightforward and non-violent manner, even though they may not fulfill all its conventions. The narratives of these individuals suggest that Islam's propagation is not necessarily characterized by aggression or violence.

Urmi<sup>43</sup> describes her modest lifestyle and regrets not putting in more effort to practice her religion. While she observes Ramadan by fasting and assisting others, she admits to not having read or understood the Quran thoroughly due to her background in chemistry. Setu<sup>44</sup> finds it challenging to balance daily prayers, work, and studies. Ripa believes in following the guidance of the Quran and considers the five daily prayers<sup>45</sup>, Ramadan fasting<sup>46</sup>, and reading the Quran as Islam's most important traditions and practices. Although she finds it challenging to find time to pray during her busy work shift, she values earnest prayer. Rupok<sup>47</sup> also places great importance on prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and prescribed charity as prescribed in the Quran. He believes that Estonia accepts minorities who may follow Islamic dress codes.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Shuvo

<sup>41</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>42</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>43</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>44</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>45</sup> For Muslims it is necessary to pray *five times a day*, before dawn, afternoon, late afternoon, after sunset and nighttime.

<sup>46</sup> In the Islamic calendar, the ninth month is called *Ramadan*. This month, Muslims worldwide spend the month fasting and praying.

<sup>47</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

According to Jeni<sup>48</sup>, the Quran guides how to maintain discipline, be charitable, and show consideration to others and one's parents. She tries to follow the Quran as closely as possible, as Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was an example of how to understand and implement the word of Allah. Although nobody is perfect, she strives to be. Jeni<sup>49</sup> has read the Bible and appreciates some of its quotations but places great importance on praying five times a day and wearing the veil. She tries to pray daily, including making up missed prayers at work. The veil is significant to her, and giving it up is not something she is willing to do quickly.

Milton<sup>50</sup> discussed how globalization and living in the West influenced his practice of Islam. He acknowledges that Western culture has impacted his religious practice, but he tries to maintain a balance and not engage in extreme activities. He believes that the Quran contains guidelines for life and where solutions to every problem. He follows the basic rules of Islam and the fundamental five pillars<sup>51</sup>, but he is flexible about it. He tries to pray regularly but sometimes fails due to business and laziness. He wears clothing following his culture and the guidelines outlined in the Quran, including wearing pants that cover his knees and refraining from showing his abdomen. He does not think that clothing defines a person's identity.

### **A feeling of isolation**

The section explores diverse theoretical perspectives on the nature of Islamophobia, as recounted by the participants who share their experiences of encountering it.

Bikas<sup>52</sup> has expressed loneliness and isolation, but he considers the mosque integral to his life. He regards it as a space for worship, social interaction, and welcome. Despite a mosque in Tartu, one cannot visit it frequently and instead chooses to pray at home. He follows most of the requirements of Islam in his daily life and hopes to raise his future children following the teachings of Allah.

Since childhood, Nodi has had to adapt to various relocations and found adjusting to Estonia's social and cultural aspects easier. She has formed friendships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and values the opportunity to learn about Estonian traditions and

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<sup>48</sup> Indian Female Participant

<sup>49</sup> Indian Female Participant

<sup>50</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>51</sup> Faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage (hajj) are the *five pillars of Islam*.

<sup>52</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

customs. Although she enjoys social gatherings, she sometimes feels lonely due to the absence of small talk in Estonian culture. Ripa<sup>53</sup> practices the religion in her way and respects religious rules but acknowledges that she cannot adhere to every expectation as a human being.

During the study, participants shared their experiences of facing challenges as Muslims. Their responses varied, including discrimination, concerns about renting a house, difficulties with wearing a hijab, and challenges while traveling through airports. Urmi<sup>54</sup> recounted an emotional experience where the immigration process took an unusually long upon her arrival in Tallinn. During this process, her documents were thoroughly scrutinized, and she felt insecure, especially because she was wearing a hijab. She concluded that this prolonged process and scrutiny were due to her being a Muslim and wearing a hijab. Additionally, while traveling on a bus, Urmi encountered another incident where an older woman refused to sit beside her and looked at her suspiciously. Urmi<sup>55</sup> interpreted these experiences as examples of the theory of threat, where her attire made the immigration officers excessively concerned and caused the older adult to view her suspiciously.

*“Upon arriving in Tallinn, I experienced an unusually long immigration process, leaving me insecure. I felt that my wearing of a hijab was recognizing as an instance of discrimination against Muslims. On a separate occasion, while on a bus, I noticed an empty seat beside me and an old lady giving me a strange look; she did not sit beside me, which I again linked to my Muslim identity.”*<sup>56</sup>

Once, She felt out of place when she began working part-time at a reputable restaurant in Tartu while simultaneously pursuing her studies, as she was the only Asian female employee. Furthermore, she explained that during Ramadan, Estonia's geographic location extends the fasting period. Ripa<sup>57</sup> encountered difficulty during this period as her manager needed to be more receptive to her fasting requirements. She did not get a chance to consume food after 18 hours while continuing her work. However, with time, her manager began to understand her predicament and even allowed her ten additional minutes to pray before breaking her fast. While

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<sup>53</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>54</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>55</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Umber

<sup>57</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

working in a restaurant, Nodi<sup>58</sup> had a similar experience where her managers did not initially accommodate her fasting schedule, even though she had communicated her requirements at the beginning of her employment. She observed that it takes time for individuals to understand her culture. On the other hand, Jeni finds Estonians friendly and welcoming, mainly when approached. She appreciates the freedom that she enjoys while working and studying in Estonia. As an introvert, Jeni prefers to be alone but acknowledges the benefits of socializing occasionally. However, despite having excellent academic results and work efficiency, Bikas, Urmi, and Arnob have expressed concern regarding the challenges they face in securing a job. They cannot comprehend why companies prioritize candidates with higher Russian proficiency levels. Despite numerous attempts, they have been unsuccessful in finding suitable employment. This scenario indicates the economic theory; individuals perceive themselves as having inadequate qualifications and feel that people judge them accordingly.

### **Coping with different situations**

In this section, the participants detail their adjustment challenges and how they have adapted to the new system. Their openness to adjusting to the system and ability to manage various circumstances are evident.

Rini<sup>59</sup> demonstrates a positive attitude towards diverse situations and is receptive to various cultural influences. She asserts that culture permeates every aspect of life, including religious practices such as Islam, which Western culture influences. She notes that certain Islamic practices, such as women's attire, contradict Western values. Despite this, not all Muslim women follow the strict Islamic dress code, although many still dress traditionally. She acknowledges that Western cultural influences have partly shaped her interpretation and practice of Islam. For instance, she felt validated when wearing traditional Bengali clothing, and her peers appreciated her attire, which made her feel included rather than excluded.

Milton<sup>60</sup> expressed a positive outlook towards his socio-cultural life and identified as an introvert who appreciates Estonian society's independence and social tendencies. He also enjoys attending parties and forming new friendships and values the Estonian culture's emphasis on

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<sup>58</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>59</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>60</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant



listening more than talking, which aligns with his personality; he was pleasantly surprised that the Estonian culture seemed familiar. Rupok<sup>61</sup> is a Tartu resident who lived in Estonia from 2012 to 2015 before his family emigrated to Canada, and he eventually obtained Canadian citizenship. He returned to Estonia with his family in 2021 and has enriched the experience. Rupok regards Estonia as a favorable location for his research work and has formed close friendships during his stay. Although he misses his other children in Canada, he enjoys being in Estonia with his wife and youngest daughter.

Individuals of diverse backgrounds may possess varying perspectives and dispositions toward Islam in cultural, social, political, and religious realms. Rupok<sup>62</sup> expressed that cultural disparities have no association with Islam. One can easily circumvent any surface-level discrepancies. In addition, cultures are subject to change over time, and rather than isolating oneself, one could consider their contribution to cultural evolution. He further mentioned that Estonian individuals are courteous and supportive of others. They possess a strong affinity for their culture and language, which the speaker admires. In contrast, he regretted not having similar feelings toward his language.

During the research study comparing South Asian and Western cultures, it was discovered that none of the participants reported experiencing conflicts related to cultural differences in the financial sector. However, the study did reveal that participants expressed no concerns regarding the banking system because, in their home country, Sharia law is not strictly enforced in the banking system. Therefore, all the participants reported that they encountered no difficulties in opening a bank account. Subho's<sup>63</sup> family practices a more liberal version of Islam, so he had no issues opening a bank account. In Bangladesh, most banks do not adhere to Sharia Law, even though it is a Muslim-majority country. He appreciated that LHV bank allowed him to keep his money before receiving his resident permit card. Bikas<sup>64</sup> had no reservations about opening a bank account in Tartu, even though he knew the bank was not regulated under Sharia Law. He preferred to keep his money in the bank to ensure its safety, but he would not invest or take any interest.

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<sup>61</sup> Pakistani male Participant

<sup>62</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>63</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>64</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

Setu<sup>65</sup> felt secure keeping her money in the bank and had no concerns about opening an account. Urmi<sup>66</sup> initially had trouble opening her account because she was from Pakistan, but she eventually did. Jeni<sup>67</sup> liked that regular bank accounts did not pose any interest-based problems. Refat was indifferent to Sharia Law but respected her religion.

Regarding banking practices, Milton<sup>68</sup> expressed that he does not prefer banks offering interest, as it goes against Islamic law. He noted that in Bangladesh, some banks claim to be regulated under Sharia Law yet still offer fixed interest rates, which he finds contradictory. He finds Estonian banking to be secure for his money, despite not being regulated under Islamic law and without any interest offered.

*“I observe that certain banks in Bangladesh claim to operate under Sharia Law but still offer a fixed interest rate, which they do not understand. I prefer banking in Estonia, which offers security for their money without any interest, even though it is not regulated under Islamic law. I believe that interest is always considered haram for Muslims and therefore do not prefer banks that offer interest.”*<sup>69</sup>

Conversely, Rupok<sup>70</sup> mentioned two schools of thought regarding banking and Sharia Law. The 'Orthodox' school believes that banks do not operate according to Sharia Law, which is not limited to Estonia or Europe. The other school of thought believes the Islamic definition of 'riba'<sup>71</sup> only applies to current banking practices. Despite these differences in opinion, no one encountered any problems while dealing with bank accounts in Estonia.

In Tartu, it has been observed that individuals who prefer halal meat face difficulty purchasing halal food. This issue is particularly noticeable among participants who seek to consume only halal products, often purchasing expensive halal brands. However, due to the high

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<sup>65</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>66</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

<sup>67</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>68</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Milton

<sup>70</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>71</sup> “*Riba*” is derived from the Arabic word that means to increase unequal exchanges or charges for borrowing. Interest is deemed *riba*, or an unjust, exploitative gain, and such practice is forbidden under Islamic law.

cost and unavailing, these individuals may occasionally have to compromise on their halal requirements. Some are very strict and buy from Tallinn. All participants expressed difficulty finding halal meat in Tartu, but they managed to obtain it despite the higher cost than regular meat. Rupok noted that while finding halal meat is challenging in Tartu, it is possible. He believes that facing this difficulty will be rewarded by God. The participants have explored various restaurants and found they can consume vegetables, rice, peas, seafood, and other non-alcoholic options. However, they avoid restaurants that only serve alcohol and meat.

*“Despite the difficulty of finding Halal meat in Tartu, I believe that it is not an impossible task and that facing this challenge will be rewarded by God. I have explored various restaurants and assert that we cannot find anything to eat in Western establishments is a misconception. While we avoid alcohol and meat, we consume various vegetables, rice, peas, and seafood. We consciously decide to avoid restaurants that only serve alcohol and meat.”<sup>72</sup>*

Jeni<sup>73</sup> purchases groceries from conventional supermarkets and has bought non-halal Rannamõisa chicken several times. Previously, she found it challenging to buy halal meat, but now she has friends who purchase beef or mutton from Tallinn. At restaurants, she orders both vegetarian and halal non-vegetarian food from halal restaurants in Tartu. Arnob<sup>74</sup> has a flexible attitude towards purchasing food and buys chicken, fish, and sometimes beef from traditional markets, nearby grocery stores, or any place with food. While finding halal meat is challenging, he is also okay with consuming non-halal meat. He occasionally eats chicken, soup, vegetables, seafood, and pasta at restaurants. He also stated that he is not particular about food and eats anything that appeals to his taste buds.

Rini<sup>75</sup> also buys groceries mostly from local stores and attempts to obtain halal meat but does not mind purchasing regular meat. She has discovered that regular meat brands are less expensive than halal-certified meat. She enjoys going to restaurants and trying different foods. Although she prefers well-cooked meat, it does not bother her much if it is not halal.

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Rupok

<sup>73</sup> Indian Female Participant

<sup>74</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>75</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

## **Response to Islamophobia**

The study participants found it challenging to provide a precise definition of Islamophobia. However, they generally agree that it encompasses a set of attitudes and behaviors directed towards Muslims rooted in the belief that Islam is a hostile religion and that Muslims are inherently wrong people. Commencing the interview with this question enabled initial data collection on participants' encounters with Islamophobia. This interview helped observe the participants' willingness to disclose their personal experiences and identify themes that were explored in greater detail during other parts of the interview. The subsequent section of the interview concentrated on specific challenges that participants encountered to understand better the difficulties associated with Islamophobia.

Milton<sup>76</sup> believes that if someone does not welcome the presence of a Muslim person, this is an instance of Islamophobia. He is against any harm caused to individuals based on their religion and maintains that the teachings of Islam do not condone extremist acts. Milton expresses disappointment as a Muslim when he feels that people look at him differently or do not treat him in a friendly manner. He perceives that people bear negative views toward Muslims and accepts such views without question. Despite this, he feels that Estonia is not excessively Islamophobic and that he can practice his religion safely and comfortably. He contends that terrorists and extremists exploit the shield of Islam and underscores the importance of educating young people to prevent them from being brainwashed. His argument supports The Economic theory and the observation that people view him differently and are unfriendly towards him.

According to the respondents, people's behavior towards them changes based on their perceived economic status or ethnicity. According to Ripa<sup>77</sup>, Islamophobia is an unfair stereotype attributed to all Muslims due to the actions of a few extremists. While she acknowledged that some events have been unjust, she also recognized the need to avoid generalizations. As a Muslim, she felt responsible when individuals used Allah's name to justify harmful actions. She expressed disappointment that some people use religion for their benefit, causing harm to others in the process. Ripa compared science and technology, which can also be used for good and bad

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<sup>76</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>77</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

purposes, without blaming everyone involved. Ripa<sup>78</sup> expressed her disappointment towards the unfair treatment of Islam as a peaceful religion due to the misdeeds of some extremists. She believes that such instances have led to the rise of Islamophobia, which is essentially religious racism. She acknowledges that certain events, such as 9/11, have contributed to the fear and negative perceptions associated with religion. She emphasizes the prevalence of stereotypes and prejudiced mindsets toward Muslims. She emphasizes distinguishing between a few individuals' actions and a group's beliefs.

Nodi<sup>79</sup>, on the other hand, believes that Islamophobia is not present in Estonia based on her personal experience of not encountering any discrimination from Estonians due to her religion. Meanwhile, Rini points out the negative role that the media can play in promoting Islamophobia through offensive depictions of the prophet Muhammad. She argues that their followers would also be offended if similar offenses were directed toward other religions. Rini acknowledges that discrimination exists in all societies and that the media tends to focus on incidents involving Muslim individuals and label their terrorist acts. In contrast, incidents involving individuals of other religions are often attributed to mental illness or not reported.

The interviewee highlights that any ideology can be taken to an extreme and cause harm, particularly affecting women. Rini notes that Islamophobia is a form of racism and has increased globally since the 9/11 attacks. As stated in the text, the rise in Islamophobia is a root cause of events such as the emergence of ISIS. It has negatively affected individuals and communities through hate crimes and bullying. The interviewee believes many people do not know enough about Islam and only receive information from news channels. Jeni<sup>80</sup> suggests that the media should change their approach to presenting news and perhaps host cultural events. Despite experiencing some instances of being followed or receiving strange looks while wearing hijab in Estonia, the interviewee generally felt safe during her time there. She attributes Islamophobia to hatred and baseless rumors leading to worldwide harm towards Muslims. She advocates for guiding individuals who misuse Islam and punishing them if they have gone beyond normalcy.

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<sup>78</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>79</sup> Pakistan Female Participant

<sup>80</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

Jeni also shares her experience of feeling like an outsider when people look at her strangely because of her hijab.

*“The act of people staring strangely hurts me, causing me to feel as though I am from another planet or should not exist. I acknowledge that I have received such looks due to my hijab.”<sup>81</sup>*

Similarly, Arnob<sup>82</sup> expresses his concern about being perceived as a "different guy" and facing difficulties with immigration or job opportunities due to his Muslim identity. He mentions that media portrayal of Muslims with specific attire and appearance in violent contexts has made him feel the need to conform to the societal norm of having a clean shave to avoid being targeted.

Jeni<sup>83</sup> believes that ignorance and distorted portrayal of Islam in the media are the primary causes of Islamophobia. She asserts that people generalize their perceptions of Islam based on limited exposure or sensationalist news, leading to negative attitudes toward Muslims. The outcomes of Islamophobia include mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, social isolation, economic disadvantages, and even mortality. However, she notes that she has encountered a friendly and accepting attitude toward Muslims in Estonia, despite occasional incidents of prejudice. She blames the media for perpetuating Islamophobic sentiments by selectively portraying Muslims negatively.

Subho<sup>84</sup> has defined *Islamophobia* as the fear of Islam or Muslims due to the actions of a few extremists, which he does not support. He believes Tartu is a secure and pleasant place to practice religious freedom. Urmi<sup>85</sup> suggested that some individuals may fear or feel apprehensive about Muslims because of their incomplete understanding of the religion and preconceived notions. She gave an example of the challenges she faced while presenting a business proposal for opening a halal shop, as many people mistakenly associate halal food with a broader prohibition on all types of food. As mentioned in the text, she does not apologize for her lack of understanding

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Jeni

<sup>82</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>83</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>84</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>85</sup> Pakistani Female Participant

about halal food and prefers halal-certified Turkish and Bengali restaurants. On occasions when she eats elsewhere, she opts for vegan meals and fish burgers.

In Estonia, Bikas<sup>86</sup> enjoys socializing with his peers and friends from his home country and workplace. He believes that the media is primarily responsible for causing Islamophobia. He has not experienced any judgment in Tartu, but he noticed once that someone placed stones in the usual parking spots near the mosque, which made him realize that not everyone accepts. Despite this, Bikas generally feels safe and secure in Tartu.

*“I was in the process of figuring out whether the car was parked in the wrong location or if the parking spot was on someone's personal property. However, the incident involving stones being placed instead of a notice board has left me with the impression that the neighborhood may be hostile towards people who park their cars to attend the Friday prayer.”<sup>87</sup>*

The study suggests that South Asians in Estonia are generally accepting and able to practice their religion and lifestyle freely, despite cultural differences. According to Jeni, promoting awareness and educating people on the normalcy of Islam and its practitioners could help reduce hatred and discrimination. She notes that individuals from various nations and skin tones practice Islam, so addressing religious and racial animosity is essential. Despite being alone in Tartu and unaware of other Estonian cities, Jeni feels comfortable and accessible.

All participants agreed that education and awareness could reduce the fear of Islam. However, some participants were hesitant to discuss this topic. One participant emphasized that although education and awareness building can help, actions hold greater significance. While people may spread the message that Islam is a peaceful religion, if extremists commit violent acts like the 9/11 attacks, words alone become meaningless. Therefore, actions play a more critical role in shaping perceptions of Islam. The participant suggests that Islamic leaders who promote positivity and oppose extremist behavior should take action to minimize the negative impact of such behavior or previous unfortunate events. While videos on YouTube can help spread awareness, the participant believes that actions are more important than words.

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<sup>86</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Bikas

According to a report by researchers at the University of Tartu based on the European Social Survey (ESS)<sup>88</sup>, Estonians have one of the most conservative viewpoints towards immigrants and immigration compared to other member states studied. The report indicates that Estonians strongly emphasize the expectation that immigrants must adopt the Estonian way of life, possess skills that are in demand in Estonia, have a good education, and have a sufficient command of the Estonian language.

After conducting comprehensive interviews with the participants, it has been established that their accounts corroborate the theories. Jeni<sup>89</sup> defines Islamophobia as discriminatory behavior directed towards individuals practicing Islam or from Middle Eastern countries. She asserts that Allah is not associated with hatred, disasters, or adverse events but with help and guidance. She attributes the harmful actions of some individuals to their ignorance, lack of knowledge, or misinformation from unreliable media sources. She expresses her disappointment with extremists and those manipulating religion for their gain. Furthermore, by understanding her sharing, we can recognize the stereotype theory, which suggests that media outlets often broadcast biased negative news against certain groups of people. Arnob<sup>90</sup> mentioned that when he first joined the class in the initial semester, he observed four other South Asian students who were also enrolled in the same course. During group activities, they became groupmates coincidentally. However, during the second semester, he realized that there were no South Asian students in the class, which comprised only ten students. When the teacher allowed the students to select their groupmates, other students formed three groups of three students each, and he was left alone. No one was willing to select him as their groupmate, making him feel ashamed and inadequate. He did all the group work alone, adding to his existing workload. Arnob's experience can be attributed to the collective threat theory. During an informal conversation with Milton,<sup>91</sup> he expressed his thoughts on how Ukrainian refugees were warmly welcomed in Estonia and throughout Europe. He wondered if refugees from Islamic or Asian countries would have been accepted as quickly as Ukrainian refugees were. He was very concerned about the ongoing conflict in Russia and Ukraine and connected it with how other countries at war receive support from each other. After hearing

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<sup>88</sup> <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

<sup>89</sup> Indian female Participant

<sup>90</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

<sup>91</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant



Milton's perspective, I realized that the collective threat and the theory of cultural marginality hypothesis is a valuable tool for understanding the phenomenon of Islamophobia and the challenges of adjustment for the research, which involves the rejection of particular ethnic or religious groups rather than being concerned about their specific nationality. From the discussion among the participants, it became apparent that some have encountered difficulties finding housing, while others still reside in student dormitories and may need to be fully aware of the situation. Setu<sup>92</sup> pointed out that he has observed significant segregation in Tartu city, as there is a visible difference in the building structures of Anneline and Suppilone, which may result in differences in residence opportunities. However, Rini<sup>93</sup> was fine finding a long-term rental house. Based on Setu's<sup>94</sup> observation of segregation in Tartu City, there is a high probability that the Neighborhood Security theory could apply to the city. This theory suggests that a neighbourhood's physical and social characteristics can affect its residents' security.

## **5. Results:**

The researcher had initially expected to find evidence of Islamophobia in Estonia, but to their surprise, the thirteen participants in the study revealed that the problem is not very effective in Tartu. However, since the study only focused on Tartu, it is not possible to say whether this is also true in other Estonian cities such as Tallinn, Narva, Parnu, or other cities. The study did identify specific types of Islamophobia affecting them as Muslims of South Asia in Tartu, which is described below.

### **Discrimination**

During the study, three participants reported experiencing discrimination as a daily challenge. A female participant from India shared her difficulty finding a flat to rent outside her hostel. She believed that her Asian ethnicity, as well as her visible hijab, which represents her practice of Islam, were factors that contributed to the problem.

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<sup>92</sup> Pakistani Male Participant

<sup>93</sup> Bangladeshi Female Participant

<sup>94</sup> Bangladeshi Male Participant

During the study, a Male participant from Pakistan shared that he faced difficulties finding a job that matched his academic and professional background as an electrical engineer, despite having eight years of experience and completing successful interviews that met all job requirements. He currently holds a job that he finds unsatisfactory. He believes that he is not facing discrimination based solely on his Muslim identity but as a South Asian individual who may be encountering language barriers in his job search.

A male participant from Bangladesh shared that while he has not experienced direct discrimination in his lab or the classroom, he has noticed that more challenging tasks at their part-time job are always given to him. He observed that when other employees complete the same task within two hours, they are given another task. Still, when the participant completes the same task, the manager never allows him to take a break and assigns him to continue longer than the others. This leads the participant to feel he may face indirect discrimination at work.

### **Stereotypes**

The participants shared their thoughts and emotions regarding the stereotypes about Islam and Muslims often portrayed in the media. The responses varied, with some participants feeling deeply affected by these stereotypes while others reported not feeling much affected by them. Two female participants from Pakistan and Bangladesh mentioned that negative stereotypes motivated them to make a more deliberate effort to challenge and break those stereotypes.

### **Anti- Muslim Sentiment**

During the study, participants from India and Bangladesh discussed social segregation due to religion and anti-Muslim Sentiments in their home countries. Participants from Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country, mentioned not feeling much segregation. Some participants from Bangladesh and Pakistan shared that they were not aware of the Islamophobia prevalent in India. In contrast, a participant from India, a Hindu-majority country, expressed feeling unsafe due to negative emotions toward Muslims in her home country. Despite similarities in culture and traditions, participants saw Islamophobia differently in their respective countries. They felt free from religious segregation in Estonia though they had different mindsets. Estonia was mentioned

as a secular country with minimal debate about religion. However, During the study, participants reported that they felt workplace and housing segregation was present in Tartu.

### **Adjustment with Islamophobia**

At the end of the interview, participants expressed how they coped with the challenges of being Muslims in Tartu. All participants said they often discuss their thoughts and feelings with friends or family. Eleven participants mentioned engaging in community work, volunteering, gathering with friends, and enjoying time with people from different nationalities. Two participants identified as introverts and preferred focusing on their studies and careers. However, they acknowledged that networking is essential in Tartu and that having a good job reference is sometimes necessary. The study revealed that participants adopted various ways to deal with Islamophobia, such as listening to music, praying, practicing mindfulness, fishing, and surrounding themselves with positivity. The findings show that individuals employ a range of personal motivations to deal with the issue of Islamophobia. Although some participants have faced challenges in following the five fundamental principles of Islam, all came to Estonia willing to pursue higher studies and a better future. The core values of Islam, such as forgiveness and gratitude, guide their lives and enable them to lead peaceful lives. Despite the fear of Islam, they long to build good relationships with people and demonstrate that Islam is peaceful. Sometimes they choose to ignore negative attitudes. One issue in Tartu is the need for halal food options, but they are trying to find alternative solutions. They have not encountered any problems with the banking system, as discussed. The participants showed a positive attitude towards people's perceptions of Islam, acknowledging that in Estonia, many misconceptions exist due to a lack of understanding of the religion's traditions and culture. They believe the media's portrayal of Islam and some isolated incidents have contributed to these misconceptions. Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on their recommendations for society.

### **Raising Awareness about Islam**

In the final part of the discussion, participants expressed recommendations for society. They said they desire understanding, non-judgment, and freedom from negative stereotypes that

portray Muslims as terrorists or enemies. Some participants mentioned that they had to hide or modify aspects of their religious identity. The participants were aware of how policies, acts of terrorism, and media have impacted the image of Muslim Americans. Some participants have decided to get more community involvement to address these issues. They believe that social awareness and positive media coverage can help to dispel negative stereotypes and promote a better understanding of their community. Despite Islamophobia not being intense in Tartu, the participants demonstrated an awareness of the stereotypes surrounding their community.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

To summarize, participants in a recent study highlighted that while they experienced some instances of Islamophobia, language barriers were a more prominent issue. The study highlights the challenges faced by South Asian migrants in Tartu, particularly about adjusting their cultural and religious identities and prevalent Islamophobic attitudes., which can lead to complex emotions and social and structural exclusion. These challenges faced by the South Asian population in Tartu call for a compromise, which can be challenging to achieve due to the perpetuation of marginalization and prejudice. There is a need for initiatives to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding, combat Islamophobia, and foster inclusive communities that value diversity. Education and awareness-raising among the younger generation are also necessary to dispel myths and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. The study's participants selectively adopt new elements into their cultural and social lives and are willing to adjust to new social expectations. The research underscores the necessity for further investigation to precisely evaluate the process of identity formation among the Muslim community in Tartu. It advocates for the significance of engagement and balance to enable Muslims to adapt and succeed in their new surroundings. The outcomes of the study reveal a global requirement for increased awareness regarding the challenges faced by the Muslim community in Tartu and the prevalence of Islamophobia.

The study had limited diversity in terms of ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. As we know, the Islamic faith encompasses a range of different identities. A potential future study could explore the intersections of religious-based discrimination with racial discrimination, focusing on the experiences of Christians, Hindus, and South Asians who face discrimination based on their racial and religious identities. Additionally, a study comparing the experiences of visibly identifiable Muslim women and non-visibly identifiable Muslim women would be

valuable. One woman in this study expressed feeling unsafe as a visibly identifiable Muslim woman who wears hijabs, and another even considered removing them. Investigating how the experiences of different forms of Islamophobia differ based on being a visibly identifiable Muslim would be insightful.

Overall, the study emphasizes the need for measures to combat Islamophobia, promote inclusivity, and create a climate where South Asian individuals can participate fully in Tartu's social, cultural, and economic life without discrimination.

## Kokkuvõte

Uuring "Kohandumise väljakutsed ja islamifoobia: Lõuna-Aasia migrantide uuring Tartus" uurib lõuna-aasia rändajate kogemusi Tartus ning nende toimetulekut islamifoobia ja identiteedi kujundamisega seotud väljakutsetega. Moslemite diskrimineerimise suurenemise tõttu on islamifoobia kogu maailmas tähelepanu pälvinud aktuaalne probleem. 2019. aastal Eestisse äsja saabunud immigrantide seas tehtud uuringus leiti etnilistel ja usulistel teguritel põhinevate eelarvamuste ja tõrjutuse suurenemine. Moslemid on Eestis elanud sajandeid, enamik neist on pärit sellistest piirkondadest nagu Tatarstan ja Kesk-Aasia. Neid on riigis peetud kultuuriliseks vähemuseks ja 2011. aasta rahvaloenduse andmetel on islamikogukonnas üle 50 erineva rahvuse. Võrreldes teiste riigi usurühmadega, nagu luterlased ja õigeusklikud, on moslemid aga suhteliselt väike vähemus. Käesolev uurimus keskendub Lõuna-Aasia moslemitele, kes on Eestisse tulnud kaks kuni viis aastat tagasi. Islam on tihti väärarusaadustega küllastatud kui jäik ja muutumatu religioon, mis on oma olemuselt vägivaldne ja misogüünne. Selline arusaam häbistab moslemeid sageli kui "teist" rühma, mis on vähem arenenud kui Lääs. Religiooni seostatakse sageli ka terrorismiga ning seda näetakse vaenulikkuse ja hirmu allikana. Need arusaamad on aga ebatäpsed ega tunnista islami traditsioonide mitmekesisust ja moslemiühiskondade keerulist ajalugu. Islam on dünaamiline ja arenev usk, mis on läbi teinud olulisi muutusi. Kuigi mõned moslemid võivad omada äärmuslikke vaateid, ei toeta enamik neist vägivalda ega terrorismi. Oluline on tunnistada islami keerukust ja mitmekesisust ning vältida religiooni taandamist lihtsustatud stereotüüpidele.

Uuringus kasutati kvalitatiivseid meetodeid, milleks olid etnograafilised vaatlused ja poolstruktureeritud intervjuud. Uuringu käigus jälgiti, kuidas islamifoobia mõjutab Lõuna-Aasiast pärit migrantide elu ja kuidas nad oma Lõuna-Aasia moslemi identiteeti kujundades islamifoobiale reageerivad. Tulemused rõhutavad seoseid islamifoobia ning rassi, etnilise päritolu, religiooni ja immigratsioonistaatuse vahel.

Uuringu esmaseks asukohaks on Eesti suuruselt teine linn Tartu. Tartus asub riigi vanim ülikool, kus õpib palju Lõuna-Aasiast pärit üliõpilasi. Esmased uurimisküsimused on "Milline on islamifoobia mõju Tartus elavate Lõuna-Aasia noorte ellu?" alateemaga "Kuidas tulevad Lõuna-Aasiast pärit noored aktiivselt toime islamifoobiaga ja seisavad silmitsi oluliste väljakutsetega, mis on tingitud usulistest ja kultuurilistest erinevustest?"

Uuringu kohaselt kogevad lõuna-aasia päritolu inimesed Eestis mitmesuguseid eelarvamusi ja stereotüüpe, mis on seotud islamifoobiaga ja mõjutavad nende identiteedi- ja kuuluvustunnet. Uuringus kasutati kvalitatiivset uurimismeetodit ning Tartus elavate 13 lõuna-aasia päritolu immigrantide kogemusi kirjeldati. Tulemused näitasid, et võrreldes Lääne ühiskonnaga on islamifoobia kogukonnale märksa vähem mõju avaldav, kuna see ei mõjuta väga palju nende igapäevaelu ega suhtlemist teiste ühiskonnaliikmetega. Siiski kirjeldasid osalejad aeg-ajalt kokkupuuteid eelarvamuste, stereotüüpide ja diskrimineerimisega, mis võivad põhjustada eraldatuse ja üksinduse tunnet. Uuringu tulemused näitavad, et osalejad on avatud Lääne kultuuri vastu ning suudavad tasakaalustada oma identiteeti. Kokkuvõttes rõhutab uuring vajadust rohkem teadlikkust ja vastastikust austust erineva taustaga migrantide vastu globaliseerumise ajastul.

## Annex 1. Interview Questions

**Introduction:** I appreciate your effort to participate in the interview. I am researching for my thesis to get a better picture of how Muslims in Estonia live their lives according to Islam. I will thoroughly analyze each interview for the finished product and produce a summary based on your responses. To do that, I will ask you how you feel about your religion and Estonia's religious customs. I am interested in your viewpoint on your religious beliefs and the clothes you prefer. Are Western clothes acceptable to you? I appreciate you taking the time and trying to express your thoughts and opinions with me. During our conversation, please express any ideas that may cross your mind. The conversation is private. I will use just your responses to draft the thesis summary. If you feel not to participate at any time, you can withdraw your participation; the participation is voluntary. I assure you that participation in this study will not cause harm, disadvantage, or risk. I will address you by your first name to set me apart from the other interviewers, but the name will not be mentioned in the thesis. The thesis topic is **"Challenges of Adjustment and Islamophobia: A Study of South Asian Migrants in Tartu"** The interview will happen in English and will be recorded. However, this work will not use the record anywhere else. Is that fine with you? If you are ready, we can start.

Name:

Studies/ Work:

Date:

### 1. Family and religious background

Your background will be discussed in the first section of the interview to comprehend how your religious practices have developed. You were born where? How does immigration to Western nations affect your country of origin? What is their opinion about migration? Are you descended from a Muslim family? If not, when did you become a Muslim? What factor influenced this choice the most?

What is your marital status (married/single/etc.)? Do you have children? Whom do you live with (alone/parents/siblings/husband/etc.)? Do your family relatives wear Islamic dress? How safe and free did you feel in your home country?

### 2. Islamic Traditions and Religion Practices

Your primary understanding of Islam and its practices will be covered in this second portion of the interview. How do you define religion? To you, what does Islam mean? What kinds of distinctions do you notice between Islam and other faiths? Provide examples, please. Do you think that Islam has changed because of Western culture? How? What function does the Quran serve in Islam? How strictly



do you follow the Quran every day? Have you read any other religious sacred books? Do you follow any religious writings or Quotations in your life?

Which Islamic customs and rituals are the most significant? Why? Do you pray? If so, how frequently? How do you maintain a balance between your everyday work and prayer? Do you observe the Islamic dress code or wear the veil? If so, how (always, outside, etc.) do you wear it? How important to you to dress differently and identify as a Muslim? Is it simple to change one's mind if one stops using the dress code?

Do you find any problems while opening a bank account? What is the procedure you follow to open a regular bank account? How comfortable are you while opening or maintaining a bank account if the bank is not regulated under Sharia law in Tartu?

From where do you usually buy groceries? What type of meat do you usually buy? Do you buy halal meat? Do you go to restaurants? If yes, what type of food do you order?

### 3. Social and Cultural life, Motivation, and Future plan in Estonia:

How do you feel about coming from your comfort zone, e.g., leaving your own country?

What is your experience with Estonia's social and cultural life? How do you feel about having a social gathering or having party? Do you feel like clinging to your country mate, or do you love to keep your life isolated? What are the things you most appreciate in Estonian culture? Is there anything that causes you cultural shock?

### 4. Effect of Islamophobia on your personal life.

How do you define Islamophobia? How do you think that in the name of God, people harm human beings? How do you feel when you see people being extremists and misusing the religion as a Muslim? What affects you as a Muslim? Do you think that islamophobia is a kind of racism in the modern era?

What could be the Main causes of Islamophobia?

what are some of the adverse effects of Islamophobia on individuals and communities?

How does Islamophobia is observed in Estonian society?

Do you think that media and political issues play a role in perpetuating Islamophobia?

How can education and awareness-building help combat Islamophobia?

How safe and free do you feel in Estonia?

Thank you very much for answering my questions. It will help me a lot with my thesis.

## Annex 2. Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I appreciate your effort to participate in the interview. I am researching for my thesis to understand better how South Asian Muslims in Estonia live according to Islam. I will thoroughly analyze each interview for the finished product and produce a summary based on your responses. To do that, I will ask you how you feel about your religion and Estonia's religious customs.

I appreciate you taking the time and trying to express your thoughts and opinions with me. During our conversation, please express any ideas that may cross your mind. The conversation is private. I will use just your responses to draft the thesis summary. I will address you by your first name to set me apart from the other interviewers, but the name will not be mentioned in the thesis.

The thesis topic is "**Challenges of Adjustment and Islamophobia: A Study of South Asian Migrants in Tartu**" The interview will happen in English and will be recorded. However, this work will not use the record anywhere else.

The research objectives are to find “What is the Effect of Islamophobia in the lives of South Asian youth living in Tartu?” and “How do young individuals from South Asia actively cope with Islamophobia and face significant challenges due to religious and cultural differences?”

The procedure for the interview is to accept the invitation, then we will fix a suitable time for both of us, and we will meet at a fixed location. If you feel not to participate at any time, you can withdraw your participation; the participation is voluntary. I assure you that participation in this study will not cause harm, disadvantage, or risk. If you feel not to record some parts, let the researcher know. The researcher has the full responsibility to protect your personal data. After the interview, I should transcribe the collected information necessary for the analysis. After the transcription, your recordings will be destroyed.

Is that fine with you? If you are ready, we can fix a convenient date for us. If you have any queries, please don't hesitate to contact the researcher.

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