

Report

Indian Muslims between Exclusion and Political Populism

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Abstract

Indian Muslims, second largest Muslim community after that of Indonesia, are part of India's global engagement. Their aspirations to play an assertive role in their future are not being welcomed sufficiently by their socio-religious leadership and the state institutions. Ultra nationalist groups want to keep them a hostage of a troubled legacy of partition and justify their development deficit. Their engagement with the Indian state, society and politics is defined by their aspirations and contestations.

Introduction

More than often not, Indian Muslims have been blamed and questioned for India's tragic partition in 1947 and the "Two Nation theory" which not only overshadows the validity of constitutional discourse but also keeps them in a perpetual sense of guilt. Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, the first home minister of independent India, had once reproached Muslims in the Constituent Assembly, declaring "You have got what you wanted, you have got a separate state; and remember, you are the people who were responsible for it, not those who remain in Pakistan," which still echoes in Indian politics.⁽¹⁾ This populist discourse is perhaps still valid for a significant constituency of Indian politics that see constitutional protections for minorities as divisive. India's Muslim community, which consists of 170 million people and comprises fourteen percent of India's population spread over a vast and diverse linguistic, ethnic, cultural, religious and regional landscape and has cohabited with its non-Muslim neighbours for the last 800 years, is somehow hostage of a self- and externally-imposed troubled legacy of partition.

Many of those who free Muslims of this legacy – including Rafiq Zakaria, a prominent Muslim scholar and author of *Indian Muslims: Where Have They Gone Wrong?* – suggest

that Indian Muslims must become the part of India's mainstream. The mainstream, however, is not about the state of socio-economic upliftment alone; it instead requires them "to [adapt] themselves to the life here, the ideology and the philosophy here"(2) and "give up their present foreign mental complexion and merge in the common stream of our national life", as the most revered Hindu nationalist ideologue M.S. Golwalkar says.(3) Indian Muslims' portrayal as the descendants of foreign invaders like Babur, Aurangzeb, Gaznawi and Tughlaq, and supporters of Pakistan is an essential element of an ultra-nationalist discourse which defines India more as an ideological state than a constitutional one.

Despite the intense competition between the constitutional and ideological perspectives on Indian Muslims, constitutional perspective has been the main reference. India is a signatory of the United Nations charters on minorities, which not only defines the minorities but also advises that states take measures required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law...and create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs.(4)

In 2005, the Economic and Social Council of the UNO decided to appoint an independent expert on minority issues to examine the application of its declaration by its member states.(5) The Indian government also appointed a commission headed by former Delhi High Court Chief Justice Rajinder Kumar Sachar to prepare a report on the socio-economic and educational conditions of Indian Muslims.(6) The commission, known as the Sachar Committee Report, submitted its findings which officially confirmed that Muslims' backwardness is a reality and it requires special efforts. The report had established that the Indian Muslims' exclusion from mainstream development has some systematic problems and requires similar effective measures.

The current state of Indian Muslims can be defined in mainly two themes: powerlessness and the lack social reform. Measures for their political and economic empowerment have been debated by Indian politicians, activists and academia. The possibility of a better future depends how these debates result in specific policy measures and how Indian Muslims show their willingness to undertake bold social reforms.

Powerlessness

"Powerlessness" can be defined as [Muslims'] poor level of access to the system relative to the level of access of non-Muslim compatriots. Many government commissioned studies, the most prominent of which being the Sachar Committee Report and the Justice Ranganath Mishra Report, have underlined that powerlessness of Indian Muslims

constitutes a systematic nature. As the constitution approved an affirmative framework with a 15 percent quota for Scheduled Castes and 7.5 percent quota for Scheduled Tribes for all government posts, university education, employment and election constituencies, these communities have grown and developed progressively in all walks of life.

In the absence of any such affirmative framework for Muslims, as the Sachar Committee Report and other reports have observed, their participation in government jobs has been declining since independence. For example, in India's elite civil services, Muslims comprise 3 percent of the workforce in administrative services, 1.8 percent in foreign services, 4 percent in police services, 4.5 percent in railways, 6.5 percent in education, 7.3 percent in the home department. The Sachar Committee Report also holds security forces' highhandedness in dealing with Muslims responsible for creating a sense of insecurity and fear among Muslims thus causing them to resort to living in ghettos.⁽⁷⁾ It also reports that the share of Muslims in security agencies is as low as 3.6 percent at the higher levels or categories and 4.6 percent at the lower levels or categories.⁽⁸⁾

Financially, Indian Muslims are among the poorest communities in the country according to per capita expenditures. The National Sample Survey finds that on average Indian Muslims spend 32.7 rupees (\$0.52) per day, Sikhs spend 55.3 rupees per day, Christians 51.4 rupees and Hindus 37.5 rupees.⁽⁹⁾ This is directly linked with the worker-population ratio which is also the lowest among Muslims with 33 percent of the total Muslim population is working compared to 41 percent Hindus, 41.9 Christians.⁽¹⁰⁾ The situation is likely to change very slowly as the majority of Muslims (60 percent) is working as the irregular workforce; only 28 percent of Muslims are regular working force which means they are working as salaried workers. The reason that majority of Muslim workforce is self-employed is that number of Muslims availing higher education, or professional training is far less than the national average. The NSSO reports that 22.3 percent of Muslims between the ages 17-29 years are illiterate, highest among all communities and national average which is 17 percent. Among literate Muslims in this age group, 64 percent have secondary or below secondary education, 9.8 percent have higher secondary and only 4.1 percent have graduate or postgraduate degrees, below than the national averages of 15.5 and 9.2 percent respectively.⁽¹¹⁾

Political institutions, parliament, and state assemblies as well as local bodies need to be responsive and engage with these issues. In the populist political discourse, it is projected that Muslims are getting more benefits from the political system and that political parties consider them a vote bank and, thus, appease them. But the Sachar Committee Report proves this portrayal of Indian Muslims as wrong. For example, there are sixteen constituencies in the largest Indian province, Uttar Pradesh, where the Muslim population is above 20 percent. However, not a single Muslim could win a seat in

the 2014 general elections.(12) There are only 22 Muslims among 543 member parliaments elected in the 2014 general elections, which is only 4.05 percent lower than their population ratio of 14 percent.

Among the many reasons of underrepresentation, the Sachar Committee Report has pointed out that a number of Muslim concentration assembly constituencies have been declared as 'reserved' by the Delimitation Commission.(13) For example, state assembly constituencies Sagardighi, Kaliganj, Khargram, Ketugram – I, Rajarhat and Basanti in West Bengal have above 40 percent Muslim population but these seats are reserved for Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe candidates even though their population in these constituencies is below 25 percent. Conversely constituencies with a majority of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe populations like Haldibari, Sitai, Kaliaganj, Jalpaiguri and Tufanganj – II in West Bengal have been left unreserved. The Sachar Committee Report has also included the recommendation to address these anomalies in order to allow a fair political representation of Indian Muslims.(14) This is not limited to only assembly constituencies but can be seen throughout the electoral landscape from panchayat (local village governance) to parliamentary constituencies.

Many Muslim politicians could not resist the temptation to create a Muslim only political party to address the problem. Given the fact that Muslim population is scattered all over the country and Indian politics is more about creating a winnable social engineering, no Muslim political party could have achieved much success. In a 2012 assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, four Muslim political parties contested for 333 seats but won only 7 seats(15) while 58 Muslim candidates from other political parties won. Analysts found that the idea of "Muslim vote" which can be used en bloc is largely a myth.(16) They rather vote in an alliance of other communities such as Dalits, backwards, or even upper caste Hindus. In the aftermath of the 2014 general election, there is also a growing demand to introduce a proportional representation system to enable Muslim minorities to reach elected offices.(17)

Closed Muslim Society

Part of Indian Muslims' problems comes from their own social and cultural rigidity often in the name of religion and sectarian identity. Vice President Hamid Ansari had once criticised Indian Muslims for being "trapped in a vicious circle and in a culturally defensive posture that hinders self-advancement." In the name of preserving tradition, the rationale of tradition is all but forgotten, Ansari deplures.(18) The internal dynamics of Muslim society are often unaccounted and Muslim society is seen, both by Muslim religious leadership and many non-Muslims groups, as a homogenous group. This denies the role of Muslim women, youth and a modern educated young generation whose aspirations are different from the aspirations of traditional religious leadership.

In recent months, Indian politics have seen heated debates over the prevalence of triple talaq (divorce) within Muslim society and the need for changing the personal law or introducing a common civil code. While Muslim religious leadership adamantly defends triple talaq, many within the community are extremely critical of religious leadership's denial of the misuse of shari'a provisions. Muslim women, particularly the new modern educated generation, appears to be frustrated about being seen as backward and oppressed by their non-Muslim friends.

Also, most of the Muslim-administered institutions, madrasas, schools, universities, waqfs, non-government organisations or even socio-religious movements and their activities do not reflect the aspirations of the average Muslim. They are run by various sectarian, restrictive, interest-based local and political considerations where transparency and openness are seriously lacking. Muslim religious groups, including Jamaat Ulema-e-Hind, Jamaat Islami Hind, tablighi or barelvi groups, have either limited or no space for women and young Muslims. Their leadership and decision-making bodies are dominated by certain families. Many marginalized and disadvantaged Muslim groups even accuse them of serving only upper caste Muslims.(19)

In recent years, the agitation of Muslim women, youth, activists, and groups with traditional Muslim leadership has intensified. Most of the traditional leaders, madrasas, and Islamic seminaries have taken no significant steps to sensitise Muslim masses about issues related to unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, health problems or other development issues. Thousands of madrasas still maintain centuries old syllabi in which modern Islamic jurisprudence has no space. The Sachar Committee Report had put pressure on these groups but their responsiveness is far from enough.

Soft Power

Despite their weak political and economic conditions, Muslim artists, writers, singers, actors, academics, Sufis and spiritual leaders enjoy a great deal of popularity across Indian masses. Unlike American, British or French Muslims whose social and cultural interactions with their host societies are only a century old, Indian Muslims have a completely different experience of social interaction with their non-Muslim neighbourhood. A people known for its love for songs, dance, and Bollywood movies, Indians cannot afford to stop listening songs, qawwalis (a form of Sufi music) and ghazals (a form of rhyming poetry popular in India among other places) or watching movies and shows produced or presented by Muslims.

Since their arrival in India, Muslims have paid special attention to the religious, scientific and musical knowledge of this country and put time and energy toward learning and propagating Indian experiences across the world. The first known translation of any Hindu epic, Mahabharat, Ramayan and other texts is traced back to the eleventh

century. Emperor Akbar and ruler of Kashmir, Zain-ul-Abidin, had shown special interest in translating these epics now known as Razmnama. Tahir Muhammad Sabzawari, an official of Akbar made abridged prose translations of the Bhagavata Purana.(20) According to a prominent Indian Persian scholar, Sharif Hussain Qasmi, there are 2517 Persian manuscripts translated from Sanskrit.(21) The first known illustrated versions of the Ramayana were created by artists commissioned by Akbar.(22) Sufi and spiritual traditions flourished and influenced India's diverse religious traditions.

Moreover, Indian Muslims' religious knowledge has evolved mostly within the country as hundreds of Islamic scholars have authored volumes on Quranic exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, history and other Islamic sciences, which has influenced Islamic scholars in Egypt, Saudi Arabia , Iran, Turkey and other countries. The intellectual contribution of Darul Uloom Deoband, which is considered the hub of Islamic extremism in South Asia, has not been fairly appreciated. Similarly, after independence, Indian Muslims have performed well in modern education. In recent years, skilled Muslim workers from India in Gulf Arab countries have replaced a section of a Pakistani or Egyptian workforce.

This is one of the main reasons that Indian Muslims are deeply involved in Indian society and culture. Inter-religious interactions and Hindu-Muslim relations, despite political differences, remain strong and socially and politically engaged. Perhaps much of the Muslim world is not aware of this strong relationship that Indian Muslims have successfully developed with their non-Muslim neighbourhood. The fact that Indian Muslims are not easily inclined to extremist ideologies is because they have a platform for grievance redressal, though it requires a lot of time and political and social compromises.

This is also relevant in the context of the increasing sectarian divide in the Muslim world, thanks to Saudi-Iranian rivalry in their regional politics. Because Indian Muslims do not refer to Saudi Arabia or Iran for religious reference, they do not typically endorse whatever Saudi or Iranian clerics use against each other. A more disappointing issue, however, is that Muslim countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have found no institutional channel to establish relations with Indian Muslims on the principle of mutual interest and respect. It is very difficult to grasp an OIC where the voice and contribution of 170 million Muslims is not represented.

Conclusion

Powerlessness and the lack of social reform, though not a Muslim specific problem, dominate when Indian Muslims' socio-economic deprivation is debated. Indian politics function through the multiple and complex processes of communal, caste, regional, linguistic, ethnic, class and cultural compromises. Indian Muslims can be seen in these

processes in their communal, political or personal roles. The deeper their engagement with all sections of the society, the stronger partnership Indian Muslims have achieved.

Amid India's changing political and economic profile and its engagement with the global world, Indian Muslims, particularly its youth, have grown ambitious and vocal for their rights and role in the making of their common future. The young generation is defying the old generation and defining its role anew. As Hasan Suroor states in his book, *India's Muslim Spring*: "A decade later, there is a sea change, thanks to the coming of age of a new generation of Muslims—less excitable and wiser—having learnt from the follies of their predecessors. And certainly more realistic about their place in a Hindu-majority India."

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