

Introduction

The Union of India enjoys the status of being a constitutional democracy. Contrary to many other democratic nations in the world, the Constitution of India recognizes faith-based minorities (which are religious groups other than the Hindu majority) and guarantees them special rights to preserve and safeguard their religious and cultural identities. However, the recent shift in the conduct of these minority groups concerning the assertion and appropriation of their rights and the responses of the ruling governments seem to have unwrapped new challenges of exclusion and political populism. On one hand, there is the claim that some, if not all, minorities are facing abysmal exclusion in multiple societal domains which have evoked strong efforts on part of the disadvantaged minorities calling for state intervention to make their lives better. On the other hand, there have been accusations against the government for gratuitously favoring minorities through its policies. If this 'minority appeasement' were to be interpreted as being a response to the problems and requirements of minority communities, especially the deprived ones such as Muslims, it could be strongly argued that no such appeasement has even remotely taken place. Such a claim of appeasement merits to be put in its correct perspective which would further straighten out the accurate picture of Muslim participation in and their exclusion from the crucial segments of life - education and employment (Jenkins, 2003).

Muslim Marginalization

Post-Independence, the young and energetic country of India exuberantly opted for the institution and cultivation of a secular and liberal state administered by a democratic constitution, thereby embarking upon a journey to build a nation that promised an equal stake in the national affairs to all citizens, regardless of the identity, group membership, creed, or religion. As idealistic as this vision would appear to be, the actual working of the democratic framework in this country has contradicted the promises that were made in the Constitution (Mahajan, 1999). In 1953, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then prime minister of India, expressed his concern in these letters to the chief ministers of states:

“In the services, generally speaking, the representation of minority populations is declining. In some cases, it is extremely poor, indeed... looking through Central Secretariat figures, as well as some others, I am troubled to find out that the situation is very detrimental for them, mainly for the Muslims and occasionally for others as well... In the vast Central Secretariat

of Delhi, there are but few Muslims (Parthasarathy, 1985).

.Ironically, even though a notion of minority communities in general and Muslims, in particular, being excluded from the arrangements of societal prospects existed from the beginning, due to the lack of dependable statistics until recently, little was known as to how members of religious communities could be made to benefit from progressive developments (Mahajan, 1999). All this while the share of the Muslims in the edifices of opportunities continued to decline. In the meantime, government agencies such as the Census of India abandoned the exercise of disclosing socio-economic statistics of religious communities after the Independence, although some demographic figures such as the fertility rate and the size of family, cross-examined by religious societies, continued to be published and would often become a hot debating issue in the media and political and academic circles.

The epicenter of this entire debate revolves around one question: how severe is the exclusion of Muslims - India's largest minority community? The answer is provided by the Prime Minister's High Power Panel headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar. In its report of 2006, the panel presents an analysis of the socio-economic situation of minorities in India. This was also followed by a trickle of empirical and statistical research in the years after 2006. The discoveries of the Sachar Committee as well as those of other independent scholars made it distinct that the Muslim community was lagging way behind other communities, especially the majority Hindus, in numerous significant factors of social and human development (Sachar, 2006).

The Socio-economic Paradigm

It is a fact that education serves as an architect of survival opportunities and acts as an indispensable antecedent to socio-economic flexibility. Education is the harbinger of many constructive outcomes that are so critical for human development that it is often counted as a single most effective parameter to evaluate the overall welfare of a population or a subset of it. In recent years, India has been trying to make speedy advances in enhancing the opportunities for and involvement in education. The improved access to educational opportunities and their general expansion has fostered remarkable democratization of the education system at the elementary, secondary, and higher secondary levels.

At the national level, the Muslims are presenting a remorseful figure in terms of literacy and education. The literacy rate, which is a measure of a person's ability to read, write, and understand simple statements, is lower among the Muslims than

the Hindus in general. Muslim children have shown a visibly low tendency of attending schools and even those of them who are studying are more likely to drop out than complete their school education, resulting in a broadening gap at the higher levels of schooling. As the percentage of Muslim children attending secondary schools is abysmally low, fewer among them are expected to get admission in colleges and finish with professional degrees. The Sachar Committee Report describes poor participation of the Muslims in educational avenues in these words:

“Regarding school education, the situation of Muslims is gravely concerning. The data points out that, while the overall levels of education in India measured through various indicators are below universally conventional criteria, the educational standing of the Muslim community, in particular, is even worse than that... When alternate indicators of educational achievement, more illustrative of the growth in education, are considered, a noteworthy inconsistency between the status of Muslims and that of other SRCs (except SCs/STs) is noted. For example, both the Mean Years of Schooling and attendance levels of Muslims are low in unconditional terms and contrast to all SRCs except in some cases SCs/STs. In fact, in many contexts, SCs/STs are found to have overtaken Muslims.” (Sachar, 2006)

Apart from the arena of education, the Muslim community is also showing signs of deterioration in terms of material well-being. Generally, the prevalence of poverty among Muslims is relatively higher in comparison to the general populace. The work participation rate among them is much lower than the national average as well as the majority community. Statistics show that the vast majority of Muslim workers are confined to the lower trends of economic prospects, even though they are well-represented in all classes of occupation. Inexplicably large proportions among them are self-employed and/or engaged in household enterprises which include small trades, petty businesses, and street hawking. As employees, larger proportions of Muslims than others are casual workers, a sign of their relatively lower access to and participation in secure and regularly salaried jobs (Jenkins, 2000).

Although many of these socio-economic indicators may portray the Muslim community as having fallen behind other groups, it is essential to understand that neither the Muslims nor the Hindus form any homogeneous communities in social, economic, or spatial milieus. Their access to socio-economic enterprises diverges a

great deal across this socio-spatial spectrum. For example, Muslims living in southern Indian states are relatively affluent in contrast to their comrades from other parts of the country. It is, however, upsetting that while there has been extensive progress in the total of the socio-economic condition of people in the country in recent decades, but the socio-economic condition of the Muslims has proportionally degenerated and that the predicament has remained at this status quo same even after the introduction of some policy initiatives in the years following the recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report (Shariff & Razzack, 2006).

Affirmative action for India's Muslim Minorities

India arguably has the longest history of privileged policies and is one of the first countries in the world to have affirmative action policies that are mandated by the Constitution itself (Weisskopf, 2004). Multiple provisions, constitutional as well as legal, have been enacted to augment social justice for traditionally underprivileged sections of people in India, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the untouchables and various tribal communities, collectively referred to as Scheduled Tribes (STs). To uplift them from the quagmire of ignorance, illiteracy, and poverty, a fixed quota (in proportion to their population in the respective state or territory) in educational institutions, public employment and legislatures have been put in place for these communities. Subsequent to the Mandal Commission's recommendations, the quota system (27% in public employment) has been extended to Other Backward Classes (OBC) as well (Jenkins, 2000).

These group-based affirmative actions in the form of reservations via fixed quotas are accessible in India to the members of the SC/ST and OBC categories only. When it comes to the constitutional position of Muslim reservations, they do not qualify for SC status who are identified among Hindus only, even though segments of Buddhists and Sikhs have also recently been included in Scheduled Castes. As for the Scheduled Tribes and OBC category, only a few Muslims can be classified under these communities. The Mandal Commission did recognize and include some 82 Muslim groups in the list of OBCs, which comprised a little more than half the total population of Muslims (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, a large segment of Muslims from the benefits of reservation.

It is often argued that only reservations – a fixed quota for a specific group in educational institutions and public employment – can efficiently address the problem of social inequality and group handicaps. Its justification primarily runs along the line that identity-based biases are so rooted in the distributive system of public resources

that distributive policies of mere allocation of resources with emphasis on the disadvantaged groups are likely to be unsuccessful. The debate on affirmative action for Muslims is, therefore, also largely divided between the pro- and anti-reservationists. Many voices have come up in support of quotas for Muslims in general at the national level, and the increased demands of treating the entire Muslim community as a backward class gained popularity in the recent years and has become a matter of intense public discourse (Wright, 1997). The plea that the entire Muslim community is brought under the mesh of reservation was made by the Association for Promoting Education and Employment of Muslims (APEEM) in a 1994 conference in New Delhi. This conference was of huge significance as it was attended by Sitaram Keshri, the then Minister of Welfare in the Union Cabinet, who advocated separate quota for Muslims in educational institutions and public employment. This was a subtle indication that the Conference had been convened with the tacit support of the Congress (Wright, 1997). The APEEM has been persistent in bolstering the demands of reservation for Muslims in its successive conferences.

The argument for making an allowance for the entire Muslim community as prospective beneficiaries of reservation policies has several components. First, the relative backwardness of Muslims is a problem of inter-group diversity more than a case of intra-group discrepancy. Since Muslims, in general, suffer from socio-economic infirmities and are the most underprivileged religious group in India, the whole community should be considered for affirmative actions (Akhtar & Ahmad, 2003). Second, Muslims are seen to be victims of discrimination that has resulted due to the partition in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan which continues to serve as a framework of reference for discriminatory treatment by the larger society. Occasional communal conflicts between the two communities provide a freering for breeding prejudices against Muslims. Consequently, Muslims are frequently and consciously excluded by policy-implementing agencies in schemes of distributive assistance. Given the obstinate biases against them, the implementation of affirmative actions becomes necessary, but there is very little possibility of affirmative action policy other than fixed quotas to ever work (Hassan, 2005).

Third, Muslims constitute roughly one-eighth of the total population of India. The marginalization of Muslims in various edifices of educational and economic opportunities is likely to result in lower investment in human capital and underutilization and wastage of talents obtainable from them. All this will obstruct the socio-economic progress of the entire country. Thus, improved participation of this community in

educational, economic, and employment opportunities is indispensable for the all-round socio-economic development. Finally, a fair state is one that guarantees equal participation of varied ethnic-social groups in public spheres. Though no country in the world can assert that the distributive benefits of its socio-economic growth purely mirror its societal diversity, enormous socioeconomic disparities along religio-ethnic axes are undoubtedly a political concern (Khalidi, 2006). As a democratic state, India is legally and morally bound to eliminate the hindrances that impede the effective participation of the community in public spheres.

While prevailing opinions among the Muslim elite and intellectuals appear to be in approval of reservation for the Muslim community, yet, demands for treating the community as eligible for affirmative action/reservation have also received critical backlash from within the group. Some sections of Muslims opine that class and caste classifications should be reserved while considering Muslims for affirmative actions (Jenkins, 2003). It is argued that like Hindus, Muslims are also categorized by inner differentiation in terms of caste-like assemblages. Though Islam prohibits caste and class distinctions among Muslims, in practice, the Muslim community is not insusceptible from caste-like hierarchies (Ahmad, 1978). More recent converts, the majority of whom were lower caste Hindus, are not considered as socio-economic equivalents within the community (Ali, 2001). This suggests that neither all Muslims are backward, nor are all of them in need of affirmative actions. The foundation of affirmative actions in the form of reservation for Muslims should, therefore, be related to social and economic stratification within them. The primary supposition is that, within the Muslim community, the benefits of the reservation should be provided to those who are at the same social and economic status as the Hindu Dalits. Extending benefits of reservation to the entire community would only profit the upper strata of the community who can improve their standard of living on their own, while those deserving reservations would be left untouched (Ansari, 1960). Hence, it will defeat the affirmed purpose of the policy which aims at elevating the deprived sections within the Muslim community.

In India, the prevailing environment has long been opposed to reservation bordering along the lines of the caste system. The debate on affirmative action and reservation based on religious identities is more controversial and diverged and resentment against it is unreasonably high (Weiner, 1983). The basic opposition to any affirmative action for Muslims comes, however, mainly from the right-wing parties. Primarily, it is argued that Muslims are not the only community which is

suffering due to backwardness, numerous Hindu segments are also challenged by socio-economic deprivation. Thus, Muslims share this scarcity with a large majority of people from other communities as well. Backwardness among Muslims could, therefore, also be remedied by general welfare policies, as Nehru had proposed (Rao, 1967). Hence, there arises no possible need for showing partiality towards Muslims or for any other social group, except the SCs and STs on historical and traditional grounds.

Moreover, the argument goes, a religion-based quota system would encroach upon the provisions of the Constitution and would be unharmonious with the principles of secularism (Weisskopf, 2004). Giving preferentiality to Muslims at the expense of non-Muslims would be tantamount to damaging the spirit of the Constitution simply for the sake of securing Muslim vote-bank. Also, religion-based appeasement is a dangerous prospect on grounds of communal relations as well. Those who advocate this proposition have failed to recall the consequences of such policies in the past when the separate quota for Muslims led to separatism among Muslims, which finally caused the partition. Opting for religion-based quota or preferential treatment for Muslims would mean prolonging communal divides and thereby repeating history (Advani, 2004). Therefore, it can be seen that the various strands of debates on socio-economic disadvantages of Muslims and affirmative actions for them mostly revolve around the simplification of this problem and are guided by orotundity rather than a mindful engagement with and exploration of the idea of the multidimensional nature of socio-economic dispossession in the country. As a result, the whole issue is intricately caught in vote bank politics and the diatribes of communalism versus secularism.

Conclusion

India prides itself on being a democratic country that promises certain special rights to its minorities. While minority status per se is not associated with 'access disadvantage', Muslims, who make up the largest minority group, are faced with severe socioeconomic deficits as compared to the majority community of Hindus. They are least likely to participate in the available educational opportunities. Higher the platform of education, the wider the gap between them and other communities. Similarly, they have the least access to good quality and promising jobs. Most of them, as compared to the Hindus, are engaged in economic activities that produce meager income. There are, of course, regional variations in the socio-economic conditions of the Muslims, but in most of the country, they constitute the most deprived

section of the society. Until recently, there were no substantial policy initiatives for answering the socioeconomic problems of minorities in general and of the Muslims in particular. And even now, the schemes that have now been introduced are marked by undersupplied funds and belated progress. Given the disaster of most of the schemes in making a difference in the lives of the needy, the efforts of the political powers could be designated as a politically expedient tokenism. And yet, the belief of minority appeasement has become deeply rooted in political and public discourses. Unfortunately, it has not only led to political conscription along lines of ethnic-majoritarianism but has also strengthened the exclusion of minorities in more flagrant and brazen ways. To conclude, the story of Indian minorities in general and the Muslim minorities in particular gives the impression of being imprisoned in the complex web of exclusion and political populism.

References

1. Advani, L.K. (2004, 14 August). ‘*Why Are We Opposed to Communal Reservation?*’ Speech delivered at the ‘Convention Against Religion-Based Reservations’. Mumbai: Ramblan Mahalagi Prohbidani.
2. Ahmad, Imtiaz (Ed.). (1978). *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
3. Akhtar, S. & Ahmad, N. (2003). *Reservation for Muslims: A Need of Hour*. Pages 37–66 in S. N. Singh (Ed.). *Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications.
4. Ali, Anwar. (2001). *Masawat Ki Jung*. New Delhi: VaniPrakashan.
5. Ansari, G. (1960). Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study in Culture Contact. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 13(1): **5–80**.
6. Hassan, Zoya. (2005). Reservation for Muslims, *Seminar*, 549(May): **46–50**.
7. Jenkins, L. D. (2003). *Identity and Identification in India: Defining the Disadvantaged*. London: Routledge Curzon.
8. Jenkins, L. D. (2000). Caste, Class, and Islam: Boundaries of Backwardness in India, *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 53(3–4): **328–39**.
9. Khalidi, Omar. (2006). *Muslims in Indian Economy*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective.
10. Mahajan, Gurpreet. (1999). *Contextualizing Minority Rights*. Pages 59-72 in D. L. Sheth and Gurpreet Mahajan (Ed.). *Minority Identities and Nation-*

State. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

11. Parthasarathy, G.(1985). *Letters to Chief Ministers: 1947-1964*(Vol. 3). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Rao, Shiva B. (1967).*The Framing of the Indian Constitution. Selected Documents*. (Vol. 2). Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration.
13. Sachar, Rajinder. (2006).*Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India*.
14. Shariff, Abusaleh & Razzack, Azra.(2006). *Communal Relations and Social Integration in India: Social Development Report*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
15. Weiner, Myron. (1983). Political Consequences of Preferential Policies: A Comparative Perspective, *Comparative Politics*, 16(1): **35–52**.
16. Weisskopf, Thomas E. (2004).*Affirmative Action in the United States and India: A Comparative Perspective*. London: Routledge Publications.
17. Wright Jr., T. P. (1997). A New Demand for Muslim Reservation in India, *Asian Survey*, 37(9): **852–58**.