

Invited Article

Religion, Socio-economic Backwardness & Discrimination: The Case of Indian Muslims

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The three crucial dimensions of social exclusion of Muslims are backwardness, marginalization and discrimination. More troublesome is the relationship between ethnic violence and socio-economic achievements. That a very high share of Muslim workers are engaged in self-employment activities, particularly in urban areas – street vending, small trades and related enterprises – ensures that the community is far more exposed to disruptions and damages caused by urban conflict and violence. The fragility of Muslim participation in the economy and the low level of asset accumulation further intensify their vulnerability to displacements caused by situations of continual communal strife, argues the paper.

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The Framework

This paper is based on data about Indian Muslims collated from the Rajinder Sachar Committee Report (SCR) as well as from the 2001 Census and other recent materials to relate the themes of marginality, human security and discrimination on the basis of religion. There are three crucial dimensions of social exclusion of Muslims: backwardness, marginalization and discrimination. What also appears troubling is the relationship between ethnic violence and socio-economic achievements. Within this framework, concerns regarding affirmative action also become relevant.

Backwardness

The literacy and educational status of Muslims is particularly low. The literacy rate among them is far below the national average and this gap is greater in urban areas and for women. Nevertheless, regional differences do also emerge. In Kerala, for instance, the difference between literacy rates of socio-religious communities is minimal. On the whole, Muslims are doing better in this respect in the southern

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There is a significant disparity between the educational status of Muslims and that of other socio-religious categories (except SCs and STs). Both Mean Years of Schooling (MYS) and attendance levels of Muslims are low in absolute numbers as well as in comparison with other socio-religious groups. Again, there are regional variations. The MYS of Muslims is lowest in states such as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Uttaranchal. However, Muslim children have more years of schooling than SCs and STs in Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. Muslim enrolment rates are showing steady increase in recent years. In 1999-2000, Muslims had the lowest enrolment rate among all the socio-religious groups. However, in 2004-05, the Muslim enrolment rate had improved significantly. It was still lower than the average, but was now slightly higher than that of the OBCs.

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In higher education, the differences between Muslims and others stand out even more sharply. The disparity in graduation attainment levels has been widening between Muslims and all others in both rural and urban areas since the 1970s. In the initial phases of planning, Muslims had a higher Graduate Attainment Rate than SCs and STs. That has now changed and the latter has overtaken the Muslims. Muslim disadvantage must be related to a number of factors including, of course, their economic status and generally low education levels.

But the latter may be in part also due to the lack of employment opportunities. This is partially supported by the data, which shows that the unemployment rate among Muslim graduates is the highest among socio-religious communities, both poor and not poor. It must also be read in light of the fact that Muslims do not see education as necessarily translating into formal employment. They are badly represented in formal employment and there is, moreover, a perception that they will be discriminated against, *as Muslims*, in securing salaried jobs. Thus, the low perceived returns from education do not help the cause of retention of Muslims in the education system. The other striking supporting data comes from the very high concentration of Muslims in self-employment activities, as revealed in every survey.

The probability of Muslims, SCs and STs completing graduation is lower than in the case of all other socio-religious

groups, especially in urban areas and for men. However, the pool of eligible population for higher education is increasing faster among SCs and STs than among Muslims. This must be related partly to affirmative action and the higher perceived returns from education for these groups. In premier colleges, only one out of 25 undergraduate students and one out of 50 postgraduate students is a Muslim. Being a Muslim, reduces the chance of achieving education at the secondary and at higher levels. This means that sustained and targeted programmes to increase enrolment and ensure retention are required for Muslims.

Marginalization

In trying to understand the dimensions of the marginalization of Muslims, we will focus on employment and income (economic marginalization) and representation in public and/or prestigious positions and decision-making bodies (political marginalization). Worker population ratios are lower among Muslims than among any other socio-religious community and this is more so in the rural areas.

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in urban areas. This concentration in self-employment – street vending, small trades and enterprises – ensures that the community is far more exposed to the disruptions and damages caused by urban conflict and violence. The fragility of Muslim participation in the economy and the low level of asset accumulation in general further intensify their vulnerability to the displacements, physical and economic, caused by situations of continual communal strife. Long hours of curfew, for instance, impact enormously on the economic sustainability of households crucially dependent on daily earnings.

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Muslims have poor access to bank credit. The average size of the credit is meagre and low compared to other socio-religious groups. The percentage of households availing bank facilities is much lower in villages where the Muslim population is high and this could be partly because of the non-availability of such facilities. This amounts to the financial exclusion of Muslims and has far-reaching consequences for a community already economically vulnerable and educationally backward. For those primarily engaged in self-employed work, access to credit is a crucial input.

As employees, Muslims generally work as casual labour and are very

poorly represented in regular, salaried employment. In this respect, they are even more disadvantaged than SCs and STs, for whom affirmative action may have improved the rates. Only about 27 per cent of Muslim workers in urban areas are engaged in regular work, while the share of such workers among SCs and STs, OBCs and Hindu UCs workers is 40, 36 and 49 per cent respectively (2001 Census, NSSO 61st Round). The participation of Muslims in formal sector employment is far less than the national average. Muslim men are over-represented in street vending (more than 12 per cent as opposed to the national average of less than 8 per cent), while women tend to work from home to a much larger degree (70 per cent) than the average (51 per cent).

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As suggested by the SCR, traditional barriers to women's mobility as well as childcare and other household responsibilities may play a big role in keeping Muslim women within the confines of home and close neighbourhoods. There are also other possible reasons. The fact of ghettoization needs to be brought out. Muslims live in certain areas in the cities and feel 'safer' in doing so. Urban ethnic conflict and the threat of violence tend to result in the confining or huddling of Muslims into community-dominated

enclaves. For women, in particular, there is a great sense of fear in going outside of these community-bound neighbourhoods. Their security, and that of their children, is felt to be better assured within the ghettos. In the absence of men, widows are even more unlikely to want to leave the bounds of neighbourhood or send, in particular, their daughters out – either to school or for employment.

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Since large numbers of Muslims are self-employed, developing skills and extending credit should be the focal points of any positive initiatives for the community. Further, the provision of social security and social safety nets becomes important for such self-employed workers. On the whole, more Muslims than the others are to be found in production related activities and transport equipment operation. Again, Muslims are more highly represented than the others in sales-related work. Muslim participation is relatively lower in professional, technical, clerical and managerial work, particularly in urban areas. Muslim participation is lower than workers of other socio-religious groups in regular salaried jobs especially in the government or in large public and private sector enterprises. Further, it is found that they tend to be more insecure and vulnerable in terms of conditions of work. This is not only because of their

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over-representation in informal sector employment, but also because their job conditions (length of contract, social security benefits and the like) even as regular workers are poorer than those for other socio-religious groups (SCR:108).

Muslims are very poorly represented in defence and security related activities. This is a matter of some concern because it is crucially linked to the sense of well-being felt by the community. The share of Muslims in ‘public order and safety activities’ at the Central level is just about 6 per cent, while that of Hindu upper castes is 42 per cent. At the state level, the share of Muslims is barely higher, at 7 per cent. Only 4 per cent of Muslims are engaged in defence related activities. Several reports, including the Srikrishna Commission Report, on the 1992-93 riots in Mumbai, have stated that the police are often biased against Muslims and that special efforts are needed to recruit more persons from minority backgrounds as well as to de-communalize the police. It has been argued that diversity in the police forces has a place in producing greater impartiality and promoting the trust of citizens (Khalidi 2003).

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There are only 3 per cent Muslims in the IAS, 1.8 per cent in the IFS and a mere 4 per cent in the IPS. There are 4.5 per cent Muslims in the Railways and they are overwhelmingly at the lower levels. In the postal services and banks, Muslims are very poorly represented. Even in the universities, there are only 4.7 per cent Muslims (SCR:165-7, Khalidi 2003). There are state-wise differences. Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka do somewhat better than other states. There is a crucial need to enhance Muslim presence and participation in public spaces and increase their role in public policy making.

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Discrimination

It is when we look at village by village data provided by the 2001 Census that some of the most disturbing information relating to the exclusion of Muslims from the resources crucial for development emerges. What we can perceive is that with respect to social and physical infrastructure, Muslims are particularly poorly served. Muslim concentration villages, as the Census of 2001 shows, are not well served with *pucca* approach roads or local bus stops. A large number of Muslim concentration villages in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir lack post and telegraph services. Several of these are states with

a high Muslim population. Further, there is a clear inverse association in small villages between the proportion of Muslim population and the availability of educational infrastructure. In most states, the proportion of Muslim concentration villages with medical facilities is lower than the proportion of all villages with such facilities (SCR: 139-49). The poor banking facilities in Muslim concentration villages have been earlier noted. These facts regarding education, physical and financial infrastructure and health facilities indicate a distinct and disturbing bias in public service provisioning in Muslim concentration areas.

Clearly, Muslims suffer from deprivation on almost every front. There is a complex relationship between discrimination, backwardness, vulnerability and religious identity.

Conclusion

Clearly, Muslims suffer from deprivation on almost every front. All the data show that Muslims face high levels of poverty and deprivation. The economic conditions of urban Muslims have not improved as much as the other socio-religious communities. While they are doing somewhat better in certain respects in some states (for instance in the south), they are generally extremely backward and live in the shadow of vulnerability and poverty. The economic and political marginalization of Muslims is compounded by evidence of poor and

discriminatory provisioning by the state.

It has been suggested by some scholars that the relatively better-off position of Muslims in south India is partly related to the fact that some of these states have remained largely undisturbed by communal rioting. Indeed, while communal violence may not be a *cause* for Muslim backwardness, there is some evidence to argue that the expectation of recurring violence may play an important role in depressing fortunes, fostering insecurity and increasing social and economic vulnerability (Razzack & Gumber 2002, Mishra & Singh 2002, Robinson 2005). In any case, there is a complex relationship between discrimination, backwardness, vulnerability and religious identity.

My own research on ethnic conflict showed the ways in which violence and the expectation of violence altered and deformed the educational and occupational trajectories of individuals and households, men and women. In many families, children's educational paths abruptly reached a halt; businesses and occupational aspirations had to be deliberately and consciously scaled down. With each occurrence of violence, the rebuilding of assets followed strained and always lowered expectations (Robinson 2005). The work of mapping the relationship between these factors for the Muslim community as a whole probably requires careful longitudinal studies of households in regions where violence has been endemic before we

can systematize the results, though I am not even so sure that we can simplistically assume that violence only impacts in those regions where it occurs. My research shows that certain incidents of violence especially in recent times – such as that in Mumbai 1992-93 or in Gujarat in 2002 – have had a profound impact on the community as a whole. Such observations complicate the kinds of questions that need research.

One of the crucial aspects brought out by the data is the clear discrimination against Muslims in the sphere of state provision of public services of all kinds. There is need to urgently rectify this imbalance. Among Muslims, some groups are worse off than the others. Apart from regional differences, class, caste and gender work to produce further inequalities of access and achievement. Muslim OBCs constitute just over 40 per cent of the total Muslim population. Muslims as a whole lag behind Hindu OBCs and Muslim OBCs, are worse off than the Muslim-general population. This suggests that the benefits of entitlements for the backward classes are not reaching the Muslim OBCs. The SCR recommends that Muslim OBCs need additional attention.

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One also finds several Muslim castes socially, educationally and economically on par with the SCs. They suffer from stigma and social exclusion due to their status. Such groups experience cumulative disabilities. The SCR recommends that these groups be treated as Most Backward Classes and several measures including reservation be made available to them. Muslims are among the most deprived of India's social groups. Marginalization, violence and discrimination are implicated in producing and sustaining these low levels of attainment, in depressing Muslim aspirations and pushing down levels of achievement. While we are beguiled with the rhetoric of growth, a substantial section of the population is being left out and this may ultimately prove very costly for the Indian nation.

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