

Coming to terms with India's missing Muslims

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Global Research, November 05, 2006

svaradarajan.blogspot.com 5 November
2006

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The reality of exclusion and discrimination can no longer be denied. But the remedy requires political courage on the part of the Manmohan Singh Government and wisdom on the part of those claiming to speak for Muslims.

WHEN THE Justice Rajinder Sachar committee submits its report on the socio-economic status of Muslims, the full extent of the community's exclusion will be obvious to all. Especially those who have made political careers out of the canard that Muslims in India enjoy special privileges and have been "appeased."

Based on the data leaked so far, it is evident there are entry barriers Muslims — who account for around 15 per cent of India's population — are unable to cross in virtually all walks of life. From the administration and the police to the judiciary and the private sector, the invisible hands of prejudice, economic and educational inequality seem to have frozen the 'quota' for Muslims at three to five per cent. Thanks to a hysterical campaign run by the Bharatiya Janata Party and some media houses, the Sachar committee was denied data on the presence of Muslims in the armed forces. But even there it is apparent that the three per cent formula applies.

This gross under-presence of Muslims in virtually every sector is presaged by substantial inequalities in education. Muslim enrolment and retention rates at the primary and secondary levels are lower than the national average and this further magnifies existing inequalities at the college level as well as in the labour market. For virtually every socio-economic marker of well being, the Muslim is well below the national norm — not to speak of the level commensurate with her or his share of the national population — and the evidence suggests these inequalities are not decreasing over time.

This bleak statistical picture is rendered drearier still by new trends visible in many cities. Muslims, for example, find it extremely difficult to rent and buy property outside of "Muslim areas" in some metros. Apart from several journalists, I even know of one former Muslim Union Minister in Delhi whose Hindu colleagues had to intercede to find him a flat. In Mumbai, the situation is perhaps worse. Many Muslim businessmen have problems accessing credit, besides having to run the gamut of uncooperative officials who look upon them with suspicion at every turn. Even in politics, as Iqbal A. Ansari's recent book, *Political Representation of Muslims in India, 1952-2004*, has shown, Muslims have consistently been under-represented in the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies since Independence except Kerala. Only half as many Muslim MPs and MLAs get elected as one might expect based on their population share. In the absence of our political parties throwing up a large enough number of Muslim elected representatives, clerics and obscurantists are only too willing to step into the breach.

The 'war on terrorism' has added a new layer to this already intolerable situation as policemen across the country give free vent to their ignorance and religious prejudice. The tendency of law enforcement agencies to target Muslims during incidents of communal violence is well known. The complicity of the police in the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 was reprehensible but not so different from what the country witnessed at other times in other places. As for legal redress, neither government nor judiciary shows any sense of urgency. Terrorist crimes such as the Mumbai blasts are prosecuted energetically and this is a good thing. But no one is able to explain what happened to the cases stemming from the killing of Muslims in Mumbai in 1992 and 1993 nor why the Srikrishna Commission recommendations against erring policemen remain unimplemented.

The media are a corrective but only to a limited extent. If one section has sought to highlight the plight of Indian Muslims, another section is constantly ready to inflame prejudice by staging debates on irrelevant issues, giving undue prominence to ridiculous statements by unrepresentative 'Muslim leaders' or broadcasting marital disputes within Muslim families (as one channel did last week) as proof of 'Muslim backwardness.'

In the U.S., the old journalistic adage was 'Jews is News'. In India, it seems, anything that shows Muslims as ignorant or fanatical helps propel TRP ratings, while rational comment is frowned upon as unhelpful. A Muslim MP was asked recently to take part in a TV debate on whether there should be reservation for Muslims. He agreed, but added that he would argue against it. The channel's reporter then tried convincing him that "surely your community needs reservation." When he didn't agree, the channel lost interest in putting him on air. One studio guest recently advised Muslims to shed their 'persecution complex' and to not forget that theirs were the "hands that built the Taj Mahal." Though no one would dare accuse Dalits of "doing nothing" to uplift themselves, Muslims are blamed for their poverty and poor education. They are gratuitously advised to study hard, as if the problem of lack of schools, delinquent teachers, inadequate books, and poverty can be remedied by will power alone.

The reservation trap

It is against the backdrop of this highly vitiated atmosphere that the Manmohan Singh Government must formulate a response to the Sachar committee's findings. The reality of systemic inequality cannot be wished away and the Government must find the political courage to confront this situation head on. So serious are the implications of Muslim marginalisation that the Congress must open a channel of communication with other parties, including the BJP, to evolve a consensus on the necessity for urgent corrective measures.

Among the remedial measures to be considered, the least helpful in substantive as well as political terms will be reservation. Whatever they do, Muslim leaders and those who claim to speak in favour of Muslims, must avoid the trap that the demand for reservation is. Sixty years of affirmative action have led to some improvements for Dalits and Tribals but it is clear that the country and its rulers have used the sop of reservation as an excuse to do nothing about the persistent, underlying causes of caste-based inequality.

It is now universally recognised that the pursuit of "equality of outcomes" and "equality of opportunity" must go hand in hand. Even equality of opportunity has a formal and a substantive aspect. 'Formal' equality means ending discrimination on the basis of caste,

religion or gender. `Substantive' equality means overcoming the barriers (or benefits) children of equal native talent inherit from their parents so that none is advantaged or disadvantaged by birth. The India state pays lip service to the idea of equality of outcomes (through quotas) but completely ignores the necessity of crafting expenditure policies that can provide equality of opportunity. Nowhere is this more glaring than in the field of education where the increased notional access of Dalits and Tribals to university is undercut by high dropout rates and underperformance at the school level.

In a 2000 paper, Julian Betts and John Roemer model the amount of differential expenditure the United States government would have to make to provide equality of opportunity to its citizens. In a typology where they define four categories of males based on whether they are White or Black and whether their parents have `High' or `Low' education levels, Betts and Roemer conclude that the `equality of opportunity' expenditure on education must be nine times higher for members of the `Low Black' group than the `High Whites'. They also found that the `High Black,' `Low Black,' and `Low White' groups must all receive more than their per capita share of educational resources if equality of opportunity were to be guaranteed.

Both in the U.S. and in India today, the actual allocation of educational resources is regressive in that those who are affluent and socially privileged corner a greater share of social allocations for education than their relative size in the population. In reality, then, existing affirmative action — or reservation — is for the privileged and the goal of public policy has to be to reverse that by using the target of public expenditure. An important finding in Betts and Roemer's work is that economic targeting alone won't alter the relative distribution of income across cohorts. The targeting has to be aimed at the discriminated or excluded cohort.

In India, the first task of the government must be to guarantee formal equality of opportunity by dealing firmly with discrimination in the labour, housing and credit markets as well as educational system. Without instituting a system of reservation — which would generate more political heat than tangible benefit for Muslims — the Government must send out a clear and unambiguous message that the social cohesiveness and future growth prospects of the country require government departments and private firms to encourage the recruitment of Muslims. But in order to generate substantive equality of opportunity and uproot inequality and exclusion from their roots, the government has to guarantee better access to education at every level for Muslims, Dalits, Tribals, and OBCs.

All of this is only a first approximation and much more will need to be done. What is important, however, is that we recognise both the reality of Muslim exclusion and the urgent need to do something about it.

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