

# Of Quotas and Traps

*The remedy for the poor state of the Muslim community according to almost all socio-economic and educational indicators does not lie in reservations and quotas. Only governance on strictly secular lines will ensure that Muslims do not face entrenched prejudices while claiming their share in all fields.*

**ZAHHEER ALI**

The oft-repeated adage (that has now turned into a cliché) that one cannot fool all the people all the time seems to be entirely incorrect. At least as far as our “democratic leaders” and Indian Muslims are concerned. The leaders of all the mainstream political parties have perfected the art of fooling this gullible largest religious minority of India all the time in the recent political history of modern India. Our ruling elite have not only inherited the Westminster model from our erstwhile British masters; they have also received as an inheritance, lessons in how to delude people to keep their control over power intact at the cost of keeping the naïve masses in perpetual misery. This ‘tamasha’ is one that we have been witnessing not only since independence but since rudimentary democratic institutions were introduced in India. The noteworthy point is that it has always been the Indian Muslims that have been taken for a ride by the major political players before and after the partition of the country. First, it was Syed Ahmed Khan (Sir Syed) who had advised this section not to join the Congress for the ostensible pragmatic reason of concentrating more on education. The irony is that a large section of the Muslim masses under the iron and obnoxious grip of the half-educated and regressive mullahs had opposed Syed Ahmed Khan for his advocacy of modern education. However, on political issues an overwhelming majority of them made common cause with him and caused

a momentous dent in the nascent body of the Indian nation. This was the beginning of the separatist tendency among the Muslims that was exploited to the hilt by the British colonisers. Its logical corollary was the formation of the Muslim League in 1906 that proved to be the institutionalisation of communalism in Indian politics. It was bound to be countered, again on the tutoring of the British masters, by the Hindu communalists in the form of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu Mahasabha. Thereafter, the task of promoting a separatist propensity among the Muslims was grandly taken over by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, a former staunch secular Congressman who had vowed to use Muslim communalism as a political weapon to settle score with his arch rival, Mahatma Gandhi. His charismatic leadership and the wretched “two-nation theory” were a deadly combination that led the Muslims of the subcontinent into political oblivion and finally culminated in the partition of the country.

The woes of the Muslims, rather of those who chose to stay in India, did not end with the creation of Pakistan. They in fact multiplied manifold with further political developments. The compulsions of a competitive democratic form of governance forced even Jawaharlal Nehru, a secular politician, to treat Indian Muslims as a separate religious category rather than an integral part of the competing, struggling mass of Indians. Consequently, the Congress under Nehru subsequently accorded legitimacy to the worst type of parasites

and self-seekers who projected themselves as Muslim leaders. This deplorable band of selfish wheelers and dealers in collaboration with the ignorant and regressive mullahs seem to have registered ownership rights of the Indian Muslims with the major political parties. In due course, these so-called Muslim leaders identified “the core Muslim problems” and suggested their “resolution” to their ever-obliging political bosses. Thus, during the last 50 years we have been hearing about “Islam in danger”, “Muslim identity and culture in danger”, “the declining status of Urdu language”, “preservation of minority character of Aligarh Muslim University” and the most trumpeted of them all, “Muslim Personal Law”. Though some of these issues may be relevant to some sections of Indian Muslims, the fact remains that they are not the real issues that ail Muslims. The real issues pertain to the socio-economic backwardness of the community and have never been sincerely addressed by any government since independence. It is pertinent to add a word of caution while deliberating on socio-economic problems. These problems are common to most Indians and in a participatory, representative democracy all the disadvantaged sections should jointly strive to resolve them. The best course of action for the Muslims to attend to their social backwardness and economic impotency is to make common cause with those similarly encumbered and support such political parties that have these issues on their agenda. This is possible only when the Muslim masses get themselves released from the virulent hold of the mullahs and the so-called Muslim leaders.

### **Sinister Design**

In this background we must analyse the latest snare laid down for the Muslim community by the Manmohan Singh government. In the postmodern and globalised world it was only to be expected of the Congress that it would come out with an extremely enchanting yet equally damaging proposal to ensure the everlasting loyalty of the Muslims. It definitely has plans to do so as well-thought stories about reservations for the Muslims in employment and educational institutions appearing in the media show. The whole drama is well orchestrated at the highest level. The prime minister first expressed his “shock and deep concern” about the appalling backwardness of the Muslims that

he only got to know about through the findings of the justice Rajindar Sachar Committee. He also added that the publication of the entire report would be explosive. Then, gradually other Congress leaders on getting the nod from the “high command” started making the right kind of noises with suggestions that in order to ameliorate the awful conditions of the Muslims, reservations on the lines of those provided to the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) would have to be granted. The inducement almost assumed the status of an official announcement when A R Antulay, union minister for minority affairs, opined that reservation for Muslims would certainly help the hapless community to better its lot. Soon afterward Veerappa Moily, a member of the Congress working committee, who also heads the administrative reforms commission, gave his insightful opinion: that reservations for Muslims should have been part of the Constitution in the first place. Since they are not, he feels that quotas for Muslims are inevitable and his party is committed to the proposal. The political game continues as some Congress leaders like Digvijay Singh and Satyvrata Chaturvedi expressed their qualms about the issue, not on account of principles of course, but because they apprehended that such a move may cost the party its Hindu vote bank. As was to be expected the BJP and other member-organisations of the fascist ‘parivar’ raised their customary bogey of appeasement of Muslims and vowed to oppose the nefarious design of the UPA government tooth and nail. The entire episode is a political farce and such proposals and opposition to proposals are the old gimmicks of our politicians. In any case, quotas for Muslims are not feasible, as there has been adjudication against religion-based reservation. In order to bypass judicial censure, a constitutional amendment will be required. In the current political scenario of coalition politics such a move seems almost impossible.

The significant thing about the announcement of such a proposal is its timing. No one can fail to see through the calculated design of the Congress to sponsor the overture of reservation for Muslims at this particular time. Elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) are to be held early next year where the Muslim population is the largest among all the Indian states. Likewise, the Congress appears desperate to regain some respectable political standing in a state that

had been its mainstay till the demolition of Babri masjid. The traditional vote banks of the Congress, viz, the upper caste Hindus, the Muslims and the dalits deserted it for different reasons and despite the projection of Rahul Gandhi as the new messiah of the UP masses, the party is far from achieving even third position in the state. Consequently, by hoodwinking the Muslims with a promise of reservation in employment and educational institutions, the Congress assumes that it can wean away credulous Muslim voters from Mulayam Singh and Mayawati. If the common Muslims, the insidious mullahs and self-serving Muslim leaders fail to see the obvious trap and bite the bait then they would definitely prove incorrect the old adage that one cannot fool all the people all the time.

### **Dismal Scene**

The Sachar Committee report that was tabled in Parliament on November 30, 2006, portrays a grim picture of the largest religious minority reduced to being the most underdeveloped section of society. Muslims lag behind almost all other segments of society in terms of most of the socio-economic and educational indices. Their educational index is dismal as only 56 per cent are literate while merely 3.6 per cent of them are graduates, the lowest among all the religious communities. Their share in central services is pegged at less than 3 per cent while in no state except Jammu and Kashmir do Muslims comprise more than 11 per cent of government servants. The most revealing statistics are from West Bengal where Muslims constitute 25 per cent of the population while their share in government jobs is only 4.2 per cent. The government led by the CPI(M), in that state for more than a quarter of a century and claiming to be the harbinger of secularism and the rights of the minorities has a lot of explaining to do. The other statistics are similarly appalling. For instance 94.9 per cent of Muslims living below poverty line don’t get foodgrains. In rural India, 60.2 per cent of Muslims don’t own land and only 1 per cent own handpumps or tubewells. These are alarming findings indeed and it is equally true that immediate corrective measures are badly needed. Nevertheless, of all the conceivable remedial actions, the least desired is reservations for them. There are social, political and economic reasons for this line of argument.

First, the quotas will turn Muslims into parasites. Already they suffer countless indignities because of their religion. Still an overwhelming majority of them proudly struggle to make a living as petty traders, skilled workers, artisans, weavers, tanners, mechanics, taxi/autorickshaw drivers, landless farmers, menial labourers, etc. The false hope of getting a cushy government job on a platter will snatch away the fighting spirit that is the driving force for most common Muslims. The quotas will add insult to their misery and in the eyes of most Indians they will look like social liabilities. Second, the quotas may also accentuate the sense of religious identity among them that may consequently further strengthen the position of the mullahs. This is a sure agenda for making the Muslims into a permanent communal category. Third, it will invite the backlash of the majority community and consequent consolidation of Hindu votes. It will politically help their worst enemies, the Sangh parivar. Religion-based quotas for Muslims or for that matter for any religious community will be a serious setback to the secular foundations of the polity that are already shaken because of the communal onslaughts during the last decade and half. Fourth, the laboratory for experimenting and arriving at the right conclusions for societal issues is history. The history of the last 55 years is testimony to the fact that despite constitutional provisions, reservations have not helped an overwhelming majority of the SCs and STs. The beneficiaries comprise minuscule sections of the dalits who have had access to higher education. Fifth, quotas by their very nature help those who are already in a position to take advantage of them. In case of quotas in educational institutions and employment, the most likely beneficiaries will be the members of the middle class. Since there is hardly a middle class worth the name among the Muslims, quotas will not be of much help to a huge section of the community. Last, the cost of providing quotas is enormous. The union and state governments in India are already overburdened because of 50 per cent reservations that they have to make available to various caste groups. Any further addition to the quota category will surely lead to financial disaster and the Sangh parivar will not lose a moment in blaming the Muslims for it.

We have to find other practicable and expedient corrective measures to better the socio-economic conditions of Muslims.

The Sachar Committee findings do pose a challenge to the secular, democratic governance of India. However, we must not respond to the dismal statistics compiled by the committee in a foolhardy manner. If we do, we may impair the secular character of the polity. The simplest corrective measure to improve the lot of the Muslims is to stick to secularism as an operative principle of running the administration. The bureaucracy in India is perhaps the most communal section of our society. If the Muslim percentage in employment is abysmally low, the main culprits are the bureaucrats, many of whom have covert affiliations with the RSS. By making the recruitment procedure truly transparent we can attract deserving Muslim youths to join the public services.

Another area that needs re-examination is the financial sector. Almost all the banks, public or private, victimise Muslims. Their loan applications are rejected not for any technical or procedural reason but only because the applicants are Muslims. As a result of it, a sizeable section of the community that is business-inclined does not get the necessary support to become self-employed. An urgent necessity is to weed out communal elements from the law enforcing agencies. The situation at present is so bad that in the eyes of every policeman, a Muslim is a potential terrorist. The irony is that, if there is a blast in a mosque

and only Muslims are killed, the so-called intelligence agencies and the police arrest humble, innocent Muslims! It is the most damaging psychological factor that alienates the common Muslims from the national psyche and forces them to go back into their shells. On that account they fall prey to the intrigues of the wily mullahs and the crooks masquerading as Muslim leaders. The most important exigency is to improve the educational status of the Muslims. This does not require reserving seats for them in educational institutions but to make available educational infrastructure and opportunities to them. The unfortunate reality in India today is that political gangsters who run most of the institutions of higher and professional education coerce the union and state governments to finance their institutions. Obviously, the percentage of institutions that cater to the needs of the Muslims is negligible. If the UPA government is really sincere about helping Muslims improve their socio-economic and educational conditions, it should see to it that the enrolment of Muslim children in schools increases, their dropout rate decreases and they get fair and judicious opportunities to join institutions of higher and professional education. Muslims should earn their rightful position in Indian society on account of merit rather than charity. **EPW**

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