

The Contemporary Muslim Situation in India: A Long-Term View

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Even as they are regarded as the Other of the nation, a new "citizen politics" seems to be taking shape among Muslims in India today, articulating demands relating to jobs, income, education and so on. This new politics – part of a process of secularisation – is radically different from the pre-independence separatist trends. Except at the surface, in the form of demands for reservations and quotas, there is nothing in common in the nature and content of Muslim politics then and now.

A deep change has begun to crystallise among the Muslim communities in the recent period. Since the submission of the Sachar Committee Report (December 2006) a discernible, unifying thread of a positive kind is beginning to shape the articulation of political demands among the Muslim. Much of what is being talked about can be summarised as politics of inclusion as citizens (in short, let us call it, for sake of convenience, citizen politics). A pronounced characteristic of citizen politics is that it is resistant to discrimination and is marked by a push towards an egalitarian social ethos. Citizenship is after all, minimally, concerned with entrenched equal rights for all and it therefore becomes facilitative of egalitarian living. This follows because a citizen is also, ideally, constituted without reference to anything that attaches to us as cultural (specifically, in the case of India, ritual status) inheritance. Therefore it needs to be noted in passing that citizen politics cannot but be conducted only within a secular framework.

Politics of Bourgeois Equality

Democratic politics in the last 15-20 years has so reshaped the issues that all those communities which were left behind or strongly feel so are in the forefront of struggles for an egalitarian social order. Democracy in India has therefore primarily become – over and above the many other definitions that mark out its terrain – the politics the governed take recourse to gain a voice, a foothold, a sign of status, a measure of effective power and so on. Apart from the modern proletariat, the category of the governed in India has been largely made up of the dalits and the other backward classes (OBCs) and women among all of these groups. This category more or less overlaps with those who were direct producers in the pre-capitalist economy. And we must remember that among the producers women played an important role both in household production and agriculture. Their work was valuable in contributing to family welfare and the overall economy. Actually, in the context of the level of development of the productive forces, their work was highly skilled and comparable to those of the men in most respects. This fact is important because in the present-day battle of the oppressed for equality, the leadership of the oppressed communities, including among the Muslims, has systematically excluded women from the struggle for equality and rights. This is an infirmity in the continuing expansion of democracy in India which has to be kept in mind.

This broadly sets the terrain of the politics for bourgeois equality being waged now by all the oppressed communities. This battle has two aspects. There is, on the one hand, the question

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of constitutional formal equality; this is a matter of declaration, you declare everyone to be equal, something passive in the sense that it does not necessarily change the conditions. There is, on the other hand, a struggle for recognition; this is an active component of the process because it is based on reciprocity, that is, in the process of recognising we, at least, remove the opposition between the self and the other as something necessarily present or, maximally, make the other constitutive of our own self. Together these make up for an egalitarian society, however much materially based inequalities may continue to persist. Therefore there is nothing pejorative in calling this the politics of bourgeois equality.¹

In the last 20 years the Muslim communities are increasingly joining this politics. As this process has gone on, an interesting development has taken place among the Muslim. Oppressed communities from among the Muslims who have joined this battle for bourgeois equality have moved away from the Muslim elites who had traditionally provided leadership to them. There is a pronounced split between the ordinary Muslim masses and the established gentry. Muslim communities who are socially oppressed have sought alliance with those who are adjacent to them in term of work and leisure. They therefore have been supporting different parties of the oppressed and this is particularly the case in the Indo-Gangetic belt. As an aide, this has been an important cause in the decline of the Congress Party. With the Sachar Report new churning are now beginning and how they change the political equations on the ground it is too early to tell. Now therefore politics among the Muslim cannot be talked about without reference to what is happening among similar other communities within other religions. This is of quite some importance in avoiding absolutisation of community politics. This is the good that democracy has done to India, whatever the infirmities of this politics.

Dramatic Moment

There is a curious feature to the social churning and the kind of politics that has taken shape. In case of most such communities, it was a dramatic moment which brought this about into the open as a discernible pattern. I do not mean to suggest that the dramatic event caused this to happen. What actually happens is that the long-term secular trend (the development in the making) with all its currents and diverse propensities get together and crystallise as a unified politics; in other words, the dramatic moment acts as a catalyst. In the case of the OBCs, it was not just the announcement about the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, however important in itself it was. What made it the dramatic moment was the kind of reaction and the expression it took. It was the long lasting vandalism by the upper caste youth who held the society to ransom. And all this happened with the shrill support of the mass media and the backing of bureaucracy. This polarised the society into two warring camps. It was also the moment which created a privilegensia with the decomposition of the consciousness of the middle class into fragmented consciousness of the upper castes and their gravitation into the militant Hindu right wing as a counter to the assertion of the oppressed.

Something similar happened in the case of the Muslims in India. The Ram Janabhoomi movement made the Muslims bewildered, more so after the demolition of the Babri masjid, but

that is another story. The killings and mayhem and anarchy in the wake of Advani's 'rath yatra' and culminating in the massacre following the demolition with all its violent disorder was something India never saw after the Partition killings. By the way, as an aside, something of importance changed which should be noted. From this moment on, riots in the conventional sense ceased to occur in India. What came in their place is pogrom like killings and cold-blooded massacres reaching their climax in Gujarat. To call these riots, as many still do, is to surrender to the discursive strategy of Hindutva ideologues, of becoming complicit in the making of a false and deceptive public perception of the current situation. Away from the aside, the mass killings with the virulent propaganda against the Muslims as a treacherous presence for the nation's integrity created a situation where Muslims were wondering whether any body owns them in India.

Paradoxically, it was this moment that brought about a radical change in the orientations and disposition in Muslims towards the Indian nation and the politics within it. A feature of this change is that it does not seem to be the culmination of long-term tendencies or any structural changes but because of an exemplary act. V P Singh giving up power and losing his prime ministership to protect the Babri masjid became in their eyes an act of crucifixion. The memory of it still operates in an exemplifying fashion. Muslims feel a sense of wonder about his action. The change was therefore sudden and has been dramatic in its impact. They had come to believe that in the power games that go on in electoral politics, communities, more specifically Muslims, have always only been a calculation for gaining power; that everybody, even including the Janata Party in 1977, had used them for climbing on to power. It is only V P Singh, and in this V P Singh stands as a lonely figure, which, within these power games inevitable in politics, abdicated power for their honour and dignity. He made them feel that with him they could stand with dignity, as an inalienable part of the "nation". This development took place in the background of the Mandal movement and this also led to the identification between this politics and the shift within the Muslim communities.

One can quite conceivably argue that this change may have been in the making for a much longer time, a process made up of many factors. This may well be so. But there is little by way of evidence, direct or indirect, to say anything confidently. All one can say is that, if such were the case, then, V P Singh's exemplary act worked as a catalyst, a precipitator. Whatever be the extent of validity of this perceptual assessment, what seems to me to be significant is that within the frame of dispositions people have, this event brought about an important alternation in the way these dispositions were aligned in their consciousness. Questions of security so carefully fostered by the Congress Party got pushed back and concern with dignity (and honour) had a relative ascendancy. On questions of life, limb, and property, though fearful of prospects, they seem to have learnt not to treat these as the only events that decide their public lives.²

Unifying Strand

All of this brought about a positive pan-Indian dimension to the Muslim politics. I was travelling at that time from Shimla to Hyderabad to Calcutta and many different places. Wherever I

went it was the same tone and flavour to what the Muslims were discussing and debating. How best they can align with the new secular trends or formations which then were emerging in different parts of the country. The rapid spread of Hindutva ideology and the menacing marches up and down the country of the Sadhus armed with 'trisuls' added to the urgency of the search of new secular allies. The all-India dimension, which took shape, then is crystallising now with the dissemination of the findings of the Sachar Report.

Earlier, what is called the Muslim politics was regionally specific, in the sense that there were distinct regional patterns. The talk of Muslim politics in India was an over-generalisation. All such exercises are devoid of content. The regional specificity did not die out with V P Singh's exemplary act. It remained a parallel current. Now with the Sachar Report these will not die out. All regional specific currents will remain but subsumed under citizen politics. What I mean by regionally specific in the earlier period was the absence of any positive pan-Indian dimension; in other words, a unifying democratic strand informing the political debates among the Muslims or the demands raised by them in the different regions or sub-regions of India.

The politics of Muslims in Hyderabad or Telangana region of AP had little to do with what existed in Malabar or the northern region of Kerala. Likewise what prevailed in UP or Bihar had little connection with the southern regions. Bengal had its pattern. If we were to look at the demands around which the politics was played out, we find very little of a common ground. Muslims in each region had, and still have, their specific problems and in the articulation of which the politics of these regions got distinct flavour. There was also very little actual contact between the leadership of the Muslims in these regions although all knew one another and sympathised with their politics.

The regionally specific nature of Muslim politics is rooted, it seems to me, in the very nature of the presence of Muslims as minorities in the various linguistic-cultural communities of India; to put it in another way, as the minority components of the different nationalities (a term deeply suspect and disfavoured as usage in India) of India. There are two sides to this difference. One, and quite important, Muslims as a people, before independence as well as in the later period up to now, did not get culturally integrated within their nationality groups. While this is outside the scope of the present argument it is yet important to note that this has hindered the unification of different nationalities in India. The other aspect has to do with the very different nature of the relations of the Muslim minority with the nationality of which it is a part – the nature of relations of Muslim Bengalis with Bengali Hindus as compared to those in Kerala or Tamil Nadu or those in UP. This is bound to give rise to different flavours to Muslims politics in the different regions.

Some of these region-specific formations have been parties of a communal nature, most prominently the Muslim League in Kerala and the Ittihad-ul Muslimeen in the Hyderabad, Telangana and on a smaller scale the Muslim League in Tamil Nadu;³ in these places these have become the main electoral voice of the Muslims. Each of these communal parties possess distinct histories, contexts and patterns of development.⁴ It is surprising that Muslim

communal formations thrive in regions where Hindu communalism does not have a strong presence. Surprising because it is generally thought that one form of communalism reinforces another. On the other hand, wherever Hindutva forces are strong and have been in power often, there are no organised Muslim communal parties and this does not mean that there is no Muslim communal consciousness in these regions. On the contrary, historically, in the pre-independence period this was the region where the separatist politics of the Muslim League was the strongest. This may probably be the reason for the absence of Muslim communal parties, defensive fear of being linked to that politics again.⁵ I am not meaning to suggest that one communalism does not reinforce another; all I am doing is point to an interesting pattern. It does but the process is more complex. One can, perhaps, study the process of reinforcement by looking at, for instance, how government of India's systematic anti-women stand in the Shah Bano case worked in favour of Hindutva by giving a new voice to the most hidebound sections of the Muslim community.

Aligning with Secularism

Nevertheless, whatever be the case, Muslim communalism is very different from the militant Hindu right wing. Unlike Hindutva as manifested in different organisations which together go as Sangh parivar, Muslim communalism neither has a single, all-India ideology nor a single, monolithic organisation guided and led by something like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It is not only region specific but scattered and without any identifiable foundations. It is based, on the one hand, on resentments, grievances and apprehension and, on the other, on vague aspirations and hopes of getting a better deal from the government.

Having talked of Muslim communalism and the nature of Muslim communal consciousness, it is worth remembering that their spread is not as extensive as the presence of Muslims in the different regions of India. Moreover, there has emerged ambivalence or a contradiction (I do not know what will be a more appropriate term here) in the Muslim consciousness since the beginning of Ram Janmabhoomi and the Babri masjid controversy. With the (from their point of view) menacing growth of Sangh parivar organisations and the stints in power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Muslim organisations, including the communal ones like the Majlis in Hyderabad or the League in Kerala, have increasingly taken to a vocal defence of secularism. This is at the level of politics. There has been any number of ideological statements talking of secularism as a desirable ideology⁶ as well as constant appeals to voters to vote for the "best proven" secular candidate in their constituency. Muslims are in alignment with different secular forces in different regions of India unlike earlier. But on the cultural and religious questions they have shown an uncanny affinity with Muslim orthodoxy across the world in taking to the streets on the slightest provocation, where in fact it should not have been seen as a provocation at all. This hypersensitivity shows a clear unease with the process of secularisation. One can cite innumerable instances from the reactions to art, cinema, dress and so on how strong can the resistance be to

choices others make which seem contrary to what is taken to be Islamic sensibility or identity. This is an ambivalence which needs to be studied both in its theoretical and empirical manifestations more closely.

This alignment with secularism as a political ideology as well as with the secular forces has altered the Muslim consciousness, including those of the communal formation. There is no shrill communal voice among Muslim organisations. These are communal to the extent of defending the issues and interests close to the community. Given this, these have become or are becoming akin to communitarian organisations. Undoubtedly this is a welcome development prone to long-term democratic possibilities.

Terrorist Violence

But together with this has emerged a very worrisome aspect, disastrous for the country as a whole. A very small section of the Muslim community, in fact minuscule, has taken to terrorism of a wanton kind. And slowly this has acquired international links. Terrorism among the Muslims in India is of post-Babri masjid origins. The first recorded act of Muslim terrorist violence in India (leaving the violence in Kashmir out not because Kashmir is not India but together with north-east it has a history of specificities which puts it apart) took place on the December 6, 1993, to the day a year after the demolition of the Babri masjid.⁷ And it took place with crude bombs placed in some trains leaving from Hyderabad; some exploded and most did not because this was the job of young men who hurriedly learnt to make bombs to observe the 'barsī' (yearly celebration of the death of the near ones). It is with this that the trans-boarder terrorists came to know that there is a potential constituency which can be tapped into. Since then it has grown extensively and by now comprises many modules in the country with clear trans border links. Before this there is no evidence that any Indian Muslim could be recruited by any of these international networks. Nonetheless, now it is a menace both to the Muslims and the country at large, irrespective of its origins, though not unimportant as such because the origins give you the first causal links.

Having said all this, let me come back to something that concerns the great majority of all Muslims and this has a direct link with what has been earlier referred to as the regional specificity of Muslim politics. There has been one factor underlying all this specificity and scatter that imparted to Muslim consciousness a recognisable common feature and kept them away from different democratic currents in Indian politics. This has to do with history and sociology of riots since the early 1960s and their increasing incidence since the 1980s. This has been, I believe, a source of some sort of pan-Indian unification of Muslim communities. Whatever the differences between Muslims belonging to different linguistic-cultural communities and within these of varying occupations and skills, a consciousness born of similar experiences has emerged. It is of a negative kind, in the sense of being outsiders lacking in bonds of belonging with other communities; putting it in another way, Muslims have been feeling as the unwanted other in Indian society. This had gone on from the 1960s till, what I

have above termed as V P Singh's exemplary act of sacrificing for the sake Muslims. This thesis, I agree, is controversial and not quite easy to establish in a conclusive way. But I will stick my neck out and try to argue it.

Being Unwanted

Anthropologically inclined political analysts have been arguing for a long time that there is no such thing as a Muslim community in India, because Muslims are scattered into diverse ethno-cultural and linguistic regions in the country and, secondly, because at a micro level, the surrounding Hindu ethos has made imperceptible yet deep inroads among Muslims. There are three kinds of works, which emphasise directly or inferentially the multi-community nature of the Muslim population in India. One is due to the survival, as strong and visible residues, of the previous modes of living habits, thinking patterns and worshipping styles among Muslims from times before their conversion to Islam.⁸ Second there is the viewpoints to the deep impact on Muslims of caste and ritual practices of the surrounding Hindu milieu and this results in perceptible differences in the outlook and behaviour among the Muslims even across short distances.⁹ There is third view which holds that this is due to the implications and consequences of being embedded in the larger social structure and the demographic features of the Indian society.¹⁰

I strongly believe that there is naïveté surrounding application of anthropological categories, which are notoriously oblivious of the underlying political process.¹¹ This is true not only of the anthropological approach to the Muslim problem in India but also in the case of various adivasi communities undergoing processes of social and/or political unification. However, ethnic and other diversities, linguistic differences and social differentiation can all coexist with growing political unification or an emergent sense of "community".¹²

Now out of the combat with anthropology, I want to argue that what provides the basic impetus to the political unification of Muslims around a common discourse, of equal significance to them wherever they may be in India, is the regularity of riots and a pervasive perception of being discriminated against and a sense of being unwanted in the society. This is not to say that socio-political problems faced by Muslims or the demands they raise in Kerala or Andhra Pradesh, are one and the same, this not being the case has been argued earlier. Yet these differences tend to get subordinated to the overwhelmingly brutal fact of riots and the growing feeling of being discriminated against. Common suffering in communal riots¹³ brings Muslims together just as economic strangulation unites tribals, or the evils of untouchability unite dalits, or gender humiliation unites women, all in common political action and generating a sense of bonding. But there is one big difference here. Communal carnage and butchery are much more prominent news items. Wherever these may occur, they immediately become a part of Muslim consciousness everywhere. The fact of carrying a Muslim name is to involuntarily share in this consciousness. Wherever I have gone in India since the late 1970s, among the first questions Muslims have asked me are: "Are there riots in your area?" "How safe are Muslims there?" "Are they well off?" "Do they get jobs?"

It is this shared perception that has given rise to the process of unification among Muslims and an incipient sense of being a pan-Indian community. Yet the absence of organisational uniformity and of a common ideological foundation to Muslim (communal) politics (in contrast to the way Hindutva provides a common cementing force for the Hindu communal forces all over the country) has to a good extent hampered this process. To whatever extent this happened was because of a negative development, the making of the Muslims as a people as the Other of the nation. This circumstance leaves open the possibility of radical, democratic interventions and the making of a new politics.¹⁴

Secularisation of Politics

This possibility is now taking shape. What started with V P Singh is now crystallising with the discussions and movements around the Sachar Committee Report. A uniform thread of a democratic kind is fast becoming visible across different regions of the country. I have started by calling this positive and have argued that it is so because it represents citizen politics. This citizen politics has three important values, viz, equality, recognition and equal rights and a set of demands like jobs, income, education, health, housing, etc. These precisely are the one which have come to the forefront of Muslim politics. These values and issues, whether with dalits or OBCs or Muslims, are the stuff of secular politics and these now give a common basis to the politics of the oppressed.

One important component of the secular politics, which is more often not talked about, has to do with everyday life. The daily rhythms of the mundane life that we live come to the forefront. It does not mean that the sacred or the substantive in terms of beliefs or commitments become unimportant but rather it does not more occupy a foregrounded position in the political life of the ordinary people. Instead issues of every day life get foregrounded. This is what happened in 19th century Europe and played a rather decisive role in the secularisation of politics and eventually society. I do not mean to suggest that there is going to be a replay of what happened there. This is only to suggest the importance of this development. By what route the secular will come to become a publicly acknowledged feature of our society is not going to be easy to predict. What however ought to be taken note of is the emergence of secular themes in the politics of the oppressed even while we recognise that this has not yet stabilised and there can be reversals given the prominent presence of right reaction.

Issues Raised by the Sachar Report

In the context of this, some issues raised by the Sachar Report will strengthen this trend. I do not intend discuss the report because it has been quite extensively written about and there is little point in going into that again.¹⁵ The report has established that the socio-economic condition of the Muslim communities is abysmally low, that it is just above that of the dalits and may be worse off than that of the OBCs. The question of under-representation of Muslims in services and allied areas, their lagging behind in education, poor access to health facilities and so on is equally well established. Not that this is a startling revelation. Many of us who have been using the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey data on class formation within different communities

have written on lines quite similar to what the Sachar Committee has come to show. What puts the findings of this committee on an altogether different footing is not just the thoroughness, it is of course exhaustive, but also rather the official stamp that it carries.¹⁶

What though should get highlighted, an astounding fact is the backwardness of all areas where Muslims (territorially) have a very sizeable presence. These have to do with housing, tap water, schools, medical facilities, roads, what the Sachar Report has called the infrastructural variables; the access of Muslim children under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is also low and so is the overall coverage. There are, according to 2001 Census, 11 districts where the Muslim population is above 50 per cent, 38 where it is above 25 per cent and about a third of Muslim population lives in these areas. There are another 182 districts where the Muslim population is between 10 and 25 per cent and about 47 per cent of Muslims live in these areas. Apart from these districts, there are a large number of small and medium sized towns with a sizeable Muslim population. All these areas are poorly provided with urban infrastructure and other civic amenities. This is astounding. Some may argue, as has been the case, that the under-representation of the Muslims in services, and higher unemployment may be due to the educational and social backwardness of the community; the extent of under-representation however cannot be accounted for by the degree of backwardness. But how does one account for the sheer absence of physical infrastructure? The short answer can only be one: Muslim areas are deliberately ignored in the state provision of public services of all kinds.¹⁷ In this respect, those of physical development, densely populated Muslim areas are similar in many respects to tribal belts or the village areas where dalits reside.¹⁸ A very high degree of deliberate neglect therefore becomes undeniable.

This has led many people quite innocently – a section of communal-minded leadership among the Muslims has also done it in a manner to defame the Indian state – to assert that all deprivation and poverty among the Muslims is the making of the Indian state. This view is completely erroneous. The state comes in a different way, as we will soon see but not that it created the poverty among the Muslims like it did among the tribal communities through massive displacements. To understand the present plight of ordinary Muslims it is essential to take an analytical look at poverty among them.

Historical Context

What seems important to do is to see how conditions left behind by the pre-colonial feudal rulers got effected by the working of the colonial economy. In other words, Indian poverty, including among the Muslims, is a creation of a complex combination of feudalism and colonialism.

Historically, the Muslim gentry and the section of the then ruling classes from among the Muslims never treated the Muslim masses any better or differently than the other subjects under them. All people were equally the beasts of burden under them and unworthy of respect or dignity in the eyes of the rulers. It is important to remember the limits to the brotherhood of faith in conditions of feudal rule. Both the rabble-rousers among the leaders of Muslims and the Hindutva chauvinists need to be reminded of this again and again. The Hindutva chauvinists are

being utterly dishonest in harping on the theme that the ordinary Muslims have been a favoured community because of a long period of Muslim rule. Feudal self-aggrandisement is not a favour nobody does to anybody, the Muslim masses being no exception. There is no evidence that in areas ruled by the Muslim kings the condition of Muslim masses, including the peasantry among them, is any better. Take Telangana, till quite recently (1948) ruled by the Nizams. If anything, the conditions of the peasants, including Muslim peasants, is worse off there than in other parts of southern India. Same is the case with Marhatwada, also ruled by the Nizams. There, of course, was a Muslim gentry, about which a little later. Taking the evidence from UP or Bihar, where vast feudal estates existed under the Muslim lords, there is nothing to show that the conditions of Muslim peasants were any better there than where the Muslim peasants were under the Hindu feudal lords. When the British conquered India from the Muslim rulers in 1757, they soon found that the condition of Muslim peasants was no better than those of Hindus.¹⁹ The condition of a few retainers here or there is no evidence of any kind. Much the same can be said of the handicraftsmen or those others engaged in secondary household production.²⁰

Colonialism impacted on this situation in many ways but two of them were significant, in my view, in the making of poverty which India inherited after independence. The impoverishment of the peasantry was the result of these. This needs some elaboration because simply to say that there is no evidence that the Muslim peasants were not any worse off is not enough.

Colonial Impact

By the time the first British conquest of India was completed, the revenue policy of the new colonial regime was well in place. It made for, among others, three major changes in the revenue policy of the Mughals perfected by Raja Todar Mal (which itself was built on the one created by Alauddin Khilji). Most drastically the English colonial administration changed the basis of levying revenue from the land cultivated to the land owned; that is, under the Mughal system if the peasant had say 100 acres but cultivated only 50 acres, revenue was calculated only for 50 acres whereas the colonial system it was for the entire 100 acres owned. Secondly, under the pre-colonial system, revenue was collected after the crop was harvested but the British changed it to the financial year which so followed that it was before the crop was harvested and thus the peasant was forced to borrow to pay the revenue.²¹

Together these measures not only doubled the amount of revenue levied but also added the interest burden on the peasant because he now had to borrow to pay the revenue. Moreover, under the Mughals the state made concessions in case of crop failure but this measure was discontinued by the British. All this enormously added to the revenue burden on the peasant; it became back breaking. Additionally, part of the revenue collected by the state earlier used to come back for land improvement and other welfare measures undertaken by the state for the society. The British used the entire revenue either to finance further conquest of India or the amount was repatriated to Britain.²²

The result was the impoverishment of the entire peasantry and we must remember the biggest famine India experienced till then. It affected each and every community equally depending

on who inhabited which area. Landlessness also followed for the first time on a very large-scale which hitherto was a negligible feature. This was also caused by a drastic change introduced by the British in land policy in India. In pre-British times, there was a long established convention, invariably followed, that a non-peasant would not be allowed to alienate the land of the peasant; only a peasant could acquire the land of another peasant. All this changed with the British. Anyone was allowed to buy the land as one would any other commodity. With rising indebtedness large amounts of land passed into the hands of moneylenders and traders who no longer were barred by the state from buying peasant lands. Land became some kind of a commodity which it earlier was not.

Now there is no evidence to suggest that these changes in revenue policy impacted different communities differently. Historical research has not shown any such tendency anywhere in India. In the absence of this, it is untenable to infer that the British differently treated Muslim peasants during this period.

What however differently affected different communities later on after the onset of the Industrial Revolution in Britain was the process of deindustrialisation, which took place on a massive scale. India had a vast pre-modern manufacturing sector so much so that Akbar had established a department called 'mahkam e kharkhana' (department for factories). It is well known that India had a vast, flourishing textile sector. There was also large-scale manufacturing of guns and armaments and therefore there was a spread all over of innumerable foundries. Manufacture of saltpeter was also quite extensive. Guilds of various kinds existed for the manufacture of articles required by the courts and the numerous aristocrats and the gentry. All these were more or less completely destroyed by the forced imports of British industrial manufactured goods.²³ It is true that in the caste order and under its influence different communities specialised in different kinds of manufacture, including Muslims in some sectors. But it was the case then that Muslims were in any way overwhelming in all of these factories. There is no study to show that Muslims were especially badly affected. They went down together with others creating a very large pool of unemployed and all of these people were eventually thrown on to agriculture further impoverishing agriculture increasing the burden on peasants.

At this point I want to digress a little to make a point. In our analysis of poverty (and deprivation) the structure, in its conceptual sense, is generally under-theorised. There is a need to pay more careful attention to this. The dynamics of what happens here is much deeper and the remedial actions also should attempt to alter the deeper forces emanating from the structure. The need to pay attention has another angle. We then can avoid a totalising view of the community and adopt a disaggregated discursive strategy in talking about the problem. Politics so built will not allow communitarian concerns from becoming communalism. We should remind ourselves that communalism is a result of interventions from the above by the powerful within the communities. After all, communalism is a power relation whichever way you tune its ideology. The Muslim League before partition and the forces of Hindutva now helped establish control by hegemonic elements in the community over politics in the name of community. Love of Ram never became hatred of the other without intervention from above.

Muslim poverty is as much a result of the many intersections of feudalism and the depredations and predatory practices of British colonial rule as poverty in general. India after independence inherits this situation. The Indian state is in no way responsible for Muslim poverty as is alleged by communal leaders out to make a quick political buck out of the findings of the Sachar Report.²⁴ The state in India is responsible though for the manner in which it has treated poverty in general and in being blind and insensitive to the continued under-representation of Muslim in services and other public bodies. In fact, in a number of sensitive areas of employment there has been a declining trend, even evidence of secret directives from certain ministries to be careful in recruiting the Muslims. Here the Indian state is culpable and ought to be held accountable.

Deep-Rooted Contempt

But to understand the dilemma of Muslims, it is equally important to be perceptive of the fault lines that create insensitivities and cruelties in Indian society. Muslims are not the only people who have suffered neglect. The dalits have also been the victims of hostile neglect, routine violence and sporadic killings. Their presence is like that of a deadly virus that should be immediately removed or else it may cause fatal contaminations. It is for reasons of sustained reservations for them over such an extended period of time, that the ordinary people from among the dalits have produced a stream into the middle classes and which in turn has provided a reserve of energy for protracted struggles. And yet they remain at the bottom of the heap of the unwanted humanity in Indian society. The adivasis have in fact in one sense suffered the worst at the hands of the Indian state. They are the most numerous among the victims of the massive displacement due to the developmental process and unnecessary gigantisms that has become a part of it. Compensation and rehabilitation has been so pathetic that Roy Burman once spoke of a “displacement-compensation-displacement continuum”, meaning thereby that you so rehabilitate people that they soon get alienated both from land and income and remain part of the heap called poverty.

I have one explanation why such has been the case, which may well be a speculation and if so I hope an enriching one. Caste society produces a consciousness, which has deep contempt, often unconsciously, for those who are below you, all the poor and the oppressed and the disregarded belong here. It does not cause you pain if they remain the way they are for as long in the future as they have been in the past. Given this, there cannot be the need for urgency or hurry. This consciousness will always try to prove that things are better when they have not been better even by a bit.²⁵ Or, how else can we explain the rather pronounced efficiency of the same personnel who can put back to normal the infrastructure and other physical assets in case of natural disasters but fail to distribute food and relief to the poor in case of drought or famine? Attitude to the lowly, people of degraded social status, where caste (seen as karma's fruit here) historically is genetic to consciousness is one of utter contempt and also therefore of condescension. Consciousness at one level is a curious thing, in terms of its structure. If it is prearranged to prejudice then in the experience of the Other it will always find something or other to reinforce the prejudice by screening out all else that may negate it;

prejudice always employs gatekeepers who never allow anything to gatecrash. Consciousness in which caste is a genetic feature is akin but not identical to consciousness in which patriarchy is a genetic component; you are always nice and it is the other who is a complaining type. So we find the poor, including the Muslim, who is always grumbling when the state is doing so much for them. That is why, I wish to speculate further, that much of what goes in the name of affirmative action has failed to take-off the ground. Actually, administrative negligence or failure has its roots, not in this or that technicality or lapse, but in this deep-rooted contempt for the ordinary people.

Holding the State Responsible

Let me go back to colonial times to highlight something which has become so much a part of Muslim thinking and gives it a certain sensitivity, many not attuned to this may find it to be a bit hyper at times. While the impoverishment of the peasantry, including the Muslims, went on, the Muslim gentry and the salariat were doing quite well in services and employment, in some, like the judiciary, rather well. Here Muslims did not experience any decline till the mid-1830s even as a very versatile and eminent elite was emerging from among the Hindu upper castes, which was to usher in both the Indian renaissance and religious revival. But when the decline set in it was rapid and steep. It happened with the adoption of, what is famously known as, the McCauley minutes. After a long debate on the issue of Vernacular vs English, McCauley won the debate and his minutes were adopted in 1833-34 as the official language policy for the British empire. In 1837 orders were issued for a shift from Persian, till then the language of administration, to English as the language for conducting administration and business. After this the Muslim decline was rapid, very much so.^{26,27} Muslims since then hold the government responsible for their decline or upward mobility.

They were proficient in Persian as many Hindus also were. But by 1830s a sizeable number of Hindus had become proficient in English. Muslims had pronouncedly lagged behind, remained duds as far as English was concerned. Many writers have said that Muslims were resistant to English because of their conservatism and Hindus with their nose tuned to opportunity took to English and hogged it. To put the story on a different pitch, let me speculate again. When the Hindus had learnt Persian and Urdu they did it as a forced necessity, because there were opportunities in doing so. When they had to give up Persian and Urdu and take to English, their instinct told them that they were moving from one foreign setting into another foreign landscape full, perhaps, of opportunities. For Hindus it was a rational choice situation. On the contrary, for Muslims Urdu and Persian were felt as their own languages and to give it up for English was seen as giving up your mother tongue for a foreign imposition. For the Muslims, it was not a rational choice situation but an emotional burden to decide about, and such situations always delay decisions. They could not till about the 1860s and therefore lagged behind, but after 1860s, made very rapid strides once the reasons for deciding became clear with the intervention of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan at the national level and many regional leaders like Syed Abdul Lateef in Bengal.

Quite apart from small measures of self-help, Muslims leaned heavily on the state to lift them up. Sir Syed's advice to them to stay away from the emerging Congress platform was in fact, in my reading, not to take to politics but confine themselves only to economic demands. The British read this, in my reading again, clearly. They conveyed to the Muslim leadership that their demands being non-political could be easily met whereas the Congress demands being political can hardly be conceded. So it seemed better for the Muslims to stay away from the Congress. This then became one plank in, what came to be known as divide and rule policy.

Whatever was made up from 1860 to the time of independence got shifted to, barring a region or two in India, to Pakistan; elites among the Muslims fought for Pakistan and when it materialised migrated to their realised "homeland" leaving the Muslim masses to fend for themselves. Since then, with minor shifts of an inconsequential nature, the conditions of the Muslims have remained what has been described in the Sachar Report. They again will have to lean on, as earlier, on the government. As a vulnerable community they cannot, barring small measure of self-help like earlier, overcome the many hurdles of the economic and social structure quite apart from the many prejudices and biases scattered within these structures. If the government is not forthcoming, their communal leadership is waiting to take charge.

Widespread Backwardness, High Accomplishment

I have often in this essay spoken of the economic and social backwardness of the Muslim and that they are just above the dalits and generally below the OBCs. Having said all this it should also be emphasised that Muslims taken as a whole are unlike any other backward community. There is no other community in India or perhaps elsewhere with a large-scale presence of backwardness that also has such a big stratum of people with pronouncedly high level of accomplishment as the Muslims of India. In the creative fields of art, literature, music and culture they are second to none in the world; in the intellectual world of science and humanities they stand in equal measure to any other community in India; in the professional world of doctors, lawyers and so on they have done exceptionally well; such is the case in the field of sports; and the list here can be extended. Suffice it to note here, Muslims are a highly accomplished and successful people. And these accomplishments of the Muslims are a highly visible feature of Indian social life while the extent of their backwardness is a statistical feature.

The two sides put together, widespread backwardness and high accomplishment, make Muslims uniquely incomparable people; I would think anywhere in the world. This specificity ought to be recognised by the democratic movement in India. When the Sangh parivar talks of pandering to the Muslim it is to this section of successful Muslims they point to. It is easy to say to the communally minded and ignorant that such is the case. It is going to be, I presume, one of the most delicately placed tussle for the democratic forces in India ever since our independence. The communal-chauvinists led by RSS and BJP are going to make a big issue of the minority favouritism of the secular forces and especially of the "pampering" of the Muslims by the Congress. Their main contention will be centred around, as whenever an issue of positive discrimination for Muslims came to the fore, the theme of threat

to the unity and oneness of India. It will be charged that quotas for Muslims will lead to separatism, as they always did historically. The Muslim elite, it will be alleged, has always had a separatist mentality (whatever the separatist in today's context implies); the negative charge that the term carries is what is important.

Politics of Citizenship

Here an issue of quite some significance is involved and needs to be carefully sorted out. It has to do with the nature of difference in the character of Muslim political demands today as distinct from those in days prior to independence, starting with the intervention from Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in the aftermath of the 1857 great rebellion. Much of what we see of Muslim political demands in the last few decades has to do with what is entailed in the politics of citizenship and therefore with egalitarianism and rights. A sea change has come in the way Muslims have placed themselves in relations to the main currents in India's political life as against the pre-independence period.

Muslims, in other words, have joined the politics of empowerment, egalitarianism and deepening of democracy. This is, as I have referred to above, the politics of citizenship rights. Not that other trends do not exist in Muslim politics, like that of political Islam or terrorist activity, but the trend mentioned here, it seems to me, has the decisive edge. There is now a possibility of building alliances of the oppressed communities, which is already happening in ad hoc ways. The left democratic interventions must help to cement these. It should be obvious that politics based on communities, however oppressed, can never become class politics. But if it can through democratic alliances of the oppressed acquire the tone of radical democracy, then it can come into close alignment with left democratic politics and this is one important task for the radical forces.

Here it is very important therefore to distinguish the nature of Muslim politics today from that which dominated the pre-independence era. This is all the more important because the BJP and the Hindutva forces are raising the bogus debate that attention to the recommendations of the Sachar Report will strengthen separatist trends and will weaken national unity. Nothing can be more far fetched. Let us look at this briefly.

This new politics, as should be obvious, is radically different from the pre-independence trends within the Muslim politics. From Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to Jinnah and partition of the country, whatever the major differences in the politics of Sir Syed and Jinnah and their implications that are many, one feature runs as a common theme. This had to do with the amount of mental energies that went into showing that Muslims were different and their politics had nothing to do with that of the emerging Freedom Movement; in other words, the effort was to demarcate the Muslim communities as an ally of the British and to demand not only a share in power but a weighted reservation, something more than their proportion in the population. All this was viewed as essential to neutralise the overwhelming preponderance of the Hindus. This early separatism (keeping the Muslims separate as people, not necessarily territorial division) persisted in changing forms at different times and was the crux of the pre-independence Muslim politics.

To compare the politics of these two different times is ridiculous. The change by now both in the content and form is quite

evident and rather drastic. Except at the surface level, that is, asking for reservations and quotas and forms of affirmative actions, there is nothing in common between the politics then and now. Surface similarities are always misleading. Therefore careful attention to the details should go into the making of our understanding of the current situation. The BJP and the Hindutva forces are going to make a hell out of any move to create special schemes for the welfare of Muslims or the demands for

reservations that may be raised by the Muslims. It is here that careful thought is required. Whatever strengthens chauvinism weakens democracy. And the weakening of democracy is not in the interests of the ordinary people including the Muslims. So the leaderships of the Muslim communities need to carefully formulate their demands. It should be obvious to them that whatever the nature of the backwardness of Muslims, they have not been marginalised in the country except, perhaps, in Gujarat.

NOTES

- 1 For a detailed discussion on these issues see Javeed Alam, *Who Wants Democracy?*, Tracts for the Times 15, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2004.
- 2 Many of these issues have discussed in Javeed Alam, 'A Minority Moves into Another Millennium' in Romila Thapar (ed), *India: Another Millennium*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2001.
- 3 For Hyderabad see Javeed Alam, 'Communalism among Muslims: The Majlis-e Ittehad ul-Muslimeen in Hyderabad' in TV Sathyamurthy (ed), *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender, and Culture in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996. For an earlier period see Rasheeduddin Ahmad Khan, 'Muslim Leadership and Electoral Politics in Hyderabad: A Pattern of Minority Articulation', *Economic & Political Weekly*, April 10 and 17, 1971.
- 4 As far as I am aware, there is perhaps no study of Muslim communalism or of the Muslim League in Kerala or Tamil Nadu. Not being an expert on communalism I may well be wrong.
- 5 See Mushirul Hasan, 'Adjustment and Accommodation: Indian Muslims after Partitions' in K N Panikkar (ed), *Communalism in India: History, Politics and Culture*, Manohar, Delhi, 1991; see also Percival Spear, 'The Position of the Muslims, Before and After Partition' in P Mason (ed), *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity*, OUP, London, 1967.
- 6 Abdul Rahim Quereshi, secretary, Muslim Personal Law Board, has written articles in Urdu defending that Palestinians must remain a secular state because there is a sizeable minority of Christians there who should be made to feel secure. This was in the context of the tussle between the Hamas and the al Fateh in the wake of the death of Yasser Arafat.
- 7 I do not mean nothing happened before. Small incidents, including two aborted bombing attempts, were taking place here and there. From here then begins the systematic terrorist phase in India.
- 8 For this viewpoint see Mohammad Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1967, see esp the 'Introduction'.
- 9 For an elucidation of this viewpoint see the studies in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed), *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims*, Delhi, 1973.
- 10 For studies around this theme see Zafar Imam (ed), *Muslims In India*, Delhi, 1975. There are many more words on these themes but the ones noted above best represent such viewpoints. For an interesting historical overview see also Percival Spear, 'The Position of Muslims, Before and After Partition', op cit.
- 11 There is another debate on this issue within the Marxist tradition. On this see Irfan Habib, 'Problem of the Muslim Minority in India' in *Social Scientist*, June 1976 where Habib assumes, rightly I think, but for reasons I may disagree with, that something of a pan-Indian community has already begun to take shape. Suneet Chopra in his rejoinder under the same title in *Social Scientist*, September 1976 feels that the heterogeneity of factors will not allow such a sense of community to emerge.
- 12 I have developed an elaborate argument through empirical reasoning on the theme while looking at the Jharkhand advisis. See Javeed Alam, 'The Category of Non-Historic Nation and Tribal Identity In Jharkhand' in P C Chatterji (ed), *Self-Images, Identity and Nationality*, Shimla, IAS along with Allied Publishers, 1989. While the tribals having

experienced trans-ethnic unification and politically making self-references to them as the Jharkhandis, our anthropological scholarship on the region kept pointing to the sharp differences among the Mundas and the Oraons and Santhals and Hos and what not. Those differences still remain when it comes to kinship rituals or festivals or marriages but it will be absurd not to recognise them as one people, politically. I do not mean to suggest that the Muslim case is identical or, even, similar. Far from it. I am only buttressing the theoretical possibility of a certain process in the presence of X Y and Z and Xi, Yii and Ziii sharply differing anthropological features.

- 13 On riots see Ashghar Ali Engineer (ed), *Communal Riots in Post-independent India*, Sangam, Hyderabad, 1984 and M J Akbar, *Riots after Riots: Reports on Caste and Communal Violence in India*, Lotus Collection - Roli Books, New Delhi, 2003.
- 14 For a very different kind of discussion on the dialectics of Muslim orientations in India see Mushirul Hasan, 'In Search of Identity and Integration: Indian Muslims since Independence', *Third World Quarterly*, 10, 2, April, 1988.
- 15 Among others, see the Symposium on Sachar Committee Report in EPW, March 10, 2007 comprising five articles.
- 16 For an earlier situation, especially in relation to the Gopal Singh Report, see, among others, Muthusamy Varadarajan, 'Minorities: Basic Questions, Possible Answers', Conference Papers, New Delhi, December 19, 1996, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, RGICS Project No 20, 1997.
- 17 It is also reported in the Sachar Report that many areas of Muslim concentration have been designated by Banks as "red zones" or negative geographic zones which means that the banks should be very cautious in granting loans in these areas. What makes the banks declare these areas as not credit-worthy? There is no evidence, I am told by those well-informed, of any greater extent of non-recovery of loans from the Muslims. In fact my experience of work in rural areas tells me that the vulnerable are very afraid of not abiding by contractual obligations whether with the official or non-official agencies. By their very social location, it is not easy for them to defy, unlike the powerful, who can simply get away with whatever they want to in our rule-deficit society.
- 18 Indicators of development here are of an objective, quantitative kind so the matter of neglect or discrimination is qualitatively of a different kind altogether. The point is: in the selection of a candidate for a job, a subjective element of one sort or another is involved. This requires not just a fair assessment of skills or merit but also prejudice, bias or simply the lack of sensitivity as in the case of women even if we write off hostility. There just cannot be any subjectivity when it is the case of choosing an alignment for a road or for providing a doctor or a teacher to a primary health centre or a school and such other things. When such is the case it is deliberate and intentional on the part of decision-makers and ultimately reflects on the nature of the state. During the terrorist blast in Malegaon, a town of a few lakhs with a majority of Muslim population, it came to light that there was not a single government hospital. We are told that the chief minister of the state, in his blissful ignorance, was shocked when he came to know that!
- 19 See James Grant's *Analysis in the Fifth Report, 1812*, edited by W K Firmingar, *Historical Introduction*

to the Bengal Portion of the Fifth Report (1917), reprint, Calcutta, 1962.

- 20 The dedicated champion of Muslim rights and well-being, Iqbal A Ansari is one of the few men who explicitly acknowledges this fact. He writes, "The facts are that the overwhelming majority of the present day Muslims of India are of indigenous origin and they did not have any share in power even during Medieval India, and they did not undergo any socio-economic upward mobility by virtue of their conversion to Islam. Their present backwardness can be traced to their occupational structure and social status that has remained unchanged during the period of about a thousand years." See his 'Minorities in India: The Muslim Case' in *Minorities in India*, Conference Papers, New Delhi, December 19, 1996, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, RGICS Project No 20, 1997.
- 21 Amiya K Bagchi, *Political Economy of Underdevelopment*, CUP, Cambridge, 1983; Indian edition by Orient Longman; see also Irfan Habib, 'Colonisation of Indian Economy, 1757-1900', *Social Scientist*, March 1975.
- 22 Amiya K Bagchi, *ibid*. See also his 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth in India during the Period of British Rule' in *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol XCV, Part 1, No 180.
- 23 Amiya K Bagchi, 'De-industrialisation in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications', *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol 12, No 2, 1976.
- 24 There is nothing written on these lines by anyone. But in a number of conventions of Muslims that I had a chance to be present, this has not been an unusual refrain. A certain leader went on to shame Indian democracy, calling the condition of Muslims a black spot on democracy in India. He had to be gently reminded that it is entirely because of democracy in India that something like Sachar Report becomes possible and much else that is happening.
- 25 There are two kinds of debates going on today without the policymakers trying to link them or at least to see if there is any connection between the figures being cited. I mean the figures about poverty and those about malnutrition. The figures about undernourished children at 47 per cent plus are about double of what the Planning Commission has given out for poverty. Now to me the question is, even a methodological one, who these 20 per cent and more children are and from what kind of families. It is also a disturbing fact that after the lactation period, the number of the undernourished children slightly goes up. Now who the hell are these parents, especially the mothers given the structure of our families, who give birth to underweight children and allow them to remain malnourished? If it is not poverty then it has to be deliberate neglect or callousness. If we do not answer this question in terms of poverty, then we are making a very disturbing comment on the culture informing the Indian family and the attitudes to child upbringing.
- 26 The classic work on this issue is W W Hunter, *Indian Musalman*, available in many different prints. Some very useful material has recently been reproduced in a reader-friendly manner: Najmul Karim, *Dynamics of Bangladesh Society*, OUP, New Delhi, 1980. See also Amalendu De, 'Roots of Separatism in 19th Century Bengal' in Barun De (ed), *Essays in Honour of Prof S C Sarkar*, New Delhi, 1976.