

Muslims Community : Issues and Problems

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Abstract

The socio-economic conditions of the Muslim community of India present a dismal picture. The Muslims are deprived of due representation in public employment even at the lowest level. There is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states, (and among the Muslims, those who identified themselves as OBCs and others); the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development. In fact, by and large, Muslims rank somewhat above SCs/STs but below Hindu-OBCs, Other Minorities and Hindu General (mostly upper castes) in almost all indicators considered. Among the states that have large Muslim populations, the situation is particularly grave in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam.

Keyword: - Muslim Community, Minorities, socio-economic conditions, Employment, Representation.

Introduction

There is a debate in the country about the backwardness of Muslims in India. Mostly it is theorized that it is their religion which is primarily responsible for this state of affairs. Such theorization, to say the least, is utterly faulty and reflects either the anti-Islamic bias of the theorist or his / her lack of understanding of social roots of a problem. No religion can be held responsible for backwardness of its followers. This amounts to mixing up religious category with that of social one. Also, such a theorization seeks simplistic explanation. Weber's Sociology of religion has been criticized and it is beyond the scope in the present study. Suffice it to say that any social phenomenon is a pretty complex one and a social theorist has to look into various factors-social, economic, cultural as well as religious. Also, no religious community can be treated, by a sophisticated social theorist, as a homogenous one. All religious communities are invariably divided in various groups, sects and classes and these groups, sects and classes have specificities of their own. No community can be either entirely backward or forward. If a section is backward, another section will be forward and yet another section in between. It hardly makes any sense to say that all Muslims in India are backward. A section, howsoever small, will be construed as forward. Thus, when we say

Indian Muslims are backward, we mean a larger section of them, compared to the Hindus, the majority community, is backward. And when we say Muslims are backward, it should not imply that all Hindus are better off and have made it economically. There are millions of Hindus, even from upper castes, who are illiterate and poor in addition to those belonging to the Scheduled Castes i.e. dalits (harijans). It is necessary to point these things out in order to fight the stereotypes widely prevalent both among the Muslims and the Hindus.

First of all, it must be stressed that all Indian Muslims are not backward. In contemporary India also, there are quite a number of Muslims who are quite wealthy, educated and well placed in society. They are quite influential in regional or central political power structure. Secondly, it must be understood that the main cause of Muslim backwardness is in their social origin. All Muslims in the medieval period did not belong to the ruling classes which were feudal in origin. Comparatively very few Muslims in India belonged to the upper classes. The vast majority of Muslims were converts from amongst the Shudras of the Hindu society. Here we do not want to go into the controversy about coercive conversion. Suffice it to say that such a stereotype is totally inadequate explanation of the complex process of conversion. It is more proper to say that conversions were, by and large, specially from amongst the dalits (harijans), of a voluntary, and not of coercive nature.

As pointed out before, bulk conversions to Islam from amongst the Shudras by and large accounts for general Muslim backwardness. These conversions took place because to these oppressed people Islam appeared to be much more democratic and egalitarian than the caste-ridden Hinduism. Among these Shudras there were numerous jatis (castes) based on profession. Thus there were Julahas, Khatiks (those slaughtering animals), Dhobis (washermen), Rangrez (dyers), Pinjaras (carders), Malis (gardeners or those who grew and sold fruits and vegetables), Gorkans (grave-diggers), Tambolis (those selling betel leaves and nuts), Hajjams, Lohars (iron-smith), Suther (carpenter) and so on. When converted to Islam, these professions were not given up by them. Thus what changed for them was their religion but not their social status. No wonder than that these converted Muslims were generally looked down upon by the Muslims belonging to the ruling classes. As is well-known the upper class Muslims were known as Ashraf and those belonging to the lower castes as Ajlaf. The latter were also known as Kamins a contemptuous term for these Muslims. Zia-ud-din Barni, a chronicler of the Sultanet period refers to these converted Muslims in the most contemptuous terms and opines that they do not deserve higher education. It is enough if they are taught how to recite the Quran and say prayers which are obligatory for them as Muslims.

Thus it will be seen that a large majority of Muslims was utterly backward on account of the very nature of their social origin and it is these Muslims to constitute the vast majority in India.

It will be seen that in religions like East Bengal where vast numbers converted to Islam from earliest days, poverty and illiteracy ruled the roast. It is well known through various anthropological studies that in Bengal it is low caste Hindus who had, by and large, embraced Islam.

In 1978 Rashiduddin Khan in his article 'Minority segments in Indian polity: Muslim situation and plight of Urdu' states: There is no denying that Muslims have been at the lowest rung of the ladder in terms of basic categories of socio-economic indicators of development.

The socio-economic profile of the Muslims by the Sachar Committee has been depicted as a depressing one. In all major socio-economic indicators, the members of India's biggest religious minority are, on the average, worse off than members of the majority community. First, they spend less on items of daily consumption because they apparently earn less. The incidence of poverty is therefore likely to be higher among Muslims than Hindus. Second, literacy rates are substantially higher among the Hindus and a Hindu boy or girl who goes to school is more likely to go on to college than a Muslim. Third, working Muslims are to be found more in casual labour and seasonal occupations than Hindus. Fourth, among those with access to land a Hindu household is more likely to be cultivating larger plots. Fifth, unemployment rates are higher among Muslims than Hindus. This overall profile is true of both men and women, in rural and urban India and in all States. Moreover, the disparity between the majority and minority religious groups in most cases widened during the 1990s. The only positive feature is that the sex ratio among Muslims is better than among the Hindus. The story then is that in a poor society, the members of this minority religion are more likely to be at the bottom of the heap. Their economic conditions are as remote as possible from living off the fruits of state "appeasement". It is necessary to recognise that for the vast majority of the discriminated groups. State intervention is crucial and necessary. Similarly, the use of economic and social planning as an instrument of planned development is equally necessary. Economic discrimination, in general and market discrimination in particular, is a serious market failure. Thus, planned State intervention to ensure fair access and participation in social and economic development in the country is necessary.

As free India progressed on the economic front, with successive five-year plans reducing the poverty line of its people and improving agricultural and industrial development, the economic condition of Indian Muslims deteriorated. Indian Muslims are able to manage, by and large, a hand-to-mouth existence either by way of self-employment in petty trade or working in the unorganised sector.

In reality the ordinary Muslim was left to his fate and the development schemes devised for uplifting the community were never made effective. Economic and educational deprivation reduced the community's ability to seek relief from government development schemes.

The socio-economic conditions of the Muslim community of India present a dismal picture. The Muslims are deprived of due representation in public employment even at the lowest level. There is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states, (and among the Muslims, those who identified themselves as OBCs and others); the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development. In fact, by and large, Muslims rank somewhat above SCs/STs but below Hindu-OBCs, Other Minorities and Hindu- General (mostly upper castes) in almost all indicators considered. Among the states that have large Muslim populations, the situation is particularly grave in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam.

Thus, from an all-encompassing category as during the British period, backward classes as a category has gradually emerged to specifically refer to those caste groups that occupy the middle position in the social hierarchy and lag behind in terms of economic, educational and other human development indicators. Sociological studies on the social structure of Muslims in India have emphasized on the presence of descent based social stratification among them. Features of the Hindu caste system, such as hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation have been found to be amply present among the Indian Muslims as well. The Census of India, 1901 listed 133 social groups wholly or partially Muslim. The present day Muslim Society in India is divided into four major groups: (i) the Ashrafs who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan, the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam, (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes, Bhangi, Mehtar, Chamar, Dom and so on.

These four groups are usually placed into two broad categories, namely, 'ashraf' and 'ajlaf'. The former, meaning noble, includes all Muslims of foreign blood and converts from

higher castes. 'Ajlaf' meaning degraded or unholy, embraces the ritually clean occupational groups and low ranking converts. In Bihar, U.P and Bengal, Sayyads, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans constitute the 'ashrafs'. The 'ajlaf', are carpenters, artisans, painters, graziers, tanners, milkmen etc. According to the Census of 1901, the ajlaf category includes 'the various classes of converts who are known as Nao Muslim in Bihar and Nasya in North Bengal. It also includes various functional groups such as that of the Jolaha or weaver, Dhunia or cotton-carder, Kulu or oil-presser, Kunjra or vegetable-seller, Hajjam, Darzi, and the like.' The 1901 Census also recorded the presence of a third category called Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India Arzal: 'It consists of the very lowest castes, such as the Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal, and Bediya...'

Conclusion

The Indian economy has made remarkable progress in the last 70 years. Yet, for various reasons, Muslims in India have been unable to enjoy the fruits of development and so they continue to belong to the weaker sections of society. As a result of the on-going trends of globalization and liberalization, the economic conditions of Muslims are expected to worsen since only highly competitive and skilled individuals and industries are expected to survive in such an economy. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the socio-economic upliftment of Indian Muslims.

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