

Indian Muslims: The Varied Dimensions of Marginality

The Sachar Committee Report brings together a wealth of data of immense value with respect to the development and marginalisation of different socio-religious groups, the Muslims in particular, in the country. This article examines the social, political and economic profile of Indian Muslims emerging from the SCR; its regional, gendered and other variations; and the implications thereof.

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The Rajinder Sachar Committee Report (SCR) is of great benefit to scholars and policymakers. Until recently, academics bemoaned the fact that so little data was available on Indian minorities in general and Muslims in particular. It is indeed possible that, with respect to Muslims, the ghost of the “communal” hung so much over politics that sanction for such documentation was not available. While some attempts at the collection and analysis of data had begun, the SCR brings together a wealth of data for the whole country that is of immense value for those seriously concerned with questions of the development and marginalisation of different socio-religious groups.¹

This paper examines the social, political and economic profile of Indian Muslims as available to us in the SCR in terms of its regional, gender and other variations and its broader sociological implications. This article also attempts to relate the SCR data and other documents to the human security and development concerns of Indian Muslim communities. Within this framework, questions of affirmative action are also raised.

Population Distribution

Of the 593 districts in India only nine are predominantly Muslim (over 75 per cent of the population is Muslim). These

include Lakshadweep and eight districts in Jammu and Kashmir. Only 11 districts have a Muslim population of 50 per cent to 75 per cent. These are in Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Kerala and Bihar. However, only 13 per cent of Indian Muslims live in these districts (SCR: 30). Against this data, the extent to which Muslims can and have been taken for granted in public policymaking becomes a little less astonishing.

Thirty-eight districts have a Muslim population between 25 and 50 per cent. These districts account for 22 per cent of Indian Muslims and are in states such as Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Delhi. In 182 districts, Muslims constitute between 10 and 25 per cent of the population and 47 per cent of all Muslims reside in these districts. As many as 77 districts have less than one per cent Muslims. The main areas of Muslim concentration, therefore, are in the Indo-Gangetic plain, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Assam and south-central India (SCR: 30-31).

Muslims are clearly on the margins of the structures of economic, social and political relevance in India. Thus it was that many Muslim groups in Mumbai realised with a start after the violence of 1992-93 that the lack of their representation in the hierarchies of power made them particularly vulnerable to attack. This data also sensitises us to the sense of insecurity of Muslims in Gujarat, for instance, who, constitute just 9 per cent of the state's

population and are scattered across villages and districts and after 2002 systematically hounded out and not allowed to return. It was as a result of this insecurity that the Muslim Relief Committees made specific attempts to re-house scattered rural households only in the relative safety of gated community complexes.

Health, Fertility and Population Growth

While the sex ratio in India as a whole is lower than 1000, it is not altogether surprising that Muslims show a better sex ratio as compared to other socio-religious groups (though why this ratio has been steadily improving may need further exploration). Further, Muslims have the highest child sex ratio of any social group in the country (SCR: 33-38). A combination of factors including religious ideology and particularly kinship and marriage practices might be working together to ensure that the high devaluation of daughters common among Hindus and many other groups is diminished among the Muslims. In keeping with this data, infant and child mortality is also lower than average among Muslims and is definitely far lower than among Hindus. These figures persist despite economic disadvantage and lower levels of female schooling among Muslims.

In part, as I have suggested, these features may be due to the close kinship networks and marital circles of Muslims, contributing somewhat to the greater physical (and social) security of the children. The possibility of "within-kin" marriage practices and lower marriage payments might also ensure that the girl child is not considered so much of a burden. For Muslim women who marry in more tight-knit circles and more often among kin, the support of the natal family in childcare and in the care of the new mother may be of some importance in adding to the survival-chances of the child, including the girl child. Even so, poverty and disadvantage must be partly responsible for that fact that the Muslim child has a higher risk of being underweight in comparison to a child from another socio-religious community.

Fertility rates reveal that fertility varies among the Muslims as among other groups in accordance with social, economic and regional factors. Thus one speaks here of average fertility rather than in any sense of a "fertility norm" for or among Muslims

(SCR: 39). Total fertility rate (TFR) figures show that among the four large socio-religious groups fertility is lowest among the Sikhs, preceded by the Christians. It is the highest among the Muslims. The various estimates show that Muslim TFR is higher than the average by 0.7 to one point.

By treating migration as the residual, as the difference between actual and natural growth (births minus deaths), the SCR tries to make an assessment of the impact of international migration on the overall Muslim growth in India. The figures show that mortality among Muslims is lower and the fertility rate higher than average. Detailed analyses show that the contribution of migration to growth of Muslims is due largely to higher fertility and then secondarily to lower mortality. The contribution of migration to the growth differential between Hindus and Muslims is small (SCR: 41).

Education

The Committee Report shows clearly that the literacy and educational status of Muslims is particularly low. The literacy rate among Muslims is far below the national average and this gap is greater in urban areas and for women. Nevertheless, regional differences do also emerge. In 10 out of 21 selected states, the literacy rates among Muslims is found to be higher than the state average. These states include Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka. In Kerala, the difference between literacy rates of socio-religious communities is minimal. On the whole, Muslims are doing better in this respect in the south and in the west of the country.

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

groups. However, in 2004-05, the Muslim enrolment rate had improved significantly. It was still lower than the average enrolment rate, but was now slightly higher than that of the OBCs.

The data shows the increasing interest of Muslims in education. As mentioned earlier, the invisibility of Muslims at levels of power and influence struck the community forcefully after the ferocious Mumbai violence of 1992-93. The realisation gave rise to several efforts at the grassroots to draw Muslims of capability out of poverty into the services, professions and various levels of government and public sector employment. Similar efforts now appear to be coming to light in Gujarat as well.

In higher education, the differences between Muslims and others stand out even more sharply. The disparity in graduation attainment levels has been widening since the 1970s between Muslims and all others in both rural and urban areas. In the initial phases of planning, Muslims had a higher graduate attainment rate than SCs and STs. That has now changed and the latter have overtaken the Muslims. Muslim disadvantage must be related to a number of factors including their economic status and generally low education levels. It may also be in part due to the lack of employment opportunities. This is partially supported by the data, which shows that the unemployment rate among Muslim graduates is the highest among socio-religious communities, both poor and not poor. It is further supported by the fact that Muslims do not see education as necessarily translating into formal employment. Muslims are badly represented in formal employment and there is, moreover, a perception that they will be discriminated against in securing salaried jobs (SCR: 15). Thus, the low perceived returns from education do not help the cause of retention of Muslims in the education system. The other striking supporting data comes from the very high concentration of Muslims in self-employment activities.

The probability of Muslims and SCs and STs completing graduation is lower than for all other socio-religious groups especially in urban areas and for men. However, the pool of eligible population for higher education is increasing faster for SCs and STs than for Muslims. This must be related partly to affirmative action and the higher perceived returns from education for these groups. Being Muslim reduces the chance of achieving

education at the secondary and then at higher levels. This means that sustained and targeted programmes to increase enrolment and ensure retention are required for Muslims.

Too much has been made of the madrasa issue. It is commonly and falsely believed that Muslims being conservative prefer to send their children to madrasas, where they acquire religious and other education. At the all-India level, a mere 3 per cent of all Muslim children of school-going age are enrolled in madrasas. Many children, however, may attend "maktabas", in addition to their regular school. The maktab gives a religious education and as studies have shown, is a complement to, rather than a substitute for mainstream education. While the number of children with Urdu as their mother tongue necessitates the provisioning of education through this medium in different states, Muslims are not averse to sending their children to mainstream schools. Further, my own ethnographic research has shown an increasing number of Muslims who want an English-medium education for their children.

Employment and Income

Worker population ratios are lower for Muslims than any other socio-religious community and this is more so in the rural areas. Muslim women fare even worse in both rural and urban areas; their lowest figures for work participation show up in urban areas. Statewise figures for women's work participation are not analysed in the SCR, but we can place its data alongside the recent Muslim Women's Survey conducted by Hasan and Menon (2004), which sampled data from 40 districts spanning 12 states. The socio-economic status of Muslim households was compared with a sample of the Hindu population broken down by caste, using a relative development index. While the data underscored the dismal numbers of women in the workforce, the reasons were seen to be complex. For one, in rural areas, low work participation rates particularly in agriculture link up with the low rates of ownership of land by Muslims as a whole. Further, there is considerable difference across regions, the rates in the south being higher than in the northern or central states. This suggests that there are varying structures of opportunity in place in different regions, which constitute Muslim participation in the labour market

differently. Thus, Muslim women are disadvantaged not by religion alone but by a complex of forces including the play of class and gender.

Further, the concentration of Muslim workers in self-employment – street vending, small trades and enterprises – ensures perhaps that the community as a whole is far more exposed to the disruptions and damage caused by urban conflict and violence. As I have suggested elsewhere, the immense fragility of Muslim participation in the economy and the low level of their asset accumulation in general further intensify their vulnerability to the displacements, physical and economic, caused by situations of continual communal strife [Robinson 2005].

As employees, Muslims generally work as casual labour and they are very poorly represented in regular, salaried employment. In this respect, they are even more disadvantaged than SCs and STs for whom affirmative action may have improved standards. Only about 27 per cent of Muslim workers in urban areas are engaged in regular work, while the share of such workers among SCs and STs, OBCs and Hindu UCs is 40, 36 and 49 per cent respectively (SCR: 93). The participation of Muslims in formal sector employment is far less than the national average. Muslim men are over-represented in street vending (more than 12 per cent as opposed to the national average of less than 8 per cent), while women tend to work from home to a much larger degree (70 per cent) than the average (51 per cent).

As suggested by the SCR, traditional barriers to women's mobility as well as childcare and other household responsibilities may play a big role in keeping Muslim women within the confines of their homes and close to the neighbourhood. However, there are also other possible reasons that need to be explored. Muslims live in certain areas in the cities and feel "safer" in doing so leading to their ghettoisation. Urban ethnic conflict and the threat of violence tend to result in the confining or huddling of Muslims into community-dominated enclaves. For women in particular, there is a great sense of fear in going outside of these community-bound neighbourhoods. Their security, and that of their children, is felt to be better assured within the ghettos.

Since large numbers of Muslims are self-employed, developing skills and extending credit should be the focal points of any positive initiatives for the community.

Further, the provision of social security and social safety nets becomes important for such self-employed workers. At the macro-level, sectors which are important for Muslims such as apparel, auto-repair and electrical machinery, are potentially high-growth sectors and policy initiatives focusing on them may yield employment-related dividends for Muslims (SCR: 101-3). On the whole, more Muslims than others are to be found in production-related activities and transport equipment operation. About 34 per cent of Muslims are engaged in such occupations as against 21 per cent of all workers.

Again, Muslims are more highly represented than others in sales related work. Muslim participation is relatively lower in professional, technical, clerical and managerial work, particularly in urban areas. Muslim participation is lower than the workers of other socio-religious groups in regular salaried jobs especially in the government or in large public and private sector enterprises. Further, it is found that they tend to be more insecure and vulnerable in terms of conditions of work. This is not only because of their sizable presence in informal sector employment, but also because their job conditions (length of contract, social security benefits and the like) even as regular workers are poorer than those for other socio-religious groups (SCR: 108).

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

In the current Lok Sabha, there are only 36 Muslims of 543 candidates. There are only 3 per cent Muslims in the IAS, 1.8 per cent in the IFS and a mere 4 per cent

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

Infrastructure and Poverty

It is disturbing to note that with respect to other social and physical infrastructure as well, Muslims are poorly served. Muslim concentration villages, as the Census of 2001 shows, are not well served with "pucca" approach roads or local bus stops. A large number of Muslim concentration villages in states such as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir lack postal and telegraph services. Several of these are states with a high Muslim population. Further, there is a clear inverse association in small villages between the proportion of Muslim population and the availability of educational infrastructure. In most states, the proportion of Muslim concentration villages with medical facilities is lower than the proportion of all villages with such facilities (SCR: 139-49). These facts regarding education, physical infrastructure and health facilities indicate a distinct bias in public service provisioning in Muslim concentration areas.

Muslims have poor access to bank credit. The average size of credit is meager and low compared to other socio-religious groups. The percentage of households availing bank facilities is much lower in villages where the Muslim population is high and this could be partly because of non-availability of such facilities. This amounts to the financial exclusion of Muslims and has far-reaching consequences for a community already economically vulnerable and educationally backward. For those primarily engaged in self-employed work, access to credit is a crucial input. In sum, the data shows that Muslims face high levels of poverty and their condition is only slightly better than that of SCs and STs. Relative deprivation of Muslims is much higher in urban rather than rural areas. The economic conditions of urban Muslims have not

improved as much as the other socio-religious communities.

Conclusion

On the whole it is clear that Muslims suffer from deprivation on almost every front. While they are doing somewhat better in certain respects in some states (for instance in the south), they are generally extremely backward and live in the shadow of vulnerability and poverty. It has been suggested that the relatively better-off position of Muslims in south India is partly related to the fact that some of these states have remained largely undisturbed by communal rioting. Indeed, while communal violence may not be a cause for Muslim backwardness, there is some evidence to argue that the expectation of recurring violence may play a very important role in depressing fortunes, fostering insecurity and increasing social and economic vulnerability [Razzack and Gumber 2002; Mishra and Singh 2002; Robinson 2005].

Demographic transition is also underway among Muslims as among others. In many parts of the world, there appears to be a tendency towards higher fertility among ethnic minority. Promoting security and well-being could do more to depress fertility rates than any panic reactions. Moreover, the strengths of Muslim kinship and family patterns should not be overlooked as they seem to better infant survival rates and the sex ratio. A proper understanding of Muslim familial and kin relations may be central to promoting family planning and child-oriented health measures.

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

There are also several Muslim castes socially, educationally and economically

on par with the SCs. They suffer from stigma and social exclusion due to their status. Such groups experience cumulative disabilities. The SCR has recommended these groups be treated as most backward classes and several measures including reservation be made available to them. It would perhaps be more pertinent to argue that these groups should be included among the list of SCs. SC Christians and Muslims have been struggling to be accorded the same benefits that are granted to SCs professing the Hindu, Sikh, and neo-Buddhist religions. SC Christians and Muslims are not recognised as such under the law and are not eligible for the benefits of positive discrimination.

The Constitutional Order of 1950 listed SCs and STs using the list employed by the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1936. The 1950 Order specifies that no person professing a religion other than Hinduism may be deemed SC status. The limitation has been understood in terms of the logic that religions such as Islam or Christianity claimed the principle of human equality and therefore there could strictly not be any "Scheduled Castes" in these communities. Apart from all its other problems, such an argument cannot any longer be defended since the Order has already been amended in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits and again in 1990 to include Buddhist Dalits. These are both religions that espouse the idea of equality.

In the light of these amendments, it would appear that the continued exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from the benefits of reservations amounts to religion-based discrimination and contravenes constitutional principles prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. The idea of quotas for SC Muslims or affirmative action for other sections of the community should not be considered religion-based decisions. The relevant facts are that Muslims are among the most deprived of India's social groups and communities and their social, occupational and economic profile is appalling. Marginalisation, discrimination, violence and social exclusion have further depressed Muslim aspirations and pushed down levels of achievement. A very large section of the Indian population is being left behind in the drive towards development and this can bode no good for the nation. **EPW**

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Note

1 The 2001 Census had collected data on the socio-economic condition of religious groups and this is invaluable. Prior to that, the NSS and NHFS surveys offered sample data. The work of Abusaleh Shariff and the National Council for Applied Economic Research was noteworthy. Much of their data came out in the India Development Report of 1999. Again, a recent survey of Muslim women by Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2004) provided some revealing data.

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