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The India That Does Not Shine

THOMAS BLOM HANSEN

India's Muslim community rarely receives much attention in the media, either in its own country or in the larger world. When it does, the context is invariably that of victimization at the hands of aggressive Hindu nationalism—Gujarat in 2002, Mumbai (Bombay) in 1992–3—or, more frequently, as a threat to India's internal stability and security. The bombings of the "Friendship Express" that runs between Delhi and Lahore on 19 February, and the even more horrific serial blasts on Mumbai suburban trains on 11 July 2006, are recent examples of events that have solidified anti-Muslim sentiments in India. Officials normally accuse specific extremist organizations based in Kashmir, or the secret Pakistani intelligence services ISI, of being behind these acts, but among ordinary people in India Muslims are widely seen as "anti-national," clannish, and hostile to India as a nation. These attitudes have deep historical roots in the nineteenth century and in the conflicts that led to the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. They have also been systematically cultivated by the Hindu nationalist movement in India to the point that such attitudes, today, constitute a sort of common sense among large sections of the population. While suspicions and apprehensions regarding Muslims have long existed among India's Hindu communities, blaming all of India's problems on its minorities—as has become standard and unobtrusive practice in both public and private arenas—was never common until recently. After 9/11, by way of contrast, the term "terrorist" has been seamlessly imported into the already vicious anti-Muslim rhetoric currently circulating in India.

For scholars and activists working with Muslims in India, it has long been known that the 140 million Muslims in the country—immensely diverse in terms of language, religious orientation, and social class—were among India's poorest and most marginalized citizens. It was also well known that decades of anti-Muslim rhetoric, everyday discrimination, and neglect by the government had brought about a situation of cultural introversion, economic marginality, and a huge deficit in education and social advancement compared to most other citizens of the country.

The Sachar report

Now, with the publication of the so-called Sachar report (named after the chairman of the specially-appointed "Prime Minister's High Level Committee," Justice Rajender Sachar) all of this has become official knowledge.¹ The report was ordered by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in order to shed comprehensive light on the living conditions and general situation of the Muslim community in India. The political motivations were clear: a large and disaffected Muslim minority—the biggest minority in the world—constitutes a significant security challenge but also a significant pool of votes which the Congress party used to be able to bank on but has lost since the 1980s. However, there are more than political tactics involved here. The rapid transformation of India's economy demands new forms of intensive governance, better infra structure, and a more efficient utilization of the enormous reserves of skills and manpower in the country. Muslims are generally not part of the ongoing economic boom or even its derived effects, such as the service- and security-related industries, which recruit very few Muslims. Political and social life in India has always been deeply segmented, but now the new economic boom threatens to disentangle India's Muslims from its mainstream economy. The report states quite clearly that it was motivated by a need to collect and systematize existing knowledge about the Muslims in India in order for the government

The 140 million Muslims in India receive very little media attention. The resulting lack of knowledge has assisted Hindu nationalists in cultivating stereotypical depictions, but has hindered policies aimed at the incorporation of Muslims into Indian society. This article analyzes a recent government report about Muslims in India and shows that the oft-commented upon introversion of Muslims is not an innate propensity of Muslims, but a reaction to decades of exclusion from broader social life.

to be able to calibrate future initiatives to (re-)incorporate Muslims into Indian society, and in order to qualify a debate on minorities that "largely revolved around perceptions and rhetoric."²

The work of the Sachar committee is both remarkable and deeply disturbing in its documentation of decades of systematic neglect, non-action, and open exclusion of Muslims from virtually every facet of life in the country. In the preface to the report, the committee

admits difficulties in collecting data and corroborated knowledge, but also states that its methodology included a large number of visits to different states in India and meetings with many local leaders, business people, intellectuals, and social activists in these states. This process of consultation received an overwhelming response from Muslims across the country. It is indeed remarkable that the first chapter of the report is entirely devoted to a compilation of the views and perceptions recorded in these meetings. The report does not judge the validity or veracity of these perceptions, but argues very sensibly that they "are not built in a vacuum," and that such perceptions form an essential part of the reality that the government has to deal with.

Laying demographic anxieties to rest

In a country that has been saturated by longstanding right-wing stereotypes of Muslims as a "pampered minority" that is against birth control and wants to dominate Indian society, the chapter in the report on demographic trends is indeed sobering reading. While it is true that overall fertility among Muslims is slightly above average compared to other groups in Indian society, it has been declining over the past decade. It also varies enormously within India and, in many states, the birth rate among Muslims is lower than among Hindus. There is a well-established correlation between fertility and the education level of women. As such, the generally low level of education among Muslims, and especially Muslim women, goes a long way toward explaining the birth rate differences. Other factors are that Muslims generally live longer than Hindus, and that the survival rate among Muslim children is significantly higher than among other communities at similar socio-economic levels. Muslims are less frequent users of contraception and the report reiterates what researchers and activists have known for a long time: there exists a longstanding suspicion of government clinics among Muslims, and there are relatively fewer of these clinics in Muslim localities. The lack of female doctors is one reason for this lack of trust. Another is the perception that the government wants to sterilize Muslims. This notion originated in the forced sterilization drives during the state of emergency in 1975–77 where mostly poor people, among them many Muslims, were targeted. Subsequent "demographic anxieties" propagated by right-wing Hindu nationalists keep such fears alive. The report states very clearly that even at the present birth rate, Muslims would at the most constitute 19 percent of the population in 2050.

Education and living conditions

The most damning evidence of governmental neglect and discrimination at all levels of Indian society is presented in the chapters on education and economic standing. Muslims have fallen behind on every educational parameter since Independence in spite of being more urbanized than most communities: literacy levels are far below the average level and are not improving, the school dropout rate is the highest among all groups, and the average years of school attendance among Muslims is the lowest in the country. There is evidence of systematic

under-investment in government schools and education in areas with large numbers of Muslims, and the discrimination, or lack of encouragement, of those in the educational system is evident. The relative number of young people who graduate is falling as compared to every other group, and the higher one goes in the system of higher education the fewer Muslims one is likely to find. Among graduate students at India's leading colleges, only one in fifty is a Muslim—a figure much lower than any other group, including the former untouchable communities.

One of the reasons commonly given for the high drop-out rates and lack of higher education among Muslims is that there is little incentive because a very small number of Muslims ever manage to get a job in the public sector, the bureaucracy, or the large and rapidly expanding formal sector of the economy, which includes service, technology and industry. The report does indeed confirm that the majority of Muslims are either self employed or employed in small and informal businesses and enterprises. Many of these are in the traditional artisan occupations of Muslims (weaving, carpentry, metal work, mechanics, etc.) and in petty trade. These businesses are small, low-investment and as a whole outside, if not wholly excluded from, the new economy in India. The chapter on bank and credit in the report bears this out and shows that Muslims are less involved in borrowing and streams of credit than any other community in the country. My own experience from working in Muslim areas in Mumbai and Aurangabad confirms that a majority of employees work for Muslim-owned businesses, borrow through informal credit systems, and that the many Muslims no longer even consider applying for jobs in Hindu owned companies. Those owned by other minority groups—Christian, Parsi, Sikh, and so on—are generally seen as more open to Muslim employees. This overall “economic introversion” in the Muslim community creates low expectations of formal employment among younger generations, which in turn adds to the already low level of visibility of Muslims in the public sector. Except for a few states, where Muslims make up around a quarter of the population and where there is a consistent tradition of left-leaning secularism (West Bengal and Kerala), one rarely finds employment rates of Muslims in the public sector exceeding ten percent. In most other regions, the figure is below five percent, and there Muslims tend to be occupied in lower positions such as clerks, peons, or in menial maintenance jobs. The higher the prestige and visibility of a sector (foreign service, top cadres like the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), police services, banks, and the armed forces) the lower the percentage of Muslims; indeed, it is not uncommon for them to constitute less than two percent of the workforce.

The feeling of being outside the state and the mainstream economy means that very few young Muslims appear in the qualifying exams for the civil service and even fewer actually apply for government jobs. A longstanding friend of mine, Asif Ali Khan, is involved in an organization in Mumbai that assists young Muslims in qualifying and applying for government jobs—from the railways to the municipality, among others. A few weeks ago, he told me: “we have sent thousands of applications on behalf of qualified boys in the past few years and all we have got out of it is jobs for a few handfuls of them. We have more success with private companies, not least security companies that now recruit large numbers of guards and watchmen in the city. We have submitted this evidence of discrimination to the government but [there's been] no reaction so far. Maybe with the Sachar report they will be forced to take some action, at least.”

Diverse Muslim communities

The report lists many more features of the current predicament of marginality and isolation of Muslims in India. Throughout, Muslims are treated as a single community spelled with a capital C. This reflects a certain concession to a longstanding ideal of unity among Muslims in the country. The evidence demonstrates a certain common experience of marginality but more substantially it shows that Muslims are deeply divided along lines of class, caste, and gender. More controversially, the report takes on the enduring problem of caste or *biraderi* among Muslims and argues that there exists three general status and occupational categories of Muslims: the *ashrafs* (noble) who “are without social disabilities”;³ the *ajlafs* who are equivalent to what in India is classified as

Image not available online

“Other Backward Classes;” and finally the *arzals* who occupy a position much like the untouchables, or Scheduled castes, in the Hindu social order. The last two categories are eligible for various affirmative action programmes and “reserved” jobs and political representation in India; but these have hitherto only been offered to Hindu communities. Pointing out that caste is a real factor among Muslims and that more than half of all Muslims in India belong to these sections may provoke anger among conservative Muslims. However, the proposal that these Muslim subgroups should also be eligible for reservations and assistance from the government has already provoked a complex set of reactions in India. Predictably, Hindu nationalists find the proposal preposterous and “anti-national” and have denounced Rajender Sachar as “caring for terrorists.” Many leaders and spokespeople of lower caste Hindus and ex-untouchables, for whom these provisions are at the heart of their political consciousness and organization, have been somewhat wary about the prospect of sharing the benefits of affirmative action. The issue of reserving jobs and providing education for Muslims is thus bound to be controversial, and the debate over this already overshadows the full range of compelling evidence and complex recommendations made in the Sachar report.

Marginal but proud

The Sachar report describes a diverse community which, though marginalized in multiple ways for decades, retains a strong sense of pride, and an unusual resilience. The cultural, economic, and political introversion among Muslims is often described in public debates in India as the essential obstacle for all to overcome, as if these were innate characteristics of Muslims. This report has authoritatively shown that present circumstances are the response of a proud community to decades of systematic exclusion from broader social networks in India. The question, of course, is whether the report's many and well thought-out recommendations can be transformed into viable policies in the broad centrist coalition that governs India at the moment. A related question is whether any of these recommendations—e.g. to create mixed public spaces, mixed neighbourhoods, and mixed schools and education—can ever be implemented. Will such policies address the apprehensions and anger among young Muslim men with few job opportunities, who are routinely harassed by the police, and incarcerated three times more often than anyone else in the country? Whatever happens, this report stands as a powerful “myth buster” that should significantly reduce the blame placed on Indian Muslims for the latter's marginality and poverty.

Notes

1. Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Government of India, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report* (New Delhi, November 2006).
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 193.

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**Convention
of displaced
Indian Muslims,
Ahmedabad,
1 February 2007**

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