Backwardness among Indian Muslims: A need to go beyond Sacchar

Shuja Shakir
Associate Professor in Pol. Sci.,
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar
Marathwada University, Aurangabad,
Maharashtra

Introduction

This paper seeks to address two important issues pertaining to problem of Muslims in India: backwardness among Indian Muslims and the need for a change in their attitude in the changing socio-political context of the country. After independence, even as the country embarked on a definite path of growth and its myriad communities joined the bandwagon to progress, the Muslims have tended to remain comparatively stagnant and underdeveloped. On all possible parameters – social, educational and economic – Sacchar Commission found them lurching at the bottom with their condition being worse than that of Dalit. Sacchar Commission did not, however, say anything new when it said Muslims were seriously lagging behind. It only confirmed what the hordes of Muslim scholars – M. Mujeeb, A.A Engineer, Moin Shakir, Rafiq Zakaria, Wahiduddin Khan, Mushirul Hasan and others - had been saying for long about the Muslims who were increasingly being marginalized and ghettoized in the independent India. What Sacchar Report did was to put the extent of Muslim deprivation in a perspective in an organized way and thus open the Pandora's Box in context of Muslim backwardness. Following this report, the community leaders as well as Muslim well-wishers from other communities started nailing the state for its failure to uplift the sagging community from throes of marginalisation. Most of them demanded that if the government of the day was serious about capacitating the Muslims, it needed to implement the recommendations of Sacchar report. In short, solution offered by Sacchar report has been made out to be a panacea for all the ills that afflict the Muslim society in the contemporary India.

However, it is hard to agree with the claim that recommendations in the Sacchar report carry a ubiquitous solution to Muslim problem. True, state support is indispensable to enabling a community. But it is difficult to accept that only political solution is enough to affect the requisite change in the socio-economic conditions of as huge a section of population as Muslims. For a change to be genuine it must come from within. No community can tap its full potential without bringing about crucial changes in its outlook and attitude first. Having said that, however, it is equally necessary to underline that it would be preposterous to ask somebody to try out a remedy when she does not even know the nature of malaise. And that's a grave problem with Muslims: most of them do not fully comprehend the nature of their

malaise. For them, the probable cause of their backwardness is a pervasive discrimination and lack of faith in their loyalty, which requires them to repeatedly prove that they are well-meaning and peace-loving citizens; they must show that they don't resist change and that, leaving aside their outmoded traditions, they are ready to accept modern way of life. By and large, they feel that no matter what they do, they would remain second-class citizens, segregated and discriminated against. If changing is going to yield the similar consequences as not changing then why take the trouble to change at all? To a Muslim mind, what is thus a redundant exercise to the Hindus, it is orthodoxy and rigidity. An unending vicious cycle of recrimination thus continues to operate in the mass psyche across the communities. In this context, it is imperative to understand the real facets of Muslim backwardness and attempt to dispel certain misunderstandings about it.

Whence Muslim Backwardness

Viewed in the historical context, there is nothing unique about the Muslim backwardness. India had always been a predominantly agrarian society and masses, both Hindus and Muslims, were more or less fated to live under economic hardships. What is, however, extraordinary about Muslim backwardness is it went from bad to worse while the other communities in India, notably Hindus, gradually came out of it or at least made efforts in that direction, which raises two important issues. One, the establishment, both foreign and indigenous, did not do anything substantial to prevent the downward slide of Muslims. Two, there were no significant efforts within the Muslim community, which, given its conservative outlook, failed to improve the lot of its members.

Role of Establishment

While there is a little evidence to show that Muslims masses were prospering earlier, the Muslim backwardness is usually traced from the aftermath of 1857, when British suspected that the ill-planned Uprising had a predominant Muslim character and chose to chastise community for its anti-establishment stance. And so harsh was this chastisement that the renowned Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, who was a witness to the macabre dance of British vengeance, wrote, "Here there is a vast ocean of blood before me, God alone knows what more I have to behold."[1] It may be noted that British specifically targeted the Muslim elite, whom they depleted of all the luxuries these fortunate (now unfortunate) few had so far enjoyed. British justified their action on the grounds of a humane and civilized administration. "The truth is that under Mohammedans the government was an engine for enriching a few…it never seems to have touched the hearts or moved the consciences of the rulers that a vast population was toiling bare-backed in the heat of summer and in the rain of autumn, so that a few families in each district might lead the life of luxurious ease."[2] After the Uprising, British understood the significance of keeping Hindus and Muslims divided. An essential part of Muslim chastisement also consisted in promoting Hindus in the administration with the result that "all sorts of employments great and

small are being gradually snatched away from me Mohammadans and bestowed on men of other races particularly the Hindus."[3]

But does that mean that Muslims had no economic issues before 1857? It is usually assumed that since Muslims ruled India for 800 odd years, the situation for the ordinary Muslims was a bed of roses and that only Hindus bore the burnt. This is clearly a misperception. History does not bear it out that the Muslims rulers ever Islamized their rule at any point of time. A few hardline names like Aurangzeb might crop up occasionally, but they remain more of an exception than a rule. Mostly, Muslim rulers ruled like any other power-hungry monarchs. Their administration remained oppressive for the commoners largely comprising small-time peasants and artisans, no matter what community these gullible masses belonged to. And this oppressive machinery of administration was kept well-oiled by the Nawabs and Zamindars who exploited Hindus as well as Muslims to sustain themselves in power. Muslim backwardness therefore definitely dates back to a period much earlier than 1857.

Partition and Beginning of Discrimination

Partition dealt a deathblow to Indian Muslims. Overnight they became a minority in the land where they once were a majority. Partition caused their loyalty to India to be questioned. Majority community felt that since Muslims had got what they had wanted – Pakistan – they had no business staying in India. Rightist Hindus resented the Islamic makeover that Pakistan was gradually beginning to acquire immediately after its formation. India adopted a secular constitution with all her citizens enjoying equal rights; with Pakistan, however, case was different. Despite Jinnah saying that "You will find that in the course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, as citizens of the state,"[4] Pakistan finally surrendered to the growing pressure, both from within and without, to Islamize. Very soon Jinnah's Seville row suits were discarded in favour of traditional Sherwani and Shalwar; and his favourite cigar yielded place to 'Jinnah Cap'. Very soon the country's first Dalit Hindu Law Minister, Jogendra Nath Mandal, had to flee and take refuge in India because Pakistan's first Prime Minster was busy declaring Islam as official religion of the country and Mandal's Cabinet colleagues were already shunning him and denying him access to secret files.[5]

It is an open secret how minorities are treated in Pakistan[6]. In May 2007, Islamic militants threatened the Christians to convert to Islam within a few days or face dire consequence.[7] The victims were wary of reporting the matter to police for obvious reasons. The constitution of Pakistan segregates its citizens on the basis of religion, which can lead to serious issues of human rights.[8] The zealots amongst Hindus in India took a cue from these developments. So when Golwarkar said, "Right from its inception it (Pakistan) has been indulging in inhuman atrocities and religious domination of the worst type on its hapless minority…"[9], it is not hard to understand why it carried such penetrating appeal for an ordinary Hindu.

Partition compounded the problems of Muslims both at psychoneurotic as well as economic levels. Thanks to the violence and bitterness bred in its wake, it made the Muslims in India just 'Muslims' with nobody caring to differentiate between them based on their caste and occupational markers.[10] None cared for the fact that it was a matter of life and death for the Indian Muslims to make both ends meet; none cared, although it was out long before Sacchar Report, that for instance 75% of Muslims in Ahmedabad were destitute[11]; and none cared that majority of Muslims were engaged in traditional production activities that hardly guaranteed them two square meals. In fact, in the eyes of a Hindu who was increasingly moving to a rightist position after partition, the entire Muslim community that stayed back was implicit supporter of Pakistan. It was even construed as a ploy on part of Muslim League to leave behind a section of Muslims in India as its agent that could report to it. The suspicious attitude about Muslims was not restricted to the rightist Hindu organizations as such. It was growing thick even amongst the so-called secular Congressmen. "Every Indian Muslim should 'realize clearly' what loyalty to the nation would mean if Pakistan invaded India…. Every Muslim in India would be required to shed his blood fighting the Pakistani hordes, and each one should search his heart now, and decide whether he should migrate to Pakistan or not."[12] Consequently, Hindu suspicion of Muslims became fountainhead of discrimination against the Muslims, no matter what category they came from. Sad part of the story is it is very much alive as of now, needing just a small waft of air to set the entire embers aflame again. George Fernandes reported that during the Bangladesh War in 1971, the then Municipal Commissioner of Bombay transferred a large number of Muslim workers from Vaitarna water works to the city. When the workers' Union insisted upon knowing the reason, the commissioner replied that he had special instructions from the Union Home Ministry that Muslims should not be kept in sensitive posts. Vaitrana Water Works supplied drinking water to then Bombay city and Mrs. Gandhi's government was not prepared to trust Muslims in such sensitive post. During the same time, a young Muslim girl stenographer was removed from Bhaba Atomic Power Centre at Trombay on the same grounds.[13]

It is usually assumed that because of discriminatory attitude of Hindus in general Muslims have remained backward in India. They have been denied job opportunities as well as loan facilities. The result is Muslims have been irretrievably pushed to the periphery. Muslims employed in the government jobs is less than a third of their population share; even in the West Bengal that saw uninterrupted rule of Leftists for a significant length of time, Muslim percentage in government jobs was a paltry 4.2.[14] More than half of Muslim population reels below poverty line. The rest is marginally or self-employed. Not a single Muslim figured among the 50 industrial houses up till 1985. Muslim industrialists owned only 4 units in a group of 2,832 industrial enterprises, each with sales of Rs. 50 million and above. In the smaller industrial sector, they owned about 14,000 units out of a total of 600,000 of which 2,000 belonged to the 'small' category with a limited capital outlay.[15] And the

Sacchar Report came as a last nail in the coffin of Muslim backwardness. It established that unemployment rate among Muslim graduates is the highest among all socio-religious communities in India. Banks avoid disbursement of loans to Muslims entrepreneurs. In fact, the average amount of bank loan disbursed to the Muslims is 2/3 of the amount disbursed to other minorities and in some cases it is half. Some banks that call themselves professional have marked out Muslim localities as 'negative zones' where bank credit and other facilities are not generally given. The commission found substance in the charge that there appeared to be a methodical conspiracy to deny Indian Muslims any meaningful political participation. For example in states like Bihar, UP, and West Bengal, "Muslim concentration assembly constituencies are declared as 'reserved' constituencies where only SC candidates can contest elections."[16]

There is no denying the fact that Hindu discrimination of Muslims, rooted in the cruel facts of history, constituted a crucial component of Muslim backwardness in India. But the question is whether precarious socio-economic condition of the Indian Muslims is solely due to the 'discriminatory attitude of Hindus'. Would it be appropriate to assume that if there were no discrimination, the situation of Muslims would have been totally reversed? It is hard to answer in affirmative.

Muslim backwardness, like backwardness of any other community in India, needs to be understood in historical context. Like their poor Hindu counterparts, a larger section of Muslims has lived in rural parts of the country. Locational differences, regional disparities and the nature of the state cannot be side-tracked while attempting to assess the economic conditions of a community. If the Hindu discrimination was the only cause of Muslim backwardness, the Muslims in the nations where they are in majority and where there no Hindus would have been well-off without any problems. Statistics clearly show that this is not the case.

Muslims are not homogenous

It is pertinent in this context to understand the composition of Muslim society in India. A myth sought to be perpetuated is that Muslims are a homogenous community and to prove this their so-called *'en bloc'* voting pattern is cited as evidence. This is a trashy argument. Islam forbids caste system, but the class and status divide amongst Indian Muslims is often so glaring that it often leaves the advantage of not having caste system truncated. Muslims have different sect-based identity (Shia or Sunni). They may subscribe to different juridical lineage (Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi or Maliki). Even ethnically, they are vastly different, for Bohras and Ahmediyas are also counted among Muslims though the orthodox within the community do not agree. Religiously, they may have different means of reaching the God. Those following Wahabi brand of Islam advocate strict adherence to the Quran, the Prophet and his Hadith, while the Sufis would have an additional divine intervention of the Walis (Saints). The orthodox would see bowing before the grave

of a saint in a *Dargah* an unforgivable violation and a mark of blasphemy, but, to Sufis, *Dargah* represents an eternal symbol of spiritual solace and divine pervasion.

The class divide also shows up and usually in surprising contexts. Muslims are Ashraf (high class), Ajlaf (low class) and Arzal (lowest class akin to Hindu Dalit). No less a person than Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan, held that those of 'low birth' were useless to the country and only high born could be could be loyal to the nation and government. He and with him the Muslim nobility opposed the British proposal for democratically electing the members to the legislative council and insisted that only those from the nobility and those of High birth be made members. He opposed merit as a criteria saying even if a boy from an *Adna* (low) family is able to acquire a B.A. or even an M.A. degree, he cannot be allowed to sit in the Viceroy's Council. Sir Syed also opposed the holding of the Indian Civil service exams in India and his argument was that even the low born will be able to sit for the exams and God forbid they could become officers and lord over those of Noble birth. Sir Syed had elsewhere argued that it was only the low born Muslims that had taken part in the 1857 revolt and that the Muslim nobility was always loyal to the British. He also stated fairly clearly that he had opened his college for the sons of the Shurafa and not for the Arzal, the sons of weavers and water carriers.[17] Then there is a regional dimension. Muslims of Kerala, for example, have no linguistic or cultural problems as faced by the Muslims of U.P. and Bihar. There cannot be any common language and common culture for all Muslims in the country.[18]

There is no dearth of divisions among Muslims and they keep surfacing from time to time. Recently, activists like Ali Anwar have been raising the issue of '*Pasmanda*' (low-caste/*Dalit*) Muslims whose class interests are immensely different from those of the better-offs within the community and who find themselves at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Demand for the betterment of *pasmanda* Muslims might have been a recent phenomenon, but their presence had been recorded as early as in 1901 Census, which mentions about 133 low castes amongst Muslims, some of which are so low that with them "no other *Muhammadan* would associate, and who are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground."[19]

Is Islam Growth-Curbing?

Quite obviously, in matters other than religious, there is little to tell the Muslims from Hindus in the country. Then why is it that, roughly after 100 years of the fall of Mughal Empire, even as Hindus made significant economic strides, Muslims started getting more and more marginalized? There are a few theories in this area, some of which sound plausible while others, though more popular, look implausible.

A theory that sounds somewhat plausible and has been advanced by Kuran and Singh, says that pre-modern commercial and wealth management practices delayed the Muslim economic modernization, thus contributing to the Muslim underperformance. Muslim backwardness and Hindu forwardness did have

something to do with the inheritance system of both communities. "In Islamic law, property rights reside in individuals; there is no such thing as collective ownership, except by contract, through a revocable partnership of actual individuals. Thus, an estate consists of assets owned by a deceased individual, and these assets are partitioned among individuals. By contrast, Hindu law recognizes individual ownership as well as collective ownership by a family whose membership changes through births and deaths. When a Hindu patriarch dies, he may leave behind, along with personal property, the assets of a business collectively owned by his survivors. The survivors may choose to keep the assets together under a new family patriarch."[20] It means that if one on hand, Hindus, under their *'inegalitarian'* inheritance system (because it did not give women share in property) could consolidate the wealth, the Muslims lost it due to fragmentation (despite their inheritance system being egalitarian that gives share to daughter from father's property). Earlier despite mass conversions, there were little differences in cultural practices of Hindus and Muslims, but the British judicial system, that had begun to interpret property issues strictly according to scriptures, turned out to be a crucial factor in promoting Muslim economic backwardness. Sidestepping the class/clan/caste/cultural diversities among Indian Muslims and herding them all under one law, it proved to be single most villainous factor in the keeping Muslim backward.

For some it implies that the very nature of Islam is a causative factor in the backwardness of Muslims. The proponents of this standpoint cite the case of Islamic countries where despite oil wealth, the conditions of citizens remain pathetic following "high illiteracy rates, deterioration of education, the slow-down of scientific research and technological development, poor production bases and competitive capacity, rampant poverty and mounting unemployment rates."[21]

Is Islam then actually responsible for this sorry state of affairs amongst Muslims the world over?

Nothing of this sort has so far been conclusively established because there is a lack of scientific interest in investigating the link between Islam and development, the reason being "uncommonness of interdisciplinary contacts between religion and economics."[22] Yet there are theories that seek to establish a link between Islam and underdevelopment. For instance, Earnest Renan says that early Islam and its Arab Propagators were hostile to science and philosophy. Knowledge advanced under Arab domination only under the Persian and Hellenic influences. Finding Islam a deterrent to growth, Arther Lewis contends that this can be proved by looking at the 'Moslems in India' who constitute a lethargic minority.[23] These theories look implausible for the reason that none of them answers a simple question that if Islam is growth-inhibiting, how between 8th and 13th Century Muslims, easily surpassing the Europeans, were at the forefront of scientific and technological innovations.

Maxime Rodinson, a reputed Islamic scholar, on the other hand, says that Muslim economic conditions have nothing to do with Islam per se; rather, material conditions and the response of resignation to them led to the economic descent of Islamic civilizations. Marxist scholars largely agree with this point of view. "Religion has a role but it's of secondary importance. Primary consideration is naked self-interest."[24] Again, it's not religion as such but the "coercive apparatus of the state and the 'robust authoritarianism' that is responsible for the conditions of poverty, backwardness, illiteracy and resistance to democracy in the Middle East and North Africa."[25]

From the analysis of various social, economic, political and religious factors impacting the Muslim backwardness, we can broadly summarize that,

1. Muslim backwardness in India is an age-old phenomenon and cannot be traced from a specific period;
2. Hindu discrimination of Muslims constitutes a small link in the chain of Muslim backwardness;
3. Muslims being as heterogeneous as Hindus do not have similar range of problems across the various regions of the country;
4. Faith in Islam is not responsible for keeping Muslims backward; rather, the material conditions and the kind of response that the community frames to them proves to be a determining factor in its economic condition; and,
5. State support can mitigate Muslim backwardness, but only to an extent. Major efforts in this direction need to come from the community itself.

Need for Change amongst Muslims

Muslims need to change their outlook on a number of issues so that they become a part of mainstream and also retain their identity as Muslims. Muslims largely feel any talk of joining the mainstream implies abandoning religious identity, which is a mistaken thinking. Need of the hour for them is to focus on "(1) Education (2) Employment (3) Social adjustment with Hindus (4) Family Planning and (5) Political realism."[26]

The issue of education is crucial amongst Muslims today. It's ironical that pursuit of knowledge is highest calling in Islam and one seldom sees Muslims winning intellectual prizes at national or international level. Sacchar Commission notes that "25% of Muslim children in the 6-14 year age group have either never attended school or have dropped out. In premier colleges only one out of 25 under-graduate students and one out of 50 post-graduate students is a Muslim. The Commission also stresses that one reason why Muslims send their children to Madarsaas is access to government schools is seriously limited. Affirmative action of the state is certainly called for in this area. But it has to be understood that in this era of globalisation when the state is increasingly withdrawing from sphere of public welfare, too much of reliance on the affirmative action of the state would not be fruitful.

Madrasa system is very useful for the community as these madrasas house a number of children from destitute Muslim families that cannot feed and school them. However, madrasa syllabi need to be reassessed. Generally, the syllabi include learning of the holy Koran by heart, *tajweed* (correct pronunciation of Koranic verses), *tafseer* (interpretation of Holy Scriptures), *fiqah* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *shariah* (Islamic law), *ahadis* (life and decisions of the holy Prophet on various issues brought before him by the faithful), *mantiq* (philosophy), *riazi* (mathematics) and *falakiat* (astronomy), and *tabligh* (spreading the word of god).[27] If other subjects Physical sciences along with computer education, and a few vocational courses are added, what is the harm? Islam certainly will not forbid imparting of latest knowledge. Muslims have to understand that image of Madrasa has taken a beating in the recent times. Pakistani administrator, Zia ul Haq set up several deeni madrasas along Pakistan-Afghanistan border to produce motivated jihadis to fight alongside the Mujahideens against Soviet forces in 1980s. Impression has ever since gained the ground that madrasas are nothing but a breeding-ground for Jihadis. This is a vague generalization and the community needs to do something about dispelling this kind of impression.

Muslims need to understand the meaning of secularism properly. As the term has evolved in Indian context, it does not mean opposition to any religion or any religious values. It is all about Indian citizen being free to follow his or her religion inside his house with just being a citizen on the streets. As the societies across the globe are becoming multicultural, developing a truly secular mindset is mandatory for inter-community interactions. A general perception is Muslims would have sharia for themselves and want other communities to be secular, which is considered a double-standard. When Mustafa Kemal Pasha of Turkey abolished Khilafat and introduced secularism in Turkey, it had several fundamentalist Muslims across the world seething. But the great Muslim intellectual poet and philosopher, Allama Iqbal appreciated the idea and stressed that end of caliphate was trigger for Islamic renaissance. "Modern Turk is inspired by realities of experience and not by scholastic reasoning of jurists who lived under different conditions of life. To my mind these arguments (Turkish Republicanism and secularism), if rightly appreciated, indicate the birth of an International ideal which, though forming the very essence of Islam, has been hitherto over-shadowed or rather displaced by Arabian Imperialism of the earlier centuries of Islam."[28] Certainly, a loud and clear message for Indian Muslims.

Finally, Muslims are perturbed about the spineless character of their leadership in the current times. Muslim leadership is seen taking up non-issues when the community is reeling under a variety of real problems. Some time back, Shahi Imam exhorted Muslims not to join Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement for a curious reason: they shout 'vande maatram' and 'Bharat mata ki jai', which is un-Islamic.[29] This kind of leadership gives the impression that it relishes not being a part of the mainstream. It hardly attaches any importance of democratic and secular rights of

the people. Not a single Indian Muslim leader talked about supporting people's democratic movement when Jasmine revolution swept across the Arab World recently. Nor does it care that genuine problems of Muslims – poverty, unemployment, women's empowerment, and so on – are taking a back-seat even as the national attention gets diverted to emotional and cosmetic issues that community leaders usually dabble in. Situation is no different elsewhere. Muslims are disturbed about the fact that thousands of helpless Muslims continue to be killed and dislocated in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and so on and the so-called oil-rich Muslim countries despite their vast resources and effective networking with USA and Europe are just content with looking on. In India, Mullahs, representing a variety of rival Muslim sects, educated in traditionalist madrasas, constitute the core of Muslim leadership. Many of them, particularly of the Deobandi variety, had been close allies of the Congress Party. Ruling parties patronize some of these groups (in some cases, providing ministerial berths and positions in Parliament to their members, as in the case of the Jamiat ul-Ulema-e Hind-Congress alliance), in return for which these groups seek to mobilize Muslim electoral support for these parties. The relationship thus works both ways, to the benefit of both.[30] Needless to say, it never works for the benefit of masses. Unfortunately, educated and modern Muslim class that could have filled the leadership vacuum remains confined to its ivory towers. There is a little effort at plugging disconnect between the community's intellectual class and its masses.

End Notes

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