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Muslim Indians
Challenges, Struggles, and Contestations

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KEYWORD

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to explain about muslim Indians challenges, struggles and contestations in some aspects. The most difficult challenge for Indian Muslim societies is their compilation to confront their Muslim identity in the socio-political arena. Although there are many Muslim scientists there who claim that Muslims are part of India and India is their homeland. However India is part of Darul Safe (Muslim-friendly) where jihad is meaningless. It also opposes referring to Hindus as kafir (unbelievers), with its negative and exclusionary connotations. However, the struggle of Muslims in India is still long, both social-political, educational and Indian government policies towards Muslims who are still discriminatory. Although, what is felt by Muslims there, also felt by Christians in the arena of contestation with Hinduism there.

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INTRODUCTION

Muslim India and Indian Muslims The stereotype of Muslim Indians has long been that they are a relatively quiescent minority that has made its peace with the larger non-Muslim context of contemporary India. Non-Indian Muslims may sometimes scoff at the perceived tameness of the Muslim voice in India or the assimilation of and into the wider secular but Hindu-influenced culture. They will at times profess solidarity with the trials of Muslim Indians. At other times they will note with satisfaction the Indian Muslim willingness to stand in solidarity with panIslamic causes such as Palestine. But they will rarely think of Muslim Indians as a force to be reckoned with in the ummah (the worldwide Muslim community).

It was not always so. And Muslim Indian thinkers see themselves in a larger context. They are heirs to a millennium-long civilization, one of the greatest in modern history, replete with the highest philosophical, architectural, artistic, and literary accomplishments. For much of Islam's history in India, Indian Muslim civilization was regarded by Muslims throughout the world as one of the jewels of Islamic civilization. And until the division of the subcontinent's Muslims into at first two and then three nations, there would have been little question that this was one of the great national traditions within Islam, if not the greatest.

The sense of geographical, historical, intellectual, and cultural unity that Muslim Indians share with Muslims in Bangladesh and Pakistan, common heirs of the same civilization, is politically delicate. It is vulnerable to the ready Hindu chauvinist (Hindutva) charge that Muslim Indians are "anti-national" because they secretly sympathize with the Pakistani enemy, because their Muslim identity is more important than their Indian one. But at the level of culture and religious thought, their South Asian Muslim heritage is a source of

pride; theirs is a distinct and liberal version of Islam which draws on the particular characteristics of their geographical location and historical experience. South Asian Muslims constitute by far the largest regional and cultural group of any in the world of Islam.

The heritage of Islam and of Persian and Central Asian cultures remain an inextricable part of the fabric of the wider Indian national history, culture, and civilization. India's Muslims have been integral to the freedom struggle, to the articulation of a multireligious political and cultural identity for India, and to the cultural and intellectual life of India today. Muslim Indians struggle with a difficult balance: on the one hand, they take pride in their religious-cultural heritage and in the larger national culture that it has formed; on the other, Islam was the basis in 1947 for the division of their homeland. Muslim Indians also take pride in being Indian. They are the ones who chose to remain in a multireligious India rather than migrate to the new Muslim nation of Pakistan.

Yet, despite individual successes, Muslims as a group have not prospered in independent India. Recently, both in India and outside it, there has emerged an inchoate concern that the existence of a large population of economically, socially, and culturally marginalized citizens is an Achilles heel of national unity, as well as a source of potential political and social instability. Some have feared that burgeoning anti-state pan-Islamist ideologies based on a sense of grievance, and the violent groups inspired by those ideologies, will also in the future seek to recruit disaffected Muslim Indians.

Even though the Muslim Indian population (160 million) is almost as large as the entire population of Pakistan (180 million), equal to the population of Bangladesh, and greater than the total populations of major predominantly Muslim nations such as Egypt (80 million), Muslim Indians remain relatively ill understood and understudied. Their preoccupations and predicament are little known among non-Muslim Indians, let alone non-Indians. There is even a sense among Muslim Indians themselves that they do not have a handle on what is happening in the very varied Muslim communities throughout India.

Results and Discussions

A MINORITY UNLIKE OTHERS

Informal and unofficial estimates of the number of Muslims in India vary substantially, and are the subject of polemics by both their defenders and their detractors. The most conservative projection based on the 2001 census would place them at approximately 160 million, or 13.5 percent of all Indians. The dispute over whether the census offers an accurate count of the Muslim population is itself a volatile issue that reflects the volatility of the Muslim predicament in contemporary India. Anti-Muslim right-wing opinion offers estimates of the Muslim population as high as 30 percent of the total population, reflecting anxiety or a more deliberately alarmist stance toward the question of whether Muslims will render Hindus a minority and therefore threaten their security. More extreme Muslim voices believe that the actual numbers are double the official figures, and that the figures are deliberately understated in order to deny Muslims their proper place in the polity, or to mask the scale and significance of their underrepresentation in its key institutions. More responsible Muslim voices have suggested estimates as high as 20 percent. By any count, Muslims are the second largest religious group in India, and the largest Muslim minority by far.

Quite apart from the question of numbers, the complexity of the Muslim position in India arises from the fact that, although a minority in contemporary India, they are heirs to a political history of powerful Muslim kingdoms that long dominated India, and to cultural traditions, indigenous and of Central Asian origin, that have influenced the quintessential features of modern Indian identity. And as recently as the mid-20th century, before the separation of Pakistan, Muslims constituted approximately a third of the population of undivided India.

Thus Muslim Indians do not see themselves as a minority in the way that other minorities do. India is theirs, and they feel a sense of ownership and belonging shared by few minorities elsewhere. Yet, there is also a growing sense of unease with the rise of anti-Muslim right-wing Hindu chauvinism, along with a growing incomprehension of Muslims on the part of ordinary Hindus. Indian Muslims are increasingly subjected to

chronic prejudice based on ignorance and stereotypes.

RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Although Muslims have always constituted a minority in the subcontinent as a whole, the India that was gradually taken under British control was largely ruled by Muslim elites; Muslims of various ethnicities (Turkic and Persian) and dynasties had ruled most of northern India for six or seven centuries in the form of the Delhi Sultanate and the Moghul Empire. In many areas (largely those that became Pakistan), Muslims came to constitute the majority, and the cultures of Hindus in those areas bore a particular stamp of Muslim intellectual and cultural influence. Even areas not directly under Muslim control showed a Muslim influence in the presence of individual Muslims among elites, Muslim minorities among their populations, and syncretic culture in food, arts, architecture, and even religious thought.

The issue of religious identity has been a divisive one in India for a century. No consideration of India's current external security challenges can ignore the role of Islam in the formation of the nations that today divide South Asia. Yet Muslims have been present in force on both sides of the debate between Muslim separatism and inclusive nationalism. The development of a national movement for independence from Britain posed the question faced by all nationalist movements: what was the basis of Indian national identity? Three approaches emerged.

Secular nationalists, Hindu and Muslim, saw in the common and syncretic elements of Indian culture the basis of a national identity upon which to conduct an independence struggle and construct a national polity. These represented the overwhelming majority of Indian opinion. Hindu religious nationalists saw in national independence an opportunity to restore the greatness of Hindu civilization, and to stamp a Hindu character on the polity, on the grounds that the majority of Indians were Hindus. Muslims would be free to practice their religion but would live in a state marked by Hindu culture.

A section of Muslim leadership organized the Muslim League on the basis of the distinct interests of Muslims and Hindus, and a concern that Muslims would inevitably be at a disadvantage as a minority in a representative democracy. This culminated in the separation of British India into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. It was during the period before, during, and after partition that violence between Muslims and Hindus or Sikhs assumed its most virulent manifestation.

The difficulty posed by partition for Muslim interests as a whole was that a significant segment of Indian Muslims were in the Muslim-minority areas that remained in India. There were also Hindu minorities in what became Pakistan, but these were smaller. Although the movement for partition had been led by professedly secular Muslims who eschewed a religious state, Pakistan became increasingly defined by religion, and a combination of violence and intolerance resulted in the departure for India of all but a tiny number of Hindus.

The sensitivities occasioned by the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of the politics of religious identity are extremely complex. Not only did the partition divide India into Muslim and non-Muslim sovereignties, but it divided the Muslim community itself, reducing its proportion, weight, and influence in India. Moreover, the Pakistani reliance on a separate Muslim nation to safeguard the interests of Muslims in India undercut the Muslim position in post-partition India. It detracted from the otherwise unassailable argument for substantial embodiment of Muslim interests as an integral part of the body politic. Despite their numbers, and notwithstanding the legal secularism of the Indian state, Muslim Indians suffered a weakening of their political standing.

It is scarcely surprising that religious nationalist Hindus opposed the partition—and therefore weakening—of a Hindu-majority India. It is equally unsurprising that secularists, Muslim and Hindu, opposed the rejection of a common Indian identity and culture implicit in partition. What is notable is that the majority of Muslim religious and militant political leadership were similarly opposed: some, such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH), on the grounds of greater attachment to the anti-imperialist political struggle; others, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, on the grounds that partition would result in the division and therefore the weakening of the Muslim community and of Islam in India. There was also a sense among devout and culturally proud Muslims that India was their homeland. This is reflected today in the position of the

conservative Dar-ul-UloomDeoband seminary that India is not, as some pan-Islamists would have it, DarulHarb (enemy territory) but rather DarulAman (Muslim-friendly), where jihad is meaningless. It also opposes referring to Hindus as kafir (unbelievers), with its negative and exclusionary connotations.

At the time of independence and partition into Pakistan and India, the syncretic Indian culture was a living reality. Despite being a minority, Muslims could justifiably take pride as Indians in a civilization whose highest cultural, religious, and political accomplishments included inextricable strands of Muslim influence. Hindus for the most part embraced those elements of Muslim influence that lent luster to "their" civilization. This syncretic understanding at the elite level was replicated in forms of joint celebration and community life at the ground level between Hindus and Muslims, including a respectful mutual acknowledgment of religious festivals, a shared reverence for the shrines of Muslim saints, and—in some cases—even observance of the religious festivals of the one by the other.

Perhaps of greatest contemporary relevance was the fact that the secular Indian nationalist movement that struggled to keep India united included Muslims in its senior leadership. Figures such as Maulana Azad, President of the Indian National Congress; Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the undisputed moral and political leader of the Pathans of the North West Frontier Province; ZakirHussain, the third President of India; and many others established unequivocally the twin propositions that Indian nationalism was as much the pride of Muslim Indians as Hindus, and that there was an equal place for Muslims in a free India.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Muslims committed to a wider Indian sense of nationality were an integral part of the independence movement. After partition, they provided leadership and representation for Muslims within the context of a secular mass politics of coalitions of distinct interests. Their diminished numbers, and the association of separate Muslim organizing with the violence of partition and the trauma of Muslim families divided, fostered the practice of coalition politics. However, over the course of time, the intermediaries between the state and Muslim citizens came increasingly to articulate the distinct elements of Muslim interests and aspirations in terms of cultural identity, such as a separate family and inheritance law, rather than those social and economic interests that Muslims shared with non-Muslim Indians.

For many decades after independence, the Indian National Congress party was dominant, and the historical association of nationalist Muslims with the secular traditions of Congress kept them in the fold. There was always a rumble of discontent about the Muslims being treated as a "vote bank" by Congress. Muslims felt taken for granted and felt that they received only token concessions, while elements of Hindu opinion within and outside Congress saw appeasement and special treatment. With the dissolution of the Congress political monopoly, Muslim voters and leaders explored the prospects of coalitions for the purpose of maximizing Muslim power and influence. However, the instability of party politics has, if anything, divided and weakened Muslim leadership and representation.

The exception to these long-standing patterns has been found in Communist-ruled states and those where Communist parties are a powerful presence, such as West Bengal and Kerala. While Communist parties and governments have accommodated Muslim interests more effectively than others, recent discourse has noted that senior Muslim leaders have not appeared in mainstream politics in commensurate proportions, and that Communists have practiced the politics of tokenism just like other Indian politicians. In recent years Communists have been accused of seeking electoral advantage by flirting with extreme religious, antisecular, and divisive Muslim political movements and leaders, such as Abdul Nasser Madani of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Kerala. Others note that the situation is more complex, and that religious extremists are also more willing to form radical alliances with other economically and socially disadvantaged Indians. Madani's PDP, for example, claims to be an alliance of Muslims, Dalits (the most disfavored caste), and the so-called "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs), reflecting Madani's evolution from his original founding of the Islamic SewaSangh, a radical Islamist movement based on the model of the right-wing Hindu RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh (RSS).

The results of the 2009 elections are instructive about contemporary Muslim political behavior. Whereas there has been a significant and sustained trend of Muslims "coming back to the Congress fold," Muslim political behavior has varied across India according to circumstances. Where the political

competition is essentially between the right-wing Hindu BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP) and Congress—as in Delhi, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh—the Muslim vote has generally been consolidated against the former. In states with more multifaceted political competition—such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra—Muslim votes are divided among several parties reflecting varied local or class interests and coalitions.

In Assam, where not only are Muslims a substantial percentage of the population, but where many state legislative assembly constituencies have Muslim majorities, pluralities, or significant presence, the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) has had significant presence as a new and specifically Muslim political party. Kerala remains sui generis, in that Kerala Muslims constitute a steady quarter to a third of the population and have an established political presence and a party—the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)— which has been an essential partner to whichever of the other two major parties in the state (Congress or the Communists) wishes to lead a government. Other well-established Muslim political parties include the Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Musalmeen (MIM) in Andhra Pradesh.

A notable recent development in Muslim politics is the proliferation of new Muslim political parties throughout India, though many have not lasted long. In the most populous and politically most competitive northern state of Uttar Pradesh alone are found half a dozen. Although the precise political significance of this development remains unclear, it does appear to demonstrate a fracturing of Muslim ideological and political consensus in ways that reflect the variegated character of Muslim communities across India. This development notwithstanding, Muslims do find themselves increasingly aware of common interests in the emerging and hotly contested discourse about the nature of Indian national identity, and the place of Muslim ideas and culture within that.

As important has been the development of deep divisions within long-established Muslim political parties and movements, such as the MIM, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH), and the IUML. In each instance, the split has been the result largely of personal rivalry or disputes over dynastic succession or family monopoly (the Owaisi family in the MIM or the Madani family in the JUH), evidence of the quasi-feudal nature of established Muslim political leadership.

VIOLENCE, EXTREMISM, AND THE STATE

In Gujarat state in western India in 2002, Muslims suffered a vicious and systematic series of mob attacks, with gruesome deaths such as burning alive and dismemberment, rape, and widespread destruction of property, mosques, and shrines. The chain of events leading up to this has been described and debated in great detail, and with some controversy. Rightwing Hindu activists had engaged in abuse and violence against Muslims and others on a railway platform at Godhra, the train carrying them had been set on fire, resulting in death and injury, and Hindu mobs went on a rampage against Muslims in Godhra and elsewhere. What is clear is that the subsequent attacks on settled Muslim communities elsewhere in the state, including its largest city Ahmedabad, were systematically planned by political activists closely affiliated with the state's governing political party.

Attackers carried voter rolls to identify the locations of Muslims. Police, with a few honorable exceptions, failed to protect Muslims, and likely acquiesced in and joined the violence. Elected leaders up to the state's Chief Minister have continued to be militantly unapologetic about these events. The term "pogrom" has often been used to describe what transpired. This was merely the latest in a series of events in the more than five decades since independence that had drawn attention to the vulnerability of Muslim communities in India. This pattern has long concerned those interested in Indian political stability and socialintegration, or in human rights more generally. However, there is also a widespread sense in India that the 20th century pattern of chronic "communal" violence has taken on a new significance. There is a concern that a new nexus between state officials or institutions and extremist anti-Muslim organizations simultaneously constitutes a new threat to law and order and a debilitation of state capacity to respond.

STATE AND SOCIETY

The Muslim position in modern India is ambiguous. There is, on the one hand, the emergence of systematic, officially sanctioned anti-Muslim discrimination, sustained by several related developments. One is the steep growth over less than two decades of the Hindu right wing, embodied both by the coming to power (nationally and at the state level) of the BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP) and in the increase in ideological influence of its more extremist and anti-Muslim allies, such as the RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh (RSS), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Bajrang Dal. Governmental power has conferred control of educational curricula and the opportunity to deliberately recruit ideological zealots to public services.

These developments have in turn promoted and been promoted by the emergence of a resurgent cultural discourse. That discourse draws in part on Hindu incomprehension of Muslim experience and opinion, in part on an emerging global sense about the supranational loyalties of Muslims to pan-Islamic identity at the expense of national loyalty to predominantly non-Muslim states, and in part on the increasing segregation of the two groups in their everyday lives. This undercurrent of Hindu chauvinism, or at least Hindu supremacy, is of longer standing than the recent rise of the BJP and its Hindutva allies, according to an influential body of Indian historical scholarship, and it has long been present even in the professedly secular Indian National Congress party, albeit as a minority tendency. Although many have noted the Congress party's opportunistic turn to "soft Hindutva" in the past two decades throughout India, and particularly in Gujarat in the past decade, the tendency may be older.

The countervailing and still influential trend emphasizes the secular traditions of Indian political life and the secular requirements of the Indian constitution and law, and appeals to a syncretic vision of Indian national identity inextricable from Muslim culture and history. This tradition also appeals to the larger requirements of social peace and political stability in a society where Muslims are pervasive and are intermingled with non-Muslims.

Many have leveled the charge of tokenism or "vote-bank politics"—a sense that concessions to Muslims have been cynical electoral calculation rather than service of their substantive interests. There is certainly some truth to this, and often the accommodation of Muslim interests has been of those elements of cultural identity, such as separate laws relating to marriage and inheritance, that emphasize distinction rather than common national identity. At other times, political elites have a particular view of Muslim identity and interests—those articulated by conservative religious leaders—rather than the variety of interests, including those articulated by Muslim reformers, Muslim feminists, or other liberal currents of thought. The perception that there has been "appeasement" of Muslims has given rise to resentments on the part of many Hindus, and has been readily fostered and exploited by anti-Muslim movements and ideologues.

Nonetheless, as clearly discernible is the very real weight and prestige in Indian political practice of the need to address the broader concerns of Muslim Indians. One important manifestation of this is Indian officialdom's repeated search for an assessment of the welfare and security of Muslims. Bodies have been set up under the 1952 Commissions of Inquiry Act or under the notification powers of the Prime Minister to constitute highlevel committees for preparation of reports. Many analysts and observers have repeatedly, and often justifiably, criticized the various investigative bodies as empty gestures, and have suggested that the results have often been a whitewash or have proved to be "dead letters."10 Nonetheless, the fact that the state has felt the need to conduct such inquiries, and has devoted resources (and, in some cases, substantial political attention) to them, is at least a partial reflection of its acknowledgment of the importance of the issue and of the political attention that Muslim interests command in the Indian polity.

In 2007, the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Mishra Commission) arrived at many of the same conclusions as the Sachar Committee about the unacceptable disproportion in educational and employment opportunity for Muslims. However, the Mishra Commission's primary interest for political and social analysts was that it addressed the thorny question that many had raised in light of the Sachar findings: whether affirmative action measures to help victims of the caste system (currently restricted to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and tribal peoples) should be extended to lower caste Christians and Muslims. Many advocates of Christian and Muslim interests have suggested that this is appropriate in light of the fact that the Indian caste system is not entirely absent from these religious groups, and that those whose families before conversion were of lower caste are still subject to caste disabilities. The existence of caste distinctions

among South Asian Muslims has long been an open secret, with differentiated treatment extended to those who converted from Hindu lower castes and those descended from families originally of Central Asian origin.

The Srikrishna Commission report of 1998 reported on the anti-Muslim rioting in Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993 following bomb attacks on the Bombay Stock Exchange. This report rejected the notion that the riots were spontaneous eruptions of Hindu anger, and suggested that publications and leaders of a local right-wing party, the Shiv Sena, had deliberately incited or legitimized the rioting, while the state government had been complicit through acquiescence and inaction. The commission found, in a revealing precedent to Gujarat a decade later, that the attacks on Muslims were mounted with military precision, with voter lists in hand.

CONCLUSION

Like minorities, Muslim Indians experience discrimination. Thus, access of Muslim children tointegrated child development services is disproportionately low. According to the 2001census, there are 11 Indian districts with Muslim majorities. In 38 districts, Muslims are atleast 25 percent of the population; these constitute 38 percent of the national Muslim population. In 182 districts, Muslims are more than 10 percent of the population, and in thesereside 47 percent of India's Muslims. There are also numerous small- and medium-sizedtowns where Muslims are a sizable proportion. All these areas are relatively poorly provided with urban infrastructure and other civic amenities. Some analysts have suggestedthat the geography of public infrastructure provision for Muslim Indians mimics that forthe neglected populations of tribal Indians.

The social marginality of many Muslim communities and populations throughout India compounds this problem. Many Muslims make their livelihoods in traditional artisanal occupations that are obscured to all but the most comprehensive survey. Their participation in traditional artisanal occupations and their disproportionate representation in the informal economy make Muslims less visible and less susceptible to modern social science tools for social policy. In turn, the deficiencies of policy tools act as significant constraints on the capacity of state institutions to address clearly identified and agreed priorities such as access to education. Planning for appropriate numbers and placement of public sector schools is doubly difficult for such populations. While it is dangerous to ignore the role of official discrimination or neglect in the denial of equal educational opportunity to Muslims, it is also important to recognize all significant sources of their disadvantage.

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