

# Indian Muslims & Paradoxes

**Asghar Ali Engineer**

In secular India Muslims, the largest religious minority, face various problems and paradoxes. Constitutionally India is secular and provides equal opportunities to all irrespective of caste and creed. But certain castes and communities are neither equal in practice nor are provided with equal opportunities in the real world. This is paradox for secular India and to an extent paradox for Muslim community as well.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have suffered immensely throughout the history of India. They always remained on the margins and never made it to the centre of the country's affairs. They have been rightly provided with reservations in educational institutions as well as in government jobs to compensate for historical wrongs done to them. The reservations are being extended to OBCs (Other Backward Classes among Hindus) also.

However, history of Indian Muslims is little different. A section of Muslims was party of ruling class for more than 800 years. But a large section of the community comes from dalits and backward caste Hindus converted to Islam throughout medieval ages. Certainly 90% of Indian Muslims today come from these weaker and backward sections of society. The creamy layer of the community migrated to Pakistan from North India at the time of the partition in 1947.

Those who remained in India are mostly at the margin of the society like SCs and STs. Here lies the paradox—a community a section of which was at the helm of affairs, has almost been marginalised. The data –political, social as well as economic –clearly point out that Muslims have slipped below the level of Dalits. In other words, they are more backward today than even dalits.

No doubt a section of the Muslims is availing of opportunities provided by economic development in India. However, this section is very small and their social base quite narrow. This section, it is interesting to note, is coming from low caste Muslims who are mainly traditional artisans or professionals like weavers, gardeners, carders, bangle makers, butchers and so on.

Though there have been three presidents of India from amongst Muslims, three chief justices of Supreme Court and two chief ministers (in Rajasthan and Maharashtra)—and this is cited proudly as achievement of secular India—but a vast majority of Muslims live either on or below poverty line. This is another paradox Indian Muslims face.

Some political parties woo them for votes whereas communal parties like the BJP and Shiv Sena indulge in Muslim bashing citing this wooing by secular parties like the Congress, Samajvadi Party or Janta Dal, as 'appeasement of minorities'. This is third paradox being faced by Muslims. The fact is that they have been completely sandwiched between this 'wooing' and so-called 'appeasement'.

The Congress never transcended the Laxman Rekha of wooing them for votes. Several promises were made but always betrayed. Mrs Indira Gandhi appointed Gopal Singh High Power Committee to recommend measures to improve the economic condition of minorities in 1980, which did good work and submitted its report in early eighties.

Before she could examine the report she was assassinated in November 1984 and the Report was put in cold storage. It was not even tabled in Parliament.

Mrs Gandhi also had announced 15-point programme for economic uplift of Muslims but the bureaucracy turned a blind eye towards it and till today it was not implemented. The government has hardly any political will to implement such programmes. Now Manmohan Singh Government has appointed a high power committee to look into grievances of Muslims under the chairmanship of Justice Sacchar. No doubt Justice Sacchar, like Gopal Singh, is a well-wisher of Muslims and its members like Syed Hamid, Prof T K Oommen, Abu Saleh Sharif and others. All are not only eminent in their own field but also great sympathisers of Muslims and their plight.

The data collected on the plight of Muslims by Sacchar Committee from different states like UP Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra etc. is really shocking to say the least. There is no doubt that the report being prepared by this committee will be highly useful and beneficial. But again the real problem will be whether it will ever be implemented.

Firstly, it is important to note that Muslims should not be treated as an homogeneous community. There are both horizontal and vertical cleavages and regional differences. Since the implementation of Mandal Commission a caste consciousness has also emerged among North Indian Muslims particularly in Bihar and UP. These low caste Muslims—referred to in the past as *kamin zaten* (lowly Muslims) feel that they have always been left out and upper caste Muslims have taken the benefits of whatever has been given to them by political parties.

So whatever recommendations are made by the Committee, this vertical cleavage among Muslims should be borne in mind. The all-inclusive approach should apply to entire Muslim community as much as to entire country. There should be three-tier approach to Muslim problem—political, educational and economic. The problem needs to be treated on all these levels.

It is irony of the situation that Muslim elite for adequate political representation during freedom struggle, Jinnah even demanding 33% representation for Muslims in Parliament. But in post-partition period their representation in Parliament has never gone beyond seven percent and has generally remained at 5% in post-partition period. The secular parties should ensure 10% tickets to Muslims including Muslims of low caste biradaris to make their presence all-inclusive. The Congress party could take a lead by giving tickets to Muslims. In state assemblies the position is still worse. Muslim women should also find place in Party tickets. This may not be in terms of reference of the Committee but this could be informally suggested. They should also be given important positions in political parties. Political visibility of Muslims is important for the community.

On economic level more comprehensive approach is needed. A bulk of Muslims are urban or semi-urban artisans. They need loans from banks for running their small businesses or looms or machines needed for their professions. The data shows that bank loans are not available to Muslims as they are generally not considered credit-worthy. The Government should see to it that loans are available to them and nationalised banks should be asked to rigorously enforce this provision. This will greatly benefit the artisans. There should also be polytechnics established for training of these artisans and also for training them in export-import rules so that they can effectively export their products.

This was recommended by Gopal Singh Committee also. Such polytechnics could be established in cities like Meerut, Moradabad, Aligarh. Bhivandi. Malegaon etc. where Muslim artisans and workers are concentrated.

Such bank loans could be extended to Muslim businessmen who run small business establishments of their own or who want to establish small scale industries. A finance corporation for minorities could also be established or its capital could be increased as in the case of Maulana Azad financial corporation. Central and state governments could contribute. Such measures will help backward sections of Muslims as new entrepreneurs are emerging from these sections of Muslims.

Presence of Muslims is also very poor in administrative, police, military services and at lower levels of administration like clerks, grade four employees etc. Even at lower levels of services their presence does not exceed 5 to 6 percent. At these levels no special qualification is needed. There are enough matriculates and even graduates are available to take up these jobs.

At higher levels like IAS, IPS, IFS etc. Muslim presence is four percent or even less. Again short of reservations the Government should take all possible measures, including special efforts to train them, to bring their representation to the adequate levels. Their representation should go up to 10 percent in coming 10-15 years. Today Muslims nourish the feeling of being left out and this feeling should go with more affirmative measures. The experience of America also shows that African-American representation went down by two-third when in state of California the government withdrew these special measures.

The all-inclusive approach as spelt out by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is highly desirable to give adequate representation to weaker sections of society. This is all the more necessary in the highly competitive modern society. Otherwise, in the name of merit weaker sections of society will be condemned to do lowly jobs only.

One more measure necessary is to let Muslims fully avail reservations as OBCs under Mandal Commission as these reservations are not on the basis of religion but on the basis of backward classes. There are corresponding categories among Muslims under Mandal Commission, like dhobi (washerman), dyers (rangrez), weavers (julaha), lalbegis, faquirs, carders etc. This will also greatly benefit the community as a whole.

Such measures will be necessary at the third level too i.e. for educational purposes. Here too number of measures are necessary. Firstly, minorities should be given more facilities to open their own institutions especially engineering, medical, colleges of education, management institutions etc. Today they find it very difficult to get recognition for their institutions.

Government should encourage madrasas to go for modernisation and establish madrasa boards to have equivalent qualifications to matriculation, graduation etc. by introducing secular subjects like mathematics, physical and social sciences. Thus many existing infrastructures can be easily utilised by giving some financial aid to existing institutions.

Also, state and central governments should establish educational institutions in Muslim localities to encourage more children to attend schools. Today it is noticed that

there are no educational facilities in such localities and they have to go long distances which discourages them from going to schools. As far as possible facilities should be given for education in the mother tongue.

Good primary education lays the strong foundation for higher education and it is seen that one who gets good primary education can acquire merit needed to compete in the market. Let us remember that scope of government job is reducing and private sector is becoming more and more important for jobs. Thus reservation is losing its charm due to enhanced role of private sector. Though reservation for Muslims is desirable as they are on par with Dalits and OBCs but this is no remedy as communal forces would raise hell for Muslims, if ever Government was to agree to it. Muslims would get very little out of it and lose much more in terms of security and well-being. ❧❧❧❧

❧