

Living with Injustice

Zakia Soman

India's largest minority population lives in poverty and socio-economic exclusion even after 62 years of Independence. Muslims live in ghettos across the country with a persistent feeling of fear and insecurity. According to the Sachar Committee, around 4% of Muslims have managed to become graduates; Muslims have a very thin presence in banks, universities and in Government jobs. This sort of socio-economic backwardness could not have taken place overnight. Successive Governments have failed in their responsibility to enable Muslims to participate in India's democracy. The nexus between the vote managers posing as community leaders and the supposedly secular political parties has ensured that the Muslim community remains mired in poverty, illiteracy, backwardness and insecurity. Living with communalism has become the fate of the ordinary Muslim. Since 1947 the community has been pushed to the margins, so much so that some experts feel that they are the Dalits of tomorrow. Worse, unlike the Dalits, Muslims do not have any legacy of social mobilisation and political consciousness. The Dalits were fortunate to have visionaries like B R Ambedkar and Jotiba Phule. Muslims have no leadership worth the name; and whoever claims to be a community leader should own up to the all-round failure.

There are two important reasons, among others, for this dismal situation. One, the failure of the state to fulfil its welfare responsibility towards citizens in spite of the guarantees given by the Constitution; and two, the failure of the Muslim leadership, if one believes it exists.

Everybody knows how Indian democracy is marred by a corrupt and insincere polity which has no interest in the welfare of any of its excluded citizens, be it the Dalits, the Adivasis, the Muslims, the labour or the women. In the case of Muslims this is coupled with the failure to safeguard their lives and properties from communal violence. The discrimination faced by Muslims because of communal mindsets, particularly among the police and sections of the bureaucracy, is a commonly lived reality. Why else would the Sachar Committee recommend a full-fledged sensitisation programme? The community has little or no access to welfare schemes largely because of this communal mindset, apart from a general lack of education within the community. The rise of communal and fascist political parties has added to Muslim fear and insecurity.

The second reason—lack of leadership—is equally important and has far-reaching implications.

It is agreed that in a diverse country like India Muslims are not a monolithic community. There are Urdu speaking Muslims, just as there are Tamil Muslims and Bengali Muslims. There are Sunnis, Shias, low castes and OBCs. And then there are men, women and the youth including girls and boys. Apart from faith there is another common factor that has acquired a huge importance in recent times. It is about how they are perceived by the larger world as a community: "Muslims are dirty; Muslims are backward; Muslims are not patriotic; Muslims are terrorists."

While the challenges faced by the community are of Herculean proportions, the fractured Muslim leadership neither has the commitment nor the competence to address these problems. They are obsessed with non-substantive and seemingly emotive issues. Unfortunately, it suits various Governments that no real demands are made for education, jobs, financial assistance, health facilities, security, etc. All that the latter have to do is to pander to these dubious elements and thus “take care” of almost 15% of the Indian population. The community has paid a huge price because of this. The leadership is not challenged and the Government gets away without fulfilling its welfare obligations.

Why does the Muslim leadership have to be of a particular variety? On issues concerning Muslims, why does the Government consult primarily those who have religious identities? Why does the mainstream media concentrate on highlighting the opinion of a few men with beards and skull-caps? Why do all these people have to be men? Why has everybody forgotten about the Muslim women who comprise 50% of the community? How can any opinion that leaves out half the community be relied upon? No wonder the Muslim leadership has failed to find solutions to the pressing issues.

As for the question mark on the patriotism of Muslims, the question mark is actually on the Indianness of some of the self-styled guardians of the Indian nation. The truth is that Muslims are as Indian as anybody else. The debate on this issue is humbug generated by vested interests clad either in saffron or green. Are you a Muslim first or an Indian is a non-substantive question raised with mala fide intentions and is best ignored.

In spite of the prevailing situation there has been a sure and steady stirring within the community. There are ordinary citizens who want to do something for the community and society. They are teachers, students, businesspersons, professionals, and most importantly, women — people who have multiple identities like most other Indians. Thousands of ordinary Muslim women spread across the country are working tirelessly towards meaningful and responsible participation in India’s democracy. They believe in the values of equality, justice and democracy enshrined in the Constitution. They are working to make democracy a reality. Most of them have struggled to survive difficult personal and social circumstances and are now standing by others like them. Gujarat 2002 is a dark blot on the history of independent India, as is 1984. But most people may not be aware of a positive fallout of 2002. The way the riot-affected women of Gujarat have fought the battle for justice is historic. It is a pity that Muslim patriarchal leaders do not feel the need to talk about this. “Hume insaf chahiye, madad nahi [We want justice, not help],” was an assertion people heard in Gujarat repeatedly. Even as the larger community was dejected and resigned to its fate as almost second-class citizens, it was the women who continued the fight for justice. They said, “Can’t we go to the Supreme Court? Can’t we go to Parliament?” When innocent boys were picked up under the draconian POTA, thousands of them came out on the streets of Ahmedabad and bravely demanded the arrest of the culprits, some of whom were sitting members in the State Government. Similar incidents took place in Mumbai following the 1992 riots, and in other places.

The story has only grown in 2009. Thousands of Muslim women activists are struggling to bring to the fore the community’s sane, alternative and progressive voice. These women are demanding a comprehensive

implementation of the Sachar Committee recommendations, even as they are working to disseminate its findings. They are asking Government officers what they have done for them. They are using Right to Information to enforce accountability in various Government institutions. Slowly but clearly a collective feminine voice is emerging.

It is not religion that has treated Muslim women unjustly, but the supposedly religious men. The Muslim woman has been treated unfairly by the distorted interpretations of Islam's religious texts by some ulemas. What is most abominable is that these ulemas have made it a habit of dispersing injustice in the name of religion.

Isn't Islam a religion of justice, equality, kindness and humanity? How can then some Muslims be more equal than others? How can Muslim men be more equal than Muslim women? How can privileges be heaped on one section while another section is excluded? This is discrimination, this is injustice. And it is common knowledge that discrimination and injustice are un-Islamic. □□□