

WHITHER MUSLIM MIDDLE-CLASS?

Muslims Need an Ambedkar

[Noted Islamic scholar and social activist Asghar Ali Engineer heads the Mumbai-based Institute of Islamic Studies and the Centre for the Study of Secularism and Society. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, he reflects on various aspects of the Indian Muslim leadership.]

Q: One often hears Muslims complain that they suffer from a leadership crisis, that they have no leaders, in the true sense of the term, to guide them. How do you see this complaint? How do you account for it?

A: There is, undeniably, a serious leadership crisis among the Muslims, but I don't think this problem is specific to them alone. Rather, it is one that affects the country as a whole as well and communities other than Muslims as well. Of course, with regard to the Muslims, the crisis is even more acute because, on the whole, they are educationally, economically and socially backward. Further, most Indian Muslims are descendants of converts from various what are today called Dalit and Backward castes, and they still carry that historical baggage. The state as well as Muslim community organisation has done little or nothing at all for their educational and economic empowerment. Muslim Backward Castes (OBCs) have not reaped the benefits of state-sponsored affirmative action policies in any significant way, and Muslim Dalits continue to be wrongly denied Scheduled Caste status. So, to expect the emergence of a progressive leadership to emerge from their ranks is perhaps unrealistic.

I think Zakir Husain was the last Muslim leader in whom large numbers of Muslims from across India could repose their trust. But now there are no such charismatic Muslim leaders with a strong following, not even at the regional level. Instead, the leaders they have are all dependent on the patronage of some political party or the other, and lack grassroots links and an independent voice of their own. The crisis of the Muslim leadership needs to be seen in a historical context. The bulk of the so-called ashraf or 'high' caste Muslims, especially from northern India, migrated to Pakistan in 1947. This is an additional reason for the overall backwardness of the Indian Muslims, which is reflected in the backwardness of their present leadership. Prior to 1947, there was a sizable Muslim middle-class, which had emerged, for the most part, from the decaying feudal order, and they had a long tradition of cultural and intellectual activity. Many of them set up educational institutions, worked for social reform and heralded a new progressive social consciousness. Many of them migrated to Pakistan in 1947. The Muslim middle-class that remained was simply too small to assert itself and to carry on with the work that progressive sections of the pre-1947 Muslim middle class had been engaged in. From the 1980s onwards, a new Muslim middle-class began to emerge in northern India, but, in contrast to its pre-1947 counterpart, it has emerged largely from the Muslim OBCs, who lack the cultural capital of the latter. Moreover, its quest for upward social mobility and assertion is often expressed in the form of a very conservative sort of religiosity, such as in building fancy mosques or patronising madrasas, which only exacerbates the malaise of the Muslims rather than solving it. In addition, with job options limited for the growing Muslim middle-class in India, many of them have taken up better-paying jobs in the Gulf, from where they often return with a very conservative understanding of Islam, which they seek to propagate here.

Q: Why is it that almost all organisations that claim to represent the Indian Muslims are mullah-led-the various *tanzeems*, *jamaats* and *anjumans*? Why is the middle-class

intelligentsia, small though it may be in numbers, not active in such groups? Why have they not tried to assert their voice publicly?

A: The major reason for the continued hold of the maulvis on the Muslim populace and the influence they enjoy is because the vast majority of the Indian Muslims are backward-economically, educationally, socially and intellectually. The power of the conservative maulvis is strengthened by their nexus with political parties that regularly court them in order to use them to garner Muslim votes. This works to strengthen the influence of the maulvis, who are wrongly projected by these parties as the representatives of the Muslims, a claim that the maulvis themselves never tire of asserting. These parties will never do a thing that would displease the maulvis, for they know this would cost them Muslim votes. So, you can see how these parties have a vested interest in keeping Muslims backward, under the leadership and control of conservative Maulvis.

The Urdu papers are also deeply complicit in this nexus with the maulvis, routinely projecting them as the leaders of the community, and, in doing so, so reinforcing Muslim backwardness. By highlighting the maulvis, they know their papers will sell. Conversely, they know that if they dare criticise the maulvis their circulation will plummet. But how can the maulvis provide proper leadership at all when they know next to nothing about the modern world? When the maulvis themselves are backward, how can the Muslims advance under their leadership? The intellectual backwardness of the Maulvis is immediately apparent from the absurd fatwas that keep being issued from one Madrasa or the other. And, because they exercise such a major influence on the Muslims through the community institutions that they control, the Maulvis have an impact far beyond what their numbers might otherwise suggest on the way millions of Muslims think.

Q: But what about the Muslim middle-class, small though it may be? Why have they been unable or unwilling to challenge the authority of the Maulvis or their way of understanding the world and Islam? Why is it that progressive voices of Islam, such as yours, are so rare in India, even among the middle-class? Why have they let the Maulvis assert a monopolistic claim to speak for Islam and the Muslims?

A: I think this has much to do with the educational system in this country in general. It is definitely not geared to promoting critical thought. Rather, it stresses conformity. It produces docile, not questioning, minds. And that is reflected in the acceptance of conservative interpretations of religion even among the supposedly educated middle-class. Take, for instance, the leading Muslim centre for modern education in all of India, the Aligarh Muslim University. It is in the grip of the most conservative elements, such as the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the *Jamaat-e Islami*. Huge numbers of Muslim students in this university are members or activists or sympathisers of these two movements that are deeply conservative and definitely not progressive. Given this, how can one expect and hope for the middle-class that is under the influence of such movements to play a socially progressive role? How can they even think of challenging the hegemony of the maulvis? Matters are made worse because of the growing terrorisation of Muslims and the demonisation of Islam, which only strengthens Muslim conservative elements and forces Muslims to retreat into their shells.

Yet another factor is at work which inhibits the possibility of the growing modern-educated Muslim middle-class to articulate socially progressive thinking. This is the growing tendency among students-and this holds true irrespective of community-to go in for technical, professional courses, courses such as computers or management and commerce, which are subjects that might get them highly-paid jobs, but which certainly do not produce critical minds. And so, they readily and uncritically accept religious conservatism. By and large, they are so taken up by their careers and their consumerist aspirations that they simply have no interest, time and energy for social issues.

Q: Why is it that Muslim organisations, by and large, do not place the educational and economic development of the Muslim masses high on their list of priorities, whether in terms of their own practical work or in terms of the demands that they make on the state? Rather, the focus is overwhelmingly on what are projected as religious and identity-related issues. Does this not only further strengthen Muslim backwardness?

A: Yes, you are right. Their demands on the state are limited to such issues as protecting of Muslim Personal Law or security in the face of communal riots and targeting of innocent Muslim youths in the name of countering terrorism. This is a vicious trap. It is also one that hardly costs the state anything in terms of resource allocation to Muslims. I think the publication of the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra reports have made some difference though, because now some Muslim organisations have started talking about the need for the state to take measures for the economic empowerment of the community. These reports have definitely facilitated a new thinking in Muslim circles, but I am not sure how long this can be sustained because the Government seems to be unwilling to seriously act on the suggestions made by both reports. Some political parties might want some action to be taken on the lines of the recommendations of these reports in order to garner Muslim votes. However, by and large, the bureaucracy is against this. They are blocking the way because, as far as I can see, the majority of bureaucrats are RSS sympathisers.

Q: How can this process of shifting the agenda of Muslim organisations, from mere identity related issues to substantive issues of economic and educational empowerment, be facilitated?

A: For this to happen, the Muslim middle-class will certainly have to play a more important role in community affairs, which can happen only if the maulvis are sidelined. But this is an uphill task, given the small size of the Muslim middle-class and the powerful influence of the maulvis. Things have been made even more difficult than they might otherwise have been with Gulf petrodollars financing a considerable number of madrasas all over India. These Arab patrons have no interest whatsoever in promoting modern education and the economic advancement of the Muslim poor. Many rich Arab sheikhs are so neck-deep in corruption that they think that by patronising Madrasas in poor countries like India they can have some of their sins washed away! They think that in this way they can overcome their guilt and compensate for their sins. And so you have this huge amount of money coming into India to fund splendid, palace-like Madrasa buildings, even in small villages, and these are centres for promoting very conservative interpretations of Islam. Naturally, they work to strengthen the influence of the conservative Maulvis. Poor Muslims might want to send their children to modern, English-medium schools, but because they are simply unable to afford their high fees, they are forced, often out of economic compulsion, to educate them in these conservative madrasas. And so the influence of the conservative maulvis continues to mount.

I often say that the Indian Muslims need an Ambedkar of their own. The vast majority of the Indian Muslims are of 'low' caste background, and a Muslim Ambedkar is what they need. Babasaheb Ambedkar provided the Dalits with intellectual, social and political leadership which played a very central role in their struggle for social justice. He set up schools, colleges and hostels that catered to the Dalits, the poorest of the poor. In contrast, Muslims produced one Syed Ahmad Khan, who set up the Aligarh College. But unlike Ambedkar, Syed Ahmad Khan was hostile to the interests of the poor. The only people he was concerned about were the ashraf or so-called 'upper' caste Muslims, whose interests had been shaken with the advent of the British. And so he set up the Aligarh College to train sons of ashraf families, strictly keeping out 'low' caste Muslims, so that they could get well-paying jobs in the British administration. I think that ashraf mentality, a mentality rooted in an extremely feudal culture, is still very deeply-rooted in the psyche of Muslim organisations, especially in the Urdu-Hindi belt. Most of these organisations are led and controlled by the so-called ashraf. They seem, as Syed Ahmad

Khan himself was, indifferent to the plight of the non-ashraf poor, who form the vast majority of the Indian Muslim population. I think this feudal attitude is one of the major reasons for the overall backwardness of the Muslims. The men who run these Muslim organisations have little or no concern for internal democracy. In such a situation, it would be unrealistic to expect them to be truly concerned for, and to work for, the Muslim poor. That would go against their own interests.

Let me come back to what I was saying about the need today of a Muslim Ambedkar. The so-called ashraf would, of course, definitely not look at this with favour, because it would directly challenge their internal hegemony-in quite the same way as 'upper' caste Hindus, in general, are viscerally opposed to the empowerment of the Dalits. But there is another factor to consider here. There are many reasons why the Muslim OBC or Muslim Dalit movement has not really gained ground despite the fact that 'low' castes form the majority of the Indian Muslim population, and one of them is that no party wants to do anything substantial for the Muslim masses. If any party does something, it is immediately accused of 'Muslim appeasement'. Furthermore, in this age of neo-liberalism, popular movements in general have declined. The Left is in crisis. Even the workers' movement in places like Mumbai has been captured by groups like the Shiv Sena and RSS. In the face of Hindutva chauvinism, the voices of conservative Muslim forces that definitely do not look at favour on progressive popular movements gain an additional boost. In such a situation, it becomes even more difficult for the 'low' caste Muslims to challenge ashraf hegemony and articulate a progressive political and religious discourse.□