



SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MUSLIM MINORITIES IN INDIA: SOME REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

India has committed itself seven decades ago to build an inclusive, pluralistic, and secular society that equitably integrates its religious minorities while respecting their distinct identities and honoring differences. This commitment is particularly significant for the country's largest minority community, Muslims, who constitute 13.4 percent of the population and are also socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged. Muslim minorities face social exclusion, manifesting in segregation across social, political, economic, cultural, and educational spheres. This exclusion demands reorganization through affirmative action. Religious minorities are among the most vulnerable segments of Indian society, with Muslim minorities being especially affected. They deserve social justice and equity comparable to other disadvantaged groups, including Dalits and OBCs. There is a pressing need to include Muslim minorities in the mainstream of the nation's economic development, a goal underscored by the Eleventh Plan. This paper reviews the current status of Muslim minorities in India and critically analyzes their socio-economic and educational representation. It also offers recommendations for inclusion of Muslim minorities into the government's development agenda, emphasizing the necessity of inclusive policies.

Keywords: Religious Identity, Discrimination, Marginalization, Stigmatization, Affirmative action, Community Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the development and inclusion of minority communities remain central to the pursuit of social justice and equity. Among these communities, Indian Muslims represent a significant minority group that has historically faced various forms of socio-economic and educational exclusion. This exclusion is not merely a matter of individual disadvantage but is deeply embedded in systemic structures and societal attitudes, perpetuating disparities in access to opportunities and resources.

The socio-economic status of Indian Muslims is marked by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and underrepresentation in education and public services. Studies indicate that Muslim communities experience lower literacy rates, higher infant mortality rates, and limited access to quality healthcare and education compared to other groups. (Uday Mahurkar,2008). These challenges are compounded by significant barriers in employment, with Muslims being underrepresented in government jobs and elite professions. For instance, despite constituting about 15% of the population in several states, Muslims hold only 5.7% of government jobs, and their representation in high-ranking positions across various sectors remains disproportionately low.

Moreover, the socio-economic conditions of Muslim communities are further exacerbated by discriminatory practices and societal prejudices that hinder their integration into the mainstream economy and public life. This scenario calls for a robust and inclusive policy framework that not only addresses the immediate needs of the Muslim community but also works towards dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate their marginalization.

An effective policy framework must prioritize several key areas: enhancing educational opportunities, ensuring equitable access to healthcare, promoting fair employment practices, and strengthening social welfare programs. (Arvind Sharma, 2008). Additionally, it should foster a culture of inclusion by combating stereotypes and prejudices, promoting inter-community dialogue, and empowering Muslim communities to actively participate in the socio-economic development of the nation. In this context, the establishment of the Ministry of Minority Affairs in 2006 marked a significant step towards addressing these issues. However, the implementation of policies such as the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme requires further refinement to ensure they are not just advisory but have the statutory backing and political will needed for effective execution. Furthermore, the inclusion of religious minorities in the broader framework of affirmative action and reservation policies is essential to undo historical injustices and promote inclusive growth.

This paper explores the current state of Muslim minorities in India, critically analyzes existing policies, and proposes a comprehensive strategy to foster an inclusive society where every individual, regardless of their religious or social background, has the opportunity to thrive. By leveraging the principles of equality, justice, and community solidarity, we can work towards building a more inclusive, just, and equitable society.

In recent years, the social inclusion of Muslim minorities has become an increasingly significant topic globally. As Muslim communities continue to grow and diversify in various countries, the dynamics of their integration into broader societal frameworks have drawn attention to issues of equity, representation, and cultural understanding.

Muslim Minorities face unique challenges that impact their social inclusion:

Cultural and Religious Identity: Maintaining a distinct cultural and religious identity while integrating into diverse societies can present challenges related to acceptance and understanding.

- **Discrimination and Stigmatization:** Instances of Islamophobia and prejudice can hinder the full participation of Muslims in social, economic, and political spheres.
- **Access to Opportunities:** Socio-economic disparities and barriers to education and employment opportunities can affect the ability of Muslim minorities to thrive and contribute positively to society.
- **Political and Legal Challenges:** Policies and legislation that target or disproportionately affect Muslims can exacerbate feelings of marginalization and exclusion.
- **Social Inclusion:** Despite these challenges, efforts towards social inclusion of Muslim minorities are being actively pursued.

- **Community Engagement:** Many Muslim communities actively engage in interfaith dialogue, community service initiatives, and cultural exchanges to foster understanding and build bridges with wider society.
- **Education and Awareness:** Educational programs and initiatives aimed at promoting cultural awareness, religious literacy, and combating stereotypes contribute to greater acceptance and inclusion.
- **Advocacy and Representation:** Advocacy efforts for equal rights and representation in political and institutional settings aim to address systemic barriers and ensure fair treatment.
- **Social Integration Programs:** Programs that support language acquisition, job training, and social integration help facilitate the inclusion of Muslim minorities into the social fabric of their host countries.

As societies continue to evolve, the journey towards achieving full social inclusion of Muslim minorities requires ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and a commitment to mutual respect and understanding. By addressing systemic inequalities and promoting inclusive policies and practices, societies can harness the richness and diversity that Muslim minorities contribute to their cultural tapestry and collective identity. Addressing the social exclusion of Muslims in institutions in India, particularly concerning limited debates about affirmative action, requires a multifaceted approach. Some suggestions for a new approach are given below:

Studies and Surveys: Initiate studies and surveys to gather comprehensive data on the representation of Muslims in various sectors like education, employment, and government institutions. This data should be disaggregated by socioeconomic status, region, and gender to identify specific areas of exclusion. There is also a need to evaluate the effectiveness of existing affirmative action policies (such as reservations) in addressing the representation of Muslims in institutions.

Policy Reforms: Develop inclusive policies that specifically address the underrepresentation of Muslims in institutions. This could include targeted affirmative action measures tailored to the socio-economic and educational realities of Muslim communities. Review the implementation of existing affirmative action policies to ensure that they are reaching marginalized Muslim communities effectively. (Thakur R.N.,1999)

Awareness and Advocacy: There is a need to launch awareness campaigns to highlight the issue of social exclusion faced by Muslims in institutions. This could involve media campaigns, seminars, and workshops to educate the public and policymakers about the challenges faced by Muslim communities. Encourage Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), and Advocacy groups to actively promote the inclusion of Muslims in institutional settings. This includes lobbying for policy changes and providing support to affected communities.

Education and Skill Development: Implement skill development programs specifically targeting Muslim youth to enhance their employability and educational opportunities. Introduce scholarships and grants for students from Muslim communities to ensure access to higher education and vocational training.

Interfaith and Intercommunity Dialogue:

Promote Dialogue: Foster interfaith and intercommunity dialogue to build understanding and empathy between different religious and social groups. This can help reduce prejudices and stereotypes that contribute to social exclusion. Ensure effective implementation of anti-discrimination laws and regulations to protect the rights of Muslims in institutions. There is a need to provide legal aid and support to individuals facing discrimination.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation of initiatives aimed at reducing social exclusion of Muslims in institutions. This ensures accountability and identifies areas needing further intervention. By adopting a holistic approach that combines policy reforms, awareness-building, education, and legal protections, India can work towards mitigating the social exclusion faced by Muslims in institutional settings and fostering a more inclusive society. These efforts should be sensitive to the diverse needs and challenges faced by different segments within the Muslim community.

The Dynamics of Social Inclusiveness and Exclusiveness in Muslim Institutions:

Muslim institutions, ranging from mosques to educational centers and community organizations, play pivotal roles in shaping social cohesion within Muslim communities. However, the extent of their inclusiveness or exclusiveness often varies, reflecting broader societal dynamics and internal community factors.

Inclusive Practices: (Sachar, R. et al. 2006).

At their best, Muslim institutions serve as beacons of inclusivity, fostering a sense of belonging among diverse segments of the Muslim population and beyond. Inclusive practices within these institutions can take various forms:

- **Welcoming Spaces:** Many mosques and community centers actively strive to create welcoming environments for all Muslims, regardless of ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or level of religious observance. They provide prayer facilities, educational programs, and social services that cater to a wide range of needs.
- **Community Engagement:** Inclusive institutions engage with the broader community, participating in interfaith dialogues, community service projects, and collaborative efforts with non-Muslim organizations. This outreach promotes understanding and strengthens social bonds.
- **Representation:** Leadership and decision-making structures that reflect the diversity of the community enhance inclusivity. When individuals from different backgrounds have a voice in governance, policies are more likely to be inclusive and responsive to community needs.
- **Educational Initiatives:** Institutions that offer Islamic education and cultural programs accessible to all members of the community contribute to a shared understanding of Islamic teachings and traditions.
- **Social Support Networks:** By providing support for marginalized groups within the Muslim community, such as converts, refugees, and economically disadvantaged individuals, these institutions uphold the principle of social justice inherent in Islamic teachings.

Challenges to Inclusion: (Ansari, I. A. ,2006).

However, Muslim institutions also face challenges that can hinder their inclusivity:

- **Cultural Barriers:** Cultural norms and practices sometimes overshadow religious principles, leading to exclusionary practices based on ethnic or national identities.
- **Gender Equality:** Despite Islamic principles advocating for gender equity, some institutions struggle with gender-segregated spaces and unequal access to leadership roles for women.
- **Sectarianism:** Differences in theological interpretations and sectarian affiliations can create divisions within Muslim communities, impacting the inclusiveness of institutions.
- **Youth Engagement:** Meeting the needs of younger generations, including addressing issues of identity and integration in multicultural societies, which requires proactive measures from institutions.

India has pledged itself seven decades ago to build an inclusive, pluralistic, and secular society that would equitably integrate its religious minorities while respecting their distinct identities and honoring differences. This commitment is particularly important for the country's largest minority community, Muslims, who constitute 13.4 percent of the population and face social, economic, and educational disadvantages. Muslim minorities experience exclusion in various forms, including social, political, economic, cultural, and educational segregation. (Kudaisya, G. 2006). Addressing this kind of exclusion requires affirmative action. Religious minorities, especially Muslims, are among the most vulnerable segments of Indian society. They deserve social justice and equity comparable to other disadvantaged groups such as Dalits and OBCs. There is an urgent need to include Muslim minorities in the mainstream of the nation's economic development, a goal highlighted in the Eleventh Plan. This paper reviews the current status of Muslim minorities in India, critically analyzing their socio-economic and educational representation, and suggests ways to integrate Muslim minorities into the government's development agenda, emphasizing the necessity of inclusive policies (Engineer, A. A. 2004).

Social Exclusion: A Multidimensional Concept

Socially excluded individuals are often denied equal opportunities to increase their income and lift themselves out of poverty through their own efforts, despite overall economic growth and rising income levels in society. This exclusion results in a growing proportion of marginalized individuals remaining in abject poverty, rather than benefiting from economic prosperity. Exclusion is not merely about being included or excluded from participating in society; it manifests in unequal terms and conditions within economic processes, such as in labor markets.

Labor markets vividly illustrate this disparity, where socially excluded groups face exploitation and reinforced disadvantage due to their marginalized status. Amartya Sen refers to this phenomenon as "unfavourable inclusion," wherein discriminated groups experience differential treatment in contractual terms, pricing discrimination in essential services like water, electricity, house rent, and paying higher prices for goods. Amartya Sen (2000) holds that exclusion from social relations can lead to other deprivations that further limit our living opportunities. It can thus be constitutively a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures. In the Indian context, exclusion revolves around institutions that discriminate, isolate, shame and deprive subordinate groups on the basis of identities like caste, religion and gender (Thorat and Newman 2007).

In India, the Muslim community represents one of these excluded groups. A significant number of Muslims live below the poverty line, outnumbering any other demographic indicator. Despite this, Muslims often do not receive their equitable share as citizens in terms of policy-level considerations or program interventions designed to address socio-economic disparities. This underscores the need for inclusive policies that ensure fair and equitable opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their social or religious background, to participate meaningfully in the country's development trajectory.

Efforts by Non-State Actors in Uplifting Muslim Minorities

Efforts by non-State actors in uplifting Muslim minorities in India have complemented government initiatives aimed at addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting inclusive development. Until the Seventh Five Year Plan, Minorities, including Other Backward Classes (OBCs), have not benefited from developmental initiatives. However, recognizing the need for targeted interventions, private organizations have played a crucial role in supplementing government efforts.

In 1989, the Maulana Azad Education Foundation (MAEF) was established as an autonomous and non-political organization with a significant corpus of Rs. 100 crore. MAEF's primary focus has been to promote education among educationally backward Muslims, particularly girls. Over the years, MAEF has undertaken various initiatives such as establishing and expanding schools, colleges, hostels, vocational and

technical training centers, and providing scholarships. By the end of the Tenth Five Year Plan, the corpus of MAEF had doubled, with interest accrued used to fund educational initiatives. The Foundation has disbursed substantial grants totaling Rs. 91.81 crore to 702 NGOs and local bodies across 20 States and 2 Union Territories, supporting infrastructure development in educational institutions. (Hasan, Z. 2012)

During the Eighth Plan (1992-97), exclusive schemes were introduced for the educational and economic development of minorities. Subsequently, in the Ninth Plan (1997-02), a Central Sector Scheme aimed at providing pre-examination coaching based on economic criteria was introduced. This scheme later merged with existing programs to form the Coaching and Allied Scheme for Weaker Sections, encompassing Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and Minorities.

The establishment of the National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) in 1994 during the Tenth Five Year Plan marked another significant private-led initiative. With an authorized share capital initially set at Rs. 500 crore and later increased to Rs. 650 crore, NMDFC aims to provide concessional loans to economically weak minorities for income-generating activities. Since its inception, NMDFC has disbursed financial assistance amounting to Rs. 827.00 crores to 2.16 lakh beneficiaries across 25 States and 3 Union Territories, facilitating economic empowerment among minority communities. (Basant, R., & Shariff, A. 2010).

These private efforts, in conjunction with government programs, have been pivotal in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Muslim minorities in India. By focusing on education, skill development, and economic empowerment, these initiatives have contributed significantly to enhancing opportunities and fostering inclusive growth among marginalized communities. Moving forward with continued collaboration between public and private sectors will be crucial in sustaining and expanding these efforts to ensure equitable development for all sections of society.

Despite the implementation of various schemes by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment until the end of 2005-06, aimed at educational development and economic empowerment of minorities, a pivotal shift occurred only on January 29, 2006. It marked the establishment of a separate Ministry of Minority Affairs, signaling a focused approach towards addressing the needs of minority communities in India. This initiative recommended several key measures, (Khan, A. 2013), such as:

- **Autonomous Assessment Monitoring Authority (AMA):** To ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of minority welfare programs.
- **National Data Bank:** For comprehensive data collection and analysis on minority communities to inform policy and decision-making.
- **Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC):** Proposed to safeguard the rights of minorities and ensure equal opportunities in education, employment, and other spheres.
- **Hostel Facilities:** Provision of hostel facilities at affordable rates for minority students.
- **Inclusion in Teacher Training:** Integration of minority perspectives into the general curriculum for teacher training programs.
- **Strengthening Urdu Medium Schools:** Support for the establishment and enhancement of state-run Urdu medium schools.
- **Madarsa Reform:** Linkage of Madarsas (Islamic seminaries) to Higher Secondary Boards, recognition of Madarsa degrees for eligibility in competitive examinations, and provision of financial and other support to Madarsas.

These recommendations are aimed to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive development for minority communities, emphasizing education, skill development, and equal access to opportunities. The creation of the Ministry of Minority Affairs marked a significant policy shift towards empowering and integrating minority communities more effectively into the national development agenda.

Challenges in Public Service Representation

As of 2024, the employment status of Indian Muslims reflects significant disparities and under-representation in various sectors:

- **Self-Employment:** Nearly half of Muslim men aged 25 to 45 are self-employed, which is higher compared to 30% among Dalits and 45% among Hindus. This indicates a reliance on entrepreneurial endeavors for economic sustenance. (Verma, A. 2010).
- **Regular Employment:** Only 13% of Muslim men are in regular employment, contrasting with 35% among Hindus. This highlights lower participation in formal wage employment opportunities.
- **Government Jobs:** Muslims face stark under-representation in government jobs. Data from the Sachar Committee Report across 12 states, where Muslims constitute 12.4% of the population, reveals that they hold a mere 5.9% of government jobs. In States with high Muslim populations like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, this ratio drops even further, often below one-third of their population share. Kerala, with a seemingly higher representation at 9.4%, still falls well below their population share of 24.7%. West Bengal reports a dismal 7.2% representation in state employment, significantly lower than their 25.2% population share, underscoring systemic exclusion.
- **Representation in Elite Services:** In elite cadre services such as the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and Indian Police Service (IPS), Muslim representation remains very low—2.9%, 1.9%, and 4.0%, respectively. They are notably absent from key positions in intelligence agencies, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), National Security Guards (NSG), and other VVIP protection forces. In paramilitary forces and the armed forces, Muslim representation is nominal, with estimates around 1% to 5% and approximately 2%, respectively. The military's reluctance to disclose precise figures citing concerns over communalization highlights challenges in transparency and addressing under-representation effectively.

These statistics illustrate the deep-seated systemic exclusion of Muslims from economic opportunities and key sectors of public service, exacerbating socio-economic disparities and underlining the urgent need for inclusive policies and equitable representation measures to address these inequalities.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Political empowerment generally refers to the ability of a group or community to participate fully in the political process, including representation in government and decision-making roles. (Ghosh, P. S. 2003)

Empowerment of Muslims in the political context can involve several aspects:

- **Representation:** This includes having Muslim individuals elected to political offices at various levels of government, from local councils to national parliament.
- **Political Participation:** Encouraging and facilitating Muslim participation in voting, activism, and engagement with political parties and processes.
- **Policy making:** Ensuring that the concerns and interests of Muslim communities are heard and considered in policy-making, particularly on issues that affect them directly.
- **Community Leadership:** Supporting and promoting Muslim leaders who can advocate for their community's needs and aspirations effectively.
- **Institutional Support:** Providing resources and platforms for Muslims to organize politically, such as through community organizations, advocacy groups, and political associations.

Efforts to empower Muslims politically often aim to address issues like discrimination, representation gaps, and ensuring equitable access to political opportunities. This can contribute to a more inclusive and representative democracy where diverse voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes.

Advocating for Equitable Opportunities:

Affirmative action for Muslims is a concept that addresses the specific challenges and barriers faced by Muslims due to religious discrimination and social exclusion. Here are some reasons why affirmative action might be needed for Muslims: (Hasan, M. 1997).

- **Religious Discrimination:** Muslims, particularly in non-Muslim majority countries, often face discrimination based on their religious identity. Affirmative action can help counteract this discrimination by ensuring equal opportunities in education, employment, and other areas.
- **Underrepresentation:** Muslims may be underrepresented in various sectors of society, including government, corporate leadership, academia, and media. Affirmative action can aim to increase representation by providing targeted support and opportunities for qualified Muslim individuals.
- **Access to Education:** Affirmative action can help Muslim students who may face barriers such as prejudice or lack of resources to access education. It can include scholarships, mentorship programs, and support services tailored to their needs.
- **Employment Opportunities:** Muslims may encounter barriers in the job market, such as bias during hiring processes or workplace discrimination. Affirmative action policies can encourage employers to actively recruit and retain Muslim employees, fostering a more inclusive workforce.
- **Community Empowerment:** Affirmative action can empower Muslim communities by investing in infrastructure, social services, and cultural initiatives that promote integration and social cohesion.
- **Inter-sectionality:** Affirmative action should recognize the diversity within the Muslim community, including differences in ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background. Policies should be inclusive and address the intersecting forms of discrimination that individuals may face.
- **Promoting Diversity and Tolerance:** By promoting diversity and inclusion, affirmative action contributes to a more tolerant and cohesive society. It challenges stereotypes and prejudices, fostering understanding and respect for religious diversity.
- **Human Rights and Equality:** Affirmative action aligns with principles of human rights and equality by addressing systemic discrimination and promoting fairness and justice for all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The implementation of affirmative action policies for Muslims requires careful consideration of local contexts and needs, as well as collaboration with Muslim communities to ensure that policies are effective and beneficial. It should aim to create opportunities for empowerment and advancement while addressing the specific challenges faced by Muslims in different parts of the world. (Siddiqui, M. 2013).

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it may be stated that the issue of inclusiveness within Muslim institutions reflects both progress and persistent challenges facing Muslim communities globally. While many institutions endeavor to uphold Islamic principles of equality, justice, and community solidarity, ongoing efforts are essential to effectively dismantle barriers to social inclusion. By promoting dialogue, embracing diversity, and implementing equitable practices, Muslim institutions can continue evolving as crucial centers of social cohesion and solidarity in an increasingly diverse global society. Recently, the social inclusion of Muslim minorities has gained prominence globally as these communities grow and diversify in various countries. Integration into broader societal frameworks has highlighted the issues of equity, representation, and cultural understanding. However, in India, the Muslim community continues to face marginalization in different spheres. The constitutional provisions intended to protect minorities have often failed to effectively address their concerns. Policy makers hitherto have neglected the significant Muslim minorities, and governance often reflects societal prejudices rather than inclusive policies. Transparency in data and policy implementation remains a challenge, hindering effective governance and equitable development. (Sharma, S. 2011).

In India, similar to Muslims, Christians have also faced discrimination in certain circumstances, raising international concerns. Some states in India are contemplating to introduce changes providing reservations to Muslims in education and government services which is a welcome measure. Moving forward, clear policy directives with strong political will are crucial for the effective implementation of initiatives like the Prime Minister's 15 Point Programme. It may not be out of place to mention that strengthening state minority commissions with statutory powers is necessary to address the diverse issues faced by religious minorities comprehensively.

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