

# Being Muslim in Pluralistic Society: A Discussion on Pluralism in Indian Context

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## Abstract

Pluralism has been the main feature of Indian society; India is a democratic and pluralistic country in which almost every religion exists. Pluralism refers to the existence together in our society of people of different beliefs, ways of life, cultures, races, religions, ancestries and so on. But in the contemporary Indian society Muslims are being discriminated in terms of education, religion, employment, etc. This is evident from the various studies carried out in the area of sociology of religion. The study has been carried out in Indian context and aimed to trace the various problems of pluralism in India. This paper attempts to examine *being Muslims in the pluralistic society, problems faced by the Muslims in the pluralistic society, factors for discrimination in the pluralistic society* and so on. The paper is based on secondary sources of data and other relevant literature wherever necessary. The statement will also be supplanted by participant observation of the authors.

**Key words:** (pluralism, problems faced by Muslims, Indian context)

## 1. Introduction

Pluralism in its broadest sense refers to the belief that a diversity of beliefs and practices should be accommodated within a society with equal citizenship rights. But in this talk pluralism shall refer to religious pluralism rather than other kinds of pluralism such as cultural, political or ethnic.

India, a highly diverse society, is an endangered pluralist polity. An early adopter of a constitutional framework that recognized group-differentiated rights, India is now challenged by forces that threaten its fragile political consensus. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section offers an overview of India's diversity, state forms and nationalisms in broad brushstrokes. The second focuses on a particular change experience: constitution-making in India (1946-49). The Indian Constitution's adoption of group differentiated rights in 1950 presaged multiculturalism in some respects. However, despite a range of group rights, including quotas for Untouchable and tribal groups, and self-government rights for linguistic groups, a normative deficit remained in India's constitutional framework with respect to the protection of minority cultures. Shifting to the present, the third section discusses sources of inclusion and exclusion in the Indian polity. Focusing on reservations discrimination against Muslims, Hindu nationalism and violence, it outlines key dimensions of exclusion in India today. The final section summarizes key lessons from the Indian experience with pluralism.

## India's Diversity

In comparative terms, India's demographic diversity is significant in at least two respects. First, it offers an example of extensive cross-cutting diversity along the lines of religion, language, caste and tribe. Hindus form a majority of the population, around 79.8% out of a total of 1.21 billion.<sup>2</sup> With around 180 million Muslims (approximately 14.2% of the population), India is also the third-largest Muslim country in the world, due to become the largest Muslim country by 2050. The population of India's other major religious communities is: Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.7%, Buddhist 0.7% and Jain 0.4%. However, the followers of each religion speak different languages and belong to a variety of sects, castes and tribes. In terms of language, there are some 22 official languages and 122 major languages listed in the census.<sup>3</sup> Hindi speakers constituted 41% of the population, followed by Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil and Urdu speakers, each constituting more than 5% of the population. Religious and caste divisions have been of enduring significance in national politics, with linguistic divisions becoming less contentious since the 1950s. Second, India's diversity is long-standing and not a product of recent migration. Unlike in most Western democracies, the rights of immigrants have not been central to debates on pluralism in India. India's different religious, linguistic and tribal groups are all national minorities of one kind or another. It is true that Islam and Christianity are viewed by many Hindu nationalists as foreign religions, unlike Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, which are regarded as the progeny of Hinduism and indigenous to Indian soil. Nevertheless, with some of the oldest Muslim and Christian communities in the world, and with most followers of Islam and Christianity seen as converts from Hinduism, religious minorities are not viewed as recent migrants, unlike in Europe and North America. The rights of migrant minorities have been a contentious issue mainly at the sub-national level, with sons-of-the-soil movements against migrants' influential in some provinces (notably Assam). With cross-cutting and long-standing patterns of diversity, which groups are to be considered India's minorities is not straight forward. In national politics, the term has, for the most part, denoted religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

In late colonial India, other groups claiming special representation (notably Dalits) also called themselves a minority, although during constitution-making attempts were made to restrict the term's use.<sup>8</sup> In numerical terms, as well as with regard to marginalized status, Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SC, approximately 16.6%) and tribal groups or Scheduled Tribes (ST, approximate 8.6%) are also minorities. At the sub-national level, the majority Hindus are a numerical minority in some states. In Hindu nationalist accounts, Hindus are often described as a besieged minority in a part of the world dominated by Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Hindu nationalism in India, like Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, reflects a "minority complex,"<sup>10</sup> a sense that the majority religion is not getting its due share of recognition and resources from the state. With regards to language, the speakers of the majority language Hindi (the Indian Constitution does not designate a single national language), as well as each of the 22 official languages (each state can choose its official language) constitute a minority in some provinces. As such, depending on the unit of analysis, there is hardly any group that lacks a claim to minority status. In caste terms, the official category Other Backward Classes (OBC), comprising several intermediate lower castes, constitutes a majority, nearly 44% of the population according to many estimates (based on the last caste census of 1931). Upper castes, including Brahmins and other dominant castes, constitute around 16%, a numerical minority.

## 2. Relevant Literature Review

**Mc, Grath & Alister, E. (1992).** In his study reveals that liberalism is currently asserted as a form of pluralism. Given the emphasis in liberalism on neutrality and openness, liberals see themselves as exponents of pluralism par excellence. Indeed, liberals often assume that theirs is the only genuine way of managing directional plurality. They wish to provide the setting in which each individual pursues his or her own freely chosen life, in which each tolerates the other, each view is held in equal respect, no view is imposed upon another, and the state is neutral between all competing particular value claims. Such a view does not lead to an open society but to the imposition of individualism upon all, thereby replacing a plural society with a homogeneous liberal one. Liberalism is not an adequate form of pluralism: rather, it is a significant force in the homogenization of our society. It is necessary to distinguish carefully among pluralism, liberalism and secularism. Though pluralism is a fact, a pluralistic society does not need to be a secular or liberal society. Pluralism simply means that people with different views need to find a way to live together. One of the major problems in our society is that liberalism often claims and pretends to be the only form of pluralism. In reality it is a form of secularism that does not give much freedom to communal diversity, especially religious diversity. Christians therefore need to develop an approach to pluralism that is more amenable to Christian concerns, that is integrally Christian, and that is fully just to the real differences among religion. **Norman, R. (2000)** in his work points out that pluralism in its broadest sense refers to the belief that a diversity of beliefs and practices should be accommodated within a society with equal citizenship rights. But in this talk pluralism shall refer to religious pluralism rather than other kinds of pluralism such as cultural, political or ethnic religious groups. The author reveals that I shall further understand religious pluralism to mean that worldview according to which one's religion is not the sole source of truth, and thus that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions. As such it must be distinguished from toleration, which allows only for coexistence. We know that there exist exclusivist religions which insist on their divinely revealed truth as the only real truth with all others being false. Examples abound in the history of Christianity, where Catholics and Protestants battled out their theological differences in the pre-Enlightenment era.

### The aim of the present paper is as follows

1. To examine the problems faced by Muslims in the pluralistic society
2. To analyze the factors which brings discrimination in the pluralistic society

## 3. Methodology

The paper is based on secondary sources of data and other relevant literature wherever necessary. The statement will also be supplanted by participant observation of the authors. The experiences regarding being Muslim in pluralistic society: A discussion on pluralism in Indian context.

## 4. Problems faced by Muslims in the pluralistic society

India has experienced many instances of what is referred to as communal violence since independence in 1947. Such episodes, increasing in frequency and intensity in the 1980s and 1990s, have culminated more recently in a number of major incidents (such as in Gujarat in 2002, Orissa in 2008 and Muzaffarnagar in 2013) that have left thousands dead, many more injured and many more injured and displaced. Alongside these and other large-scale attacks are

lower intensity instances of communal violence a continual occurrence in certain areas across the country, although many go unreported by either authorities or the media.

Communal violence disproportionately affects India's religious minorities in particular Muslims, but also Christians and Sikhs. While often instrumentalized for political gains, communal violence draws on and exacerbates a climate of entrenched discrimination against India's religious minorities, with far-reaching social, economic, cultural and political dimensions. Such violence is frequently met with impunity and in certain instances direct complicity from state actors, ranging from inciting violence through hate speech to refusing to properly investigate communal incidents after they have occurred. This includes a significant number of state officials affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but also other actors across the political spectrum.

It follows that communal violence further intensifies the marginalization of those affected, who frequently face high levels of insecurity alongside inadequate access to justice and reparations, often with particularly challenging implications for women. Religious minorities have long been the target of a range of different forms of persecution, such as hate crimes, threats, attacks on places of worship, and forced conversion. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been rising hostility against India's religious minorities, particularly since the current rightwing BJP government promoting Hindu nationalism took power at the national level after its election in May 2014. The BJP has long been associated with right-wing Hindu extremist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and involved with the exploitation of communal elements, contributing to its electoral victory in 2014. While as Prime Minister Modi himself has attempted to reorient his political image around business and economic development, critics have argued that extremist groups have been emboldened under BJP's rule. Also highlighted has been his reluctance to condemn a spate of recent incidents targeting minorities, including hate speech, threats and a wave of attacks around cow slaughter that have particularly targeted Muslims as well as Hindus belonging to lower castes. This context has been further legitimized by policies and legislation introduced or strengthened at the state level in recent years, such as Gujarat's announcement in March 2017 that cow slaughter would be punishable with a life sentence.

While India's religious minorities face varying degrees of violence and discrimination, communal violence has in particular targeted Muslims, and to a lesser degree Christians and Sikhs, who also face varying degrees of socio-economic, cultural and legal discrimination. Constituting the largest religious minority, India's Muslim population is dispersed throughout the country, with the majority living in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Kerala, as well as Jammu and Kashmir. Indian Muslims are far from homogenous, divided by factors including language, ethnicity and caste, amongst others, and there are considerable differences between Muslims both within and between each of India's states. For example, Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state is home to over 22 percent of India's Muslim population, who make up over 19 percent of the overall state population. While the majority of Muslims reside in Western and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, primarily in urban areas, there remain a number of differentiating factors for example, identification as marginalized (officially called 'Other Backward Class' or OBC) or as belonging to a specific occupational group which have a bearing on an individual's socio-economic and political position.

Bearing in mind these differences, investigations by the Sachar Committee, established in 2005 to undertake research on the living conditions of Muslims across India, highlighted the overall impact of systematic discrimination against the country's largest religious minority. The findings of the Committee's 2006 report drew attention to high levels of poverty amongst Muslims, and their limited representation in the country's political and public life. The

subsequent follow-up to this research by the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee in 2014 concluded that Muslims continued to suffer disproportionately from lack of access to healthcare, low educational attainment and economic deprivation, particularly in urban areas. This occurs alongside ongoing social and cultural discrimination, such as obstacles to buying or renting property, or representations of Muslims as ‘terrorists’ or unpatriotic in the media or educational materials. Although often the target of so-called ‘vote-bank’ politics whereby political parties attempt to elicit support by appealing to narrow communal or identity based issues many Muslims continue to lack access to basic services, and measures introduced to help improve this are frequently difficult to reach for those most marginalized.

These issues are exacerbated for those facing intersectional discrimination, including Muslims belonging to lower castes and women. Muslims and other minorities in India also face institutional discrimination, including in relation to law enforcement. According to 2015 statistics from the NCRB, more than 67 percent of those in India’s jails are defendants under trials, and 55 percent of this population is made up of Muslims, Dalits and adivasis together constituting only a combined 39 percent of the country’s total population. In the wake of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists, in particular the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, Muslims have increasingly been targeted by police through profiling, staged encounters and incarceration on false accusations of terrorism under the cover of anti-terror laws, such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Muslims have also been the target of state violence, in particular in Jammu and Kashmir, where civil society groups have documented systematic and widespread human rights abuses by police, including arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings. It is within this broader context that Muslims in India have been subjected to the most serious manifestations of communal riots since Partition: in many cases, violence has been actively enabled by the failure (such as lack of protection or access to justice) or even complicity (for example, through hate speech) of public officials.

### **5. Factors for discrimination among Muslims**

Through the Constitution the Indian state promises equality to all its citizens. The various provisions of the Constitution elucidated in the chapters on Fundamental Rights (justifiable) and on Directive Principles of State Policies (non-justifiable) delineate the state’s obligation to provide equal opportunities to all its citizens in social, political and economic spheres.

According to 2011 Census, Muslims constitute about 14.2 percent of India’s total population. But we do not know much about the sociopolitical dynamics of this theoretically monolithic and empirically diversified community due to lack of sufficient research. There has been an attempt to represent Muslims as a single, monolithic, homogenous group not only in political terms, but also in social science discourses. These kinds of representations have been facing a serious challenge in recent times owing to the emergence of the perspective of understanding Muslim society from below. Indian democracy, despite its various pitfalls, has over the year’s unleashed forces of democratization among various social groups including marginalized ones. However, it has not unleashed forces of democratization within the Muslim community. Thus, the initiation of wider social and educational reform within the community is yet to start. Therefore, it is essential to look at the issues related to the silence imposed historically, socio-economically and politically on Muslims, especially Muslim women and how Muslim women have been marginalized, excluded and discriminated throughout the processes of democratization and trajectories of development.

In the Indian pluralistic society history is itself a mirror-process which puts various narratives in the world picture of marginalization, exclusion and inequality. Indian history of Muslims depicts how they have been visibly invisible in the processes of democratization and prone to significant decline in socio-economic as well as political terms. Indian Muslims being the lost children of India's partition bear the stigma of the past throughout the history and perceived as the main culprits for divided India. This has resulted in unprecedented sufferings of deprivation and marginalization process of Indian Muslims. Therefore, this section tries to explore what role has Indian history played in the process of 'marginalization' of Muslims. With the invasion of Muslim rule, the generally accepted belief was that the exclusion of Muslims had its roots in the conversion of dalits and backward classes to Islam but with the imposition of caste system among Muslims. The frequent fight between the Muslim rulers with that of Hindus had widened the communal divide. Though conversion to Islam gave them a sense of identity and equality but it didn't make difference to their socio-economic situations. Rather it pampered the sufferings causing inequalities on the basis of caste structure. For instance, the Hindu dhobi became a Muslim dhobi and he still remained a dhobi. The Varna system of Hinduism became the jamaats of Muslims or what Muslims call it 'zat' or 'biradari'. Of course, one cannot forget the momentum of the Partition that shook the very existence of Indian Muslims. Since then the vibrations of communal passions turned Muslims into a mere suspicion of Pan-Islamic leanings. In fact, Muslims marginalization was a complex condition of disadvantage that this minority community had experienced before and after the independence in the hands of both, Britishers and Hindu forces. Because of their troubled legacy and vulnerabilities, the systemic marginality of Indian Muslims was created by socially constructed inequitable forces of bias. Muslims who stayed back still face the general suspicion and their loyalty is continuously questioned by different sections such as state, media and political class. They also categorically dub them as "agents of Pakistan". Therefore, it is important to question that why even after 60 years of independence, the stereotypes about Muslims in general and women in particular continue to prevail not only in the minds of political class, media, opinion-takers but in the whole discourse of the processes to democratization, change, equity and development.

According to the Sachar Report, the literacy rate among Muslims in 2001 was 59.1 % which was far below the national average (65.1 %) and other SRCs (70.8%). In general, the state level estimates suggest that the literacy gap between Muslims and the general average is greater in urban areas and for women; Muslims in urban areas, especially Muslim women, have a larger literacy deficit vis-à-vis the average condition prevailing in the state. On the other hand, a comparison across SRCs both by gender and by place of residence also reveals consistently lower levels of Mean Years of Schooling (MYS) for the Muslim community.

According to the Sachar Committee's findings, 25 percent of Muslim children in the 6-14 age groups either never went to school or else dropped out at some stage. It is highlighted that the gap between Muslims and other SRCs increases as the level of education increases, whereas only 3 percent as a whole is lagging behind in education of Muslim children among the school going age go to Madras. This disparity reflects that how Muslim community education sector, which directly or indirectly perpetuates inequalities in this regard. This disparity as a result of exclusion from mainstream depicts the picture of societal marginality of Indian Muslims. Now the question arises when this is the case with Muslim community as a whole, then what can be the various critical conditions of a Muslim woman who is doubly marginalized and excluded group from mainstream arena. NSSO data 1987-8 clearly shows that Muslim women in urban India are much worse off than their rural counterparts, not only in terms of their overall

educational status as citizens of India, but also in terms of their relatively poor educational status when compared to Hindu or Christian women. This trend is all the more alarming when this situation is compared to the advances in Muslim female education achieved at the turn of the century. Since education is considered to be one of the foremost indicator to the strategies of inclusive development, then, of course an important tool for creating a gender just society. Marginalization in education is an important factor in the widening of social and economic inequalities. The interaction between marginalization in education and wider patterns of marginalization operates in both directions. Through case studies one can have a larger picture of the marginalization of Muslim women in the education sector. In a Case study 'Muslim Women and Girl's Education: A case study from Hyderabad', Rekha Pande tries to look at the educational status of Muslim women and their attitude towards the education of their girls in three slums of Hyderabad.

According to this survey, the overwhelming finding is of conspicuous and continuing disparities in education for the Muslim women. While 28.66 percent men were illiterate, 38.66 percent women were illiterate. Even at the all India level most Muslim women have never been to school. Close to 58 percent of women reported themselves to be illiterate and the school enrolment rate for the Muslim girl is high at the primary level that is 53.46 percent, but as we move up the education ladder, there is a significant drop in the proportion of the higher education. The reasons found were economic backwardness of Muslim community and they do not see that the formal system of education providing them livelihood because they are miniscule in government jobs. Of course, through the lens of women, they are at most disadvantage due to cultural norms as well as family livelihood strategies through making the very socialization of women. Through the Case Study of Jammu & Kashmir where majority of population is Muslims shows that the educational status of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular is quite dismal.

Similarly, F. A. Bhat in this study 'Islam, gender and education: A case study of Jammu and Kashmir', and others reveal that though Muslims constitute the majority community of the state with 67 percent of the total population are at the bottom with 47.3 percent literacy rate. It is clear from this survey that Muslims are educationally a marginalized community in the state of J&K and the situation of Muslim women is much more disappointing. The present educational scenario in the state of J&K clearly reveals that gender disparity exists and disparity between religious groups in education and Muslim women being the worst sufferers in this context. This study further reflects that it is not out of the religious compulsions or Islamic teachings that make the basis for this backwardness and marginalization but due to the lack of social awakening and political consciousness. Hasan and Menon in a survey carried out across the country on Muslim women found that near about 60 percent of Muslim women reported themselves as illiterate. Therefore, there is immediate need to develop various platforms and channels to deal with educational backwardness of marginalization in Muslim community as whole and exclusively Muslim women. Education of women is one of effective tool and channel of measurement to reduce socio-economic inequalities, tackle discrimination and contribute in the process of equity and development.

## 6. Conclusion

Marginalization of Muslims in India is a harsh reality. Based on the above theoretical data and observation method, it is evident that an issue of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular is complex but a serious matter of concern in the modern Indian pluralistic society. While imparting education to all Muslims is very much required, the causes and consequences of spatial marginality reflects the

negative image of the pluralistic Indian society, which needs to be assessed and examined. It all leads to their severely stigmatized and extremely excluded conditions. It is important to seek effective measures to improve the conditions of Muslims.

It has been clear from the study that the poor representation of Muslims in the employment market was highlighted over and over again across all states. Despite obtaining degrees and certificates Muslims were unable to get employment, especially in the Government and organized sector. The Committee's attention was drawn to the lack of Muslim representation in positions of power. The lack of Muslims in public employment in the bureaucracy, police and the judiciary, and so on has been a matter of great concern. Discriminatory practices, especially at the time of the interview, were cited as reasons for poor Muslim representation even at the Class IV level or in Grade D employment where high educational qualifications are not required. The recommendations of the 15 point programme which made it mandatory for selection committees to have representation from the minority community have not been followed. Concerns about the poor representation of Muslims in the police force were repeatedly expressed in various meetings. While Muslim representation at the highest level was miniscule, even at the level of the constabulary Muslim representation was reported to be very low. Complaints regarding discriminatory procedures adopted for recruitment in the police force were voiced. In some states the qualifying test required a sound knowledge of local language and at times that of the Hindu religion. This put urdu speaking Muslims at a disadvantage. Repeated incidents of this kind have made Muslim youth diffident and they shy away from participating in competitive examinations for fear of being rejected. Because the political participation of Muslims also was limited there are very few to raise a voice in their favour.

Similarly, it has also been observed from the study that Muslim presence in the private sector was found to be even more dismal. It was felt that the private sector needed to be sensitized to this issue so that it would include Muslims in their recruitment through positive discrimination and affirmative action. Mention was made of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector, where interestingly, a large number of Muslims seem to find employment. It was pointed out that proficiency in English was the only criterion for gaining employment in this sector. Sheer market forces were determining recruitment here rather than affiliations of any kind. However, while this may partially be true for some of the larger companies, small or medium scale companies that dominate the private sector have not extended a level playing field to Muslims and so on.

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