

Muslim Indians

Struggle for Inclusion

Amit A. Pandya

Copyright © 2010
The Henry L. Stimson Center

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010924341

Cover photos: India elections © 2004 Amit Bhargava/Corbis; Indian man at a Vishwa
Hindu Parishad rally in New Delhi, India, Prakash Singh AFP/Getty Images

Cover design by Free Range Studios/Updated by Shawn Woodley

Book design/layout by Nita Congress

An electronic version of this publication is available at:
www.stimson.org/rv

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any
form or by any means without prior written consent from
The Henry L. Stimson Center.

The Henry L. Stimson Center
1111 19th Street, NW, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 202.223.5956
Fax: 202.238.9604
www.stimson.org

Introduction:

The Stimson Center/ Institute for Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution Study

Since December 2007, the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, DC, and the Institute for Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution in Mumbai have conducted a thorough inquiry throughout India to better understand and describe the priorities, thinking, and concerns of Muslim Indians. We undertook this study because we believed that the state of opinion among Muslim Indians is inadequately understood. The adoption of policies in India that adequately address the sources of disadvantage and resentment demands a clearer understanding of how Muslims experience their membership in Indian society. US policy will be well served by a clearer understanding of the thinking and concerns of such a numerous and significant section of both the Indian population and of the global Muslim community.

What lends added interest for those concerned with security policy is the potential appeal of anti-state ideologies and violent pan-Islamist networks feeding on the alienation and despair of Muslim Indians. There is no evidence that violent and extremist pan-Islamist ideologies have yet spread widely or taken deep hold in any Muslim Indian community. Nonetheless, many Indians, Muslim and non-Muslim, of all ideologies and from a variety of occupational perspectives, express alarm at the prospect that they might do so. The widening of the gulf between Muslims and Hindus would certainly add fuel to any such development.

Moreover, in the absence of a dispassionate mapping of the actual state of Muslim opinion, the topic can and has become the subject of speculation that can be dangerous in its political implications. Surmises about the growth of radicalism in Muslim communities can become the pretext for more suspicion or harder line security policies and police practices. Not only is this likely to add significantly to the hardships already suffered by Muslims, but it could prompt the very resentment and radicalization that occasions concern. At the same time, the failure to understand the true extent of radicalization, or its roots in the alienation and marginalization suffered by Muslims, may lead to complacency and a failure to address the root causes of such alienation and marginalization.

We held focus group discussions lasting half a day in Calicut, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Delhi, Aligarh, Kolkata, Guwahati, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai. In Mumbai and Lucknow, we held two sessions each. The numbers of people attending the focus groups ranged from 15 to 60. These meetings were followed by a national meeting in Delhi in early 2010 to discuss the national implications of the discussions in each of the provincial focus groups; this was attended by 30 people chosen from among those who had attended the focus groups. Those attending the meetings included women and men, social activists, political leaders, religious leaders, social service providers, entrepreneurs, teachers, philosophers, scientists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, lay and religious scholars, and academics.

We also conducted interviews, throughout all quarters of India, of ordinary Muslim workers and the self-employed, as well as additional members of the occupations noted above. In sum, we have spoken to Muslims at all levels, from senior-most government officials to ordinary people struggling for livelihoods in communities.

In choosing people to interview, we were particularly careful to ensure that we found voices and points of view that, for a variety of reasons, were not present in the focus group discussions. In each interview and focus group, we have sought comments on the themes raised in previous discussions. Thus, the entire two-year process may be seen as a cumulative and ongoing single discussion divided into parts. And the value of convening focus groups has been that, in addition to the accumulation of individual points of view, we have been able to hear what Muslims from different points of view and life experiences have to say to each other, in debate or agreement. The opportunity to listen closely to the conversation within the community has been invaluable.

The invitation lists for the focus groups, and the lists of people to be interviewed, were developed so as to encompass as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible, in order to reflect the thinking of Muslims as accurately and in as much detail as possible. We sought to ensure representation of the widest possible variety of sectarian identities and religious and political ideologies, and of occupational, economic, and professional backgrounds. The composition of focus groups varied according to the location where each was held. Everywhere, we have heard from—and heard discussion and debate among—political philosophies including liberal secularists, militants, Islamists, and feminists; religious scholars and lay religious points of view from the most orthodox to the most liberal; and economic positions from the immediate and direct experience of struggle for survival, radical socialist ideologies, through statist perspectives up to radical free-enterprise capitalist points of view.

While the ideological stances and the tactical approaches of participants varied widely to the issues that were raised and discussed, there was a remarkable consensus on what are the principal sources of concern to the Muslims of India.

We must candidly acknowledge that our inquiry has not extended into rural India. While many of our interlocutors were well informed about developments in villages and rural areas, often on the basis of first-hand experience and observation, our fieldwork was entirely in the cities and towns of India, and the perspectives reflected here are largely urban.

We must also note that we deliberately did not include in this study the one Indian state with a Muslim majority, Jammu and Kashmir (often and misleadingly known as “Kashmir”), despite our having traveled there to study environmental change and economic trends. Kashmiri Muslims do not identify with other Muslim Indians and, whatever their positions on the sovereignty and status of their state, frame their situation as distinctly one of a national or subnational culture and history, defined by geography.

In the course of our focus groups and interviews, it was clear that Muslims in the rest of India see the issue of Kashmir and the welfare of Kashmiri Muslims as *sui generis*. In part they share the Kashmiri perception about the distinct historical and geographical dimensions of that conflict. They also fear that the taint of the India-Pakistan rivalry found there will prejudice their own standing in the larger Indian polity, lending fuel to the right-wing Hindu charge that most Muslims are “anti-national” or secret sympathizers with Pakistan.