

Muslim Indians

Struggle for Inclusion

Amit A. Pandya

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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

The Larger Context

“I am a Muslim and am proud of the fact. Islam’s splendid tradition of 1,300 years is my inheritance. The spirit of Islam guides and helps me forward. I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is the Indian nationality. I am indispensable to this noble edifice, and without me the splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim.”

—Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

The Larger Context

Muslim India and Indian Muslims

The stereotype of Muslim Indians has long been that they are a relatively quiescent minority that has made its peace with the larger non-Muslim context of contemporary India. Non-Indian Muslims may sometimes scoff at the perceived tameness of the Muslim voice in India or the assimilation of and into the wider secular but Hindu-influenced culture. They will at times profess solidarity with the trials of Muslim Indians. At other times they will note with satisfaction the Indian Muslim willingness to stand in solidarity with pan-Islamic causes such as Palestine. But they will rarely think of Muslim Indians as a force to be reckoned with in the *ummah* (the worldwide Muslim community).

It was not always so. And Muslim Indian thinkers see themselves in a larger context. They are heirs to a millennium-long civilization, one of the greatest in modern history, replete with the highest philosophical, architectural, artistic, and literary accomplishments. For much of Islam's history in India, Indian Muslim civilization was regarded by Muslims throughout the world as one of the jewels of Islamic civilization. And until the division of the subcontinent's Muslims into at first two and then three nations, there would have been little question that this was one of the great national traditions within Islam, if not the greatest.

The sense of geographical, historical, intellectual, and cultural unity that Muslim Indians share with Muslims in Bangladesh and Pakistan, common heirs of the same civilization, is politically delicate. It is vulnerable to the ready Hindu chauvinist (*Hindutva*) charge that Muslim Indians are "anti-national" because they secretly sympathize with the Pakistani enemy, because their Muslim identity is more important than their Indian one. But at the level of culture and religious thought, their South Asian Muslim heritage is a source of pride; theirs is a distinct and liberal version of Islam which draws on the particular characteristics of their geographical location and historical experience. South Asian Muslims constitute by far the largest regional and cultural group of any in the world of Islam.

The heritage of Islam and of Persian and Central Asian cultures remain an inextricable part of the fabric of the wider Indian national history, culture, and civilization. India's Muslims

have been integral to the freedom struggle, to the articulation of a multireligious political and cultural identity for India, and to the cultural and intellectual life of India today. Muslim Indians struggle with a difficult balance: on the one hand, they take pride in their religious-cultural heritage and in the larger national culture that it has formed; on the other, Islam was the basis in 1947 for the division of their homeland. Muslim Indians also take pride in being Indian. They are the ones who chose to remain in a multireligious India rather than migrate to the new Muslim nation of Pakistan.

Yet, despite individual successes, Muslims as a group have not prospered in independent India. Recently, both in India and outside it, there has emerged an inchoate concern that the existence of a large population of economically, socially, and culturally marginalized citizens is an Achilles heel of national unity, as well as a source of potential political and social instability. Some have feared that burgeoning anti-state pan-Islamist ideologies based on a sense of grievance, and the violent groups inspired by those ideologies, will also in the future seek to recruit disaffected Muslim Indians.

Even though the Muslim Indian population (160 million) is almost as large as the entire population of Pakistan (180 million), equal to the population of Bangladesh, and greater than the total populations of major predominantly Muslim nations such as Egypt (80 million), Muslim Indians remain relatively ill understood and understudied. Their preoccupations and predicament are little known among non-Muslim Indians, let alone non-Indians. There is even a sense among Muslim Indians themselves that they do not have a handle on what is happening in the very varied Muslim communities throughout India.

A Minority Unlike Others

Informal and unofficial estimates of the number of Muslims in India vary substantially, and are the subject of polemics by both their defenders and their detractors. The most conservative projection based on the 2001 census would place them at approximately 160 million, or 13.5 percent of all Indians. The dispute over whether the census offers an accurate count of the Muslim population is itself a volatile issue that reflects the volatility of the Muslim predicament in contemporary India. Anti-Muslim right-wing opinion offers estimates of the Muslim population as high as 30 percent of the total population, reflecting anxiety or a more deliberately alarmist stance toward the question of whether Muslims will render Hindus a minority and therefore threaten their security. More extreme Muslim voices believe that the actual numbers are double the official figures, and that the figures are deliberately understated in order to deny Muslims their proper place in the polity, or to mask the scale and significance of their underrepresentation in its key institutions. More responsible Muslim voices have suggested estimates as high as 20 percent. By any count, Muslims are the second largest religious group in India, and the largest Muslim minority by far.

Quite apart from the question of numbers, the complexity of the Muslim position in India arises from the fact that, although a minority in contemporary India, they are heirs to a political history of powerful Muslim kingdoms that long dominated India, and to cultural traditions, indigenous and of Central Asian origin, that have influenced the quintessential features of modern Indian identity. And as recently as the mid-20th century, before the separation of Pakistan, Muslims constituted approximately a third of the population of undivided India.

Thus Muslim Indians do not see themselves as a minority in the way that other minorities do. India is theirs, and they feel a sense of ownership and belonging shared by few minorities elsewhere. Yet, there is also a growing sense of unease with the rise of anti-Muslim right-wing Hindu chauvinism, along with a growing incomprehension of Muslims on the part of ordinary Hindus. Indian Muslims are increasingly subjected to chronic prejudice based on ignorance and stereotypes.

Religious and National Identity

Although Muslims have always constituted a minority in the subcontinent as a whole, the India that was gradually taken under British control was largely ruled by Muslim elites; Muslims of various ethnicities (Turkic and Persian) and dynasties had ruled most of northern India for six or seven centuries in the form of the Delhi Sultanate and the Moghul Empire. In many areas (largely those that became Pakistan), Muslims came to constitute the majority, and the cultures of Hindus in those areas bore a particular stamp of Muslim intellectual and cultural influence. Even areas not directly under Muslim control showed a Muslim influence in the presence of individual Muslims among elites, Muslim minorities among their populations, and syncretic culture in food, arts, architecture, and even religious thought.

The issue of religious identity has been a divisive one in India for a century. No consideration of India's current external security challenges can ignore the role of Islam in the formation of the nations that today divide South Asia. Yet Muslims have been present in force on both sides of the debate between Muslim separatism and inclusive nationalism. The development of a national movement for independence from Britain posed the question faced by all nationalist movements: what was the basis of Indian national identity? Three approaches emerged.

Secular nationalists, Hindu and Muslim, saw in the common and syncretic elements of Indian culture the basis of a national identity upon which to conduct an independence struggle and construct a national polity. These represented the overwhelming majority of Indian opinion.

Hindu religious nationalists saw in national independence an opportunity to restore the greatness of Hindu civilization, and to stamp a Hindu character on the polity, on the grounds

that the majority of Indians were Hindus. Muslims would be free to practice their religion but would live in a state marked by Hindu culture.

A section of Muslim leadership organized the Muslim League on the basis of the distinct interests of Muslims and Hindus, and a concern that Muslims would inevitably be at a disadvantage as a minority in a representative democracy. This culminated in the separation of British India into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. It was during the period before, during, and after partition that violence between Muslims and Hindus or Sikhs assumed its most virulent manifestation.

The difficulty posed by partition for Muslim interests *as a whole* was that a significant segment of Indian Muslims were in the Muslim-minority areas that remained in India. There were also Hindu minorities in what became Pakistan, but these were smaller. Although the movement for partition had been led by professedly secular Muslims who eschewed a religious state, Pakistan became increasingly defined by religion, and a combination of violence and intolerance resulted in the departure for India of all but a tiny number of Hindus.

The sensitivities occasioned by the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of the politics of religious identity are extremely complex. Not only did the partition divide India into Muslim and non-Muslim sovereignties, but it divided the Muslim community itself, reducing its proportion, weight, and influence in India. Moreover, the Pakistani reliance on a separate Muslim nation to safeguard the interests of Muslims in India undercut the Muslim position in post-partition India. It detracted from the otherwise unassailable argument for substantial embodiment of Muslim interests as an integral part of the body politic. Despite their numbers, and notwithstanding the legal secularism of the Indian state, Muslim Indians suffered a weakening of their political standing.

It is scarcely surprising that religious nationalist Hindus opposed the partition—and therefore weakening—of a Hindu-majority India. It is equally unsurprising that secularists, Muslim and Hindu, opposed the rejection of a common Indian identity and culture implicit in partition. What is notable is that the majority of Muslim religious and militant political leadership were similarly opposed: some, such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH), on the grounds of greater attachment to the anti-imperialist political struggle; others, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, on the grounds that partition would result in the division and therefore the weakening of the Muslim community and of Islam in India. There was also a sense among devout and culturally proud Muslims that India was their homeland. This is reflected today in the position of the conservative Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband seminary that India is not, as some pan-Islamists would have it, *Darul Harb* (enemy territory) but rather *Darul Aman* (Muslim-friendly), where *jihad* is meaningless. It also opposes referring to Hindus as *kafir* (unbelievers), with its negative and exclusionary connotations.

At the time of independence and partition into Pakistan and India, the syncretic Indian culture was a living reality. Despite being a minority, Muslims could justifiably take pride as Indians in a civilization whose highest cultural, religious, and political accomplishments included inextricable strands of Muslim influence. Hindus for the most part embraced those elements of Muslim influence that lent luster to “their” civilization. This syncretic understanding at the elite level was replicated in forms of joint celebration and community life at the ground level between Hindus and Muslims, including a respectful mutual acknowledgment of religious festivals, a shared reverence for the shrines of Muslim saints, and—in some cases—even observance of the religious festivals of the one by the other.

Perhaps of greatest contemporary relevance was the fact that the secular Indian nationalist movement that struggled to keep India united included Muslims in its senior leadership. Figures such as Maulana Azad, President of the Indian National Congress; Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the undisputed moral and political leader of the Pathans of the North West Frontier Province; Zakir Hussain, the third President of India; and many others established unequivocally the twin propositions that Indian nationalism was as much the pride of Muslim Indians as Hindus, and that there was an equal place for Muslims in a free India.

Political Participation

Muslims committed to a wider Indian sense of nationality were an integral part of the independence movement. After partition, they provided leadership and representation for Muslims within the context of a secular mass politics of coalitions of distinct interests. Their diminished numbers, and the association of separate Muslim organizing with the violence of partition and the trauma of Muslim families divided, fostered the practice of coalition politics. However, over the course of time, the intermediaries between the state and Muslim citizens came increasingly to articulate the distinct elements of Muslim interests and aspirations in terms of cultural identity, such as a separate family and inheritance law, rather than those social and economic interests that Muslims shared with non-Muslim Indians.

For many decades after independence, the Indian National Congress party was dominant, and the historical association of nationalist Muslims with the secular traditions of Congress kept them in the fold. There was always a rumble of discontent about the Muslims being treated as a “vote bank” by Congress. Muslims felt taken for granted and felt that they received only token concessions, while elements of Hindu opinion within and outside Congress saw appeasement and special treatment. With the dissolution of the Congress political monopoly, Muslim voters and leaders explored the prospects of coalitions for the purpose of maximizing Muslim power and influence. However, the instability of party politics has, if anything, divided and weakened Muslim leadership and representation.

The exception to these long-standing patterns has been found in Communist-ruled states and those where Communist parties are a powerful presence, such as West Bengal and Kerala. While Communist parties and governments have accommodated Muslim interests more effectively than others, recent discourse has noted that senior Muslim leaders have not appeared in mainstream politics in commensurate proportions, and that Communists have practiced the politics of tokenism just like other Indian politicians. In recent years Communists have been accused of seeking electoral advantage by flirting with extreme religious, antiseccular, and divisive Muslim political movements and leaders, such as Abdul Nasser Madani of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Kerala. Others note that the situation is more complex, and that religious extremists are also more willing to form radical alliances with other economically and socially disadvantaged Indians. Madani's PDP, for example, claims to be an alliance of Muslims, Dalits (the most disfavored caste), and the so-called "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs), reflecting Madani's evolution from his original founding of the Islamic Sewa Sangh, a radical Islamist movement based on the model of the right-wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The results of the 2009 elections are instructive about contemporary Muslim political behavior. Whereas there has been a significant and sustained trend of Muslims "coming back to the Congress fold," Muslim political behavior has varied across India according to circumstances. Where the political competition is essentially between the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress—as in Delhi, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh—the Muslim vote has generally been consolidated against the former. In states with more multifaceted political competition—such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra—Muslim votes are divided among several parties reflecting varied local or class interests and coalitions.

In Assam, where not only are Muslims a substantial percentage of the population, but where many state legislative assembly constituencies have Muslim majorities, pluralities, or significant presence, the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) has had significant presence as a new and specifically Muslim political party. Kerala remains *sui generis*, in that Kerala Muslims constitute a steady quarter to a third of the population and have an established political presence and a party—the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)—which has been an essential partner to whichever of the other two major parties in the state (Congress or the Communists) wishes to lead a government. Other well-established Muslim political parties include the Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Musalmeen (MIM) in Andhra Pradesh.

A notable recent development in Muslim politics is the proliferation of new Muslim political parties throughout India, though many have not lasted long. In the most populous and politically most competitive northern state of Uttar Pradesh alone are found half a dozen. Although the precise political significance of this development remains unclear, it does

appear to demonstrate a fracturing of Muslim ideological and political consensus in ways that reflect the variegated character of Muslim communities across India. This development notwithstanding, Muslims do find themselves increasingly aware of common interests in the emerging and hotly contested discourse about the nature of Indian national identity, and the place of Muslim ideas and culture within that.

As important has been the development of deep divisions within long-established Muslim political parties and movements, such as the MIM, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH), and the IUML. In each instance, the split has been the result largely of personal rivalry or disputes over dynastic succession or family monopoly (the Owaisi family in the MIM or the Madani family in the JUH), evidence of the quasi-feudal nature of established Muslim political leadership.

Violence, Extremism, and the State

In Gujarat state in western India in 2002, Muslims suffered a vicious and systematic series of mob attacks, with gruesome deaths such as burning alive and dismemberment, rape, and widespread destruction of property, mosques, and shrines. The chain of events leading up to this has been described and debated in great detail, and with some controversy. Right-wing Hindu activists had engaged in abuse and violence against Muslims and others on a railway platform at Godhra, the train carrying them had been set on fire, resulting in death and injury, and Hindu mobs went on a rampage against Muslims in Godhra and elsewhere.

What is clear is that the subsequent attacks on settled Muslim communities elsewhere in the state, including its largest city Ahmedabad, were systematically planned by political activists closely affiliated with the state's governing political party.¹ Attackers carried voter rolls to identify the locations of Muslims. Police, with a few honorable exceptions, failed to protect Muslims, and likely acquiesced in and joined the violence. Elected leaders up to the state's Chief Minister have continued to be militantly unapologetic about these events. The term "pogrom" has often been used to describe what transpired.²

This was merely the latest in a series of events in the more than five decades since independence that had drawn attention to the vulnerability of Muslim communities in India. This pattern has long concerned those interested in Indian political stability and social

¹R. B. Sreekumar, the Additional Director General of the Gujarat Police and responsible for intelligence at the time of the riots, later filed an affidavit with one of the official commissions charged with investigating them. In the affidavit to the Nanavati Commission, he said: "These riots were conceived, designed, planned, organized, prepared, and perpetrated by the higher stations of the ruling party. There is no doubt."

²For a detailed account, see Paul R. Brass, "The Gujarat Pogrom of 2002," *Contemporary Conflicts* (Social Science Research Council, 2004); <http://conconflicts.ssrc.org/archives/gujarat/brass/> (accessed March 29, 2010).

integration, or in human rights more generally. However, there is also a widespread sense in India that the 20th century pattern of chronic “communal” violence has taken on a new significance. There is a concern that a new nexus between state officials or institutions and extremist anti-Muslim organizations simultaneously constitutes a new threat to law and order and a debilitation of state capacity to respond.

There was credible evidence in Gujarat—for example, accounts of senior police officials—that the highest level of state officials had colluded in mob violence. Police officers such as Additional Director General of Police Sreekumar, who had sought to discharge their responsibility to protect life and property without discrimination, suffered retribution at the hands of senior government officials in their professional advancement.³ The systematic erosion of the state’s responsibility to uphold law and order threatens the welfare and interest of all Indians, non-Muslims as well as Muslims. It is arguably a significant source of weakness in the Indian state’s capacity to serve its citizens, and in the stability necessary for the larger Indian society’s economic development.

Apart from evidence of systematic collusion of state institutions in public disorder, the aftermath of Gujarat also suggested a new systematic weakening of public order. Previous instances of Hindu-Muslim violence in modern India have taken the form of eruptions of rioting, followed by retaliatory mob violence. In contrast, the *Times of India* reported on March 27, a full month after the initial events in Godhra, that 30 cities and towns in Gujarat remained under curfew. Where the established pattern of religious conflict in India has been one of localized violence, or of reactive violence in a limited number of localities, in Gujarat the violence was pervasive. One hundred fifty-three state assembly constituencies, 993 villages, 183 towns, and 284 police stations were affected.⁴

Although the Muslims’ minority status had always rendered them disproportionately vulnerable in such tit-for-tat violence, in Gujarat the disproportion assumed an alarming scale. In Godhra, the ratios of Muslims to Hindus killed was an already appalling five to one; in the aftermath of Godhra, this increased to 15 Muslims killed for every Hindu. Two new patterns of victimization of Muslims exemplify the qualitative change. Whereas Muslims have traditionally been relatively safe in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods, in the recent events in Gujarat they were attacked in Muslim majority areas,⁵ and there was an unprecedented extension of violence and killings to rural Gujarat.

³ The case of Sreekumar was resolved by the Supreme Court of India in his favor and against the Gujarat state government.

⁴ *The Indian Express* (Trivandrum ed.), November 24, 2007, p. 3.

⁵ Interviews by the author, various locations in Gujarat; see also T. K. Rajalakshmi, “Testimonies of Terror,” *Frontline* 19, no. 8 (2002).

Less than two months after Godhra, the number of displaced Muslims in camps was 150,000. Although many of these have since found more permanent homes, few have been able to return to their original homes. The long-term trend has been an extreme form of residential segregation, with even well-to-do Muslims who had been living in mixed neighborhoods moving to exclusively Muslim communities. The already substantial disabilities suffered by poor Muslim neighborhoods in the form of “redlining” (lack of accessible public services such as banks, public transport, and schools) have been compounded as a result of this intensified residential segregation.

Many Indians, Muslim and non-Muslim, have observed that there is an increasing psychological and cultural gap between mainstream Hindu opinion and the bulk of Muslims. This gap is characterized by increasingly suspicious and hostile assumptions about the intentions of the other toward one’s own community, by the mutual sense that the other is not truly committed to a national unity based upon a common national identity, and by highly fictitious notions about the other’s cultural prejudices and practices. In this respect, it is noteworthy that during the post-Godhra events, the Gujarati-language press engaged not only in highly provocative anti-Muslim reporting but also in incitement of their readers to anti-Muslim violence.

Hindutva zealots most commonly seek to justify anti-Muslim outrages by reference to the proliferation of terrorist incidents in India and the alleged complicity or sympathy of Muslim Indians in them. By contrast, the influential Islamic seminary Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband in late 2007 and early 2008 came out with a forceful public condemnation of terrorism, calling it a “heinous crime against humanity,” thus lending the prestige of a religiously conservative institution against terrorism. In May 2008, Deoband issued a *fatwa*, declaring terrorism “un-Islamic.” In early 2009, Deoband declared suicide attacks “un-Islamic.” Muslim extremists were enraged. The Jaipur bombers released statements in 2008 branding the Deoband authors “dogs,” “a bunch of cowards,” and “puppets of Hinduism.” An Islamist member of Parliament wryly noted that Muslims are attacked by (Hindu) communalists for supporting terrorism, and by terrorists for not supporting them.⁶

It is important to acknowledge that sources of difficulty remain, though none of them justify the zealots’ broad-brush condemnation of Muslim Indians. These difficulties stem from two sources, theological and practical. As noted by Muslim liberals, including former Union Minister Arif Mohamed Khan, the Deoband statement condemning terrorism coexists with an educational curriculum that includes the following language: “The destruction of the sword is incurred by infidels, although they may not be the first aggressors, as appears from various passages in the sacred writings which are generally received to this

⁶ Praveen Swami, “We Are Fighting to Defend Islam,” interview of Mahmood Madani, *The Hindu*, June 9, 2008.

effect.”⁷ Moreover, Muslim Indians have been found to be involved in some recent terrorist incidents and plots.⁸

State and Society

The Muslim position in modern India is ambiguous. There is, on the one hand, the emergence of systematic, officially sanctioned anti-Muslim discrimination, sustained by several related developments. One is the steep growth over less than two decades of the Hindu right wing, embodied both by the coming to power (nationally and at the state level) of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and in the increase in ideological influence of its more extremist and anti-Muslim allies, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Bajrang Dal. Governmental power has conferred control of educational curricula and the opportunity to deliberately recruit ideological zealots to public services.

These developments have in turn promoted and been promoted by the emergence of a resurgent cultural discourse. That discourse draws in part on Hindu incomprehension of Muslim experience and opinion, in part on an emerging global sense about the supranational loyalties of Muslims to pan-Islamic identity at the expense of national loyalty to predominantly non-Muslim states, and in part on the increasing segregation of the two groups in their everyday lives. This undercurrent of Hindu chauvinism, or at least Hindu supremacy, is of longer standing than the recent rise of the BJP and its *Hindutva* allies, according to an influential body of Indian historical scholarship, and it has long been present even in the professedly secular Indian National Congress party, albeit as a minority tendency. Although many have noted the Congress party’s opportunistic turn to “soft *Hindutva*” in the past two decades throughout India, and particularly in Gujarat in the past decade, the tendency may be older.⁹

⁷ See Amit Pandya, “Faith, Justice, and Violence: Islam in Political Context,” in Amit Pandya and Ellen Laipson, eds., *Islam and Politics: Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2009).

⁸ These include the February 2010 bombing in Pune and the attacks on Mumbai in 2007 and 2008. Earlier incidents include attacks in 2007 in Lucknow, Varanasi, and Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh; an arrest in Kolkata; arrests in Hubli, Karnataka; planned attacks in Goa; arrests in early 2008 in Uttar Pradesh for 2005 attacks in Bangalore and planned attacks on Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, and Mumbai in 2008. Very often, the involvement of Indians has been at the level of local low-level facilitators, usually for money or in furtherance of criminal objectives. A shadowy nexus, reflected in the recent attacks on Pune, has developed between Pakistani-supported operatives (such as David Headley of Chicago) and indigenous Indian covert groups such as the so-called “Indian Mujahideen” and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). In many cases, the Indians involved are relatively well educated in technical disciplines. Arrests of young men from Kerala have given rise to concern that the empowered, educated, well-to-do, and well-integrated Kerala Muslim community is also being radicalized.

⁹ Manu Bhagavan, “The Hindutva Underground: Hindu Nationalism and the Indian National Congress in Late Colonial and Early Post-Colonial India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 13, 2008, p. 39.

The countervailing and still influential trend emphasizes the secular traditions of Indian political life and the secular requirements of the Indian constitution and law, and appeals to a syncretic vision of Indian national identity inextricable from Muslim culture and history. This tradition also appeals to the larger requirements of social peace and political stability in a society where Muslims are pervasive and are intermingled with non-Muslims.

Many have leveled the charge of tokenism or “vote-bank politics”—a sense that concessions to Muslims have been cynical electoral calculation rather than service of their substantive interests. There is certainly some truth to this, and often the accommodation of Muslim interests has been of those elements of cultural identity, such as separate laws relating to marriage and inheritance, that emphasize distinction rather than common national identity. At other times, political elites have a particular view of Muslim identity and interests—those articulated by conservative religious leaders—rather than the variety of interests, including those articulated by Muslim reformers, Muslim feminists, or other liberal currents of thought. The perception that there has been “appeasement” of Muslims has given rise to resentments on the part of many Hindus, and has been readily fostered and exploited by anti-Muslim movements and ideologues.

Nonetheless, as clearly discernible is the very real weight and prestige in Indian political practice of the need to address the broader concerns of Muslim Indians. One important manifestation of this is Indian officialdom’s repeated search for an assessment of the welfare and security of Muslims. Bodies have been set up under the 1952 Commissions of Inquiry Act or under the notification powers of the Prime Minister to constitute high-level committees for preparation of reports. Many analysts and observers have repeatedly, and often justifiably, criticized the various investigative bodies as empty gestures, and have suggested that the results have often been a whitewash or have proved to be “dead letters.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, the fact that the state has felt the need to conduct such inquiries, and has devoted resources (and, in some cases, substantial political attention) to them, is at least a partial reflection of its acknowledgment of the importance of the issue and of the political attention that Muslim interests command in the Indian polity.¹¹

The most important recent example is the high-level committee set up by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Justice Rajender Sachar to report on the Social, Educational and Economic Status of the Muslim Community. The Sachar Committee reported in 2006 in the form of a comprehensive review based on fieldwork, statistics, literature, and hear-

¹⁰ The Srikrishna Commission report into the anti-Muslim riots in Mumbai in 1992–93 remained without official follow-up or corrective actions despite changes of government at the state level and promises during subsequent elections to redress the wrongs.

¹¹ The Ram Sahay Commission, although not discussed here, is testament to the attempted reach and detail of official Indian efforts to address Muslim concerns, specifically those of Muslim artisan weavers.

ings. The 1983 report of the Gopal Singh inquiry into minorities had previously drawn attention to the educational problems of Muslims, including high primary school dropout rates and low participation in higher and technical education. In this respect, as well as in government employment, Muslims were found to be significantly worse off than Sikhs or Christians.

In 2007, the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Mishra Commission) arrived at many of the same conclusions as the Sachar Committee about the unacceptable disproportion in educational and employment opportunity for Muslims. However, the Mishra Commission's primary interest for political and social analysts was that it addressed the thorny question that many had raised in light of the Sachar findings: whether affirmative action measures to help victims of the caste system (currently restricted to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and tribal peoples) should be extended to lower caste Christians and Muslims. Many advocates of Christian and Muslim interests have suggested that this is appropriate in light of the fact that the Indian caste system is not entirely absent from these religious groups, and that those whose families before conversion were of lower caste are still subject to caste disabilities. The existence of caste distinctions among South Asian Muslims has long been an open secret, with differentiated treatment extended to those who converted from Hindu lower castes and those descended from families originally of Central Asian origin.¹²

The Srikrishna Commission report of 1998 reported on the anti-Muslim rioting in Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993 following bomb attacks on the Bombay Stock Exchange. This report rejected the notion that the riots were spontaneous eruptions of Hindu anger, and suggested that publications and leaders of a local right-wing party, the Shiv Sena, had deliberately incited or legitimized the rioting, while the state government had been complicit through acquiescence and inaction. The commission found, in a revealing precedent to Gujarat a decade later, that the attacks on Muslims were mounted with military precision, with voter lists in hand.¹³

As would also later occur at Gujarat, Justice Srikrishna found that in Mumbai individual policemen had participated in the attacks on Muslims, and that there was evidence of anti-

¹² A dissent by a commission member suggested that the inclusion of Christians and Muslims in caste-based affirmative action would constitute insertion of caste into religions that do not recognize it. Behind this debate lurks the suspicion that the failure to include Muslims and Christians in affirmative action is based less on the absence of caste in those religions and more on a desire to punish those who have converted to religions of non-Indian origin.

¹³ For an excellent summary of the Srikrishna Committee findings, see Praveen Swami, "A Searing Indictment," *Frontline* 15:18 (1998).

Muslim bias in the police force, which led to a reluctance to take firm measures against violence, looting, and arson.¹⁴

That said, a clear indication of ameliorative capacity and responsiveness to Muslim concerns of state institutions and Indian society is found in the aftermath of 1992–93 in Mumbai. The police and Muslim and secular community organizations banded together to form the highly successful Mohalla Committees, to provide confidence building, consultation, and collaboration between state and society. These committees include very senior retired police officers alongside community activists, and help keep the police aware of developments in the community, and the community aware of the requirements of policing. They take pride in having prevented any communal violence since their establishment, despite the occurrence of two major terrorist attacks in Mumbai in the past few years, which would ordinarily have been triggers for extremists to provoke violence.¹⁵

The most recent to report (2009), has been the commission chaired by Justice Liberhan to look into the events surrounding a Hindu mob's demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, in December 1992. The Liberhan Commission, which was charged with reporting within three months, has justly been criticized for reporting almost 17 years after the events in question, and for taking several years after concluding its inquiry to prepare its report. The government in turn has been criticized for delaying several months in releasing the findings to the public.

A source of irritation for some Muslim advocates has been that the Srikrishna and the Liberhan bodies, while unequivocally finding that violence was planned rather than spontaneous, and that right-wing Hindu mobs acted at the behest of senior political leaders (in the case of Ayodhya, the BJP) and in collusion with state officials and police, excoriate the role of Muslim sectarians and criminals who joined the fray and compounded the problem. It has been suggested in certain quarters of Muslim and secular Hindu opinion that these types of conclusions reflect an unfortunate pattern of blaming the victims.

A similar charge was leveled against the Nanvati-Mehta (formerly Nanvati-Shah) judicial inquiry's findings (presented September 2008) about the burning of the train at Godhra station which set in motion the carnage in Gujarat. The reasons this has proved to be controversial vividly illustrate many elements and offer a case study of the Indian state's responsiveness to attacks on Muslim security. The original chairs of the inquiry had made remarks

¹⁴ Several official inquiries have looked at the actions of the police over the years, in addition to the Srikrishna Commission; these include the Madon inquiry into Bhiwandi Jalgaon, Jagmohan Reddy into Ahmedabad, and Vythyathil into Tellicherry.

¹⁵ Usha Thakkar, "Mohalla Committees of Mumbai: Candles in the Ominous Darkness," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7, 2004.

at the outset suggesting that they had made up their minds before the investigation. The forensic evidence they relied on was highly controversial, of a Muslim mob deliberately and for ideological reasons attacking the train. The Additional Director General of the Gujarat Police (Intelligence) at the time of the event, and therefore the officer most responsible for and knowledgeable about these events, testified to the Nanavati Commission that he had been threatened by senior political leadership if he dared reveal the truth, but the Nanavati report included no reference to this testimony. Finally, the report made no refutation of the findings of an earlier commission of inquiry into the same events, constituted as required under the Indian Railway Act, under Justice U. C. Bannerjee, which had reached exactly the opposite conclusions.

Social and Economic Disadvantage

In recent decades, the Muslim community in India has endured economic, social, and cultural marginalization. Muslim Indians, with some notable exceptions, are in the main disproportionately poor and uneducated, and suffer from impediments in access even to the scant social resources available to the poor. They experience increasing hostility in popular attitudes, discrimination at the hands of police and other officials, biased educational curricula, tendentious views of history, and the consequences of cultural incomprehension. Despite their having at times been viewed by popular prejudice as sympathizers of Pakistan, Muslims in India have for the most part remained patriotic and loyal.

Some of the current Muslim predicament in India results from the processes of rapid economic and social change brought about by modernity and globalization, such as the destruction of traditional Muslim livelihoods and physical communities. Some is the result of evolving notions of cultural nationalism among Indian Hindus. There is a widespread sense in the community, and among its Hindu allies and sympathizers, that the integral role of Muslims and Islam in the making of all aspects of Indian thought and culture is being deliberately displaced by the articulation of a more “Hindu-ized” sense of national identity.¹⁶

While the particular systemic and cultural determinants of Muslim status in Indian society demand attention, it is also important to place the Muslim predicament within its larger context of social and economic disadvantage that afflicts many social groups in India.

¹⁶ These processes are occurring at the same time as global cultural communication, as well as integration of economies, institutions, and communication technologies, which has led to the rapid transnational transmission of ideas, ideologies, and senses of shared identity and interests among co-religionists, including Muslims worldwide. In the past, Muslim and non-Muslim Indians, like Muslims and their non-Muslim compatriots elsewhere, would have assumed that the national cultures that united across religious divides would be more significant than the transnational religious identities that divide within nations.

Despite India's impressive aggregate economic growth rates of recent years, its capital in search of foreign asset acquisitions, and its competitive performance in knowledge-based industries, India is stuck in low per capita income, and suffers serious problems of inequality, malnutrition and child mortality at sub-Saharan African levels, and significant threats to social order and civil peace. Inadequate access to courts for the poor, police incompetence, long-term detention prior to conviction, and poor prison conditions are the bane of all poor Indians. No doubt these are often compounded for Muslims. However, to examine the common disabilities of Muslim and non-Muslim Indians may help us arrive at a clearer understanding of the relative significance of Muslim poverty and systematic anti-Muslim discrimination.

Migration to Pakistan in the population transfers attending India's partition in 1947 drew away a disproportionate share of the best-educated and economically well-to-do Muslims, leaving the residual Muslim community in India composed disproportionately of poorer Muslims not confident of starting life anew away from their homes, and others (artisans, farmers) whose livelihoods in traditional occupations tied them to a particular locality. These included India-wide occupations such as leather goods manufacture and wholesale and retail trade by merchants in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and the west coast. They also included regionally specific and specialized occupations such as the weavers of Mubarakpur, Gorakhpur, and Benares, and the lockmakers of Aligarh. In many cases, these traditional occupations provided Muslims with a basis for economic self-sufficiency, or even advancement. The advance of modern education has not kept up with that economic advancement, as these occupations frequently rely on apprenticeship of children. When education has been sought, it has been a more traditionalist religious education.¹⁷ Recent economic trends have benefited some of these groups such as traders and leather merchants, while severely undercutting traditional handicrafts with competition from imported manufactured goods.

The shift in the social composition of the Muslim community with partition also changed the political leadership of Muslim Indian communities in the course of the 1950s and 1960s. Other than a small number of secular Muslim political leaders, the center of gravity of Muslim leadership shifted significantly to religious leadership or more traditionalist elements. This emphasized the indicia of Muslim identity rather than those Muslim political and economic interests that overlapped or were shared with the larger Indian population.

The disproportion in representation of Muslims in various groups confirms the particular disadvantage suffered by them, whatever the mix of general socioeconomic reasons and anti-Muslim discrimination. According to the Sachar Committee, Muslims are significantly

¹⁷ Thus, to this day, well-to-do Muslim merchant families in Rajasthan remain relatively lacking in education.

overrepresented in prisons. In the western state of Maharashtra, where Muslims are little more than one-tenth of the general population, they are almost a third of those convicted or facing trial. In the Indian Administrative Service, the elite officers of the public services, Muslims account for less than 3 percent as compared with their 13.5 percent proportion of the Indian population. Among district judges in a sample of 15 states surveyed, Muslims again constituted less than 3 percent. These figures improve slightly for the Indian Police Service (the centrally recruited and assigned elite officer cadre for police forces throughout India—4 percent), high court judges (more than 4 percent), and judicial officers (more than 6 percent), but are still short of their share of the population.

What is remarkable is the underrepresentation of Muslims even in those states where they constitute substantial enough minorities to have more cultural or political influence (Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar), or those states where there are well-established progressive and inclusive political and governance traditions (Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu).¹⁸

The figures shown in the table on representation in the ranks of the police illustrate this well. Given the importance of the issues of rule of law, personal security, and sense of victimization by the state reported from our fieldwork, these figures are particularly significant.

	Muslim %	
	of population	in police force
West Bengal	25.25	7.32
Assam	30.92	10.95
Bihar	16.53	5.94
Kerala	24.70	12.96
Uttar Pradesh	18.50	4.24
Tamil Nadu	5.56	0.11

Source: National Crime Record Bureau.

The armed forces tell a similar tale, of equal though distinct significance. The question of Muslim participation in the armed forces also affects the Hindu majority's *perception* of Muslim patriotism, regardless of the actual reasons for their underrepresentation. Muslims, for their part, are concerned that their lower level of recruitment into the armed forces reflects the nation's lack of trust in their patriotism.

At the time of partition, Muslims were almost a third of the Indian armed forces. This was reversed with the division of the Indian Army, and the decision of most Muslim officers to join the Pakistan Army. Despite the six decades that have elapsed since, there has been little restoration of the demographic balance through recruitment of Muslims into the Indian Army. Today, they constitute less than 3 percent of the armed forces.

The severe underrepresentation of Muslims in public service employment has given rise in recent years to a demand that they be entitled to "reservations" or affirmative action,

¹⁸ In Uttar Pradesh, for example, where Muslims constitute a quarter of the population, in 1960 they constituted 12 percent of public service employees. Today, that figure has dropped to 4 percent.

which is currently available to Dalits and so-called “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs), but is denied to Muslims and Christians on the spurious grounds that those religions do not practice caste. As noted earlier, this is a contentious issue, because some Muslims agree with the latter argument. Others believe that the Muslim community should not be entitled as a group to this benefit, owing to its great social variety. However, there is an emerging sense that those Muslims who occupy essentially the same low social status as lower caste Hindus should be entitled to reservations.¹⁹

A quite distinct issue from that of underrepresentation in various types of public employment is that of unequal enjoyment of publicly funded infrastructure and state services. This has been identified by the Sachar Committee. Thus, access of Muslim children to integrated child development services is disproportionately low. According to the 2001 census, there are 11 Indian districts with Muslim majorities. In 38 districts, Muslims are at least 25 percent of the population; these constitute 38 percent of the national Muslim population. In 182 districts, Muslims are more than 10 percent of the population, and in these reside 47 percent of India’s Muslims. There are also numerous small- and medium-sized towns where Muslims are a sizable proportion. All these areas are relatively poorly provided with urban infrastructure and other civic amenities. Some analysts have suggested that the geography of public infrastructure provision for Muslim Indians mimics that for the neglected populations of tribal Indians.²⁰

Education, Identity, and Empowerment

The relationship between education, identity, and power has been a complex one in modern Muslim history in India.²¹ The movement for Pakistan, and before it Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s Aligarh movement for a distinct Muslim identity within India, was led by modernizers who embraced modern education and the assimilation of Western learning and norms. Yet these modernizers also sought to regenerate a distinct sense of Muslim identity.²²

There is a close relationship, institutional and ideological, between Sir Sayyid’s establishment of the Mohamedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh and Maulana Muhammad Qasim’s establishment of the traditionalist though reformist Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband seminary, the intellectual powerhouse of one of the two most important Islamic schools of

¹⁹ See Irfan Engineer, “The Backward Muslims,” *Secular Perspective*, March 6, 2010.

²⁰ Javeed Alam, “The Contemporary Muslim Situation in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 12, 2008, p. 45.

²¹ See Arjumand Ara, “Madrasas and the Making of Muslim Identity in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 3, 2004, p. 34.

²² Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

thought throughout the subcontinent.²³ Each had its origins in a common British-led and Mughal-sponsored institution—Delhi College, established in 1825.²⁴

Whereas elite modernizers might have been expected to embrace ideas that united Muslims with non-Muslims, their emphasis on Muslim identity led them to adopt approaches that looked to the consolidation of traditional sources of intellectual and cultural authority. Thus, while Muslim elites availed themselves of modern nonreligious education, and while *madrassah* and *maktab*²⁵ developed to educate boys of more humble families in conservative and traditional religious values and identity, there developed a convergence between the two in the attachment to the safeguarding and fostering of distinct Muslim identity. This consensus made Muslim identity paramount in the design of Muslim educational institutions.

In the absence of an equal emphasis on education for economic opportunity, for poorer students religious identity and values were counterposed to the pursuit of economic advancement through modern education. With the departure of modern-educated Muslim elites to Pakistan, or their assimilation after partition into the Indian upper middle class, distinct sources of traditional religious identity such as Muslim family law became the overwhelming definers of Muslim interests, and religious leaders and teachers became the articulators of Muslim identity.

Under the Indian constitution, Muslims enjoy the right of access to quality publicly funded education. In practice, however, they, like poor non-Muslim Indians, are denied such an education. This leads Muslims to seek out the alternative of *madrassah* (religious seminaries)—which in turn only further separates them from the mainstream. Moreover, *madrassah* uniformly provide inadequate preparation for occupations other than religious teaching

²³ There is much confusion about the nature of the Deoband seminary, which is often misleadingly termed “fundamentalist” or “radical.” Many of the most radical elements at war with the state in Pakistan are descendants of the same tradition as Indian Deobandi. In late 2008, Pakistan’s government complained to the United Nations Security Council that Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband was influencing terrorists in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas. However, as the Pakistani writer Akbar Zaidi has suggested, the Indian and Pakistani Deobandi traditions have developed distinctly since partition; the latter much affected by Saudi Wahhabi funding and influence in recent decades. The mainstream Deoband tradition has a history of robust engagement in pluralist discourse and a more progressive and nationalist political orientation. Early in its history, Deoband participated in religious debate and discourse with Hindu and Christian scholars, and struggled jointly with Indians of all religions in the largely nonviolent anti-colonial movement. Deoband was also influential in the nonviolent, Islamist, yet nonseparatist anti-British struggle of the Pathan Khudai Khidmatgar in the North West Frontier Province, in alliance with the secular nationalist Indian National Congress. (For a brief account of the Khudai Khidmatgar, see Pandya op. cit.) Such traditions still affect Deoband’s engagement in the broader Indian political discourse.

²⁴ S. M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 280.

²⁵ Religious elementary school. In the present essay, for simplicity, the term *madrassa* (plural *madrassah*) is used to refer to both types of schools.

or prayer leadership. Thus, the emphasis on indicia of religious and cultural identity for Muslim empowerment acts against their empowerment in terms of educational and economic opportunity.

Because of the distorting effects of the prejudices of the well-to-do which often accompany the lack of educational opportunity for the poor, the discourse has gained currency in mainstream opinion that Muslims have, for cultural reasons or reasons of poverty, rejected modern education. The figures suggest otherwise. Attendance of Muslim children in publicly funded secular schools has increased faster than that of non-Muslim children.

National Sample Survey Organization data collected in 1999–2000 and 2004–05 show that, in rural areas, attendance of Muslim boys (ages 5 to 14) increased almost 12 percent compared to 9 percent for non-Muslims. The figures for girls were 16 percent for Muslims compared to 13 percent for non-Muslims. This increase closed the gap with Hindus: in 2004–05, 76 percent of Muslim boys and 71 percent of Muslim girls were attending school compared to 84 percent of Hindu boys and 71 percent of Hindu girls. In urban areas, the rate of increase was equal between Muslim and non-Muslim boys; Muslim girls experienced double the rates of increase of others.

These figures do not tell us about the quality of education offered, which is uniformly low in the publicly funded education systems, and by some accounts even worse in predominantly Muslim schools. What is more troubling is the inequality in employment opportunity for equally educated Muslims and non-Muslims. In rural and urban areas, the unemployment rate for Muslim graduates was double the rate for Hindus. Whether for this reason or otherwise, the rates of increase in numbers studying beyond the secondary level were significantly lower among Muslims than among others. Muslim men in higher education in urban areas actually declined during this period.

A news report on the National Sample Survey Organization findings brought home the link between these dry statistics and the headline news of the day. It quoted a Muslim resident of Jamia Nagar, where police had recently arrested suspected terrorists: “Many educated boys spend the whole day hanging around at tea shops. Who knows what is going on in their minds.”²⁶

The fear of loss of cultural autonomy poses a substantial obstacle to attempts to bring the values of quality modern education to the *madrassah*. Nonetheless, initiatives have been taken to introduce modern secular curricula to *madrassah*, and to subject them to some quantum of regulation for content and educational standards. In the past year, efforts have included funding from the national Human Resource Development Ministry’s Sarva

²⁶ Subodh Varma, “More Muslims Studying, but Can’t Find Jobs,” the *Times of India*, October 27, 2008.

Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) scheme for *madrassa* modernization in Delhi. This includes assignment of teachers from the ministry pool, and training of *madrassa* teachers for science and English instruction. Legislation drafted by the government would provide funding in return for regulation of curriculum content and standards, under the aegis of a proposed central *madrassa* board. It must be acknowledged that the poor quality of secular government-funded schools lends little persuasive force to such efforts.

The quality of most *madrassah* remains low, and their curriculum suggests that they act to separate Muslim students culturally and intellectually. The likelihood or outcomes of official attempts to regulate them and improve their quality remain uncertain. However, at the level of popular initiative, encouraging counterexamples may be found. Leading and prestigious organizations of religious teachers (*ulema*) such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) have taken a lead in the reform of religious schools. As part of this effort, *madrassah* have hosted political debates and discussions on issues including terrorism, to which non-Muslim political and social activists, journalists, and religious leaders have been welcomed.²⁷

Perhaps as significant is the development of models for interreligious collaboration on improvement of Muslim religious schools. A collaboration between the JUH and Janvikas, a secular organization, resulted in the development of the Jeevan Talim project, which works in Gujarat to improve numeracy and literacy education in Muslim schools, including pedagogical training for religious teachers and peer instructors. Bringing together the capacities of Janvikas, which has long worked with primary education reform for all socially disadvantaged groups including Muslims, and the access and prestige of *ulema*, this collaboration has threaded the needle of religious/cultural identity and educational quality.

Such initiatives are particularly important in a political climate where other socially disadvantaged groups have, since the Gujarat riots, often kept their distance from solidarity with Muslims for fear their cause might be set back in the face of growing anti-Muslim sentiment.

Uncertain Data

While some official data, albeit incomplete and not entirely reliable, exist on the representation of Muslims in public services, other demographic data are sorely lacking. The Sachar Committee, possibly the most comprehensive review ever undertaken, itself acknowledges the problem of data insufficiency. Sachar suggests that a national body is

²⁷ Yoginder Sikand, "Reforming Traditional Muslim Education," *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 19, 2008, p. 19.

needed to generate data. Demographic issues are one indicator of the ways in which factual uncertainty can feed the respective anxieties of Muslims and non-Muslims. To assess these anxieties, let alone effectively address them, is almost impossible in the absence of clarity about the true situation.

The social marginality of many Muslim communities and populations throughout India compounds this problem. Many Muslims make their livelihoods in traditional artisanal occupations that are obscured to all but the most comprehensive survey. Their participation in traditional artisanal occupations and their disproportionate representation in the informal economy make Muslims less visible and less susceptible to modern social science tools for social policy. In turn, the deficiencies of policy tools act as significant constraints on the capacity of state institutions to address clearly identified and agreed priorities such as access to education. Planning for appropriate numbers and placement of public sector schools is doubly difficult for such populations.

While it is dangerous to ignore the role of official discrimination or neglect in the denial of equal educational opportunity to Muslims, it is also important to recognize all significant sources of their disadvantage.