
Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community of India: A Report, Government of India, November 2006, pp. 404.

A long awaited report! Report of Prime Minister's High Level Committee (2006) is worth looking at. The committee was constituted on March 9, 2005, under the chairmanship of Justice Rajender Sachar, for preparing a comprehensive report on the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims in India. It was submitted to Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on November 17, 2006 and was tabled in both houses of Parliament on 3 November, 2006. The committee comprised well-known experts from the fields of economics, sociology, education, demography, public administration, development planning, and programme implementation, who functioned as its members.

The above report is an outcome of the concerted efforts of the committee, which has collated a huge wealth of data in tabular, graphical and thematic forms under a single volume. It not only provides first-hand information on Muslims in various social, economic and educational spheres but also presents a comparison of the status of the Muslim community vis-à-vis other socio-religious communities in the country. The inter-state comparisons, and rural-urban segregations add richness to the data by highlighting both the similarities as well as the diversity among different communities. The Report is thus akin to a single window for viewing the situation of Muslims in India and also acts as a benchmark for further discussion on the subject amongst academicians and policy-makers.

The socio-economic position of the minorities, especially that of the largest minority community, that is, the Muslims, has been the subject of a sharp debate over the last few decades. It has also been widely discussed among parliamentarians, policy-makers, academicians, and politicians as well as in media. One of the reasons for this has been the lack of availability of authentic information about the Muslim community in India, which has prevented policy-makers from taking some radical decisions for the benefit of the community. Another factor has been the frequent projection of Muslim community as a prejudiced one, which is largely, if not solely, responsible for communal disturbances and the spread of terrorism. The Report is an answer to some of those queries.

The Justice Sachar Committee was mandated to cover two dimensions: (i) the collection of systematic information on the socio-economic status of Muslims, and opportunities in both the public and private sectors available to them as compared to those available to the other socio-economic categories; and (ii) the consolidation, collation and analysis of the above information/literature to identify the areas wherein the government can intervene to address relevant issues relating to the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community.

The Report is based on two types of data—qualitative and quantitative. For obtaining qualitative information, the committee went through an interactive process of compiling information on various dimensions of its mandate. The committee members have visited all the major states in India and have met different stakeholders for wide

consultations. In addition, the people were encouraged to send representations through the media. Based on rich responses, the perceptions and views of consultations has been summarized in chapter public perception and perspectives which provide a context to the analysis. The Report is heavily dependent on quantitative data for statistical analysis, and this data is mainly collected from the Census, National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), banking and financial institutions, government commissions, organizations, Ministries, public sector units (PSUs) and academic institutes. The information thus collected is classified into twelve chapters. At the outset, the Report discusses the inter-related issues of identity, security and equity, which are the main concerns of Muslims in India.

As regards identity, the perception of the Muslims is that they are constantly being viewed with a great degree of suspicion and are discriminated against in matters pertaining to housing, employment, and admission in educational institutions, as well as in gender-related issues. The focus of the media in the past on the conditions of a few Muslim women brings the lens of gender injustice to focus solely on religious ideology rather than on the other related factors. The community also carries a double burden by virtue of being labelled as anti-national and terrorists. Thus there is a very high degree of insecurity among the Muslim community, especially in communally-sensitive areas, though the gravity and intensity of this sense of insecurity varies across states. The discriminatory attitude of the police and the media, coupled with the feeling of injustice in the context of the inadequate compensation paid to riot victims has compounded the problem, gradually taking it towards the ghettoization. Due to ghettoization, members of the Muslim community perceive themselves to be easy targets for neglect by municipal and government authorities. These perceptions of insecurity, ghettoization and discrimination are intrinsically linked.

The Muslims feel that they are widely discriminated against in terms of issues on education, employment, access to credit, infrastructure, government programmes, political participation, etc. There are diverse views regarding the educational level, employment, access to schools, education provided in the *madarsas*, use of the Urdu language, women's education, employment, and participation in the labour market. There is an acute problem of low level of educational attainment among large sections of Indian Muslims. The specific reason assigned for this was that education was not necessarily seen as translating into formal employment. The lack of good quality schools and hostel facilities for girls, poor quality of teachers, communal content of some textbooks, and the existence of Urdu medium schools are believed to be some of the important factors responsible for the low level of educational attainment among Muslims. As regards Muslim girls, the Report highlights that there is a strong desire and enthusiasm for education among Muslim girls, but hurdles like low access to schools in the vicinity, poverty, financial constraints, and discrimination faced at school prevent them from continuing education. Increasing incidents of communal violence and insufficient public security discourage the community from sending the Muslim girls to distant schools. Under such circumstances, *madarsas* are the only option that girls have for acquiring education. Issues related to *madarsa* education that have

been highlighted include control of its easy access, mainstreaming of the institution, modernization and its affiliation to a regular education board. This has also been specifically recommended in the last chapter. While supporting *madarsa* education and bringing it into the mainstream, the Committee also, in some respects, encourages Muslim girls to attend schools in the early years. However, it is felt that creating and developing such institutions based on religion will, in the long run, create a sharp communal divide as also aggravate the seclusion and ghettoization of Muslims.

Employment is another key factor of concern for Muslims. The poor representation of Muslims in public employment is seen as the result of discrimination against the Muslims. The growing trend of liberalization and globalization has a deleterious effect on the livelihoods of Muslims as large chunks of the population are dependent on the unorganized sector of the economy for employment and income. Muslim women have been among those most adversely affected as they are overwhelmingly self-employed in home-based work. It has also been pointed out that Muslims face discrimination in the area of access to credit. Many banks have allegedly designated the Muslim zone as a 'red zone'. The reasons for such allegations are not cited anywhere in the report. This necessitates an investigation of banks to identify the reasons for designating such zones as well as an analysis of the credit flow to Muslims from banks. It is also felt that the low participation of women in the self-help group (SHG) programme has also led to the ghettoization and seclusion of women, thereby preventing them from taking collective action and placing a set of demands for their services. These problems are also felt in the areas of access and usage of infrastructure and government programmes. In general, none of the SHG programmes being run in India points towards discriminatory practices on basis of religion. The non-participation of Muslim women in the mainstream could also be due to other factors like 'seclusion', which need to be closely examined.

While the above issues highlight the perceptions of Muslims about their own conditions and problems, they also show that these perceptions are "mere impressions based on common generalizations rather than on a scientific truth". However, some of the data has been validated through statistics like a poor literacy rate, the mean years of schooling, dropout rates, rate of enrolment, etc., which shows a low percentage for Muslims as compared to Hindus and SC/STs. However, an assessment of the state-wise data shows that states like Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Jharkhand have higher literacy levels among Muslims as compared to SCs/STs. Similar trends were also found (the states may be different) in other important variables like the proportion of enrolled children, the mean years of schooling, etc. Supporting statistics which indicate the low status of Muslims are following: Literacy is 59 per cent, 25 per cent of the Muslim children in the age group of 6-14 years have never attended school, less than 4 per cent are graduates or diploma-holders among the population aged 20 years, more than 12 per cent are in street vending, 70 per cent of the Muslim women workers execute work at their home, more than 16 per cent are engaged as sales workers, and the prevalence of poverty in urban Muslims is 38 per cent, while that among the rural Muslims is 27 per cent.

Again, it would be pertinent to highlight that the perceptions of Muslims derive from issues of identity, security and equity, which are based on the responses obtained from a large group of individuals and organizations, and are not derived from a scientifically representative sample based on some research strategy. Moreover, some of the claims made by the Muslims like poverty and financial constraints being the major causes that prevent Muslim girls from accessing modern/secular education, lack of information and non-availability of affordable healthcare facilities, and lack of knowledge of contraceptives (p. 24), are not specific to Muslims but are also applicable to other sections of society living under similar conditions. For example, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)–III data on access to healthcare shows that the situation of Scheduled Castes (SCs)/Scheduled Tribes (STs) is more deplorable than that of the Muslims (pp. 115, 447). The data indicates that 49.3 per cent of the Muslim women report at least one problem in accessing healthcare, whereas the corresponding figures for SCs and STs are 50.4 per cent and 67 per cent, respectively. The most common reporting problem in accessing healthcare was the distance' between the home and the place where the healthcare was being provided, which was the highest among STs (44 per cent), as compared to 26.8 per cent among Muslims, and 27.3 per cent among SCs. The knowledge pertaining to the use of modern methods of contraception was universal among all religious and social categories, that is, more than 90 per cent of the respondents had this knowledge. Similarly, the reason for children dropping out of school as per the NFHS III (p. 35) shows that 18.3 per cent of the respondents equate it with heavy costs while 21 per cent claim that they are not interested in studies. These results indicate that the issues raised by Muslims are actually not specific to Muslims only but also in generally applicable to other poor and marginalized sections of society.

The author has undertaken research among rural as well as urban Muslims for carrying out her doctoral and M.Phil dissertation. She has found that Muslims by themselves constitute a heterogeneous mass and show great diversity across different cultural settings. Indian Muslims are the combination of two great cultures, viz. the Islamic and the Indian culture. In various regions of India, Muslims follow a variety of customs and traditions, which are not Islamic *per se* and are practicing various localized cultures adopted by them over a period of time. Muslims in rural and urban areas also show a lot of differences in the practice of their customs. The culture of the rural areas is influenced by the local traditions, which are non-urban, implicit and comprehensive in nature, which offers a contrast with the formal, literate traditions propagated by the Great Tradition or Islam. Both the local as well as Islamic traditions are constantly influencing each other and acquire different shapes in different settings. The local leader or *mullah* also plays a very important role in shaping the religious ideology and beliefs of the people, which act as a normative pattern in the local culture.

It has been found that in the Meos (a Muslim community), among whom the author has undertaken research, a lot of local customary practices relating to the rituals of marriage, childbirth, etc. have been adopted over a period due to culture contact from Hindu community or other neighbouring culture. For instance, practices like dowry, preference for the male child, marriage among non-kins, village exogamy,

non-observance of the *burqa*, levirate, etc. have been observed amongst Meos as well as neighbouring Hindu castes. The preference for sons is quite dominant among the Meos, as is evident from a few peculiar practices prevalent within the community. One such practice is that of burying the placental cord of the baby girl at the back door of the house and that of the baby boy at the front door of the house. The underlying belief for this practice is that it will lead to the birth of only boys in the family. The Report also points out overall high sex ratio among Muslims in comparison to other communities, however a simple conclusion of non or less practice of female infanticide, foeticide, and preference for the male child etc cannot be generated from such data. There are also state-wise variations in the data. For instance, in states like Delhi, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand, the sex ratio of Muslims is lower than that of the overall figure.

The Report addresses various problems facing the Muslim community and also offers comprehensive recommendations for their progress. Generalized recommendations like the setting up an Equality Opportunity Commission, creation of a diversity index, formation of a national databank, and establishment of an assessment and monitoring authority are aimed at strengthening the administrative structure for the purpose of monitoring and regulation of various activities. Specific recommendations, on the other hand, like the modernization of *madarsa* education, higher education, provision of hostel facilities, and support to the Urdu language are based on the ideology of their progress.

In order to facilitate inclusive growth for Muslims, it is first essential to ensure that the Centrally-sponsored or state-specific development schemes address the specific requirements of the community and also take into account some region-wise interventions based on differences within the community. For example, Muslims residing in southern India will have different lifestyles and traits from those living in northern India. Thus, wherever State intervention is mandated, the state governments should be allowed a degree of flexibility in implementing the schemes. Secondly, it must be pointed out that the mere provision of services, and an increase or upgradation in infrastructure for the Muslims would not solve all their problems. It is essential to bring about attitudinal changes within the Muslim community, specifically on matters pertaining to education, health, family planning practices, seclusion of women, etc. The civil society and local religious leaders like *mullahs* could be involved in ushering in this change, which would help to gradually bring in the community into the mainstream in the long run. The Muslims could also be encouraged, through awareness generation programmes, to participate in self-help group (SHG) programmes, and learn to gain access to the government services that have been specifically provided for the community. In various SHG programmes, it has been observed that women members be they of any community, generally exhibit some inhibitions initially, which can be overcome gradually.

The Report, on the whole, provides a plethora of information on the Muslims as such, but there is a need to undertake further studies on the Muslims to facilitate an understanding of the various complexities prevailing within the community as compared to the other socio-religious categories. These can be in the form of micro-

level studies to be undertaken by university departments and research institutions. The Sachar Committee Report is thus a baseline document for researchers and policy-makers, and the Government has also already initiated follow-up action on it.

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