

Research Article

Rising Inequality and Challenges for Democracy in Twenty-first Century India: Muslims and Dalits

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‘What is radically wrong with our rulers is this: they are fully aware that they do not know us, and yet they do not care to know us’. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) said once. Sadly, it is still true for our times and politics.

ABSTRACT

There is an attempt in this paper to highlight the growing inequality among Muslims and Dalits, which is continuously rising in spite of many measures undertaken by the government of India since seven decades of Independence. It further shows that Muslims’ condition is worse than Dalits. There is an attempt in seeking plausible explanations from communalism, denial of free political participation, basic health services, education, food security programmes, land rights, housing and residential pattern and economic and cultural alienation as exclusionary process.

Keywords: Dalits, Democracy, Exclusion, Inequality, Muslims, Democracy, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Our leaders do not know us; especially, the weakest amongst us are the farthest from our politics and rulers. This is exactly what is happening with the two most disadvantaged sections of our society – Dalits and Muslims. They form a substantial population of India and yet the governmental and social apathy towards them is phenomenal.

The Constitution of India not only guarantees basic human rights as Fundamental Rights but also prohibits all kinds of discriminatory practices, in any form. There are progressive laws and human rights redress mechanisms and institutions, but these are not effectively implemented. In the matter of social relationships, discrimination against Muslims and Dalits takes the form of barriers against access to justice, bathing, eating, drinking, worshiping and having access to common properties. It puts a ban on all common cycles of participation. In the use of public facilities, the spirit of discrimination manifests itself in the exclusion of the Muslims and Dalits from schools, wells, temples, means of conveyance and access to land, water and other livelihood resources. Public administration is also deeply drenched in the spirit of discrimination against Muslims. It has affected law courts, government departments, banks and particularly the police. Discrimination against Muslims in the matter of securing land, credit, jobs, etc. exists in the most rampant form.

Neera Chandhoke, in her book *Beyond Secularism*, explains this phenomenon as follows. In India there is ‘a situation where the members of the minority community are threatened by calls for assimilation. If the members of the community feel strongly about their religion, they will tend to group themselves around their religious identity, in order to make a claim for recognition. The claim originates from a group of people who are affected by assertions of power. The meaning of the claim is constituted by the fact that these people resist assimilation. . . . The feeling that this claim taps is that of resistance to assimilation. And the communitarian identity that people acquire for that historical moment is that of a minority community’. Now when people come to think of themselves and of others in terms of one set of identity experiences, they alienate themselves from other experiences and other identities. In the first instance, therefore, one identity is foregrounded because a series of historical and political circumstances may have forced people to adopt this particular identity to the exclusion of other’ (Chandhoke, 1999, pp. 30–31).

In light of particular events and circumstances within India, the Muslim community unites along its common religion and fissures within the community or commonalities with other religious communities becoming less significant. The perceived threat to the specifically Muslim identity is what causes them to unite and these threats come from a variety of sources – even as far as the international level; for instance, Yaseen Akhtar Misbahi, a founder of an Islamic seminary, argues that ‘Great Britain, America and Israel have waged war against Islam across the world and this has brought Muslims together and now we adhere to Islam much more’.

Sachar Committee Report Findings

The report of the High-Level Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Justice Rajindar Sachar presents striking details about the marginalisation of the Muslim community. In terms of education, when compared with the SC and ST, the growth in literacy for Muslims was lower than for the former. The report says, 25 per cent of Muslim children in the 6–14 age groups either never went to school or else dropped out at some stage. Situation is not any better when it comes to employment, wherein in no state of the country the level of Muslim employment is proportionate to their percentage in the population but mostly half of their population proportion. It says that the share of Muslims in ‘amounts outstanding’ is only 4.7 per cent. This figure is 6.5 per cent in the case of other minorities. Further, on an average the amount outstanding per account for Muslims is about half that of the other minorities and one-third of ‘others’. The pity is that, according to the report, many areas of Muslim concentration have been marked by many banks as ‘negative’ or ‘red’ zones where giving loans is not advisable (Chishti, 2006).

Communalism as a Hindrance to the Growth of Minorities

After four decades of painstaking research, extensive field work and a number of visits to Aligarh District, Paul R. Brass in the book *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* asks ‘How do such ghastly atrocities akin to Nazi violence occur in democratic India?’ *His answers are also specific: First, the police are predominantly Hindu; many of them imbued with the same anti-Muslim feelings as the general population. Second, there is a special police force, the PAC that is notoriously anti-Muslim. Third, repeated accounts in Sara iSultani and elsewhere make it clear that the police and the PAC work hand in hand with members of the militant Hindu organizations in beating and killing Muslims. Placing these incidents in a wider, global framework, he explains that such acts take place within a context, a discourse, that isolates and demonizes a particular group of people-in this case Muslims, their religion, and their social practices-and characterizes them as a physical danger to Hindus and to the unity of the country* (Brass, 2003).

He chose Aligarh as the place for his investigations where he has scrutinized the political, demographic, social and economic factors which have produced a series of riots from 1946 to 1995. If this was not all, Brass also describes after effects of riots, when facts are horribly twisted by politicians, journalists, police officers, social scientists and historians that at the end of the day there is no one responsible for these ghastly acts (Brass, 2003).

Human Rights and Dalits in the Caste System

As a system of social, economic and religious governance, the caste system is not founded on the principles of equality, liberty (or freedom) or fraternity but on the principles of inequality in every sphere of life. Historically, the caste system has formed the social and economic framework for the life of the people in India. In its essential form, caste as the system of social and economic governance is based on principles and customary rules which involve the division of people into social groups (castes) where assignments of rights are determined by birth are fixed and hereditary.

In this framework, the concept of human rights under the Hindu social system has a specific meaning. Unlike other human societies, the Hindu social order in its classical form does not recognise the individual and her/his distinctiveness as the centre of the social purpose. The unit of the Hindu society is not the individual. Even the family is not regarded as a unit of society except for the purposes of marriage and inheritance. The primary unit of society is caste. The 'upper castes' are given all privilege and rights, as they are considered to be 'superior social beings', and Dalits being worthy of considered at the bottom are denied all rights because they are treated as 'sub-human beings or lesser human beings', considered unworthy of any rights.

Denial of Free Political Participation

The granting of reservations to Dalits within the new Panchayats (Village level local bodies) established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 is one of the most significant changes introduced in recent decades. Apart from seats for Dalits in every Panchayat based on their population, the posts of Sarpanch (Village head) together with 1/3 of the seats for Dalit women have been reserved. These provisions have the potential of throwing up a new leadership among Dalits who can play a seminal role in participation and decision-making in the new Panchayats.

Land Rights

Dalits and Muslims' land rights are often denied; it is directly linked to caste system, discriminations based on religion and its pernicious influence resulting into gross human rights violations of worst kinds in multiple forms. There is also a nexus between being lower caste and landless. The implementation of land reform law has been subverted by the absence of political will and bureaucratic commitment, loopholes in the laws, tremendous manipulative power of the landed classes, lack of organization among the poor and excessive interference of courts. Matin (2009) has drawn attention towards similar trend and highlighted the growing marginalisation of the Muslims.

Right to Education – Muslim and Dalit Children

The enrolment of Muslim and Dalit children has increased over the years, revealing the increased interest in education and mobility. But the real problem is an alarming dropout rate among these students. In many habitations, the school is situated in localities inhabited by dominant Hindu castes which are hostile to students belonging to lower castes and minority groups. Teachers have been found to maintain discriminatory attitudes and practices that underlie caste relations in society.

Denial of Basic Health Services

The National Family Health Survey – a government of India agency data for 1998–1999 revealed wide gap between Muslims, Dalits and others. The infant (83) and child mortality (39) among the Dalits is higher than others, 61 and 22, respectively. In 1998–1999, at least 56% of Dalit women suffered from anaemia. More than 70% women's delivery took place at home and only one-fifth took place in institutions.

Discrimination in Food Security Programmes

Considering high dropout rate in primary education the Supreme Court of India directed the Union government to provide mid-day meals, so students may be retained and the right to education for all can be realised. In some cases where a Muslim or Dalit cook has been hired, the so called upper caste parents then begin sending their children to school with lunches packed at home, or require their children to come home for lunch, in any case forbidding their children to eat food prepared by the Muslim or Dalit cook.

Economic Exclusion and Discrimination

The economic exclusion of Muslims and Dalits is through pricing in sale, purchase and hiring activities, ranging from raw materials to finished goods. The religion and caste-based labour market discrimination is conceived in the form of exclusion of Muslims and Dalits from employment by Hindu 'higher caste'.

Right to Housing versus Residential Segregation

Muslims and Dalits are being discriminated against in the housing market. It is mainly related to the restrictions faced by Muslims and Dalits in purchasing land for the construction of residential house in predominantly high-caste locality, in taking house on rent in so called Hindu high-caste locality and in self-restrictions imposed by high castes, buying land in the low-caste locality for construction of residential houses.

Accountability of State vis-a-vis State Impunity

The traditionally oppressed overwhelming majority of which are drawn from the lowest rung of the traditional social hierarchy continue to suffer on many counts. Today they are the inequitable victims of the manifest professional inefficiency of the State apparatus as well as the social bias built within the democratic institutions. They are also the victims of its petty corruption and brutalised excesses, both in the urban areas as well as in the rural areas.

Cultural Alienation

The dominant cultural values and practices have played a major role in not only subjugating Muslims and Dalits but in concurrently alienating them from the so-called mainstream of a civilized socio, cultural, economic and political set-up. The alienation has been to such an extent that even granting them human hood so as to enjoy certain rights has been out rightly denied. There is a pattern of institutional discrimination in the implementation of different welfare schemes meant for Dalits and other marginalised and excluded communities. There is gross under allotment of funds for Muslims and Dalits in the Union Budget. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 found similar provisions in the Indian Constitution. But, as a matter of fact, the socio-economic base of the Indian Political system has acted as a great barrier for establishment of an egalitarian society. To quote Dr B.R. Ambedkar, in the Indian village republic there is no place for democracy, equality, liberty and fraternity. In fact, the Indian village is a negation of republic. The republic is an empire of the Hindus over the untouchables. The untouchables have no rights because they are outside the village republic. For them there is no equal right and justice (Ambedkar, 1989).

The Most unfortunate part is that after almost seven decades of independence and despite all constitutional and legal safeguards, for the disadvantaged sections, we have not made much progress on the ground. We are regarded as the largest democracy in the world, which conducts transparent and peaceful elections and has mostly seen smooth transfer of power after the fixed term is over. We can be a model of sorts for many new and old democracies on how to conduct elections and have peaceful transfer of power. But over the decades, have these electoral exercises brought just the electoral change or the fundamental change that is at the centre of this whole democratic exercise. The persistent marginalisation of the large section of the society and degeneration of the electoral process has severely affected the credibility of the liberal democracy in India. This process of exclusion may be explained by theoretical perspectives critically examined by Matin (2015). Rabindranath Tagore's observation is of tremendous significance for the contemporary India that our rulers (government) should try to know us and our problems then only we will be able to realise the true essence of democracy by good governance.

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