

Book Review

Lives of Muslims in India: Politics, Exclusion and Violence, by Abdul Shaban, Routledge, April 20, 2012, Price Rs 950 (Hardbound); ISBN 978-81-7304-903-3

Reviewed by

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The readers may feel that the present book is another addition in the stock of publications figuring in recent times. But this volume is one of the most vividly captured and compiled manuscript of the recent time on Muslims and their concerns. The debate on Indian Muslim has taken new dimensions in the post Gujarat carnage and shortly after the Sachar Committee report came in public domain. Shaban has taken a bold initiative to take the challenge of bringing this volume and consider all the seriously examined papers in the book. The coherence in the following chapters leads the reader to reach at the stage of clarity and understanding about the lives of Muslims in India. The book is primarily dependent on well argued and debated papers contributed by serious scholars, academia and activists on the respective fields. Critically, the volume will touch everyone's mind due to the reason that it is one of the first attempts to sketch the lives of Indian Muslims; there is no inhibition to praise the author for marvelous compilations.

The excerpt of the book deeply elaborates the structure followed as "the fast consolidating identities along with religious and ethnic lines in recent years have considerably 'minoritised' Muslims in India. The wide-ranging essays in this volume focus on the intensified exclusionary practices against Indian Muslims, highlighting how, amidst a politics of violence, confusing

policy frameworks on caste and class lines, and institutionalised riot systems, the community has also suffered from the lack of leadership from within. At the same time, they have emerged as a 'mass' around which the politics of 'vote bank', 'appeasement', 'foreigners', 'Pakistanis within the country', etc. are innovated and played upon, making them further apprehensive about asserting their legitimate right to development. The important issue of the double marginalisation of Muslim women and attempts to reform the Muslim Personal Law by some civil society groups is also discussed".

The discussion on exclusion, minority or minority-ism, identity and communities in India, nationalism in the realm of growing discontent among multiple social groups of Indian population, etc. are the bold initiatives brought together. The unique experiences of Muslim minority in India are an important part of any democracy. In India, there are all kinds of minorities-religious linguistic, cultural and ethnic but the larger context generally arises on Muslims. Communal tension in the post independent era has become the legacy of Indian democracy and nothing has stopped such acts to stop. The deprivation process among Indian Muslims is not only due to the apathy of the state machinery but also persistent political mobilisations have brought exclusion and fear-ghettoisation among Muslims across the Indian Territory.

The misleading notions and impression formed that this book is yet another addition on the debate of minority or minorities in India is far from truth. At the first stage, let us understand that the chapters compiled by Abdul Shaban narrate the Indian Muslims and their diversities as communities of India. He says “India has considerable religious, social, cultural and racial diversity. Given this, no ‘one’ identity alone is able to signify a group but other identities also criss-cross it”. Further, he elaborates that the monolithic character attributed to Indian Muslims in day-to-day discourses are not empirical rather they are far from the realities. They are densely divided and segregated community on the lines of caste, sect and region due to its own socio-historical facts. The chapter also goes back to relate the fact of social division in *The Imperial Gazette of India (1907)* about Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzals as three broader categories among Indian Muslims. The seriousness of the writings is reflected while debating the most dominant factors of modern India, alienation and ghettoisation. There are barely a few strong ethnographic studies on the lives of Muslims, settled in the mini-Pakistan, which Abdul Shaban uses, living in these ghettos and carrying the burden of alienation. The theoretical understanding of alienation loses its ground in sociology due to the very fact that the forms of class alienation in Marxist formula is no longer solid and crystal rather vivid forms of alienation exist among Muslims as a community in India.

The first chapter signifies how Muslims ought to be and the historical development in the lives of Muslims in independent India. M. J. Akbar sharply notes that Islam, modernity and Muslims are important concept to understand before jumping to conclude. Modernity means to have equal rights, irrespective of colour, creed, language, origin and equality before law of modern and democratic nation. The economic equity has never been achieved in India and hundreds of millions of people are living below poverty line. All these created space for political parties to misuse the existence of Muslims not more than merely a vote bank and severed the damage already done during and after partition. The chapter attempts to understand the notions of minorityism spread in political discourses. In this process, the author re-looks into the past and when the beginnings of disempowerment take place among Indian Muslims. The idea of secularism and democratic values

govern the larger policies of independent India, but the intricacies of true democratic tradition are not realised and brought in the lives of every citizen.

Valenta focuses on the core of the everyday lives of Indian Muslim. The scarcities of empirical knowledge on the lives of Indian Muslims have benefited the rival social groups and at times political groups for their own sake. Before Sachar Committee Report (2006), there was by a hair’s breadth any source of information available on Indian Muslims as community of India. The transformation of large groups of Indian Muslims into a deprived and excluded group is not a by-product of a day. It took toll of lives and capital without refuting the consequences. Muslim as victim and as agent is the serious agenda of the current political-judicial and legal discourses. True to the central debate, Valenta says the problem of Muslims in India is not an intellectual or scholarly or social one but rather a political one. Muslims as a category sustained not due to the facts but on politics. Hence, politics around Muslims are tensed and crumbling rather showing strength of political participation and assimilation. Largely, Islam is blamed for the backwardness of Muslims and focuses on the richness and inclusive history of Islamic trade and social lives is not given. Vast notes are presented to understand the deficiency of Indian Muslims in the context of India as a whole. It is also suggested in the chapter that in approaching Muslims as the poor and minority through the lens of deficiency, even majority Hindus are deficient at certain level. Hence, it is not specific to religious community rather the nation India itself is facing persistent deficiency.

Jain understands the multiculturalism and social exclusion in the democratic framework and then looks deeper into the policies framed for Muslims in Independent India. The punching point in the philosophy of multiculturalism is best where it recognises the hegemonic base of marginalisation and advocates dissent against hegemonic forms of dominance. The modern nation by not recognising the overt discrimination perpetuated by its own codes, the States makes no serious attempt to ensure that the cultural orientation of different communities is respected. Such bold ideas needs the attention of the present day modern nation society, then only the disadvantaged and minorities such as Muslims in India finds inclusive space and everyday participation.

Author acknowledges the fact that India is pressed into a nation of multicultural and plural ethos but cultural diversity is merely tolerated in India in the context of minorities and small sections of other groups. She further quotes Kammen that “policies of Indian state reveal an ambiguous approach towards minority communities (pages 77). It is hoped that the only grassroot level pressures and their capacity may bring changes in liberal democracy whether in the form of making it recognise group rights and cultural rights or in bringing in structural changes in the form of Equal Opportunity Commission. Puniyani elaborates very critically politics of exclusion and how Muslims in India faces multiple discriminations. It is trust worthy that Indian Muslims have formed themselves into a community not in a day or two but it is a historical fact to look into the fact community formation. From the first stage of Malabar Coast welcoming the Arab traders during seventh century to the modern age of democratic and free economy, Muslim gradually comprised a lot of poor and labourers. The independent India is not due to the elite politics but the efforts and sacrifices of large masses from all communities. But the stereotyping of Muslims as the foreigner did get prominence in the mass perception and at the same time, Indian leadership used religious consciousness to inculcate modern nationalism among the people. But this resulted in the arousal of two process first nationalism and second communalism. The beginning of communal politics during British period continued in the independent India. Repeated communal riots in the major cities of India created strong insecurity among Muslims and the process of ghettoisation take place rapidly. The paper highlights the lack of opportunities in governmental services and apathy of the state towards Muslims became synonymous in the lives of Indian Muslims. The revealing facts and information demonstrated the state of affairs to the society and the second stage of modern India begins. Sachar Committee proved to be fortune teller to the lives of Muslim community in India and Puniyani narrates the chronological fates of Indian Muslims today that leads them towards extreme exclusion at the economic, social and political levels.

The paper by Irfan lays the thrust on the syncretic tradition of India. The shared history of identity based on multi-religious groups and also shared cultural and

intellectual history throughout the sub-continent gives Indian Muslims a shared identity with others. There is no doubt that that the syncretic culture grew out of the Indian kingdoms or Muslims ruler hands rather conversion was due to the Sufi saints ways of embracing everyone, excluded without their identity and belongingness. The existence of various Silsila or order of faith is a pan India phenomenon and they attract all religious followers. Except the recent or not early than post independent India, Hindu-Muslims shared and participate in each other’s festivals. The growth of two forces during freedom movement, Hindutva forces and Muslim separatism played catastrophic role consistently in the past and even at present. This chapter draws attention on the mobilisation process of such forces and how the religious role in political sphere began important.

Very contrary to other contributors, Hebbar pen downs on a neglected side of academic and social learning’s. The rise of communal forces in the politics of India is not new but it changes over the period of time. The major force of Hindutva Avatar in the last 30 years Bhartiya Janata Party never said that it does not want Muslim vote. Of course this party relied upon the communal card and mainly on the upper caste votes. In the process of its growth and possibility of gaining and reaching at the top of the ruling centre, BJP engaged with Muslims at one level. The entry point of Arif Baig and Sikandar Bakht, later Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi along with Shahnawaz Hussain is a wholesome gain to the party. The embarrassment of these leaders did not wither away during the demolition of Babri Masjid or Gujarat Carnage but party managed to retain later two leaders as the front torch bearer from Muslim community. This chapter is an eye opening description of the BJP’s engagement with Muslims and provides sincere note about the socio-politico drama played by the party governed by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. BJP does need the support of Muslim vote bank but not on the basis of reservation to Muslims.

The seventh chapter again relies upon Sachar Committee Report (2006) and consistently uses the empirical data made available in the documents. The deficient data on the socio-economic status of Muslims in independent India severely affected the community at large. Taha Abdul Rauf briefs the issues of majority–minority

dynamics embedded in social relations. He quotes the interplay of identity, equity and security as the core of the Sachar Committee Report and heart to the Indian Muslims. The thick descriptions about 'Muslims' as others have been focal point in the global scenario in post 9/11 equating Muslims as terrorist, anti-modernity and religious hysteria. This rhetoric is well chosen and used by the right forces in India to counter and create fear among the largest minority in India. The argument manufacturing violence based on consent, even, police joining the communal wings during riots has destroyed the ethos of secular nations. Muslims are thrown out of jobs and employment after Gujarat carnage is the well-witnessed realities of Gujarat land. The author highlights the strengths of a few studies after communal violence of 2002 in Gujarat, study of Harsh Mander (2009) is seen very important. In nutshell, the declining ratio of socio-economic inequality among Muslims is not only due to their development deficit but also an outcome of right wing Hindutva forces.

The book therefore highlights those under-explored aspects whereby large numbers of Muslim groups were fighting for the independent India and dreaming about a multicultural nation, but the communal agenda within the parties never withered away even after 60 years of independence. In the recent decades, few works have appeared that underline this particular aspect of majoritarian communal prejudices of the Congress politics causing alienation of the Muslim communities. The book provides an all India problem of the Muslim community facing in everyday lives. There has been an assertion that the participation of Muslims in political activities is less but not due to their unwillingness but due to the varieties of excluding reasons. Indian democracy can reaffirm its strength by giving equal strength of political participation and economic empowerment, it include Muslims. Despite admirations of Indian polity, there is a strong need to rethink on the process and ways of implementation of democratic rights and translating in the lives of every Indian Muslims.

The eighth and ninth chapters give more powerful description of the theme than any other part of the book in the case of Hindu-Muslim riots in India. Very wisely Bhagat explains the Hindu-Muslim riots and its root in India. There are studies contesting that the riots before nineteenth century were a rare phenomenon in Indian

history, but this has changed over the period of time. Divide and rule policy has gone deep into the vein and bone of Indian psyche that a few political parties functions and survive on this ground only. The highest number of riots occurred in the areas with high density of both population Muslims and Hindus but there is proven and consistent theory to elaborate this fact. The police conduct during communal riots has been a proven fact of Indian police. The most significant fact brought by Jyoti Punwani during the communal riots in Mumbai is the role of police not only junior constables but even also senior officers were engaged directly to help the communal forces or fired on Muslims directly. The paper talks about how Srikrishna Commission also elaborated the fact that is widely discussed in this chapter.

Abdul Shaban provides a broader understanding on ethnic politics, Muslims' Space in contemporary Mumbai in the tenth chapter of the book. From the perspective of developmental or geographical approach, the rapid growth in urban expansion has affected most of the city and lives. The author writes "today the urban landscape in Mumbai is characterised by mutual distrust, fear and economic and social exclusion. While in the American cities, exclusion often follows on the lines of race, but in India it is mainly based on caste, class, religion and region". The segregation process is encouraged with the help of political aspirations and regional identity. It is quite interesting to read the paper about the gradual changes with the onset of Shiv Sena and other associations in Mumbai. How Muslims are called by different derogatory names at times as 'others', but not as a citizen of India? Precisely, the purpose of the paper lies to highlight the discontent in the civil society largely in major cities like Mumbai, which have communalised and ethnicised. The talk of the everyday communication is arising out among people not about basic needs but more metaphorical about nation-state and territorial barriers.

Sattar in her chapter on social exclusion and Muslims of Kolkata define the concept of social exclusion and tell about the origin of social exclusion. The genesis of the concept lies in the European nations where the meaning and context of exclusion is entirely different than any other nations like India. Lenoir thought to mainstream the poor, unemployed, abused, alcoholics and marginalised minority groups. Basically, it was a

kind of rupture in the social bond in French society. The context and social explanation of exclusion in Indian society is vivid in terms of 'causes and consequences'. In the second para, historical process of Muslims in Kolkata is discussed with the help of demographic figures. It helps to understand the long history of Muslims living and being an integral part of the city but they are most backward and excluded social groups among all minorities in the city. The most serious elaboration is about the employment of Muslims in government jobs is not new to us. Even it prevailed during the British period and later carried away the same legacy of least employed social groups in the society. The consequences of partition, later separation of Bangladesh into East Bangaldesh divided the social interactions between Hindus and Muslims. Several riots battered and strained the already tensed social interaction between Muslims and Hindus. All these took years to fade away but the overall lower socio-economic status of West Bengal completely disempowered Muslims of Kolkata. The city of cultural ethos and heritage remained a city of archives with abysmal lives of Muslims. The task ahead lies in breaking the educational and cultural lag inherent with this population and show greater participation in the everyday socio-political lives.

The double exclusion or triple exclusion does exist in the contemporary society, which is cleverly presented in the chapter on 'Muslim women and Law Reforms:...' by Noorjehan and Apte. This being the last chapter of the book catches full attention of the reader and critic. A minority in India, Muslim and later Muslim women, all these three are the social categories to understand in the domain of research. The broad-spectrum to look the agenda of Muslim women is very critical. The political processes do not allow moving freely and acting upon the policies of the government, if it does not suit all men. Muslim women suffer triple level of exclusion and deprivation. But the paper also raises serious questions that whenever there is question

Uniform Civil Code, personal laws, why Muslims only respond and react to the questions. Are the other communities have stood up to forgive and forget their personal laws? The chapter takes back into the history of reforms on Indian Muslims and how the legal framework was established in the past. This also brings the challenge the patriarchal interpretations and relook the Quranic injunctions. Feminist scholars have given a fresh approach towards reading and interpreting the divine texts. The contributor is well informed about the leadership of Muslim women and gives a visible document to prove the attempts of reforms done in the past Indian society. In the last paragraph, the Muslim women movements are portrayed, which was faced by the Muslim community as a whole. The alienation and exclusion of Muslims have created large vacuum in the leadership and the most or majority of the Muslims masses have become dependent on others. The sect-wise difference among Muslims appears to be creating divide and as the paper conclude that Sunni Muslims have never been truly organised at the community level. Hence, it is right to say end this review that Muslim women must now also be heard by the state as an alternative, progressive and liberal voice of the community.

One of the most significant things to be explored by Abdul Shaban is to compromise such a diverse area of attention in one volume and bring the book in an academic realm. The narratives about vivid forms of exclusion and everyday lives of Muslim as an embedded community in India is truly sociological and demands serious attention of policy framers. The readers will definitely benefit with this volume and transform the thought processes towards Indian Muslims. No doubt, lives of Muslims in India is based on politics of violence and entrenched into various forms of exclusion. Last, it offers significantly new things to the readers. One hopes it would be appreciated not only in academic as well as popular circles but also in policy domain and state executive.