



SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA AND DEFICIENT DEBATES ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW APPROACH

Mohd Sanjeer Alam

LOKNITI/CSDS, DELHI, INDIA

ABSTRACT Many nations today grapple with problems of social exclusion along ethno-religious lines and face demands for some kind of affirmative action by disadvantaged ethnic, racial and religious groups. In India, caste inequalities among Hindus have long been recognised and substantive measures for redressing disadvantages of lower castes have been in place for decades. Since India's Muslims, too, are faced with various types of social exclusion, there have been ongoing debates about the necessity of state intervention in the form of affirmative action for Muslims.

The article interrogates various strands of this debate. While relative socio-economic disadvantages among Muslims cannot be denied, how Muslims are currently presented as a marginalised and excluded community is shown to be too simplistic and actually leads to isolation. In view of the multi-dimensional nature of group disadvantage for Muslims, particularly spatial patterns observable across India, more careful understanding is needed to develop effective affirmative action policies. While deeply flawed reasoning grounds prevailing current arguments in favour of separate affirmative action for Muslims, the article suggests that the aim should be to achieve better development for all disadvantaged people from all communities in any particular space.

KEYWORDS: *affirmative action, equality, minorities, Muslims, regional diversity, reservation policies, spatial analysis, secularism, social exclusion*

Introduction: The Wider Context

Many contemporary multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious nations are faced with the problem of exclusion of ethnic, racial and religious minorities (Byrne, 2005).

Constitutional frameworks in liberal democratic nations formally speak of equality of opportunities for all citizens regardless of social identities. But socio-economic and power stratification along ethnic, racial and religious lines often effectively pushes certain minority groups to the margin of society. This has long led to demands that minority groups in democratic nations should be given greater and more substantive equality through preferential policies (Weiner, 1983).

We know that Indian society exhibits long-standing and baffling diversities in terms of ethnicity, caste, tribes, language, religion and so on. Multiplicity of religious faiths constitutes one of the cardinal aspects of social diversity in India and is also widely treated as a major fault line of Indian society. Diversity continues to be a fact of human existence, requiring new thinking about how to handle and manage difference and systemic disadvantage. Although different religions in India have coexisted and created for themselves cultural niches within shared space since time immemorial (Ahmad, 1999; Dutt and Devgun, 1979), the modern history of communal relations in India, especially between Hindus and Muslims, is marked by overt antipathy, bitterness, mutual exclusion and contestation for greater shares in socio-economic and power structures (Ahmad, 2004; Kaura, 1977; Seal, 1968). It is widely assumed that this led eventually to partition of the country into two independent sovereign nations, India and Pakistan, on 14/15 August 1947.¹

However, though religion combined with differing aspirations and differential access to socio-economic and power structures between Hindus and Muslims served as the basis of the 'two nation theory', partition itself did not make either new nation a religiously homogeneous country (Buultjens, 1986; Davis, 1949, 1967).² While 'the Hindu-Muslim question' has thus continued to remain unresolved in the subcontinent, and will probably be there forever, it assumes today considerable relevance also in the various South Asian diasporas across the world (Modood and Berthoud, 1997; Modood, Triandafyllidou and Zapata-Barrero, 2006). To some extent, then, 'the problem' has been exported globally through large-scale migration of South Asians of all religions, but it is not exclusively a matter of religion.

In India, evidence of glaring socio-economic disparities between the two major religious groups, Hindus and Muslims, has recently ignited a wider debate about whether Muslims should also be entitled to the benefits of affirmative action programmes. In view of the multi-dimensional nature of group disadvantages, due particularly to the persistent caste system across religions and considerable spatial inequalities in social development, there is no doubt that India's Muslim community as a whole stands on the fringe of socio-economic life of the country (Sachar, 2006). Like other socially disadvantaged communities, the Muslim community thus perhaps needs state intervention in the form of affirmative action to pull them out of their disadvantaged situation and to provide enhanced access to social goods and services. But how does one go about this and avoid, at the same time, the familiar claim of giving unfair favours to 'others'?

Despite the widespread view among Indian leaders that the very logic of a separate nation for Muslims was that Hindus and Muslims had mutually incompatible and antagonistic interests, India's early leadership took a rather sensitive and sanguine view of the consequence of partition for those many Muslims who stayed back in India. It was realised early on that in post-partition situations, religious minorities would be even more vulnerable than they were earlier. Therefore, India chose to institute and to cultivate a liberal and secular state governed by a democratic constitution (Mahajan, 1999; Sheth, 1999), while Pakistan went for the model of a religio-centric state. The 1950 Constitution of India went even further to provide special rights to minorities, along with other weaker and deprived sections of society.³ This is quite unlike the American Constitution, and actually far more radical than this potential model. The American Constitution did not do away with slavery when it came into being, despite grand allusions to liberty and equality (Zinn, 1991). In brief, post-1947 India set out to be a country where all citizens, irrespective of identity, group membership or religion, would have equal stakes in the nation's life.

However, while socio-economic differences and marked disparities continue to persist, the actual working of secular democracy in India over the past 60 years has been widely claimed to have served predominantly the interests of the dominant castes, classes and communities. Many scholars argue that the Indian state seems to have abdicated its constitutional responsibility to protect democratic rights and the legitimate interests of minorities (for example, Needham and Rajan, 2007; Rajan, 2003). It is also often claimed that the Muslim community in India, as minority communities experience elsewhere, is increasingly being seen and treated as 'democracy's step child'. The stepmotherly treatment of the community is said to be reflected in declining socio-economic status and unabated marginalisation in public spheres since independence (Massey, 1998; Shariff and Razzack, 2006; Zakaria, 1995). Of late, particularly following the release of Justice Sachar's Committee Report (Sachar, 2006),⁴ the issue of the community's exclusion in public spheres in general and in educational opportunities in particular has gained renewed vigour and now occupies the centre stage of Indian public discourse. The findings of the Sachar Report on the exclusion of Muslims have attracted intense debates in the media, in academia and political circles. They seem to have also given more sinews to demands for affirmative action or reservations for Muslims, especially in educational institutions and public employment.

As of now, the demand of reservation for Muslims has with utter subtlety been placed under a blanket by the current ruling elite. Given the political fragmentation in the country, often resulting in a situation where 'a few seats either way can topple the state and even the central government' (Mawdsley, 2002: 132) and with Muslims as a significant political constituency, the issue is likely to hit the news and the headlines of national dailies every now and then in the following years.

This article seeks to interrogate the ongoing debate and argues that while relative socio-economic disadvantages among Muslims are not to be denied, the way Muslims are presented as a 'marginalised community' or 'a community faced with social exclusion' is rather too simplistic and deeply flawed. The debate on affirmative action is, therefore, quasi-informed, devoid of substance and mired in polemics. The article argues that keeping in view the multi-dimensional nature of group disadvantages, due particularly to the persistence of the caste system across religions and glaring spatial inequalities in social development, there is a need for more careful understanding of the disadvantages Muslims are actually suffering in India, so as to develop an effective and efficacious affirmative action policy for them. Deeper rethinking may result in a more appropriate method of handling not only the developmental but also the highly stressed and deeply contested secular trajectory of Indian policies.

Following this introduction, the next section presents evidence of social exclusion of Muslims in different spheres and domains at the national level, which serves as the basis of current debate. In the second major section, a brief overview of the literature on justification and critique, respectively, of affirmative actions for minorities is presented. The third section briefly discusses affirmative action policies in India in general and outlines various perspectives on affirmative actions for Muslims. The fourth section attempts to interrogate the debate and provides a perspective that not only contests the usually invoked arguments regarding group deprivation, but also moves the vectors of current debate onto an elevated plane. The final section suggests a more sophisticated secular approach for the long-term inclusion of Muslims in India.

Social Exclusion of Muslims: The Evidence

The concept of 'social exclusion' refers to a complex and multi-dimensional process and encompasses a wide field. However, in a broader sense, it is used to mean the processes involving the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationship and activities available to the majority of people in society (Levitas et al., 2007). These activities may pertain to economic, social, cultural or political arenas. Thus individuals or groups could be considered as socially excluded if they are geographically resident in a society, but for reasons beyond their control they cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens, though they would like to participate (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachand, 1999). Social exclusion is thus seen as relative, relational and multi-dimensional. Among various indicators of social exclusion, access to publicly provided goods and services such as education and the labour market are the most salient ones (Bhalla and Lapeyre, 1997). Access of individuals or groups to such educational and economic opportunities determines their access to other resources and participation in other activities. Concern, therefore, focuses on access of Muslims to educational and economic opportunities as compared to Hindus. The result is, all too easily, further polarisation rather than examination of the parameters for a better shared future.

Much theoretical and empirical literature rightly lays emphasis on education as a necessary precursor to socio-economic mobility. In fact, the positive outcomes of education are so huge and so crucial for human development that one often takes education as a single measure to assess the overall well-being of a population or a subset of it. In brief, the higher the proportion of a population with formal schooling, the wider is the stock of human capital and the greater the ability to achieve upward socio-economic mobility. Nationally, the Muslim community of India as a whole seems to cut a sorry figure in terms of literacy and education, one of the most critical indicators of human development (Alam and Raju, 2007; Shariff, 1999; Shariff and Razzack, 2006). The literacy rate, one's ability to read, write and understand a simple statement, is lower among Muslims than among Hindus as a whole. Muslim children are less likely to attend schools and those attending are less likely to stay in schools for a few years. Muslims fall far behind Hindus in terms of completed levels of education. They are far less likely to enter higher levels of education as compared to other religious groups (Hasan and Mehta, 2006). Thus the gradient of disparity between the two communities becomes steeper with higher levels of education (Table 1). In sum, the Muslim community, at national level, appears to be experiencing huge educational deficits as compared to other religious groups.

Table 1 **Educational Attainment among Muslims vis-à-vis Hindus (2001)**

<i>Indicators of Educational Attainment</i>	<i>Hindus %</i>	<i>Muslims%</i>	<i>Hindu-Muslim Disparity Index</i>
Literacy Rate (7 years and above)	65.1	59.1	.05
Completed Educational Levels			
Primary/Middle (11 years and above)	30.2	29.7	.01
Secondary (15 years and above)	12.0	9.0	.13
Higher Secondary (18 years and above)	6.4	4.1	.20
Graduate and above (20 years and above)	6.9	3.6	.29

Source: Census of India (2001).

Note: Disparity between the two religious groups is computed by using the (improved) disparity index as developed by Kundu and Rao (1985). The index is as follows:

$DS = \log (X_2/X_1) + \log (200-X_1)/(200-X_2)$, where $X_2 > X_1$ and X_2 and X_1 are the literacy rates et cetera of the two groups—Muslims and Hindus respectively between which disparity is calculated. The larger the value, the greater is the disparity. In the present case, the reference group is Hindus.

As in education, Indian Muslims appear to be lagging behind other religious communities in the economic sphere, too. Prevalence of poverty is much higher among Muslims as compared to Hindus. Over one-third of Muslims live below the poverty line as against one-fourth among Hindus. Muslims living in urban areas are more likely to be poor than others, as well as their counterparts in rural areas (John and Mutatkar, 2005; Sachar, 2006; Shariff, 1999). Muslims have lower levels of consumption and

lower levels of income compared to Hindus (Table 2) and disparities in consumption between Hindus and Muslims are even wider in urban areas.

Labour force participation rates of Muslims are also much lower than among other religious communities. For every hundred main workers among Hindus, there were 86 main workers among Muslims (Table 2). While the proportion of main workers among Muslims is lower, that of non-workers is higher. This indicates a higher unemployment rate among Muslims, though further questions may need to be asked about the extent of the informal economic sector in relation to Muslims. Statistics indicate that the vast majority of workers among Muslims are concentrated in lower rungs of economic opportunities (Khalidi, 2006). Their participation in high earning jobs is low, too. The proportion of regular salaried persons of any social group is an indicator of income as well as material well-being. The representation of Muslims in this particular job category is much lower than among Hindus. For every hundred regular salaried workers among Hindus employed in the public sector, there were only 67 Muslims. The situation is even worse in the private sector, as Table 2 indicates.

Table 2 **Economic Status of Muslims vis-à-vis Hindus**

	<i>Ref. Year</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Hindu</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Muslim/ Hindu Ratio</i>
% Workers	2001				
Main workers		48.1	49.1	42.2	.86
Marginal workers		13.0	13.5	10.4	.77
Non-workers		38.9	37.5	47.5	1.27
% Regular salaried	2004–05				
Government sector		34.2	35.3	23.7	.67
Public/Private Ltd.		13.1	13.9	6.5	.47
Monthly per capita expenditure (current prices)	2004–05				
MPCE (Urban)		1105	1139	804	.70
MPCE (Rural)		579	568	553	.97
Incidence of poverty	2004–05				
Poverty ratio (Urban)		29	27	44	1.63
Poverty ratio (Rural)		28	28	33	1.78

Sources: Census of India (2001); NSSO (2006); Sachar (2006).

In brief, if the above statistics reveal anything; they portray Muslims in disadvantaged positions in relation to Hindus at national level in India, as is also reported for the UK (Modood and Berthoud, 1997). Their overall access to available socio-economic

opportunities is much less compared to Hindus as well as other religious communities. The stratum of lower socio-economic conditions is disproportionately large among Muslims. The most disturbing fact is that while there has been substantial progress in the sum total of the socio-economic conditions of people in the country, the socio-economic conditions of Muslims have worsened during the last decade (Shariff and Razzack, 2006). As Reddy (2002: 11) sums up:

Whichever group of indicators one looks at and whatever level of detail the comparison, the story is the same. The Muslims are on the average on lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder than the Hindus and the differences either remained the same or widened during the 1990s.

Thus, a strong overall impression of consistent Muslim disadvantage results from analysis of the available material at national levels. This then leads to arguments for the need for protective discrimination or some kind of affirmative action. Before we address that issue, the next section explores in a little more depth how the relevant discourses have been developing.

Social Exclusion of Minorities: A Review of Discourse

Minority status per se is not always linked to disadvantaged socio-economic status. Nevertheless, in most cases, it is minority groups who are actually suffering disadvantage or claim to be suffering from socio-economic handicaps and seek preferential treatment from the government. Democratic nations have responded to such demands differently, with a variety of measures to remove certain obstacles to social justice and reduce socio-economic disparities (Weiner, 1983). Apart from various policies aimed at redressing the problems of underprivileged groups, many nations have gone for proactive policies of 'affirmative action'. With regard to India, Galanter (1984) remains a major study, which is of course in need of updating. Affirmative action in a broader sense refers to policies and programmes aimed at remedying various types of under-representation to provide justice to those who are ill-treated, discriminated against and/or under-represented due to inherent socio-economic and cultural traits, or preventing those in power from doing any further wrong to disadvantaged sections of the community (Brest and Oshige, 1995; Sowell, 2004; Steeh and Krysan, 1996; Tierney, 1997; Weiner, 1983). Affirmative action is, therefore, a proactive policy seeking to achieve equality, or at least a higher degree of equality. It aims to do this not just as a theoretical right, but seeks to create new facts and results (Loury, 1981; Mullen, 1988; Steinberg, 1995).

The justification of affirmative action for disadvantaged minorities is mainly derived from concepts of compensatory or distributive justice, responsiveness and the theory of social utility (Tierney, 1997; Tummala, 1996). From the compensatory justice point

of view, it is argued that due compensation should be extended to groups that have historically been discriminated against or are currently prone to discrimination due to custom, tradition, caste, creed or religious affiliation. The concept of distributive justice implies that just distribution of social goods and other resources requires equal opportunity and access to all. Similarly, the notion of responsiveness asserts that if public service reflects a microcosm of the society, that is to say, representation of all segments of the population in public service, the service itself becomes more responsive to the needs of all (Tummala, 1996). The theory of social utility suggests that everyone in society has something to contribute and a society is better off when everyone participates in various societal avenues (Rossenbloom, 1999). A diverse ethnic mix brings variety in abilities, experiences and cultures that may be productive and may lead to innovation and creativity (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005).

However, affirmative action has remained one of the most controversial and hotly contested notions in the field of contemporary social and political philosophy and has been criticised on several accounts. The arguments against affirmative action include that (a) it fosters reverse discrimination; (b) it stigmatises the beneficiaries and makes it difficult for them to gain full respect for their accomplishments; (c) it lowers standards in academia and reduces efficiency in the labour market; (d) it takes into account groups and not individuals who really need affirmative action, and consequently the benefits of affirmative action are often largely appropriated by a minuscule minority within a group that is already advantaged and needs no affirmative action (Sowell, 2004; Steele, 1990). This, then, is the 'creamy layer' issue that has become ever more prominent in Indian debates about this subject (see earlier Galanter, 1984: 548).

In brief, the debate on affirmative actions for disadvantaged group is divided along lines of social justice versus procedural justice; formal equality versus substantive equality; equity versus efficiency; group versus individual entitlements and social harmony versus group conflicts. A huge body of empirical literature not only debunks the critics of affirmative action, but also re-emphasises the potentially large social benefits of affirmative actions (Holzer and Neumark, 2000; Iyigun and Levin, 2003). Emphasising the complexity of the issues involved in India, Galanter (1984: 547) concluded earlier that '[u]ndeniably, compensatory discrimination policies have produced substantial redistributive effects', but also found, almost in the same breath, that redistribution of educational opportunities was achieved '[a]t the cost of enormous wastage' (Galanter, 1984: 548).

As a matter of fact, the practice of affirmative action in favour of disadvantaged minorities is in vogue in one form or another in a large number of countries around the world, depending on the political and social climate of the nation (Sowell, 2004). Given that so much appears to have been achieved with regard to Hindus and related communities, the question therefore arises to what extent such policies should also be applied for Muslims in India.

Affirmative Actions for Muslim Minorities in India: What, Why, and Why Not?

India has probably the longest history of preferential policies and is the first country in the world to have affirmative action policies mandated by the Constitution (Jenkins, 2003; Weisskopf, 2004). There are many provisions, constitutional as well as legal, to enhance social justice for historically deprived sections of people in India, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), largely ex-untouchables, and various tribal communities, collectively referred to as Scheduled Tribes (STs). In order to uplift them from the morass of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty, a fixed quota (in proportion to their population in the respective state or territory) in educational institutions, public employment and legislatures has long been in place. Following the Mandal Commission's recommendations, the quota system (27 per cent in public employment) has more recently been extended to Other Backward Classes (OBC) also.⁵

Thus group-based affirmative actions in the form of reservations through fixed quotas are available in India to members of the SC/ST and OBC categories. As far as Muslims are concerned, legally they do not qualify for SC status, as SCs are identified among Hindus only, though SC status has of late been extended to some segments of Buddhists and Sikhs. Also there are very few Muslims classified as STs, while the OBC category does include some Muslims. The Mandal Commission recognised and included in the list of OBCs some 82 groups of Muslims, which constituted a little more than half the total population of Muslims (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, a large segment of Muslims stays outside the purview of reservation.⁶

As affirmative action in India mainly refers to quota, the scope of discourse on affirmative action for any prospective group seems to be reduced to being for or against group quota. Other forms of affirmative action are hardly considered and debated. It is generally argued that only reservations, a fixed quota for a specific group in educational institutions and public employment, can effectively address the problem of social inequality and group disadvantages. The justification often employed runs along the line that identity-based biases run so deep in the distributive system of public resources that distributive policies which merely allocate resources with emphasis on disadvantaged groups are likely to fall flat. The debate on affirmative action for Muslims is, therefore, also mainly divided between the pro- and anti-reservationists.

Though these are standard arguments invoked in affirmative action debates, there are nevertheless many particularly distinctive arguments relevant to Muslims only. Many voices support quotas for Muslims as a whole at the national level and the demand of treating the entire Muslim community as a backward class has been in place for quite some time. This demand gained in salience during the early 1990s (Wright, 1997) and has become a matter of intense public discourse more recently. The demand that the entire Muslim community ought to be brought into the net of reservation was raised by the Association for Promoting Education and Employment

of Muslims (APEEM) in a 1994 conference in New Delhi. This conference was of immense importance because the then Minister of Welfare in the Union Cabinet, Sitaram Keshri, not only attended the conference but also advocated separate quota for Muslims in educational institutions and public employment. This implied that the Conference had been convened with the tacit support of the Congress (Wright, 1997). The APEEM has continued to buttress demands of reservation for Muslims in its successive conferences.

The arguments for considering the entire Muslim community as potential beneficiaries of reservation policies have several strands. First, relative backwardness of Muslims is more a matter of inter-group diversity than intra-group disparity. Since Muslims as a whole suffer from socio-economic disabilities and are the most disadvantaged religious group in India, the whole community should be considered for affirmative actions (Akhtar and Ahmad, 2003; Hassan, 2005). Second, Muslims as a whole are seen to be victims of discrimination that has left the community high and dry. Partition of the country and the creation of Pakistan continue to serve as a framework of reference for discriminatory treatment by the larger society. Distant memory or occasional conflicts between the two communities provide easy grounds for cultivating prejudices against Muslims. As a result, Muslims are often deliberately excluded by policy-implementing agencies and society at large in schemes of distributive benefits. Given the persistent biases against them, it is argued that not only are affirmative actions necessary, but no affirmative action policy other than fixed quotas is ever likely to work.

Third, Muslims constitute about one-eighth of the total population of the country. Exclusion of Muslims in various structures of educational and economic opportunities would result in lower investment in human capital and under-utilisation and wastage of talents available among them. All this will surely impede the socio-economic progress of the country. Thus enhanced participation of the community in educational, economic and employment opportunities is essential for the socio-economic development of the country as a whole. Finally, a just state is one that ensures equal participation of diverse ethno-social groups in public spheres. Though no country in the world can claim that the distributive benefits of its socio-economic progress simply mirror its societal diversity, huge socio-economic disparities along religio-ethnic axes are certainly a political issue (Khalidi, 2006). India, as a democratic state, is morally and legally bound to remove the obstacles that hinder effective participation of the community in public spheres.

While dominant views among the Muslim elite and intelligentsia appear to be in favour of reservation for the Muslim community as a whole, demands for treating the community as a whole as eligible for affirmative action/reservation have also come under attack from within the community. Some sections of Muslims argue that class and caste categories should be retained while considering Muslims for affirmative actions (Jenkins, 2003). It is argued that like Hindus, Muslims are also characterised by internal differentiation in terms of caste-like groupings. Though Islam prohibits

caste and class distinctions among Muslims, in practice the Muslim community is not immune from caste-like hierarchies (Ahmad, 1978; Ansari, 1960). More recent converts, the majority of whom were lower caste Hindus, are not seen as socio-economic equals within the community (Ali, 2001; Jenkins, 2000). This implies that neither are all Muslims backward, nor do all of them require affirmative actions. The basis of affirmative actions in the form of reservation for Muslims should, therefore, be linked to social and economic stratification within the community. The underlying assumption is that the benefits of reservation should go to those within the Muslim community whose social and economic status is no different from Hindu Dalits. Extending benefits of reservation to the entire community would only benefit the upper strata of the community who can advance in life on their own, while those who really need reservations would be left untouched. Hence, it will defeat the avowed purpose of the policy aimed at uplifting the deprived sections within the community.

In India, the general environment has long been against reservation simply along caste lines (Weiner, 1983; Weisskopf, 2004). The discussion on affirmative action as well as reservation along religious lines is far more controversial and polarised and resentment against it is disproportionately high. The main opposition to any affirmative actions for Muslims comes, however, mainly from right wing formations. In the first place, it is argued that Muslims are not the only community which is particularly backward. Large Hindu segments are also faced with socio-economic deprivation. Thus Muslims share deprivation with a large majority of people in other communities. Backwardness among Muslims could, therefore, also be covered and addressed by general welfare policies, as Nehru seems to have suggested (Rao, 1967). Hence, there is no need for privileging Muslims and for that matter any other social group, probably except for the SCs and STs on historical grounds.

Second, a religion-based quota system violates the provisions of the Constitution and would be incompatible with the principle of secularism. Favouring Muslims at the expense of non-Muslims would mean tampering with the spirit of Constitution for the sake of securing a Muslim vote-bank. Third, religion-based preferential treatment is a dangerous proposition for reasons of communal relations. Those who advocate preferential treatment on religious lines have forgotten the consequences of such policies in the past, when separate quota for Muslims led to separatism among Muslims, which finally resulted in partition of the country. Going for religion-based quota or preferential treatment for Muslims would mean perpetuating communal divides and thereby repeating history (Advani, 2004).

To summarise, the various strands of debates on socio-economic disadvantages of Muslims and affirmative actions for them largely rest on simplification of the problem and are guided by rhetoric rather than engaging and exploring the idea of the multi-dimensional nature of socio-economic deprivation in the country. As a result, the whole issue appears to be caught in vote bank politics and the polemics of communalism versus secularism. The following section intercepts this debate by proposing that social exclusion in India is to some extent manifested more along regional rather than

religious lines. This implies that along with other religious groups, Muslims also display differential likelihoods of being in a situation of social exclusion across the Indian social and economic space. If this holds true, then simplification of Muslims as a blanket category is even more irrelevant and questionable for policy purposes.

Interrogating the Social Exclusion of Muslim Community

Socio-economic deprivation of a group and its qualification for affirmative actions is often too narrowly conceived. A social group is frequently seen as an undifferentiated category, which is problematic. In the Indian context, social communities like SCs and STs are undoubtedly faced with historically rooted absolute deprivation, which may still hide much internal difference, while other communities facing relative deprivation are more clearly seen as internally deeply differentiated. It appears that the same conceptual mistake in presuming blanket disadvantage as in the assessment of SC/ST standing has thus also been made for Muslims.

In debates, it is often ignored that socio-economic development in India has taken place unequally in spatial terms (Bhattacharya and Sakthivel, 2004; Chakravorty, 2006; Dholakia, 1985). Such spatial specificities tend to override socio-cultural determinants of inequalities (Alam, 2007; Nuna, 1993; Raju, 1991; Sopher, 1980). This then implies that while a social group may appear to be lagging behind others at national level, at sub-national levels the problem may take an altogether different dimension. Then, what appears to be true at national level may not hold true at sub-national levels. In other words, social exclusion of a group, Muslims in the present case, is not all-pervasive and all-encompassing throughout the national space. Rather the degree of its proneness to exclusion varies widely in specific socio-spatial contexts. Thus a proper understanding of group deprivation has necessarily to be placed in a multi-layered framework rather than simply applying an overarching universal construct of group identity based on religion. Seen in this context, an effective and successful strategy to combat group deprivation within a huge nation requires proper and more detailed analysis of the problem.

To assess the prevalence of socio-economic deprivation/exclusion among Muslims in India as compared to Hindus, an Index of Social Exclusion (ISE) derived from household data sets of the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS) 2005–06 is used here. NFHS (2005–06) is one of the large-scale representative sample surveys, maintaining rigorous social scientific sampling design, high quality data and editing procedures in the country. It covered all the states of the country and collected information on a wide range of demographic, social and economic indicators of about 109,041 households. The index is based on two sets of indicators—access to and participation in publicly provided goods and possession of basic assets and amenities. These two sets of indicators include: (a) whether members of household ever attended or are currently attending educational institutions; (b) whether the household or any member of it has a bank or post office account; (c) whether members of the household

use government or private hospitals or consult private doctors for treatment; (d) whether the household has a *pucca* or semi-*pucca* house; (e) whether the household owns some agricultural land in rural areas; (f) whether the household has toilet facilities; (g) whether the household is electrified; (h) whether the household has a radio, transistor, bicycle, TV or telephone/mobile; and (i) whether the household has a drinking water facility within its own premises.

Each household was assigned 1 or 0 indicating access or lack of access to social services as well as publicly provided goods or the presence or absence of specified basic necessities and amenities. Thus the composite score of households varied between 0 and 9. If the household scored 0–2, it was categorised as faced with ‘severe exclusion’. If the composite score of a household varied between 3 and 4, it was categorised as faced with ‘moderate exclusion’. Households with composite scores between 5 and 6 were classified as just above exclusion and those households with scores above 6 classified as far above exclusion.

There is no denying the fact that the index is limited in coverage. Still, it captures the prevalence of social exclusion, because it indicates whether the household is able to break out of the vicious cycle of lower material well-being and lower access to publicly provided goods and services or not. Access to social opportunities as well as publicly provided goods and possession of basic necessities could also be used as a dividing line of measuring different levels of deprivation or degrees of exclusion. The relative importance of this index is that it combines both access to and participation in publicly provided opportunities and access to basic necessities, unlike a wealth index or a standard of living index. Second, it captures actual possession of basic amenities or assets and participation in other social opportunities, unlike consumption expenditure or poverty estimates, which are sensitive to the recall period over which the expenditure data are collected. This is so because it is possible that a respondent may forget some of his/her expenditure over the last 30 days or more (Srinivasan and Mohanty, 2004). In contrast, physical assets are visible markers and relatively easy to record. Also, material possession does reflect the level of income of the household, as usually high incomes are associated with better asset holding.

Table 3 shows levels of social exclusion/deprivation for Muslims as compared to Hindus based on the Index of Social Exclusion discussed above. It can be observed that the lower tails of the index, representing those faced with social exclusion, vary widely across states and regions. Muslims closely follow the respective regional pattern. That is, the wider the diffusion of social and economic opportunities, the lesser the proportion of those facing social exclusion, including Muslims. At the same time, within a given region or state there remain some differentials, but they are rather small and insignificant. For example, the proportion of Muslims facing severe exclusion is equal to or even slightly less than Hindus in the southern and western regions. Contrary to this, where social and economic opportunities are scarce, as in the northern-eastern regions, there exist huge disparities between the two religious communities and Muslims are more likely to be in disadvantaged positions than others.

Table 3 Prevalence of Social Exclusion by Religion and State

State/Region In per cent figures	Severe Exclusion		Moderate Exclusion		Just above Exclusion		Far above Exclusion	
	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim
Northern-eastern								
Assam	2.4	2.3	15.6	26.1	27.6	36.9	54.4	34.7
Bihar	9.1	8.1	27.7	35.4	31.8	35.2	31.4	21.3
Jammu and Kashmir	0.4	.2	8.6	6.3	30.8	30.6	60.2	62.9
Jharkhand	2.5	3.5	22.9	28.0	43.8	42.1	30.8	26.5
Uttaranchal	0.7	1.5	14.3	5.0	29.7	35.5	55.3	58.0
Uttar Pradesh	1.3	2.1	16.8	16.1	42.0	42.1	39.9	39.6
West Bengal	3.2	5.8	17.8	27.2	36.7	40.0	42.3	26.9
Western-Central								
Rajasthan	3.6	19.3	27.0	22.2	41.2	40.5	28.2	18.0
Gujarat	1.2	.0	11.9	5.7	41.2	54.5	45.8	39.8
Maharashtra	1.1	.0	13.6	7.5	36.1	51.4	49.3	41.1
Madhya Pradesh	3.9	4.2	30.2	15.9	41.2	51.1	24.6	28.8
Chhattisgarh	1.0	.0	18.6	11.2	52.3	42.6	28.1	46.2
Southern								
Andhra Pradesh	3.3	1.3	17.2	11.0	46.7	56.3	32.9	31.4
Karnataka	0.8	0.1	14.3	11.3	45.2	49.8	39.7	38.8
Kerala	.4	.0	3.8	2.3	25.7	20.3	70.1	77.4
Tamil Nadu	2.8	0.6	18.6	6.7	51.6	43.2	27.6	49.5
All India	2.8	3.6	18.6	18.1	40.1	41.9	38.5	36.3

Source: National Family and Health Survey (2005-06).

It can thus be argued that in a more developed environment, the access to social and economic opportunities or publicly provided goods and services is enhanced for all to take advantage of, leading to comparatively lesser levels of inter-group inequalities. By contrast, if the context is one of restrictive opportunities, only a small segment of the population is able to access limited opportunities, and consequently large inter and intra-group inequalities exist.

The above analysis brings a number of findings into sharp focus. One, inter-group inequalities by religion are typically associated with situations of underdevelopment. The lower the levels of development, the greater are socio-economic disparities between and within groups. This suggests that though comparatively a large proportion of Muslims may appear to be faced with social exclusion, seen in terms of access to certain social and economic opportunities, their disadvantages vis-à-vis others are not as universal as is usually claimed to be the case. Rather, their deprivation is context-specific, reflecting differing trajectories of their history and the political economy of development of such contexts. Two, being Muslim is neither linked to socio-economic deprivation nor does their corporate identity often attract latent or invidious discrimination, though discrimination against them in certain sectors is not ruled out. If being Muslim had anything to do with lower socio-economic attainment compared to Hindus, either due to religious location or because of invidious discrimination, one would have found an almost uniform pattern across states regardless of the developed/backward context in which Muslims live. One obvious reason for higher proportion among Muslims facing socio-economic deprivation at national level is that the vast majority of them reside in the northern and eastern states, which are in general marked by lower levels of socio-economic development. Additionally, the partition of the country six decades ago and consequently migration of middle class and well-off Muslims to Pakistan particularly from these states only further inflated the proportion of the lower classes among those Muslims who chose to stay back (Imam, 1978). It is thus the regionally biased demography of Muslim communities that seriously affects the national average of their socio-economic well-being, possibly more than anything else.

There is broad consensus that the profound objective of affirmative action policies is to overcome socio-economic disparities between different segments of the population. Preferential policies are designed to ensure social justice and de facto equality. Given that a relatively large section among Muslims is faced with social exclusion, there appears to be a strong case for affirmative actions for them because in a free competition of socio-economic mobility, most of them would lack capacity and resources to survive. However, affirmative action policies designed for Muslims should be informed by multi-dimensional nature of socio-economic deprivation rather than simplifying the Muslim community as an undifferentiated category, as presented in the current debate. If empowerment of Muslims in general and a contextualised approach to their socio-economic deprivation are taken into account, affirmative actions for them as a community certainly negate reservation as a policy measure to bail them out.

There are, however, other social, economic and political reasons that weaken the case of reservation as a form of affirmative action for Muslims. One, if past experience is any guide, reservation policies benefit a tiny segment of the well-off strata of the disadvantaged group, leading to the familiar 'creamy layer' problem. The benefits offered hardly trickle down to the large majority of people of the beneficiary group. As a consequence, intra-group disparity gets further exacerbated. Without going into detail, it would suffice to say that for many reasons an enhanced and effective participation of any group in the normal life of larger society is a function of the size of the middle class within that group. The expansion of the middle class hinges upon continuous recruitment from the upper lower class to the middle class. Such processes of upward recruiting could be accelerated, among other things, through affirmative actions that provide access to certain resources that are crucial inputs in upward socio-economic mobility. Viewed thus, affirmative action policies will benefit disadvantaged group most when they are designed to help out certain lower strata and filter out the well-off segments of the same communities from taking advantage of such policies. Undoubtedly, redistribution of elite positions by way of reservation enhances legitimacy and effectiveness of a society's decision-making elite (Weisskopf, 2004). It also to some extent overcomes the alienation of the elite of the disadvantaged group, but the problem of disparity continues to loom large.

Second, the success of group-based affirmative actions depends on the social and political climate of a society. In general, there is deep-seated resentment against group-based affirmative action in the form of reservation in the country. Unlike its counterpart in the USA, the Indian elite and political leadership is sharply divided on the issue of affirmative actions other than those meant for SCs and STs. When it comes to privileging religious minorities and especially Muslims, the situation is even more polarised. Given the political climate tilting somewhat, at least from time to time, towards right wing formations, pressing for reservations is bound to be politically counterproductive, which in effect will make such a policy polemical, ineffective and inefficacious.

The question thus arises what would be an appropriate approach to address disadvantages among Muslims. What should be the format of affirmative action policy for Muslims that involves least costs of all kinds and maximum benefit? There could be multiple approaches, which either singly or in combination might address the problem without attracting wrath from those who are dead against group-based reservations or preferential policies, especially for Muslims. Space does not permit here to discuss the various approaches, yet we can briefly take up one such less costly approach that may be called 'geographical approach'. This approach would involve identification of certain geographical units or subdivisions which stand low in social development and also have a sufficiently large proportion of Muslim population. Targeted investments in education, health, employment, credit lending and other arenas along secular lines, that is, for all local communities equally, could be made in such identified geographical units.

This developmental approach seems to be sound for several reasons. First of all, it has wider coverage, that is to say, it means inclusion of deprived households of all religious communities in an area. Second, the benefit will reach to the lower strata, unlike standard reservation policies that basically tend to benefit certain tiny well-off sections of disadvantaged groups. Third, this approach is not in conflict with the principle of secularism and will escape the allegation of being 'communal' or some kind of 'minority appeasement'. Fourth, as this approach ceases to be communal, it is unlikely to invite communal backlash.

However, the geographical approach is not the only least-cost approach that may be chosen. Several other such approaches need to be explored and proposed. The larger point here is that relative disadvantages among Muslims vary considerably across space throughout India. Since the issue of preferential policies for them is politically highly sensitive, a workable policy to redress their disadvantages has to employ objectivity rather than rhetoric and needs mature political engagement.

Summary and Concluding Discussion

Nationally, the Muslim community of India appears to be a community below average in terms of access to socio-economic opportunities in the country as a whole. However, a disaggregated analysis at least at sub-national levels suggests that socio-economic deprivation among Muslims in India is highly contextualised. They have by and large kept pace with the processes of socio-economic development in those states where these processes have taken place on a wider scale. Conversely, Muslims stand marginalised and experience developmental lags where developmental processes have generally been very slow and skewed. It is well known that where socio-economic resources are scarce, only a small segment of the population is able to access and appropriate available resources. Thus even as a comparatively large section among Muslims faces socio-economic disadvantages, developmental lag among them is not universal, rather it is punctuated and circumscribed by socio-spatial contexts.

Given that the issue of relative socio-economic deprivations among Muslims and affirmative actions for them is so politically sensitive, the problem of targeted affirmative action needs to be approached very carefully. While there is an urgent need to develop concrete rather than ad hoc policies for redressing the problems of the community, pressing for blanket reservations for the entire community, as some sections of the community continue to do, is certainly not an appropriate solution. Such policies tend to bypass the general masses of the beneficiary group and further aggravate intra-group disparity. Since there is deep resentment against reservation in general, reservations along religious lines will evoke sharp reactions, which in the long run will offset the benefit of reservations. Thus a basically good and well-meaning policy will be murdered by poor design.

The main conclusion is thus that affirmative action programmes for Muslims, in order to be conceived as acceptable to larger society and to become successful, need

a deeper understanding of the problem. By locating spaces of disadvantage more precisely and employing mature political engagement to target specific spatial patterns of deprivation for all people involved, including Muslims, significant progress can be made. Separate handling of Muslim reservations is politically and socially dangerous. To take the bull of underdevelopment by the horns locally and tackle affirmative action for all people in certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods seems a robust but potentially highly effective strategy.

One question that hangs around is still whether the political class has the necessary will to disburden itself from vote bank politics. It is not clear at present whether the Muslim elite is ready to come out of the footsteps of its predecessors and become pragmatic enough to appropriate the benefits of a rational affirmative action programme. Meant ultimately for the general welfare and empowerment of whole local communities as integral parts of the Indian nation, not as separate entities along religious lines, this cultivates the public interest rather than narrow personal or private agenda. Following such space-focused approaches will also implement and promote the expectations of the Indian Constitution in terms of secularism.

Notes

1. However, that is not the only possible explanation. See very recently Singh (2009) and the argument that the split of India and Pakistan in August 1947 has much more to do with irreparable tensions over centre-state relations than with religion. Political power and state-centric methods of governance rather than 'religion' are thus held responsible. For a number of perspectives, see *India Today International* (31 August 2009).
2. As per the 1941 census, Muslims accounted for 24.2 per cent of the total population of undivided India, while Hindus were 69.5 per cent. In the 1951 Census, the Muslim population was enumerated as 9.9 per cent of India's total population, whereas Hindus accounted for about 85 per cent (Davis, 1949; Dutt and Devgun, 1979). According to the 2001 Census, Hindus account for 81 per cent of the total population, followed by Muslims (13.4 per cent), Christians and Sikhs (2 per cent each).
3. The word 'minority' is quite loosely defined in the Indian context and continues to be debated. The Constitution speaks of religious and linguistic minorities. Religious communities, which are culturally distinct and numerically smaller than the Hindus, are designated as a 'minority'. For detailed discussions see Sheth (1999) and Rao (1967).
4. The UPA Government at the Centre set up a Committee under the Chairmanship of Justice Rajinder Sachar in 2005 to look into the socio-economic and educational status of the Muslim communities. The Committee submitted its report to the Government in 2006. Unlike the Gopal Singh Panel, constituted by the then Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, in 1980 to look into the socio-economic conditions of Muslims, the Sachar Committee Report was tabled in Parliament and the Government accepted 72 recommendations and suggestions out of a total of 76 recommendations and suggestions.
5. The Mandal Commission was set up in 1978 and was directed to consider the matter of extending reservations to OBCs at national level. The Commission recommended reservations

for OBCs in central government services and public sector undertakings and reservation of seats in scientific, technical and professional educational institutes. Based on the criteria, a combination of social, educational and economic indicators, the Commission declared a large number of subgroups across religious/ethnic communities including Muslims as OBCs, accounting for about 52 per cent of the total population. As according to various Supreme Court rulings reservation at national level must not exceed 50 per cent, the Mandal Commission recommended that reservations be extended only to 27 per cent of the OBC population.

However, the recommendations of the report could not be implemented almost for a decade. In 1990 when the Congress was once again dislodged from power, the new coalition government led by the Janata Dal announced implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. The announcement invited massive protests and violent agitation by upper caste Hindus, particularly in North India (Jenkins, 2003; Kumar, 1992; Weisskopf, 2004). The decision of the government was challenged in the Courts and the issue was finally settled in November 1992 when the Supreme Court ruled in favour of 27 per cent reservation of OBC population in public employment at the national level. With this about 49.5 per cent of seats in public employment at national level fell under reservation. When the Congress-led UPA government came to power in 2004 after six years, it announced reservation of seats for OBC students at institutes of higher education, including elite institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Management and Indian Institutes of Technology. The announcement again met with great resistance and ignited fierce resentment among those opposing quotas for OBCs. On both occasions, there emerged great intellectual and political support for extending reservations to the OBCs. However, such support and initiative is conspicuously absent when it comes to including Muslims as a group eligible for reservation or some other forms of affirmative actions.

6. Reservation along religious lines in public employment and educational institutions has a long history in India. In 1926, Madras established specific quotas for different socio-religious communities, including Muslims. The provincial governments that came into power in 1937 provided reservations of seats in public services and educational institutions for certain religious minorities. Religious minorities also had a certain number of seats reserved for them in public services at federal level. However, the situation altered in 1947 when reservation for religious minorities per se was abolished, though the subject was discussed and debated in the Constituent Assembly. Nehru argued that his task was to tackle the problem not by focusing on religious minorities, but rather by helping the backward groups in the country (Rao, 1967). While at national level, reservation for Muslims ceased to exist, except for some groups later included in the OBC list, many states went in for extending reservation to Muslims in the post-Independence period. In Kerala, the entire Muslim community is declared backward and a quota of 10 to 20 per cent exclusively for Muslims within the OBC category is fixed. In Tamil Nadu, there is no separate quota for Muslims but the reservation policy is so designed that it covers about 95 per cent of the Muslim population in the state. In Karnataka, all Muslims with an annual income of less than two *lakhs* Rupees (Rs 200,000) have been declared backward and eligible for benefits of reservation in government services and educational institutions of the state.

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Mohd Sanjeer Alam received his training in social geography and social demography at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, where he took his PhD in 2005. Currently attached to Lokniti as an Associate Fellow, he has worked extensively on socio-spatial inequality in education in India and has published a number of research papers in reputed academic and professional journals. His major study, *Community, Education and Context* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), is about to be published.

Address: Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054, India. [e-mail: sanjeer.alam@gmail.com]

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