

Muslims on the Decline? Understanding Processes of Marginalisation in Urban India

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The increasing marginalisation and ghettoisation of Indian Muslims is a hotly debated but poorly understood subject. Gayer and Jaffrelot's edited collection presents rich empirical evidence from Muslim localities in eleven Indian cities, providing key insights into the complex nature of this supposed decline.

Reviewed: Gayer, Laurent and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds.), *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 400 p.

The marginalisation of Muslims in India has been the subject of a heated public debate in recent years and particularly since the publication of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006. This report confirmed with solid empirical evidence what many had been arguing for years, Muslims were lagging behind other religious groups in multiple spheres, including in employment, education, and in terms of political representation, along with experiencing on-going insecurity in their daily lives as a result of communal violence. The situation was found to be particularly bad for urban Muslims, who, apart from being worse off economically than their rural co-religionists, were also increasingly subject to (or subjecting themselves to) spatial segregation. At the same time, what was missing from this report were details, particularly qualitative details of how this marginalisation was being experienced in various parts of the country by different groups of people. It is this texture and depth—the meat on the statistical bones—that Laurent's Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot's edited collection, *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, so importantly provides.

The diverse experiences of Muslims in India

Muslims are the largest religious minority in India and comprise approximately 13.4% of the population, which means that India has the third largest population of Muslims of any country in the world (only slightly less than Pakistan). As one would imagine, a population of this size contains myriad diversities based on class, caste, region, and sect, amongst other factors, which Gayer and Jaffrelot are careful to repeatedly point out. However, what is clear from evidence presented in reports such as that of the Sachar Committee, is that if taken as a whole, Indian Muslims are lagging behind other religious communities and furthermore, that they have experienced a gradual decline in their social, economic and political positions

since Partition. Furthermore, there has been a gradual polarization and hardening of boundaries between religious groups, particularly in cities. This volume aims at analysing the nature and contours of these processes by presenting rich and detailed studies of Muslims at the local level in eleven cities across India.

By far the greatest strength of this collection lies in its ethnographic depth. Hence, the strongest chapters are those that take the reader into the lanes of Muslim *mohallas*, describing how these areas have developed and what everyday life entails for their residents. Notable amongst these chapters is Qudsia Contractor's piece on Shivaji Nagar, a Muslim-majority slum in Mumbai, which is literally located on top of a garbage dump on the periphery of the city. This chapter demonstrates the impact of on-going communal violence on the spatial contours of the city and highlights how the experience of violence is coupled with economic deprivation to produce a situation of extreme marginalisation on multiple levels for its residents. While Contractor's chapter paints the story of one locality in vivid detail, Juliette Galonnier's chapter on the experiences of Muslims in the city of Aligarh does a remarkable job of demonstrating the diversity amongst Muslims in this city and the multiple divisions within this group based on class, caste and migration history.

As the reader visits different Muslim localities around the country, what becomes increasingly striking is the vast diversity that characterizes the experiences of Muslims in India. Chapters such as that of Gilles Verniers, which describe a Shia locality in Lucknow—a city where Shia-Sunni violence is much more influential in structuring the experience of urban Muslims as opposed to Hindu-Muslim violence—demonstrate that there is really no singular experience of being a Muslim in India. This is also illustrated through the studies of Cuttak in Orissa, Kozhikode in Kerala, and Bangalore in Karnataka, three contexts in which, in the words of Aminah Mohammad-Arif, Muslims are relatively, if differently, 'at ease'. These cases provide a stark contrast to the extreme insecurity and discrimination faced by Muslims living in contexts such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan where Hindu nationalism has flourished in the last few decades.

A ghettoization of Muslims in India?

One of the themes running through the volume relates to the issue of spatial segregation and whether Muslims are living in ghettos versus ethnic enclaves. In their 'Introduction', Gayer and Jaffrelot draw on the work of Lois Wacquant to outline five characteristics of ghettos and proceed to analyse whether the localities under study would qualify under the said criteria. The main distinction between the two categories is that of choice, with ghettos marked by the forced exclusion of a particular group versus ethnic enclaves the product of an elected choice amongst members of a community. While places such as Juhapura in Ahmedabad and Shivaji Nagar in Mumbai can quite easily be categorized as 'ghettos' in that they are the direct result of communal violence, most Muslim localities are more difficult to identify. Gayer, in his excellent study of Abul Fazal Enclave in Delhi, highlights the ambiguity of choice—the 'choiceless' nature of choice—in situations where individuals are bound by multiple constraints when making their housing decisions. This question, which is raised throughout the volume, touches on a key nerve in India today, where spatial segregation through subtle and not-so-subtle forms of housing discrimination is becoming increasingly prevalent in urban centres.

While their project is undoubtedly worthwhile and highly necessary in order to further the public debate on religious discrimination/spatial segregation, there is a contradiction built into the methodology of the volume that perhaps could not have been avoided. Although Gayer and Jaffrelot are careful to highlight the diversity amongst Indian Muslims throughout their Introduction and Conclusion, and while this is demonstrated through the diversity of the case studies presented throughout the book, there is a constant vacillation between referring to 'Indian Muslims' as a discrete category and an acknowledgement of the questionable nature of the category itself. This is more obvious in some chapters than others, and particularly in those where the authors attempt to describe the situation of Muslims in the particular state under study by outlining the historical roots of 'the community' and its economic and political standing.

Such an approach feeds into the notion that Muslims constitute a discrete community with a common set of characteristics and interests, when the findings of the research precisely demonstrate the impossibility of this idea. Some of the contributors to the volume reinforce the naturalness of religious boundaries and even project the notion of a unified Muslim community as an ideal. For example, in the chapters on Ahmedabad, Bhopal, and Cuttack, there is an underlying assumption that the Muslim elite has failed to protect their 'community'. This assumes that all Muslims should and must identify first as Muslims, regardless of their multiple other identities, and that they have an inherent responsibility to protect *their* community. At the same time, the project itself argues for a nuanced approach to understanding the diverse positions of Muslims across India through localized studies. One is left with the question, is it analytically useful to discuss 'Indian Muslims' at all, or would it be more fruitful to discuss the situation of Muslims living in particular contexts in order to unravel the complex dynamics of processes of marginalisation?

Furthermore, this collection of chapters would have been greatly strengthened had there been a systematic emphasis on the gendered nature of urban marginalisation. Laurent Gayer was one of the few authors to even acknowledge that his ethnography was based largely on fieldwork conducted amongst men. However, the remainder of the authors did not make their own gendered positions explicit and neither did they acknowledge the gender bias that may have appeared in their work. The experiences of women and men in Muslim localities varies greatly depending on the context, and an understanding of the gendered contours of these localities would have added a great deal to the analysis.

Overall, *Muslims in Indian Cities*, is an extremely valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Indian Muslims, which provides an exceptionally textured analysis of practices of spatial segregation in Indian cities. This volume draws attention to the necessity of precise and contextualized studies of religious discrimination in order to understand the growing feelings of marginalisation being experienced by large sections of the Muslim population in India. It also highlights the fact that these feelings of marginalisation are in no way uniform or evenly distributed amongst the population and greatly differ depending on class, caste and region. While all Muslims in India are certainly not uniformly 'on the decline', large sections of the population have clearly not benefitted from the fruits of development. *Muslims in Indian Cities* marks an important step in beginning to understand the nuances of

this marginalisation, which takes us beyond the statistics presented in national reports and brings us down to the crucial level of everyday life.

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