

Government report concedes India's Muslims are a socially deprived, victimised minority

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A report prepared by a seven-member committee headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar has conceded that India's Muslim minority faces appalling socioeconomic deprivation and is the victim of official neglect and frequent police harassment and violence.

The committee, which was charged with investigating the socioeconomic status of India's 150 million Muslims and recommending means of improving their lot, was appointed by United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in March 2005.

It has long been patently obvious that India's Muslims are disproportionately represented among the poor and that they have been the target of official discrimination. From 1998 to 2004, India's government was led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which openly espouses the Hindu-supremacist doctrine of *Hindutva*. In 2002, more than 2,000 Muslims were killed and tens of thousands more left homeless by an anti-Muslim pogrom in BJP-ruled Gujarat.

Nevertheless, the Sachar Committee's findings constitute a devastating indictment of bourgeois rule in India. In particular, they puncture the claims of the Congress Party, which dominates the current UPA coalition and has governed India for most of the 60 years since independence, to be the architect of a secular democracy.

Representing 13.4 percent of India's population, Muslims are far and away India's largest religious minority, living, albeit in varying concentrations, in all parts of the country.

The Congress-led UPA had two major motivations for appointing the Sachar Committee.

Addressing or at least appearing to address some of the grievances of India's beleaguered Muslim minority is a way the current government can differentiate itself from the former BJP-dominated coalition, while pursuing the same socially incendiary neo-liberal economic agenda. Sections of the Indian establishment have become apprehensive over the politically destabilising consequences of the growing alienation of India's Muslims, and in particular of a spurt in support for Islamicist organisations, some of them with terrorist affinities.

However, so damaging were the Sachar Committee's findings to the Congress's secular pretensions that the UPA government delayed the report's release for some two months. Discrepancies between leaked copies of the report and the final version indicate, moreover, that the government insisted that some parts be deleted before making the Sachar Committee's findings public.

The report concedes that India's Muslims live under a shadow of fear due to a communalised political establishment and state machinery: "Communal tension or any untoward incident in any part of the country is enough to make Muslims fear for their safety and security. The lackadaisical attitude of the government and the political mileage sought whenever communal riots occur has been very painful for the Community."

The report adds that Muslims have come to fear the police and security forces: "Concern was expressed over police highhandedness in dealing

with Muslims. Muslims live with an inferiority complex as 'every bearded man is considered an ISI [Pakistan's foreign spy agency] agent'; 'whenever any incident occurs Muslim boys are picked up by the police' and fake encounters [between security forces and alleged Muslim terrorists] are common. In fact, people argued that police presence in Muslim localities is more common than the presence of schools, industry, public hospitals and banks. Security personnel enter Muslim houses on the slightest pretext. The plight of Muslims living in border areas is even worse as they are treated as 'foreigners' and are subjected to harassment by the police and administration."

The treatment accorded Muslims by India's security forces is directly bound up with Indian bourgeoisie's use of anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim chauvinism as a weapon of its class rule—as a means to manufacture "national unity" and to divert the social antagonisms and frustrations born of acute poverty, inequality and economic insecurity in a reactionary direction.

The Sachar report points out that communal harassment is increasingly forcing Muslims into impoverished ghettos: "Fearing for their security, Muslims are increasingly resorting to living in ghettos across the country. This is more pronounced in communally sensitive towns and cities."

This ghettoisation, in turn, facilitates official neglect and discrimination. "It was suggested that Muslims living together in concentrated pockets (both because of historical reasons and a deepening sense of insecurity) has made them easy targets for neglect by municipal and government authorities. Water, sanitation, electricity, schools, public health facilities, banking facilities, anganwadis [day care centers], ration shops, roads, and transport facilities—are all in short supply in these areas."

India's Muslims, reports the Sachar Committee, face "deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions" of socioeconomic development.

In most socioeconomic indicators that the committee considered, "Muslims rank somewhat above SCs/STs [the historically-deprived former untouchables (Dalits) and tribal (hunter-gather) peoples]," but below all other groups, that is "Hindu OBCs [Other Backward Classes or lower caste groups], Other Minorities and Hindu General [mostly those who come from families that would have traditionally been considered upper caste]."

For some measures of social deprivation, Muslims as a group fell below the Dalits, who more than a half-century after the abolition of untouchability continue to make up a grossly disproportionate share of India's landless, poor and illiterate. And some particularly disadvantaged Muslims groups fell consistently below the Dalits.

The head count ratio (HCR) of poverty among Muslims is 31 percent—second only to the SC/ST communities whose HCR is 35 percent. The poverty figure among urban Muslims is higher, with 38.4 percent deemed to be living in poverty, as compared with 36.4 percent of urban Dalits and Scheduled Tribes.

Here it needs be emphasised that India's official poverty line is pegged

at the bare subsistence level, the income necessary to meet the caloric requirement to do a full day's work.

Using data from the 2001 National Census and National Sample Survey, the Sachar committee shows that Muslims are disproportionately poorly housed; that they use less electricity than other Indians, with "the share of villages with no electricity increasing substantially" as the size of the Muslim population rises; and that they have less access to running water. While only 25 percent of households in rural India have running water, the figure for Muslim households is a mere 10 percent.

The share of Muslims having government jobs is just 4.9 percent. Only 4.5 percent of railway workers are Muslim, and of these, 98.7 percent occupy lower-level positions. Muslims constitute just 3.2 percent of those in India's elite civil service corps.

The situation is worse in states with large Muslim populations. For example, in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam, where Muslims form 25.2 percent, 18.5 percent and 30.9 percent of the population, respectively, their share of government jobs is 4.7 percent, 7.5 percent, and 10.9 percent, respectively.

According to the Sachar report, Muslims in India have less access to education than other religious groups. As a result, the literacy rate among Muslims is only 59.1 percent while the national average is 64.8 percent. School enrollment among urban Muslim boys is only 80 percent, as compared with 90 percent of SC/ST boys. Only 68 percent of Muslim girls attend schools, while the figures for Dalit girls and girls categorised as non-Dalit are 72 percent and 80 percent, respectively.

When it comes to higher education, the Muslim presence is even lower. The report says that in the elite Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Muslim students constitute only 1.3 percent and 1.7 percent, respectively, of the student body.

One of the means through which the Indian ruling elite has discriminated against the Muslim minority is through its treatment of Urdu—a north Indian language that, like Hindi, is a variant of Hindustani, the major distinction being that Hindi uses a Sanskrit-derived script, while Urdu is written in a Persian-Arabic type script. (As a result of the activities of Hindu and Muslim communalists, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, was redefined as a "Muslim" language during the first half of the twentieth century.)

Reports the Sachar Committee: Urdu "has been neglected. The fallout of this has been inadequate access to education in the mother tongue for many Urdu speaking children. The neglect has also resulted in poor performance of Urdu medium school students because of poor infrastructural facilities and absence of adequate number of qualified teachers."

There is evidence that India's banks, both public and private, also discriminate against Muslims. According to the report, the average bank loan disbursed to a Muslim is two thirds of the amount disbursed to other minorities: "[S]ome banks use the practice of identifying 'negative geographical zones' on the basis of certain criteria where bank credit and other facilities are not easily provided."

According to the *Indian Express*, the Sachar report also contained statistics showing that Muslims make up a disproportionately high percentage of jail inmates in all parts of India. But these figures have been excluded from the final version of the report.

Citing an earlier draft of the report, the *Express* says that in Maharashtra, India's second most populous state, Muslims constitute 32.4 percent out of all inmates even though Muslims represent just 10.6 percent of the state's population. In Gujarat, also in western India, Muslims account for more than a quarter of all prison inmates although they constitute just 9.06 percent of the population. In Karnataka, in southern India, 17.5 percent of jail inmates are Muslim as compared to their 12.23 percent of the population. In Delhi, the Union Territory that is home to India's capital city, Muslims account for 11.7 percent of the population

but 29.1 percent of prison inmates.

The high presence of Muslims in Indian prisons is a product of the deplorable socioeconomic conditions that they confront and of systematic anti-Muslim bias on the part of the police and judiciary. Thousands of innocent Muslim youths have been caught up in various "anti-terrorism" dragnets—dragnets that have made use of such draconian anti-terrorism laws as the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and allow the authorities to hold people for weeks and months without charge.

Meanwhile, the Indian state has done nothing to prosecute those responsible for the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and other anti-Muslim atrocities.

Despite the claims of India's ruling elite concerning the secular and democratic character of India's polity, Muslims have faced systematic and escalating discrimination since independence.

That discrimination has its roots in the 1947 communal partition of then-British India along religious-communal lines into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. Partition was implemented through violent communal clashes fomented by both Hindu and Muslim chauvinists. These clashes resulted in the deaths of some 2 million, while another 12-14 million people were forced to flee their homes and cross the artificial border that had been drawn across the subcontinent. As a part of this forcible exchange of communities between the newly independent states of India and Pakistan, millions of Muslims were chased out of India.

Although the Indian National Congress (INC), led by Gandhi and Nehru, denied any responsibility for partition, portraying it as entirely the product of the machinations of India's departing colonial overlords and the Muslim League, the Congress played a pivotal role in implementing partition.

It was the Congress leadership that insisted that partition be taken to its logical conclusion and that the British Indian provinces of Bengal and Punjab be partitioned on communal lines, so as to ensure that the new states were as communally homogeneous as possible.

Even more importantly, it was the Congress that joined forces with the British and the League to reorganise the state structure in South Asia, so as to contain and suppress a mass anti-imperialist movement that between 1945 and 1947 had given rise to a myriad of social struggles—including strikes, peasant land-seizures and challenges to feudal obligations, popular revolts against various princely rulers, and mutinies in the British Indian armed forces—and was assuming revolutionary dimensions.

Organically incapable of leading—and opposed to—a struggle to unite India from below through an appeal to the common class interests of the toiling masses, the bourgeois-led Congress chose to "unite" India from above by accepting partition and inheriting the British-colonial-engineered Indian state.

Moreover, a large section of the Congress leadership led by Vallabhbhai Patel collaborated with Hindu-chauvinist forces such as the RSS and the princely ruler of Alwar in stirring up anti-Muslim communalism, both before and after partition. Within weeks of independence, Patel and other senior Congress leaders were pressing for measures to reduce the use of Urdu in government and restrict Muslim participation in the police and security forces. Patel, in particular, demanded that India's Muslim minority prove it wasn't a fifth column for Pakistan.

The subsequent decades of Congress rule failed to address the basic socioeconomic needs of India's working people. The deplorable socioeconomic conditions facing the Muslim minority are only an extreme expression of the situation facing the vast majority of Indians.

In the 1980s, as the Indian bourgeoisie's post-independence national economic development strategy began to unravel, the Congress, first under Indira Gandhi and then under her son Rajiv, increasingly resorted to Hindu-supremacist appeals. This in turn helped pave the way for the Hindu-supremacist BJP to emerge as a major political force.

In December 1992, a BJP-RSS anti-Muslim chauvinist campaign to

build a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya culminated in its demolition by Hindu-chauvinist fanatics and the worst communal rioting since partition. The then-Congress government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao passively allowed this to happen, thereby further strengthening right-wing Hindu communalist forces.

Some six years later, the BJP managed to become the ruling party in India, indicating a further shift of the Indian bourgeoisie and political establishment to the right and its embrace of an explicitly anti-Muslim Indian/Hindu nationalism.



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