



DALIT MUSLIM UNITY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

ABSTRACT

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The question of Dalit-Muslim unity has been in the vogue currently in academic and political circles. The issue acquired prominence with the exit of Congress party as a single dominant political force at the federal apex as well as union segments. The belief that the displacement of the two strongholds of the Congress party, namely Muslims and Dalits from its hold is said to be the prime reason for the decline of Congress factor in political calculations in the country. Consequently, a rat race among various political parties started to woo the two communities to enthuse in their respective folds to make electoral fortunes. To a larger extent the proposition worked well particularly in Uttar Pradesh where Ms. Mayawati formed government with the help of the Dalits, if not completely with the support of the Muslims. Similarly, Akhilesh Yadav could enter the Lucknow throne with the solid support of the Muslim community. The Uttar Pradesh experience vindicated the belief that the unity of the two communities and their support to any political organization will help make political gains at the hustings.

In the aforesaid background this thesis has been undertaken to explore the possibilities of concord and discord between the two vital communities to come together to make a solid social support base to any political organization and also to themselves. This key research question has been explored both historically and in the contemporary exposition wherein political changes have been rather fluid.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi inherited the consensus Congress culture left by Nehru, however, in her bid to appease and mobilize each and every segment of the Indian society, indulged in the politics of opportunism, consequently these very social segments that supported the Congress gradually drifted from its fold. The Turkaman Gate incident in the wake of Sanjay Gandhi's population control syndrome got the Muslims alienated from the Congress resulting in the defeat of the Congress party in the 1977 general elections. The post 1984 Sikh riots and the consequent appropriation of Hindutva in the Congress culture with upper caste domination slowly drifted the

untouchables and the lower castes from its support base. The political events that ensued in the aftermath of the 1984 Sikh riots corroborates with the argument that Dalits and Muslims constitute a vital support base to any political organization.

Around two decades ago when a move towards Dalit and Muslim unity began by some social organization in Karnataka, the upper castes indulged in character assassination on the grounds that the move was to grab funds from the Islamic world. With the political parties like the LJP jumping in the fray to play the role of catalyst, things started to change fast. The Dalit look at Muslims as a resilient force and Islam as a movement against oppression. They look at the Muslims to liberate them from the shackles of oppression and poverty through a united action. Even though the urge to forge unity is prevalent among the middle and lower income groups of the Muslim community, the rich among the Muslims, however, are not mobilized substantially in the direction. Fortunately, the rise of BJP to the corridors of power and the naked communal hatred unleashed by them in alliance with the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal, their use of state machinery in Gujarat to sponsor genocide on the Muslim community where even the cries of affluent elitist Muslim leaders were ignored, opened the eyes of the wealthy and the influential Muslims who now seem to be ready to join the alliance.

Historically, a vast majority of the Muslims of India are thought to be descendents of Dalits, backward castes and tribals who embraced Islam to seek liberation from ritualized Hinduism and Brahminical tyranny. It is in this vein that some authors believe that the Dalits and Muslim are brethren. Both are victims of Hindu rule and oppression and have a culture that stresses justice, brotherhood and freedom. Both live in segregated localities and are ghettoized and both have common economic, social and political interests. These facts alone should ordinarily have been enough to cement a strong bond of unity between the Dalits and the Muslims. Unfortunately, this is not the case and both communities seem to exhibit different aspirations and tread on paths which seem divergent.

The concept 'Dalit' continues to be an equivocal term without a universal definition. Chapter 1 explores this dimension whereby it undertakes an analysis of how the term

“Dalit” denotes an identity. In that regard, the term has been looked at from three perspectives. First, it indicates that the condition (of discrimination in the past and its continuation in the present) is not of their own making or choosing; rather something, which has been inflicted upon them by others; implying that there is an externality to the term. Second, there seems to be an element of militancy built into the term; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied to them. Third, the term denotes evocation; that all the castes so demarcated share a commonality of condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

The chapter also undertakes an analysis of the caste system and how it changed over time. Its historical origins and contemporary forms are discussed from various theoretical perspectives. Further, a quantitative analysis of various variables regarding the SCs in India has also been undertaken. The chapter also delves into development planning for the SCs whereby it analyzes the various inter-sectoral policies under the Five Year Plans. The achievements of the Special Component Plan for the SCs have also been critically analyzed in terms of direct financial inflows and individual-oriented programmes. In this context, it has also been argued that specific programmes akin to the SCP also need to be developed for the Muslims. Poverty as an important dimension of human development has also been analyzed for the SCs. The chapter also takes an analysis of how the term Scheduled Caste came into being in official parlance. Finally, the chapter undertakes an historical analysis of the Dalit movement whereby it traces the trajectory of resistance and assertion for their own upliftment which perhaps the Muslim community in general lacks.

Chapter 2 makes an indepth analysis of the Muslim profile in the historical context as well as in independent India, their socio-economic and political status. The chapter also delineates how the Sachar Committee took up the Muslim cause to sensitize the powers that be for the need of their upliftment if need be even through reservations. An interesting dimension of the chapter is the process of how the Muslims got subsumed with the synthetic culture of India and adopted practices contrary to its religious tenets. The presence of stratified segments within the community akin to that

of the Hindus is a vindication of the fact that there is a clear distinction between scripture and practice. The chapter set out to argue that in terms of cultural and lifestyle habits there is hardly any demarcation between the cultural traits of the Dalits and the Muslims and equally true is their social exclusion and economic discrimination that warrants close linkages between the two communities. A brief account of identity formation and subsequent identity crisis within the Muslim community, the questions of their security, the siege psychosis they are undergoing in the current political scenario and the growing aspirations of the new generations of the Muslim youth have also been touched upon in the chapter.

The demolition of Babri Mosque in December 1992 by the Sangh Parivar was neither an isolated event nor a spontaneous act, but something that was in the making for long time. Privileging majoritarian arguments in political discourse, succumbing to political expediency by the so-called secular parties, demonization of Muslim difference, and peripheralization of the Muslim voices all came together to create the pickaxes that demolished the sixteenth-century mosque.

The Sangh Parivar's planned attack on the Mosque and the riot in Bombay in December and in the following month were conducted with the complicity of the state machinery. These events jolted the Indian Muslim community and such words as "harassed, humiliated and preyed upon" convey the mental state of most of the Muslims. The Saffron Brigade's marching song did not end in Ayodhya, the electoral politics delivered the central power to BJP twice since, and Indian Muslims once again became the victims in Gujarat in 2002. More important are the reactions of the Muslim community in the aftermath of the Ayodhya. The Muslim religious leaders (i.e., ulamas, the Imam of Delhi Juma Mosque, the Babri Masjid Action Committee, the Muslim Personal Law Board etc) remained silent or, at best, expressed subdued reactions. Beside these muted responses of the traditional religious leaders, two distinctly different strands of views emerged since then. Their modes of articulation are also markedly different.

The secularists, mostly drawn from the educated middle class, underscored the need for soul searching, politics of inter-communal harmony and hoped that "this

cataclysmic event can still yield something positive.” Translating these high ideals into political activism in a turbulent period and at a time when difference is being demonized is something yet to be done. While another strand has emerged from the Muslim subaltern classes. They have allied themselves with the other marginalized segments of the society and articulated their dissatisfaction through a political strategy of supporting other communal and regional parties. In the state elections of 1993 in Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodyha is situated, the Muslims formed an undeclared electoral alliance with the Hindu lower caste Dalits and successfully defeated the BJP. The strategy goes beyond electoral solidarity. In a recent study Yoginder Sikand shows that the ‘Dalit voice’ has become a vehicle for expressing the dissent of the marginalized Muslim community.

Chapter 3 of the thesis dealing with electoral politics largely concentrates on the role of Muslims and Dalits in the electoral process and government formations. The chapter strived to focus on the bottlenecks and impediments in their way to enter the echelons of power. The chapter highlights how the Muslims got further marginalized with the sectarian politics of the Congress party during 1975. The formation of various Muslim political outfits particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Hyderabad have also been analyzed and the role of Muslim League in mobilizing Muslim support and how Muslims preferred a secular organization to that of the Muslim League has been discussed in the chapter. The role of Muslims and their political outfits vis-à-vis regional political organizations like the TDP have been discussed in a special sub-head christened ‘Hyderabad Muslims and Electoral Politics’. The chapter discerns that to be better represented in state formations, minorities in India have three political choices: one, they can join one of the parties sympathetic to minorities or secular in orientation, such as the Indian National Congress; two, they can work through a non-partisan pressure group that would ensure the election of sympathetic individuals regardless of party affiliation; and finally, they can form their own political party and try to extract benefits by holding the balance of power in a coalition government. In that regard, the chapter analyzes that all three approaches have been utilized by the Muslims but without any substantial gains or progress. It is evident from the discussion in the chapter that unless secular parties field adequate number of winnable

Muslim candidates from Muslim concentration constituencies, there is bound to be shortfall.

The second important reason is that the secular parties did not reach any understanding even on Muslim concentration seats to keep the BJP and its allies as bay. The rivalry among the secular parties, in these seats resulted in the victory of the third party, because, Muslim votes were inevitably divided among the secular parties. The third factor has already been pointed out. Despite repeated calls, appeals and advice by the Muslim leadership for Muslim Unity, at constituency level, Muslim voters were never fully registered or united, more so in the constituencies of Muslim concentration. A very damaging role has been played by some religious leaders who issued appeals in favour of one party or the other, and religious organizations which put up candidates, in comprehensibly in constituencies with low Muslim concentration, against known Muslim candidates of secular parties. Newly a dozen or more Muslim parties sprang up on the election eve especially in Uttar Pradesh.

Many non-political Muslim organizations which are active on the margin of politics have formulated common principle and have issued guidelines to select suitable candidates in Muslim concentration constituencies. But actually they gave confusing signals to the community as a result many experienced parliamentarians lost from the same constituencies.

In Chapter 4, the problems and prospects and importance of Dalit-Muslim unity are discussed at length. Influential Dalit and Muslim leaders have long stressed the need for a broad-based unity between their communities, seeing this as a powerful means to challenge 'upper' caste oppression of which both of them regard themselves as victims. Yet, the Dalit-Muslim unity agenda has hardly advanced beyond mere sloganeering or at best strategic political alliances at the time of elections. By and large, moves to unite Dalits and Muslims have been confined to the political level. Recent years have seen the emergence of several political parties ostensibly committed to Dalit-Muslim unity. Yet, as the experience of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh so painfully suggests, Dalit-Muslim unity at the political level, in the absence of strong binds between the two groups at the social level, can hardly be sustained. In

other words, a meaningful unity between Dalits and Muslims is only possible through strong contacts and close alliances at the level of civil society.

Although, Muslims and Dalits are among the most backward and marginalized of communities in India today, efforts to bring them closer to jointly struggle for their rights have proved abortive. In recent years Hindutva outfits have made great strides in winning Dalits to their fold, using them in organized pogroms unleashed against Muslims in various parts of India. In the recent large-scale massacres of Muslims in Gujarat, for instance, Dalits, under the influence and instigation of 'upper' caste-led Hindutva organizations, played a major role. Dalit-Muslim unity therefore, remains a distant dream.

In order to understand the problems and prospects of Dalit and Muslim unity, we need to reflect on the political history of both the communities. Neither do the Muslims nor the Dalits have been a monolithic community. Historically, the Muslim community has been divided by a complex form of stratification system, in which the native converts were looked down upon. While, the egalitarian ethos of Islam attracted many Dalits to convert, Dalits remained Dalits among the Muslims in India.

PROFILE OF THE SCHOLAR

Ayub Khan is presently employed as a Sanitation Inspector at the Jamia Millia Islamia. He was born in Jodhpur on the 25th of June 1966. Prior to his joining Jamia, he pursued his Sanitary Inspector Diploma from the Training Centre, Jaipur, Rajasthan. He also holds a Bachelors Degree from the University of Ajmer (1988) and Master's Degrees in Political Science (1998) and Public Administration (2006), which he pursued from the Jamia Millia Islamia. He has also participated in a UGC sponsored 'Crash Course on Research Methodology in Social Science' (2005).

He has participated in several Inter-University football tournaments during his college days as a member of the Jodhpur football team.

He has been deputed as Hajj Assistant by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India to Consulate General of India, Jeddah thrice during the years 1999, 2005 and 2010.