Muslims at the Shifting Margins: Hindu-Muslim Relations through the Margins Perspective

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Religious Indians

Religion has been unduly privileged to understand the south Asian social reality. Western scholars born in the age of Enlightenment and protestant reformation have, under the blinding effect of 'modern' (which includes the notion of secularity, nation and rational individual) branded the non-western cultures of Asia, China, and Africa as overtly religious. Many Western scholars assume that modern westerners act out of secular rational concerns while South Asians (as well as Middle Eastern and inhabitants of other regions) act under a primary impulse of religious sentiment (Said 1978). Thus orientalism assumes that religion in India is the key to understand people and identity. Identities in south Asia are predominantly religious ones, in contrast with Europeans and Americans, who are nationalists first. Privileging religion in understanding India is not a problem. However positing non-western cultures as religious, first, overlooks the salience of religion in Europe and America. Secondly it oversimplifies the existence plurality of religious groups as exclusive and divided. Western scholars of the subcontinent rely too heavily on Hindu and Muslim (particularly), as '...self-apparent terms of exclusive arenas of religious activity so that South Asian cultures can best be viewed , de facto, through bifurcated glasses that discreetly discerns two halves of India- Hindu and Muslim-in time, space and society'.

Understanding Marginalisation

Marginalisation has emerged as a most contemporary theme in the discourse on social justice and equality. Though the study of margins claims no conceptual originality and freshness for its being rooted in the conventional notions of centre-periphery debate of the dependency theorisation, still the theme is potent with capturing broader processes hitherto marginal to mainstream sociological research. The term 'Marginalization' generally describes the overt actions or tendencies of individuals and societies whereby those perceived as being without desirability or function are removed or excluded (i.e., are 'marginalized') from the prevalent systems

of protection and integration, so limiting their opportunities and means for survival. Marginalization may manifest itself in forms varying from genocide/ethnic-cleansing and other xenophobic acts/activities at one end of the spectrum, to more basic economic and social hardships at the unitary (individual/family) level. Of course, the forms of marginalization may vary, generally linked to the level of development of society; culturally, and as (if not more) importantly, with relation to economics. For example, it would generally be true, that there would exist more marginalized groups in the Third World and developing nations, than in the Developed/First-World nations. Indeed, there can be a distinction made, on the basis of the choice that one has within this context: those in the Third World who live under impoverished conditions, through no choice of their own (being far removed from the protectionism that exists for people in the First World,) are often left to die due to hunger, disease, and war (Anupkumar, n.d.).

To be marginalised is to be forced to occupy the sides or fringes and thus not be at the centre of things. In social Life, groups of people or communities may have the experience of being excluded. Their marginalisation can be because they speak a different language, follow different customs or belong to a different religious group from the majority community. They may also feel marginalised because they are poor, considered to be of 'low' social status and viewed as being less human than others. Sometimes, marginalised groups are viewed with hostility and fear. This sense of difference and exclusion leads to communities not having access to resources and opportunities and in their inability to assert their rights. They experience a sense of disadvantage and powerlessness vis-a-vis more powerful and dominant sections of society, who own land, is wealthy, better educated and politically powerful. Thus, marginalisation is seldom experienced in one sphere. Economic, social, cultural and political factors work together to make certain groups in society feel marginalised.

In India, the problem of marginalization is very real. We see it with women and women's rights—perhaps not as much in Metropolises, but definitely in smaller cities and towns, and villages. Discrimination exists against women at every level, from Female Infanticide to Widow Remarriage, and so on. The plight of Dalits is also not much different (largely due to corruption allowing only a fortunate few to benefit from the welfare programs in place). Muslims also face severe forms of marginalisation, as do people of various other minorities. The marginalization of the honest is another problem—so is the marginalization of various issues, ranging from corruption to the environment.

The effects of Marginalization are immense. Those who are marginalized generally suffer from a crisis of identity (often portrayed as 'the bad guy') and this perhaps leads to a rise in social militancy / delinquency (in terms of castes, religions, ethnic

and linguistic groups, people suffering from Medical problems (AIDS, etc), those of other sexual orientation (homosexuals). Women and the physically handicapped or mentally challenged, are simply smothered and subdued into the acceptance (without choice) of whatever is offered to them, and/or whatever views and beliefs are forced upon them. These cycles back to the marginalized being viewed in this light, since they are forced to be so. In terms of decision-making abilities and power, the marginalized are also shunned and shunted away from the mainstream, remaining a 'fringe' group, with little real representation (and due to their marginalization, little desire to organize protest against this marginalization). Policies and Political Representation are meant to cater to the larger audience. Those in power, or those with power prevent the marginalised from fuller realisation from policies and programmes. Those already marginalized remain largely so. Marginalised are not a homogenous group. For every stage of marginalized people, there exists a hierarchy of inequality within that group, contributing to the degree of marginalization. The concept of Marginalised is a dynamic one for there is impetus for constant contestation within and between the groups who are part and apart from the mainstream.

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Minorities, Muslims and Marginalisation

The term minority is most commonly used to refer to communities that are numerically small in relation to the rest of the population. However, it is a concept that goes well beyond numbers. It encompasses issues of power, access to resources and has social and cultural dimensions. The Indian Constitution recognised that the culture of the majority influences the way in which society and government might express themselves. In such cases, size can be a disadvantage and lead to the marginalisation of the relatively smaller communities. Thus, safeguards are needed to protect minority communities against the possibility of being culturally dominated by the majority. They also protect them against any discrimination and disadvantage that they may face. Given certain conditions, communities that are small in number relative to the rest of society may feel insecure about their lives, assets and well-being. This sense of insecurity may get accentuated if the relations between the minority and majority communities are fraught. The Constitution provides these safeguards because it is committed to protecting India's cultural diversity and promoting equality as well as justice. Every citizen of India can approach the courts if they believe that their Fundamental Rights have been violated. Muslims are 13.4 per cent of India's population and are considered to be a marginalised community in India today because in comparison to other communities, they have over the years been deprived of the benefits of socio economic development.

Recognising that Muslims in India were lagging behind in terms of various development indicators, the government set up a high-level committee in 2005. Chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, the committee examined the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India. The report discusses in detail the marginalization of this community. It suggests that on a range of social, economic and educational indicators the situation of the Muslim community is comparable to that of other marginalised communities like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Among other things the report found that 25 % children in the age group of 6-14 years do not attend any school. In no State Muslim participation in the workforce is proportionate to their population share. Political participation of Indian Muslim is also inadequate and is often stifled by the policy of reserved seats on a rotation basis (Sachar Committee Report on Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community in India, Government of India, Nov., 2006). Economic and social marginalisation experienced by Muslims has other dimensions as well. Like other minorities, Muslim customs and practices are sometimes quite distinct from what is seen as the mainstream.

Muslims as others

Prior to British rule in India, it was generally believed that Hindu-Muslim relations in India were that of complementarities and uneasy peace. Self-identification, exclusion

and tension among religious groups on the subcontinent derived solely from the colonial encounter. However evidence from many sources point to the otherness of Muslims in India. In the eleventh century, Al-Buruni in his *Kitab-al-Hind* distinguished between Hindus and Budhists and referred to Hindus as religious antagonists and co-religionists (Muslims) as followers of truth. Similarly, in mid-twelfth century Brahmana Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* we find reference to Muslims by an ethnic like label called *Turuska* (Turks). In a similar vein, the rise of the orders of militant *sadhus* contributed in equal measure to the construction of exclusive religious identities. The first half of the second millennium AD witnessed the expansion of ascetic orders, along with the cults of their God, throughout the Indian subcontinent. These orders combined trade with military duty and allied their economic ascent with an expansion of their cult across south Asia, establishing a comprehensive binding of *Shaivite* and *Vaishnavite* worship for many of the myriad, previously loose pages of local religious beliefs and practices. Pre-colonial political efforts to form a single organisation of Hindus soon followed and provided the basis for the discourse of communalism taken up by the imperial British and fostered by the current religious chauvinists (Veer, 1994).

The British Imperial rule in India borrowed heavily from this already existing religious exclusionism and selectively used them in furthering their imperial interest. British imperial rule in South Asia consciously and unconsciously agitated extant communal dynamics in South Asia through four mutually interacting factors: Ethnography, Historiography, the Census, and representational politics...The British first had to determine what that was, and so they attempted to discern and depict this through three forms of knowledge: Historiography, Ethnography and Statistics. Historiographers, who projected western historical patterns forged in the renaissance and tempered in the enlightenment created expectations that Asian cultures would reflect pre-modern European social conditions in which religion supposedly played a very public, socially divisive and developmentally retardant role. The British used religion as a primary criterion for the categorization not only of time but also of society. The decadal census of India, initiated in 1872, sought to delineate South Asian society principally via categories of caste and religion (Gottschalk, 2001). Similarly, with the introduction of communal representation, religious discourse ceased to be site of engagement and it quickly transformed into a tool of trans local political mobilisation.

Theoretical Traditions

In the above backdrop of religious exclusionism, it is interesting to examine the different forms that discourses on Hindu-Muslim relations in India have taken. Engagement with the Hindu-Muslim question in social science has drawn upon a rich stock of theoretical traditions which can be grouped under four broad categories,

namely, 1) Exclusivist 2) Conflict 3) Historical 4) Composite. Exclusivist tradition treats religion like Hinduism and Islam as a singular whole as neatly separate from each other. The tradition is limited to the study of a particular religion. In this view Hinduism and Islam derive from quite different sources with origins in Aryan, Dravidian, Sanskrit and Vedas on the one hand and in Arabs, Arabic, the Prophet Mohammed and the Quran on the other. Exclusivist discourse (Eg. British Historiography) divides India temporally and spatially so much so that ancient Indian civilisation as Hindus and medieval India as Islamic. Spatially places come to carry a religious tag (Benares as a Hindu City) missing in the process the role Muslims play in the pilgrimage economy of Varanasi. Conflict scholarship is a consequence of communal violence in recent times. Typically the approach (Asghar Ali Engineer, Ashis Nandy etc.) focus on Hindus and Muslims as opposed to each other and study the ways in which religious groups come to position themselves in conflict. Historical school also studies the communalist discourse but from a historical perspective. Typically they seek to find the roots of Hindu-Muslim conflict in colonial and pre-colonial past. Scholars like Bipan Chandra, Gyanedra Pandey and van der Veer consider communalism to be the direct result of British policies and Ideologies applied to South Asia. Composite approach to religion (Nita Kumar) study religious groups as a constituent of other group formations. So Hindus and Muslims are not only Hindus or Muslims but also Hindus or Muslims of a place, of a profession and so on. Or in other words identity is composed of many nested sub identities of which religion is but only one component. Nita Kumar demonstrates in the study of mostly Muslim Benarasi weavers that they *Banarasi muslim Bunkar* more than Muslims living in uneasy peace in the Hindu City of Varanasi (Engineer, 1999).

All the above approaches do shed light on the different ways in which we can study religion, religious groups, their formation, consolidation, and differentiation. However the available traditions tend to pose religious groups as fixed and are either in conflict or are at a safe distance from each other. But in everyday life, religious groups, in the process of negotiating their marginality, hardly remain so insulated from each other. Neither have they always stood opposed to each other. There is, in reality, a considerable amount of engagement between them. Marginalised religious groups, in their engagement with the mainstream, take on new strategic names and forms which compel us to consider the case of shifting margins, consciousness and identities. Old oppositional identities coalesce into new ones, boundaries serve only as symbols, communal become communitarian (Kumar, 1995).

Muslims at the Shifting Margins: A Narrative

The revenue village *Mian Patana*, Bhograi Block, Balasore District, Odisha under this study here was a Jagirdari of Hadi Mian during Mughal times. In keeping with the practice then, administrators were used to be granted land and Jagirdari of villages instead of salary for their service. Though it was not hereditary, but as long as they continue to provide services, like tax collection, maintenance of peace in the village and keep a watch on moral order, from generation to generation, the Jagirdari rights remain vested in them. Since then the village has been named after khairat mian (Son of Hadi Mian) as Mian Patana. Some 150 years ago there were only two/three Muslim families in the village and few more families in a neighboring basti (settlement, referred to as Basti henceforth) in Sarisaganj. The basti rapidly grew in size and now have around 135 families in Mian Patana. After the abolition of Zamindari and Jagirdari, rights of land ownership was taken away by the Government. Slowly over the years majority of the Muselmans rendered landless. Poor converts (some might have been forced to Islam) came to settle down in Mian Patana over the years. Now the village or as is called by Hindus, *Pathan basti* has a population of nearly 800 people, majority of whom (80%) are illiterate. Very few Muslim children go to school, though there is a primary and secondary school within a distance of 2km from the village. People cite reasons of poverty and a lack of appreciation to explain illiteracy particularly with reference to modern education, in the community. Though there was a Madrasa which had 30-35 enrollments every year in Sarisaganj, a neighboring hamlet, it is now closed for lack of fund. 'Though the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) assured government grants several times, it never happened' grumbled Seikh Basir, a local Muslim. There are three Muslims from Mianpatna who are in government service. Most of the Muslims are landless. Only one person has got more than 10 acres of land and nearly 10 more Muslims owning 5 acres or less. Rest of the community is landless. Occupational structure of the basti consist of free wage labourer, yearly contract labourer for agriculture and cattle grazing, petty trade in collection of refused iron and plastic articles, unskilled mechanical work like tube well repairing etc. These days nearly 10-15 boys go to places like Bombay, Surat, Singapore, Saudi Arabia to work in hotels, construction sites, cotton mills etc (Adhikary C. D. 2010). Poverty is writ large in the basti. The basti is surrounded by agricultural lands owned by Hindus. There is no proper approach road to the basti; earlier the basti used to be very compact. But recurrent floods in river *Subernrekha* have forced some dislocations and it now looks a little scattered. There is one Mosque in the village, another one is in Sarisaganj basti.

Muslims, in this backdrop, are living in Mianpatna with Hindus by their sides since last five generations, the maximum they can recall. The village is known as Pathan basti by majority Hindus, which is normally referred to with disdain. Pathan stands

for someone who has lost his caste; somebody who is defiling. A general attitude of contempt prevails among Hindus. Some of the Muslims also admit that some Hindus refuse to even sit with us. Muslims are ideally evaluated in a framework of purity-pollution. Detail codes of conduct designed to maintain distance exist among Hindus. Muslims are not allowed to enter homes, kitchen, touch cooked food etc. These days these taboos are little loose. Muslims are liberally allowed inside lower caste homes. Though they do not dine together, still it is a common sight to find Hindus and Muslims sharing the sitting place in the tea shops at village crossings. In keeping with the lowering of traditional moral standards, social distance and nearness between Hindus and Muslims, these days, is decided more by economic pragmatism. There was a time when people used to take bath if they happen to come through Pathan basti. Muslims today, to a large extent, are polluting to the extent that they are poor, have filthy life styles, and of course the important one, eat beef. Pathan basti used to be a place which is inhabited by Pathans, who are for all practical purpose, others or not any part of us (Hindus) or our social and moral life. Typically the basti used to be located away from the neighborhood in the middle of farmlands. However, floods wrecked large scale devastation recently. Though Hindus were also affected, Muslims having mud huts in low lands had to bear disproportionate damage. These calamities have pushed the geographical boundaries of *Pathan basti* (Muslim Settlement) somewhat closer to Hindu neighbourhood in recent years. As no Hindu will sell homestead land to a Muslim, this coming closer of Pathan basti and Hindu Sahi (Neighbourhood) is significant. Hindu and Muslim families are more face to face. There is a certain development of social exchange relations between Muslims and low caste Hindus. Few of the Muslims have now become designated relatives. These relations involve all relations of give and take, except the fact that the relations are not real but imaginary. Hindu space in the village like village crossings, that typically have few shops, selling tea and other utilities, are now crowded more by Muslims. These village squares are very important for negotiating rural power and politics and staking claim to status in the village prestige hierarchy where Muslims rub shoulder with Hindu rural elites. As the neighbourhoods are closer Muslim children (school going as well as illiterates or drop outs) freely come to play in the Hindu Sahis with Hindu children. Though Hindu children going to Pathan basti to play, however, is not very common. In general Muslims are thought to be degraded, i.e., outside caste society. However an exception to this Hindu-Muslim opposition is a general belief of Hindus as well as Muslims in *Haji Harman Pir Sahib*. In fact one of the village crossings is named after him as *peera chhak* (Peera Square, which is of course considered a frightening place, after sunset). Both Hindus as well as Muslims come here to worship with Sinni bhog (sugar offering) says Selikh Malli, Maulavi of the basti. Hindus come particularly in cases of theft which involve cows and other valuable article. Hindus are happy to depend on Bairuddin and Jabruddin (Two very familiar names even with Hindu Children) in the

basti for magic healing in cases of snake bite and other illness. There is primary health care centre at a distance of 5 km. However, Abbas, a local untrained health practitioner of allopathic medicine in the basti, is invariably the first person to approach for Hindus as well as Muslims. Abbas Daktar or simply Abbas Bhai (Doctor Abbas) is popular among Hindus and Muslims. Except a communal flash point in 1982, where there was large scale conflict over an incident of cow slaughter, religious tolerance has been a rule among Hindus and Muslims since then. The conflict then was resolved by local MLA by allowing Muslims to slaughter cows but they cannot do it openly keeping the religious sensibility of Hindu neighbours. Muslims are strictly kept away from Hindu temples and ceremonies. However, Muslims are selectively, depending on their status and closeness with the Hindu man in question, are invited on occasions of marriage and occasions like that which are not strictly religious. Of course there are few people who insist not to sit with *Muselmans* (Muslims).

In the domain of village economy, there seems to be a tentative division of labour between Hindu and Muslims. While lands belong to Hindus, Muslims are mostly landless. Basti has been a source of farm and non-farm labourers for Hindu farmers for a long time. Some of the Muslims remain tied to Hindu Landowners on a renewable contractual basis for a year. However Hindus are less likely to work as wage labourers on Muslim land (Also there are very few land owning Muslims). However there are cases of exchange labour during peak agricultural season, where a Hindu labourer, more frequently from the low caste, compensate for every man days taken by him from Muslim labourer, by working on Muslim field. All labourers, Hindu and Muslims work together in the field of big Hindu land owners. The traditional division of labour is slowly changing in favour of Muslims. The economic standard of Muslims is improving now as they are cultivating land on a share cropping basis and are increasingly taking to profitable vegetable cultivation during rabbi season. Vegetables are sold by Muslims in the weekly village market as well as nearby semi-urban daily markets. Market place represents a 'free for all' place where Muslims do buying and selling without any religious barrier. Muselmans have monopolized cattle trade in the village. They supply and buy cows and bullocks to and from Hindu villagers and sell them in nearby Sunakania *haat* (Weekly Market). Few Muslims have also turned local moneylender for Hindu clients. Hindus turn to these well off Muslims, whose, sons are in Saudi Arabia or in other places outside, for hand loans in times of need. Some enterprising young Muslims and Hindus have entered into a partnership to trade in coconut which is amply available in the area. It is aptly said that Muslims and Hindus share the burden of poverty together, and there seems to be no or little religious barrier to economic activities.

The Muslim basti used to be very sleepy politically. Poverty being their priority preoccupation they see little rationality in political pursuits. However there is gradual

realisation of the value of their votes. Increasing political party penetration among Muslims is creating consciousness among them. The whole basti is now swears by two political parties- Congress and Biju Janata Dal, a regional political oufit in Odisha, informs Seikh Ajmal, the ward member of the basti. This situation provides opportunities for community leaders to remain in touch with Hindu politicians. Muslims constitutes a sizable vote bank during panchayat elections. A new leadership pattern is on the rise consisting of young and active young Muslims from the generation next. Muslims in Mianpatna have two tier leadership. One is the *basti mukhia* (village head) responsible for settling individual disputes, quarrels in families, cases of petty burglary etc. There is another formal leader in the shape of ward member who represents the basti in the panchayat. However it is often found that quarrels and other disputes among Muslims are referred to Hindu nobles (village leaders who are senior, highly regarded and traditionally responsible for dispute settlement in the locality) in the neighborhood.

Discussion

Muslims being in minority has lived in Mianpatna at the margins of majoritarian Hindu society. However their everyday experience transcends their religious difference in the reciprocity and engagement between them. This has led to also a change in their marginality in the overlapping spheres of religion, society, culture and the political economy. Muslims being marginal to Hindus do have margins within margins in the shape of (*Sarv Hara*) dispossessed and landless Muslims. The engagement of Muslims with the mainstream is thick at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The poorer Muslims through share cropping, vegetable cultivation, outmigration networks with the poorer Hindus achieving economic success. Economic success directly translates into lowering of Hindu morals, civic voice, political weight and visibility in the public space. Many commensal restrictions are abandoned. Many Muslims in Mianpatna are designated relatives of Hindu Households. Farm lands now frequently change into the hands of Muslims. Poor Hindu small farmer are the one to sell off their land to Muslims who now have surplus from the remittances from far off places like Saudi Arabia, Surat and Bangalore. Same may not be true of sacred homestead land as no Hindu would sell it to a Muslim. However this has been breached due to displacement by a recent flood. *Eid-ul-Fitr* is louder today, *Tazias* are bigger now. New Panchayati Raj has excited Muslims about their political importance. Demand for representation, grant-in aid for *Madrasa* testify to the increase in reflexive self-awareness of the community. Religious identities, however instead of sharpening, seem to be decomposing. There seems to be a shifting and repositioning of Muslim marginality. Muslims now have better scores than low caste-low class Hindus in social, economic and political landscapes.

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