

Review - Muslims in Indian Cities

Written by Reece Jones

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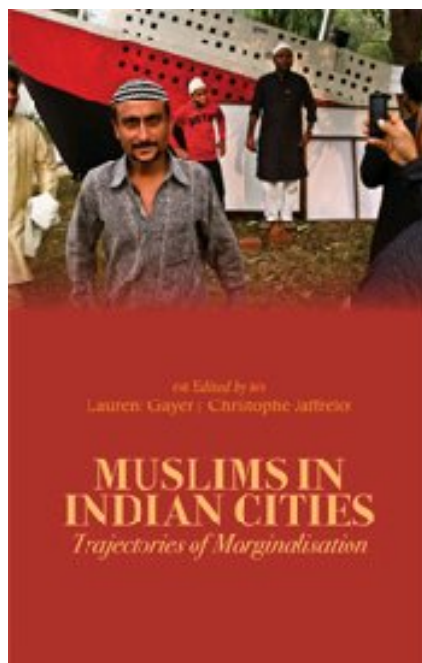
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REECE JONES, JUL 12 2012

Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation

By Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot

Hurst & Company, 2012



The 2011 Indian census estimates that there are 170 million Muslims in India, which makes it the second or third most populous Muslim country in the world after Indonesia and maybe Pakistan. The catch, of course, is that despite its large size, the Muslim population still only accounts for 13% of the total population in India. Furthermore, after the 1947 partition of British India that created Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims, there is the lingering but often unstated view that Muslims just do not belong in India. The Indian government and officials at various levels have been accused of overlooking the plight of Indian Muslims. The unsettling data and stories of declining fortunes detailed in *Muslims in Indian Cities* back up this claim.

Muslims in India are more likely to live in cities than other religious groups, which would normally indicate a wealthier population. However, the opposite is the case. Eight percent of urban Muslims are part of the formal sector compared to 21% of the total population in India. Only 7% of Muslims work for the government, while 18% of the total population does. This exclusion from the formal sector results in lower wages. The average Muslims household expend 800 rupees per month, equivalent to the lowest caste Hindus, and far less than the over 1400 rupees spent by upper caste Hindus. Muslims are also underrepresented in the judiciary and legislature in India. Only 6% of the High Court Justices, less than 3% of the Indian Administrative Service Officers, and 4% of Indian Police Service officers are Muslims. In the Indian Parliament, 5.5% of the MPs are Muslims. Furthermore, Gayer and Jaffrelot note that “many

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important states—including Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Delhi, Rajasthan, and last but not least Maharashtra—do not have even one seating Muslim MP” (p.5). This is indeed a monumental decline for a population whose ancestors once ruled the region for hundreds of years.

The book includes an introduction that outlines the current state of Muslims in India and then traces the history of the population. The substantive chapters give insights into the situation in most of the key cities in India. There are chapters on Mumbai by Qudsiya Contractor, Ahmedabad by Christophe Jaffrelot and Charlotte Thomas, Jaipur by Gayatri Jai Singh Rathore, Lucknow by Gilles Verniers, Aligarh by Juliette Galonnier, Bhopal by Christophe Jaffrelot and Shazia Aziz Wülbers, Hyderabad by Neena Ambre Rao and S. Abdul Thaha, Delhi by Laurent Gayer, Cuttack by Pralay Kanungo, Kozhikode by Radhika Kanchana, and Bangalore by Aminah Mohammad-Arif. The list is comprehensive with Kolkata and Srinagar being the only notable exclusions. The chapters follow a similar outline of first describing the current situation in the city, then tracing the history of Muslims there, and concluding with current field based research into a particular neighborhood in the city. All are well written and based in deep familiarity with place. Although few readers will be experts on all of the cities, the similar structure and clear writing makes the distinct chapters come together as a coherent whole.

In the process, several patterns emerge, which are highlighted—and nuanced—in the excellent conclusion. First, residents of all of the cities seem to have an idealized view of a past era of better relations between communities with more integration in government posts and more mixed neighborhoods. In every city, it appears Muslims are worse off today than they were in the past, although there are certainly regional differences with the South and East more hospitable. Second, each chapter identifies two critical moments that initiated and then accelerated the declining fortunes of Muslims. The first event, of course, is the 1947 partition when Muslims across India suddenly were forced to decide whether to remain in their homes or immigrate to a distant land that had been designated as their new homeland. Many of the wealthy elite migrated leaving poorer populations behind. The second events that accelerated the decline were Hindu-Muslim riots in the past 25 years. These riots solidified the feeling of vulnerability and established the persistent fear that it could happen again. The third finding that reoccurs in each chapter is that this fear has produced increasingly segregated cities with a few ethnic enclaves with Muslim majorities. This segregation reduces the opportunity for casual encounters between communities in shops, schools, and public spaces, which establishes additional social boundaries.

Overall this is a very good book; however, there are a few things that could have improved it. First, while the detailed case studies on each city are all excellent and do come together to form something of a larger picture, it might have been useful to have a few more chapters that were comparative. For example, as far as I could tell Bangladeshi immigrants are not mentioned anywhere in the book and are not listed in the index. By most estimates, there are 10 – 15 million Bangladeshi Muslims living in India, mostly in slums in cities. A chapter that traces this population might have been warranted or a comparative chapter on education, housing, or employment. Second, the introduction does not provide an outline for the book or even an indication of what the substantive chapters contain. It is only once the reader gets to them that the format of individual city case studies becomes clear. It would have been useful if the editors had explained the choice of this format so the reader could see the larger picture. Finally, there are no author bios anywhere in the book. The authors of each of the chapters are simply identified by name and no other affiliation is provided.

Muslims in Indian Cities is an interesting and well written volume. It provides detailed progress reports on the situation of Muslims in most of the major cities in India and is an important contribution that considers the legacy of partition in South Asia. Unfortunately, sixty-five years after that event, the ramifications of establishing separate territories for non-territorial religious categories continue to play out. This book demonstrates that so far, Muslims in India have been the losers in this process.

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