

People without History

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Taken as a whole, Muslims, India's largest religious minority, are, as numerous studies have shown, among the most economically deprived and educationally backward sections of Indian society. This is particularly the case in northern and eastern India, where the bulk of the Muslim population is concentrated. That the country as a whole cannot prosper if such a large section of its population remains mired in poverty and illiteracy should be obvious—even if it actually is not—to both policy-makers as well as Muslim community leaders alike.

The causes of Muslim backwardness are multiple. Some are rooted in history, while others are related to contemporary factors, such as discrimination on the part of agencies of the state and the wider society as well as the neglect of Muslim leaders of Muslim substantive interests—such as economic and educational empowerment—and an overwhelming focus on emotive, identity-related and religious concerns instead.

While much has been written on the factors behind Indian Muslim backwardness, much of this has taken the form of broad generalisations based on quantitative studies using statistical methods. Although useful, such studies lack the advantage of micro-level studies that highlight qualitative aspects related to daily life and experiences, without which the actual experiences of deprivation, in all its nuances, are completely lost. The book under review, a joint venture by noted social critic Jeremy Seabrook and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, who reports for the Kolkata-based daily *Telegraph*, is a pioneering attempt to unravel various little-known dimensions of Muslim deprivation and anti-Muslim discrimination using an ethnographic approach that foregrounds qualitative experiences to embellish its basic argument. Immensely rich in field-based insights, the book is based on dozens of in-depth interviews with Muslim respondents living in some of the most deprived and poverty-stricken slums, or what its title terms as 'Muslim ghettos', in Kolkata, a city known for its endemic poverty. Although the book is thus only about a single, although important, Indian metropolis, the insights that it generates are of far wider relevance for other parts of India. What it tells readers about the forms, dimensions and causes of Muslim deprivation as well as the limited efforts, by Muslim leaders and by agencies of the state, to address such deprivation, applies, with some difference in nuance, to much of the rest of India. In that sense, it depicts life in the numerous 'Muslim ghettos' across India in a fairly honest manner.

Muslims, the book notes, account for a fourth of Kolkata's population, but are heavily overrepresented among the city's poor. They, along with Dalits, form the bulk of the inhabitants in the city's infamous slums. Many of these Muslims are originally from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, descendants of migrants who were drawn to the city in search of employment, generally as manual labourers. The Muslim-inhabited slums the book surveys—Topsia, Beniapur, Tangra and Tiljala—are uniformly characterised by endemic poverty, and soaring rates of under-employment and unemployment. The vast majority of their denizens are manual labourers, many of them former artisans now unemployed because of the invasion of 'globalisation' that has rendered the traditional crafts that they were engaged in for centuries useless and economically unviable. Being Muslim, it is often hard for these people to find 'respectable' employment outside the small Muslim-based economy. Even domestic servants sometimes have to adopt a Hindu name in order to get work. Pathetic levels of education, added to widespread and deep-rooted anti-Muslim sentiment, make it difficult for the denizens of the slums to gain any sort of employment other than as manual labourers, such as vegetable-sellers, porters, rickshaw pullers, scavengers, and even petty thieves and smugglers.

Crime and drugs flourish under the nose of the conniving police in the slums. The slum dwellers live under constant threat of eviction, by 'developers' and land sharks. Life is short, nasty and brutal, particularly for women, who are almost wholly illiterate and at the mercy of their menfolk. Disease is rampant and often people simply cannot afford the ever-increasing costs of medical treatment. There are almost no medical facilities in the slums, in any case.

In contrast to caste Hindu localities, the Muslim-dominated slums, the book notes, enjoy miserably low levels of public service provisioning—schools, drains, electricity, drinking water, hospitals and so on. This indicates consistent indifference to Muslims on the part of the authorities of the state although West Bengal had, when the book was written, lived under uninterrupted, decades-long rule of the CPM-led Left Front that styled itself as the champion of the proletariat and of religious and ethnic minorities. This indicates, Seabrook and Siddiqui persuasively argue, that the Left Front, for all its 'progressive' claims, cared little for Muslim empowerment, or for that of the Dalits and other such marginalised groups, thus revealing it to be no different from other 'mainstream' political forces in this regard. The authors cite numerous interviewees who complain of pervasive anti-Muslim prejudice in the wider society and at the hands of the authorities, thus questioning the belief that West Bengal is somehow different from or better than other states when it comes to how minorities are treated.

Through interviews with a number of Muslims, men and women, the authors bring out the fact that although West Bengal had been spared anti-Muslim violence for decades now, the self-styled 'Communist' government simply used Muslims as a vote-bank, doing little for their development. (This certainly has something to do with the recent dismal failure of the Left Front at the polls). The Muslim localities surveyed in the book are deliberately, the authors claim, denied developmental funds. Several innocent Muslim men living in such slums have also been arrested by the police and charged with terrorist offences.

The book can be called a chronicle of an unrelenting tale of woe, for it argues that life for Muslims in these slums is sheer hell, with absolutely nothing to redeem it. This might well be true, of course, and overall the book certainly holds out little hope for the hapless denizens of these slums, who seem condemned to their conditions simply on account of their religion, their poverty and their abysmal levels of education. In that sense, the book certainly does portray the reality of life in Muslim ghettos as they really and indeed are. But it does not stop there, however. Based on the experiences of these slum-dwellers the book makes claims for Muslims in general that critics might regard as somewhat problematic and exaggerated. It seems to suggest that Muslims throughout Kolkata, West Bengal and even India at large, suffer the same predicament as these hapless, poverty-ridden denizens of Kolkata's Muslim ghettos—a claim that has little to back it, and only further reinforces Muslim perceptions of victimization without offering any hope to ameliorate their conditions.

While thick in description and providing a chilling account of what it means to be poor and a Muslim in 'shining India', the book is definitely *one-sided* in its analysis of Muslim deprivation. It appears to locate such deprivation almost entirely in terms of anti-Muslim discrimination, on the part of the agencies of the state and the wider (or Hindu) society. While this factor cannot at all be denied in any honest appraisal of Muslim backwardness, it is not the sole factor—unlike what the authors, echoing Muslim ideologues who never tire of spinning conspiracy theories and seeking to blame others for all the ills of the Muslims, argue. Admittedly, anti-Muslim discrimination does exist but, surely, its roots need to be understood rather than being summarily dismissed as sheer and unfounded prejudice. It is not that all perceptions of communities about each other are without any basis. If this point is recognised and admitted—which the authors seem to summarily dismiss—this opens spaces for communities to change their attitudes and behaviours towards each other for their own benefit. Simply bemoaning the fact of discrimination, as the authors do, in an accusatory fashion rules out the much-needed task of introspection and internal reform that many progressive Muslim scholars urge if Muslims are to pull themselves out of the morass that they find themselves stuck in.

In assessing the pathetic conditions of the Muslims in the slums of Kolkata, and laying the blame for this mainly on factors external to the Muslim community, the authors conveniently ignore the role of Muslim political and religious leaders in reinforcing Muslim backwardness and 'self-exclusion' and their doing precious little to address the question of Muslim poverty and illiteracy. At a time when the state is rapidly withdrawing from the social sector, it is for community leaders to take the initiative in setting up institutions and engaging in practical work to help their communities advance economically, socially, culturally and educationally. By leaving out of their analysis the role of Muslim community leaders in perpetuating Muslim backwardness—by their simply doing little, if anything, to help their co-religionists whom they claim to represent, and by focusing their energies, and that of their community, mainly on issues related to religion and identity and ignoring substantive real-world issues—the authors leave out an important explanatory factor for Muslim backwardness that makes their book one-sided and certainly *incomplete*.

Another major limitation of the book is its complete silence on what can be called Muslim 'self-exclusion', a factor which is central to the phenomenon of Muslim marginalisation. Such self-exclusionary trends, rooted in notions of Muslim difference, communal supremacism and cultural separatism, gain support from certain dominant understandings of Islam that are predicated on creating and constantly stressing distinctions between Muslims and others, thus ruling out possibilities for healthy inter-community interaction. Inevitably, this further reinforces Muslim backwardness as well as anti-Muslim prejudice. As sociologists point out, religion indelibly impacts on social behaviour and attitudes and even sometimes determines the economic and educational choices of individuals and entire communities. How dominant understandings of Islam among the Muslim slum-dwellers of Kolkata relate to their pathetic conditions as well as, if at all, their struggles to overcome such debilitating circumstances, is, however, completely left out of the analysis by the authors, which further reduces the value of the book in terms of accounting for Muslim backwardness.

The book also overlooks the crucial role of caste in accounting for and reinforcing overall Muslim backwardness. Presumably, the bulk of the denizens of the slums the book surveys are 'low' caste Muslims (who, taken together, form the bulk of the Indian Muslim population). Ignoring totally the caste factor, the authors fail to realise that the pathetic poverty of their respondents might owe not just to their Muslim-ness and to anti-Muslim prejudice but also to their caste background. Their backwardness thus probably owes to a host of factors other than, and in addition to, those that the authors recount, including 'upper' caste Muslim indifference to the conditions of their 'low' caste co-religionists, a stance that has long historical roots.

Overall, however, and despite these glaring lapses, this book is a must-read, brutally shattering the myth of the 'Indian developmental miracle' by providing a view from below. □□□

***PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY: INDIA'S MUSLIM GHETTOS**

by Jeremy Seabrook & Imran Ahmed Siddiqui

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