Identity Crisis and Political realities of Indian Muslims

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The surprising meeting of eleven Muslim leaders from across the country with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 6 suggests that some in the community think differently on the current political reality and the Muslim identity.

The leaders “expressed apprehensions about the trend of increased radicalisation and emerging threat of terrorism and underlined the need for greater unity and collective efforts to meet the challenge. They also discussed the issues relating to the properties of Muslim shrines, Masjids and Madrasas and sought the support of the Government in providing better facilities to Muslim youth particularly in the field of education.” The Prime Minister assured them of resolving these issues.

Reaction of the Traditional Leadership of the Community:

However, the sharp reaction of the traditional leadership in the community against this meeting suggests that they are too many unrealistic die hards who need to rethink on the priorities of the community in the larger interest of the nation. Minutes after the photos of the Muslim leaders who met the Prime Minister were posted on face book, comments have been pouring in – with majority of them even refusing to identify them as ‘senior leaders’ of the community.” (http://www.indiatomorrow.net/eng/muslims-on-facebook-refuse-to-identify-senior-leaders-of-muslim-community-who-met-pm-modi [1]).

Some of the Muslim leaders even questioned that “how many of them can you identify as senior leader of the community”? https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10204299602436202&set=a.1427932384318.2057780 [2].

Just about a fortnight back before this meeting, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board held its meeting in Jaipur on March 22-23 and took a contrary position not even to meet Modi in the near future. Prior to that, a jointly organised colloquium “Country and Crossroads by Jamiat
Ulama-e-Hind, Jamat-e-Islami Hind, Jamiat Ahle Hadees, Muslim Personal Law Board, Milli Council and the Delhi-based Institute of Objective Studies (IOS) on January 18 this year was abruptly cancelled perhaps due to the suspicion over the main organisers who were allegedly supposed to be “politically” close to Modi and perhaps assume the traditional leadership of the community. (http://www.firstpost.com/politics/muslim-meet-cancelled-delhi-feeling-guilty-talking-modi-2068143.html [3]).

The Muslim leaders like Zafrul Islam Khan, President of All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat and Abdul Aziz, Secretary, Milli Ittehad Parishad have continued with their the usual tirade that the Muslim youths are still arrested as terror suspects and “Modi’s words do not match his actions”. (http://www.voanews.com/content/india-pm-modi-remarks-on-muslims-mixed-reaction/2460436.html [4]).

In the backdrop of such divisions one wonders how far this meeting of April 6 would change the prevailing perception of the community against the Prime Minister.

Post Partition Political Journey:

If we look into the post-partition political journey, it looks that the leadership in the community has mostly remained in the hands of the descendants of the former ruling class and the radical Islamists. These leaders do not seem to have overcome the hangover of the colonial politics within the new democratic and secular frame. They remained so much obsessed with the loss of power, political superiority and inequitable privileges even in British India that they were not satisfied with the mere rights of equal citizenship.

They equated Islam with Urdu language, Persio-Arabic culture and the traditions and values of Perso-Arabic way of life to sustain the “perception” of the cultural superiority of the community. This in a way kept them isolated from a truly modern and secular way of life.

This coalition of these self-serving elites and narrow-minded Islamist clerics never made an attempt to realise the new ground realities. Instead all they did was to extract concessions periodically to sustain their leadership while ignoring the fundamental issues facing the country as a whole. Their attempts to form an All India Party for the community to bag all the votes of the community in one basket has also failed so far. So far the polarisation has not worked but one sees a visible trend in the attempt of the Owasi brothers to have an “all India” spread.

It is not a communal but a psychological problem:
In fact, India does not have Muslim problem but the fact remains that the community is suffering from a psychological problem of being not
treated equally and this has to be addressed seriously. The reasons may be may be many-like the community’s leadership that wanted to
sustain itself , to successive ruling establishments going out of the way to treat them as separate entities -all for the votes, but one cannot
run away from this perception.

Could it be that since Independence the leaders of the ruling establishment always treated them only as Muslims and not as Indian citizens
who have been given equal rights in the constitution? Could providing them the status of minority to this second largest religious majority
with special rights and privileges in the constitution be the reason for the perpetuation of this mind set?

Taking advantage of the constitutional rights, some of the leaders of the community have started playing a similar politico-communal game
of the pre-partition days and carried forward the colonial politics of reservation in legislatures. Should the community be submerged in not
thinking beyond Mosque, Madrasa and Waqf properties?

It is forgotten by many even today that the system of British-accorded separate electorates and reserved seats for Muslims in legislatures
were buried in the Constituent Assembly debates, though the ghost of old misguided colonial privileges in the name of safeguarding the
interests of the community continue to haunt many of them..

Due to a communication gap between Muslim intelligentsia and common Muslims, the radicals kept the community alienated from the
national mainstream. Had the Muslim intelligentsia taken up the leadership of the community and freed them from the hold of the Mullahs,
the psychological fear that continue to haunt the community could have been avoided. Another handicap is an acceptable tall leader of the
community to guide the people. All they had were the Mullahs and the entrenched political leadership that had the only goal of sustaining
itself.

Focus should be shifted from safeguarding the identity to one of social and economic development:

Thus, in absence of any focus on education, employment, entrepreneurship and overall development of the community either by the parties
in power or by their leaders, the second largest religious majority in the country remained under the siege of the community brokers with pre-
partition mindset that never allowed them to think beyond their religious identity.

The post-Independence political journey of Indian Muslim community had three major milestones namely Shahbano case in 1984, demolition
of Babari Mosque in 1992 and Gujarat riots in 2002. With the success of mass agitation against the verdict of Supreme Court in Shahbano
case, politicising the demolition of a disputed structure known as Mosque (which community is right or wrong is not the question here) and
the sustained psychological fear of the community in connection with the Gujarat riots- as a reaction the community seems to be playing
more and more an assertive kind of politics and this needs to be noted.

The question of “What to do?”

It has to be conceded, that the victory of the BJP in 2014 under the leadership of Modi has pushed the community leaders in a state of confusion. This political reality is new to them and this in turn has created, a sense of “what to do now?” Being scared of losing their political bargaining power, they had even refused to meet the Prime Minister. Will it help the community? I doubt. Therefore when some Muslim representatives met Modi, the traditional leaders became panicky and even questioned the authorities of these leaders without realising that they too have no legal sanction to be called as leaders of the community.

The Prime Minister’s declaration in a televised interview with CNN in September 2014,”Indian Muslims will live for India. They will die for India”. Does not seem to have had any impact on the community as whole.

It is a fact that the majority of the traditional Muslim leaders are not ready to accept the new political reality and therefore the Muslim masses are in a state of confusion as to what to do?

Arshad Alam, assistant professor in Centre for Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University perhaps rightly observed, “Muslims are facing a complex situation today. Secular parties like Samajwadi Party and Congress have failed them. Muslim leaders on whom the community trusted sold themselves off repeatedly. So what do you do?” (http://www.firstpost.com/politics/muslim-meet-cancelled-delhi-feeling-guilty-talking-modi-2068143.html [3]).

On the other hand Mohammad Sajjad, a historian at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), says: “Muslims will have to open up with Modi who is the Prime Minister today. But the problem is with the so-called traditional Muslim leadership which is corrupt and self-centred.”(Ibid.)

Dr. Rashid Shaz, an internationally acclaimed Muslim author and known for his reform writing on Islam while addressing a group of students in Aligarh University in May 2014 welcomed the victory of Modi. He said, now, for the first time in independent India, Muslims are able to see the ‘stark political realities that otherwise have been hidden by the secular hypocrisy of the Congress’. He also observed: “One of the most positive aspects of the new political development is the fall of un-Godly Muslim clergy who worked as middle-men between the Muslim masses and the ruling elite”.

The community should realise that a larger section of intelligentsia even in Muslim-majority countries feel jealous of Indian Muslims in the environment of religious liberalism. Farman Nawaz, a Pakistani journalist in his write up entitled “India make me jealous” expressed- “I am open-minded and I am a democrat but when I see that Hindu majority India enjoys co-existence of faiths, religious liberalism and active social responsiveness of its common people then I feel jealous of India”.

In view of the incapacity of the traditional leaders to mobilise an honest and a dispassionate consensus for establishing a channel of communication between common Muslims and the present Government, it is the duty of Muslim intelligentsia to come forward, hold a meaningful debate among them, judge the merit of the slogan - ‘Sabka Vikas, Sabka Saath’ and finally take a decision to guide the community for alternative politics and keeping aside the traditional politics of identity.

At the same time, Prime Minister Modi should also think of developing a mechanism so that common Muslims can avoid their middlemen culture and build direct communication with him.

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