Rethinking the Muslim Question in Post-Colonial India

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> Speaking initially in the third person, moderate Muslims might correctly say, 'In the face of colonial history and in the face of recent frustrations and defeat, Islam has an appeal for us; it is grounded in a doctrine we embrace and which has comprehensive pretensions and claims on us, including – crucially – on our polities, and this gives us a sense of autonomy and identity.' If I am right that this defensive attitude reflects a predominantly third-person perspective on ourselves, it will do no violence to the use of 'us' and 'we' here if we replace them with 'them' and 'they.' This is, after all, the voice of a community's understanding of its own condition and its causes. It is the voice of the subject that takes itself to be an object. But then, if I am right, there should be place and possibility for the switch to the first person, for the voice of the subject as agent to say, 'This appeal of Islam is something we have uncritically and indiscriminately embraced out of demoralisation and defeat, often allowing it to dominate our political actions, and it has gotten us nowhere; it is up to us to assess the relative merits of its diverse doctrinal commitments, up to us to work towards its reform, up to us to oppose the inviolability of the *Sharia*, to fashion a depoliticised Islam so that its appeal and relevance are spiritualist and universalist rather than to the polity, so that it does not remain perpetually exploitable by the fundamentalist political factions, whom we oppose.' This is neither merely the passive voice nor the reactive voice. It is, bending language a bit, the active voice.
>
> Akeel Bilgrami[1]

To talk about 'Muslim question' in India is inevitably to deal with the question of *identity* within the specific political context of the nation-state in India. However, the question of *identity* is intricately connected to the issue of *particularity*. In other words, *identity* can be identified with *particularity*, which is fundamentally counterpoised with the idea of *universality*. In this regard, a prominent political theorist on the Left, Ernesto Laclau in a recent interview has argued that there are 'no obvious forms of universality which can replace the notion of identity.'[2] In this respect, how can one deal a

A modified version of a paper presented at a national seminar on 'Minorities and the Margins: Colonial Encounter and Post-Colonial Discourses', Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, February 2011.

Vol. 40 / Nos. 07–08 / July–August 2012

particularist identity question like that of the Muslim question in contemporary India? Secondly, how should one define contemporary India? Can it be defined in terms of a time period from a particular date onwards, or within a larger structural problematic, which signifies a radical break, a kind of watershed that clearly marks a distinct departure from the 'past' and indeed identifies with our contemporary present. I would identify the 'neoliberal dispensation' in India as marker of 'contemporary India', which can be clearly distinguishable from the pre-neoliberal phase of Indian history and politics. In a post-colonial period, the major politico-ideological currents that precedes the making of contemporary neoliberal India are the Nehruvian model of State-capitalism, secularism[3] and the Congress system in 1950s and 1960s,[4] the fragmentation of the Congress system with a gradual transition to regionalism from late 1960s till mid-1980s and subsequently the rise of Mandir, Mandal and Market from late 1980s onwards: symbolically expressing the politics of majoritarian communalism, the politics of backward and lower castes and the policies of neoliberal economic reforms.[5]

The neoliberal policy regime[6] in contemporary India has been a watershed from the earlier Nehruvian vision of nation building, which adopted some welfarist principles in economic policies and Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) in the realm of foreign policy. By contrast, the neoliberal regime in India initiated the processes of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation with market led economic policies, deregulation of the economy for foreign investments, retreat of the State from major economic activities[7] and greater alignment with United States in foreign policy.[8] Roughly from 1990s onwards, the neoliberal policy regime in India was characterised by disinvestment of the public sector, inadequate public expenditure in social sectors and increasing tendencies to commercialise health and higher education sectors, withdrawal of subsidies from agriculture, collapse of the public distribution system[9] and increasing private corporate control over natural resources including large scale land acquisition by the entente of State and big private capital, often followed by either forced displacement of existing inhabitants or resistance by them.[10] Neoliberal phenomena in India[11] is characterised with agrarian crisis, poverty, inequality and unemployment along with further worsening of the living conditions of marginalised and excluded groups of poor people constituting of working classes and the peasantry.[12]

In such a neoliberal context, this paper seeks to answer whether 'community identity' of Muslims in contemporary India can be politically articulated in a struggle to transform 'group identity'/'communal identity' to a secular identification of the Muslims along the lines of 'socio-economic deprivation' and 'progressive politics'. The neglect of class issues involved in 'communal' questions is a serious weakness in current scholarship. This paper tries to venture out a theoretical possibility of making a link between 'class issues' and 'community identity' particularly with relation to Indian

Muslims. First, the paper asks a couple of questions: can the Muslim identity be also seen from the perspective of (under)class identity? And if one can argue a case for an overlap of Muslim identity with an *identity* of one of India's poorest sections, or if the Indian Muslims can be empirically identified as a deprived socio-economic group, then why the class dimensions or the issues of socio-economic deprivation of Indian Muslims has not been prominently articulated in the post-colonial political discourses? In this regard, the question of (Muslim) *identity* as a form of *particularity* needs to be located within the universal category of the *people.*

The term 'people' is used here as a theoretical concept and can be differentiated from the usual meaning in the dominant political discourses that equate it with the 'population' as a whole. The political discourses in India generally equate 'people' with the notion of 'population'. That is why, a special category of 'common people' (*aam aadmi* or *janata*) within the political discourses in India is designated for deprived and disadvantaged citizens. In this paper, I have used 'people' in the Laclauian sense of the term equating with 'plebs' or 'underprivileged'. As Laclau incisively points out, 'traditional terminology – which has been translated into common language – makes this difference clear: the people can be conceived as *populus*, the body of all citizens; or as *plebs*, the underprivileged.'[13] Laclau's further clarification regarding 'people' conceptually differs from the usual meaning in the dominant political discourses: 'in order to be the "people"...we need a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus* – that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community.'[14] This is because those sections of the population who are responsible for the underprivileged conditions of the *plebs* cannot be the legitimate part of the same community ('people' in this case) since the *plebs* are in an antagonistic relationship with a frontier made up by the rest of the population which are part of the power bloc and thus the chasm between them is 'irretrievable.'[15] In this respect, I would argue that today, the Indian people is primarily comprised of those marginalised and excluded groups who have not benefited from the current neoliberal regime. Thus, Indian people is constituted by varied marginalised sections of Indian population, primarily – workers, peasants, dalits, tribals, Muslims and women. With such a conceptual framework in mind, let us now discuss the issue of Muslim question in India, which is nonetheless a particularist *identity* question, but can be situated within the universalist concept of the (Indian) *people.*

Debating the Muslim Question in India: Religious minority or deprived group?

There is a need to seriously introspect our perception about the profile of an 'Indian Muslim' and whether the community is as heterogeneous in socio-economic terms as we want to believe. In terms of education, poverty, income and employment statistics, the Indian Muslims are comparably

more deprived than other religious communities along with dalits and tribals as observed by Sachar Report.[16] Before the Sachar Report, a number of studies[17] have already shown that Indian Muslims are a socio-economically and educationally 'backward community'. In recent past, a central government appointed expert committee report has shown that Muslims along with dalits and tribals are the poorest communities in India and the poverty has remained consistently high among the Muslims during the phase of neoliberal economic reforms.[18] According to the above report, 84.5 per cent of Indian Muslim households spend not more than Rs. 20 per day and Rs. 609 per month and belongs to 'extremely poor', 'poor', 'marginal' and 'vulnerable' sections of the Indian population. If we also take into account of the 'middle income' group as per the parameters set up by the above report, then 13.3 per cent of Indian Muslim households only spend Rs. 1098 per month or Rs. 37 as daily per capita consumption expenditure (DPCE) which is actually low given the high persistence of inflation in the economy. Only 2.2 per cent of Indian Muslims who are regarded as high income category by the report spends Rs. 2,776 per month or Rs. 93 per day.[19] Now given this above mentioned statistics, which claims that only a meagre 2.2 per cent of Indian Muslims belong to high income category, it is difficult to argue that Indian Muslims are a heterogeneous community in economic terms. The above report also shows that Muslims are at the bottom two layers along with SC/STs with high incidence of poverty and vulnerability and high concentration among unorganised sector workers.[20] Today, Indian Muslims neither own the major means of production nor control the policy making decisions of the State. Rarely do we find the presence of big capital and big landlords among the Muslim community in contemporary India.

The partition led to the migration of Muslim elites to the then West and East Pakistan leaving behind majority of poor Indian Muslims. The State-enforced abolition of *zamindari* in 1952 obliterated even the miniscule number of *ashraf* elites: the absentee landowning class formed by few traditional aristocratic Muslim families. Only a minority among the educated landed elite could remain near the seats of power, obtained employment and new status, often by successful control over their land through renting and letting. Thus, even a cursory glance at the living conditions of the Muslim community in India unravels the social fact that the Muslims are a socio-economically marginalised community. The Muslim political elite are almost negligible, as Muslims did not provide the economic and political leadership in the national mainstream. Iqbal A. Ansari in his study has clearly shown the gross under-representation of Muslims in various legislatures of the states and at the centre.[21]

A survey of available data and literature on Indian Muslims amply states that the community is not only poor but also doubly marginalised. By closely surveying the Sachar Report, one can argue that a general profile of an Indian Muslim is neither characterised with that of a regular salaried white

or blue collar personnel nor a red coloured trade unionist under the banner of *organised proletariat.* Rather its profile is more identified with that of an unorganised labour in the informal sector. As unorganised and informal sector labour force, it is also denied of several rights that an 'organised labour' gets. In this context, a majority of the Muslim population due to its limited base in the country's upper-middle and middle classes (comprised of public and private sector officials, professionals etc.) in addition, a corresponding absence in the organised working population makes it the 'other' within the country's working population itself. Therefore, if the organised working class constitutes the periphery of the society, the major sections of Indian Muslims constitute a periphery within a periphery.[22]

In this respect, majority of the Indian Muslims are lower and lower-middle classes with a *difference.* The socio-economic background of Indian Muslims disables them of getting certain rights and benefits due to their unorganised status as casual workers or among the small and landless peasants in some parts of rural India or as a self-employed group in both urban and rural sectors, whereas their educational backwardness hinders them of upward social mobility in getting access to certain infrastructural benefits from the State. This form of dual hindrances is again supplemented by the communal problem, which makes things worse for the Indian Muslims. Therefore, Indian Muslims today is an excluded community: exclusion from mainstream general education and employment due to lack of affirmative action and absence of an effective governmental policy for them. All these only make us to think that the Muslim question in India can be addressed from a vantage point of socio-economic deprivation albeit with some peculiarities and specificities of its own.

Although Muslims are occupationally differentiated but clearly, an overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims are poor. Obviously, there are few exceptions like Muslim film stars and sports personalities or a business tycoon like Azim Premji who belong to the upper class elite Indian Muslims. But they hardly don a 'Muslim identity'; rather they don a 'celebrity identity' where the nation celebrates them in an age of image and media industry. Surely, in an overall analysis, as informed by several government reports and academic literature, one hardly can argue that Indian Muslims constitute a significant section of India's ruling classes or even forms a significant section of middle classes. Thus, Indian Muslims are *heterogeneous* in terms of language, culture and regional affiliations but are relatively *homogenous* by the parameters of socio-economic profile (largely concentrated in informal sector workforce), educational backwardness and common faith in Islamic religion.

In post-colonial India, when the socio-economic issues of Indian Muslims need serious attention, often, the Muslim question has been traditionally caught up in and around the debates on secularism and communalism. Researchers have pointed out that 'an important factor

contributing to the nature of the current debate on minority rights is the fact that the Indian State has fallen short of recognising and actively addressing the issue of the socio-economic rights of Muslims.'[23] Therefore, today, can we argue the Muslim question in India from a class perspective given the overall socio-economic and political marginalisation, deprivation and backwardness of Indian Muslims?[24] Can we link up the category of 'community' and 'class' with specific regard to Indian Muslims as Fanon did between race and class in the African context?[25] The articulation of class dimensions in addressing the Muslim question in India has been so far missing within political cum policy debates. Largely, the Muslim question in India has been trapped into the questions of *identity* and *security* and less attention is paid on the aspect of *equity* by the dominant governmental discourse of policymaking. While all the aspects of *identity*, *security* and *equity* of the Muslims are interlinked, the historical experience of the post-colonial Indian state has been that of addressing the Muslim question within the ambit of a binary opposition of secular/communal divide. The issues of *identity* and *security*, characterising the secular-communal debates and autonomy of distinct religio-cultural rights (Muslim Personal Law, minority institutions etc.) had been the major political discourses, and rarely do we find the questions of socio-economic deprivation and political marginality of Indian Muslims influencing the contours of political debates in the last six decades of post-colonial India.

Even within progressive academia, the class issues, related to the social mobility of Indian Muslims have often been unheard. Despite its rigorous and brilliant endeavour, both the Subaltern Studies collective and Marxist scholars, generally regarded as the academic voice of the 'marginalised' and 'oppressed' have somehow overlooked the class aspects of the Muslim question in India. Instead, they (re)constructed theories and commentaries on communalism and secularism, in order to carry forward the agenda of secular project of the Indian State in tackling the issues related to the rights of Indian Muslims. This deadlock over the Muslim question over communal/secular discourses has to be broken in order to carve out a space for a wider perception about both politics of social justice on one hand and distributive justice on the other in the case of Indian Muslims. In this respect, the Muslim question might be comprehensively understood if the dominant discourse of a secular/communal binary is substantiated by a conscious and deliberate transition within academic and policymaking debates from simple communal/secular discourses to more discussions on class dimensions related to the everyday livelihood questions of Indian Muslims. This is however, not to suggest that one should altogether discard the communal/secular issues but only complement those with class issues of Indian Muslims in terms of both theoretical premise and practical policy interventions in addressing the socio-economic backwardness of India's largest religious minority. This is precisely because the class dimensions of

Indian Muslims are in itself *secular* and thus needs to be addressed by a secular State.

The Muslim question in India can be also seen with the specific dynamics of its own, particularly the aspects of discrimination and exclusion along with a certain sense of minority complex within the community that makes it so different and yet so special within the discourse on marginality. Now, if Muslims are an economically and educationally backward community, if the Indian Muslim is a deprived, marginalised, disempowered and excluded community, then why the Muslim question has not been significantly dealt beyond secular-communal debates in the post-colonial political discourses? If the socio-economic backwardness, political marginalisation and poverty among the Muslims are an empirical reality, then why has it not produced a similar discursive terrain in the political realm? In this respect, one can argue that construction of a political discourse is the result of *presence* or *absence* of a certain kind of political articulation. In the post-colonial political discourses, since the Muslim question has not been politically articulated in class terms, an absence of a dominant class-centric approach in dealing with the *community question* has culminated to this situation of a *non-availability* of a political discourse that can articulate the equity issues of Indian Muslims along class lines. The *lack* of a progressive Muslim leadership, the limits of secularist leadership and the failure of the Left in understanding the connectivity of Muslim community and its basic class issues are major factors behind the absence of a political discourse that could have articulated the Muslim question in India from a class perspective. In other words, the political leadership failed to understand the Muslim question from a class perspective and from the viewpoint of political under-representation, with equity concerns in all spheres of life as a priority, in handling the problems of Indian Muslims.

In this respect, the problem of approaching the Muslim question from a class perspective is related to *identity construction* and *identification* as a process of making an identity of a community. Laclau's observation on the issue of constructing an identity with the process of *identification* might be an incisive way into looking at formation of identities.

As Laclau observes:

> (A)ny social identity would necessarily entail, as one of its dimensions, construction, and not simply recognition. The key term for understanding this process of construction is the psychoanalytic category of *identification*, with its explicit assertion of a lack at the root of any identity: one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity.[26]

The above observation of Laclau might serve our purpose in understanding the problem of *Muslim identity* construction as a result of *identification* with 'Muslim community' (religio-cultural identity) and not as a

'deprived disempowered group' (a secular identity based on socio-political and economic factors) both by the inside agency (Muslims themselves) and outsiders (the non-Muslims). This process of *identification* with a particular identity of community, religion, social group etc. is important for the formation and construction of a collective identity of a group – Indian Muslims. In other words, whether Muslim and non-Muslim communities *identify* Indian Muslims simply as a religious group or a minority community (i.e. a social group but based on numerical identity) or a socially, educationally and economically *backward* group? Individuals generally assert and ascertain a particular identity among several choices since all individuals have multiple identities. Nevertheless, which identity an individual would chose or *identify* depends more on the specific circumstances and contexts in which an individual is located. Furthermore, the *identification* with a particular identity is also a function of the *availability of dominant discourses* that shape the image and decisions of an individual and by this logic, it leads to the making up of a community as well. There is scarcely any doubt that the dominant discourses both within and outside the Muslim community see 'Muslims' *only* as a distinct religio-cultural community and nothing more. Even in popular culture, Muslims have been designated and portrayed as a distinct religious minority group where Bollywood cinema has highlighted more on mythical constructions, vilifications and stereotypical imaging without reflecting the class dimensions and the underclass identity of Indian Muslims.[27] But how can we transform this one dimensional image/category of only viewing Muslims as a *particular* religio-cultural community with simply a minority status *to* an identity of a poor, marginalised, deprived, excluded and backward community? Why Muslims cannot say that they are not simply Muslims but 'poor'? Why non-Muslims cannot *identify* Muslims as a deprived and *backward* community?

In the *available* political discourses, unlike Muslims, dalits and tribals and even to some extent, women are more *identified* as 'socio-economically deprived'/'backward groups'/'disadvantaged sections'/'weaker sections'. This is true because the leadership among the dalits, tribals and women besides the secular political leadership and the Left have so far tried to understand and address the issues of dalits, tribals and women around the discourses of marginality, oppression, exploitation, deprivation, discrimination, exclusion etc. But in the case of Muslims, only secular/communal debates have been prominent as pointed out earlier, instead of looking at the issue from a class perspective. Moreover, progressive political articulation in making an equivalential chain with other struggles against social oppression, working class and peasant movements and issues that affect Muslims have so far been missing in the post-colonial political discourses in general and Leftwing politico-ideological discourses in particular. There was only one statement by ex-chief minister of West Bengal and Politburo member of India's largest communist party in the recent past, that the 'Minority question has to be

addressed from a class perspective',[28] but there is still nothing concrete theoretical analysis of the Muslim question inside Leftwing political parties nor among the progressive academics. In this respect, the Left not only needs to take account of the representational aspects of the marginalised sections into its various organisational layers, but at the same time it also needs to uphold the democratic demands of the marginalised groups like Muslims, dalits, tribals and women while making them part of the broader Leftwing political struggle against neoliberalism. To do such a task, one needs to first analyse the prominent politico-ideological discourses in neoliberal India, within which both the Muslim question and Leftwing politics are located.

Politico-Ideological Discourses in Neoliberal India

Contemporary India under neoliberal dispensation can be broadly characterised with three distinct politico-ideological terrains. In the first place, we notice the hegemonic formation of ruling politico-ideological strand of neoliberal consensus constituting the 'power bloc' in India. The political articulation in favour of neoliberalism in contemporary India can be described as *politics of status-quo* which prefers only a change in political parties in governing the country but is guided by the neoliberal consensus as the dominant policy programme. The Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and several regional political parties are the representatives of this neoliberal consensus. The political parties in the neoliberal camp generally contest with each other over the issue of a correct implementation of neoliberal policies and the political fight is often marked with the debate of how able, one party is over another, in implementing a better neoliberal policy.

Secondly, we can notice a *politics of particularism* with narrow sectarian approach primarily claiming certain democratic demands for only a selective group or community. This politics is aptly expressed among the excluded groups although it is more organised in the case of dalits. The *politics of particularism* is also a celebration of a single marginalised identity group without having an agenda of radical social transformation, particularly in fundamentally altering the existing relations of production. It tries to attack/critique the status-quo from outside but at times, also collaborates with it. Thus, politics of particularism in India is of vacillating nature, shifting from opposing and aligning with the hegemonic formation of neoliberal consensus and its political representatives – the INC, BJP and other regional parties. In India, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is the most organised and articulate representative of this kind of *politics of particularism* that has its own ambition of becoming a dominant player in Indian politics without having an agenda of fundamental restructuration of society, economy and polity but rather with some tokenism and symbolism like a dalit head of the state. Later, in this paper, I will try to trace out a politics of *Muslim particularism* which is nonetheless unorganised and split into

certain political fractions and would also like to expose the limits of such a politics of particularism among Indian Muslims.

Thirdly, Indian politics always had a Leftwing space which can be called as a counter-hegemonic politico-ideological terrain. This Leftwing political articulation is currently being marginalised in the Parliament and state legislatures after the electoral debacle of the mainstream Left forces in their own citadels coupled with increasing fragmentation and conflict among the non-mainstream Left groups – often tactically facilitating the anti-Left forces, intending to decimate those communists who think 'parliament can be a site of class-struggle'. Now, it is also interesting to note that all these three varieties of politico-ideological articulations have its own focal concerns: the neoliberal consensus is interested in serving the big capital, the politics of particularism has priority for a single community and Left politics is instinctually focused on the working class as a 'universal emancipatory class', along with the 'vanguard party' almost politically articulated as a 'messiah'.

Beyond the three politico-ideological discourses that have been discussed above, one can also notice a much marginalised discourse of localised forms of resistance in 'new social movements' but facing a 'crisis of representation' and thus becomes an unarticulated voice in the political mainstream in an age of neoliberal consensus.[29] But what constitutes the politico-ideological articulations among Indian Muslims within the wider political spectrum of politico-ideological discourses in neoliberal India that we have just now discussed? This is the subject of enquiry in the next subsection of this paper.

Politico-Ideological Articulations among Indian Muslims

Before partition, barring few exceptions, like a small section of Leftwing Muslims associated with the formative stages of Communist Party of India and Leftwing cultural fronts like Progressive Writer's Movement and Indian People's Theatre Association during pre-independence period,[30] progressive Leftwing political discourse historically, was never dominant among Indian Muslims. However, it should be remembered that although Indian Muslims never had a *dominant* progressive political articulation within the community throughout post-colonial India's political history, yet Indian Muslims have always favoured secular political formations while distancing from the communal political forces of both majoritarian and minority variety. But lately, the limits of secularism in an Indian context seem to be exposing its weaknesses in ensuring socio-economic and political justice for Muslims. The concurrence of communal riots with Muslims being the greatest victims and then the denial of justice to them as the political system fails to punish the riot criminals due to non-implementation of officially appointed investigation committee reports like Sri Krishna Commission Report regarding Mumbai riots of 1992-93 or clean chit given to Narendra

Modi on his involvement in State sponsored Gujarat genocide in 2002 by Nanavati Commission Report is now a political reality in India.

The problem of communalism is only appended with aggressive neoliberalism that worsens the socio-economic conditions of an overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims by affecting their daily livelihoods. As a result of peculiar and complex political circumstances, where an overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims are situated only as alienated victims of the political system, the *presence* of an Islamist political articulation as an assertive political choice can be noticed among a section of Muslims in India. The protests against Bush's visit to India in 2006 and in the aftermath of Saddam's execution in early 2007 among Indian Muslims[31] with core mobilisations from Muslim groups with political appeals coloured with rhetorical language of Islamic symbolisms are only glimpses of an Islamic political articulation among Indian Muslims. Such an Islamic political articulation might take an organised form in the future if the grievances of communal discrimination and democratic demands of the community are not adequately and regularly fulfilled by the political system of secular India. It should be borne in mind that a significant section of Indian Muslims identify with the position of what Akeel Bilgrami has termed 'moderate Muslims' in the epigraph of this paper. The 'moderate Muslims' have soft corner for the appeal of Islamic political articulations, thus creating the possibility of Islamism as an *available* political discourse among Indian Muslims. This Islamist political discourse might dominate future political articulations of Indian Muslims if the existing neoliberal status-quo is unable to fulfil several democratic demands of the community in the absence of a credible Leftwing political leadership and progressive political articulation within the Muslim minorities.

In a neoliberal policy regime, we can note three strands of political leadership among Indian Muslims, corroborated with three distinct politico-ideological articulations within the community. *The first group is the token representation of Muslim leadership in big national political parties like Congress, BJP and those regional parties who run political affairs with an agenda of neoliberal consensus.* In most cases, this political leadership among Muslims is from secular political parties than the communal BJP although BJP also has some minority faces including members of parliament and even ministers during the BJP led NDA government at the centre during 1998-2004. Political leadership emerging out of such a collaborationist group with neoliberalism is the representative of power bloc and its political articulation can be called as *power bloc articulation* serving the interests of neoliberal status quo. This is the dominant political leadership both within and outside the Muslim community.

The second group has an agenda of 'Muslim particularism' with only community specific demands. The 'politics of Muslim particularism' in India is generally carried out via democratic means like participating in elections,

agitations, demonstrations, rallies, protest meetings etc. This group comprises of some political parties like Muslim League, AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimin), United Democratic Front of Assam and some core Islamic organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, Jamiat-Ulema-I-Hind and likeminded small groups like All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat who often act as pressure groups with core conservative Islamic agenda. Historically, the politics of *Muslim particularism* has been relatively more vocal in terms of articulating sectarian interests for its constituency along identity and emotive issues than demanding the basic livelihood questions of education and employment from the State. It was only after the official publication of the Sachar Report in late 2006 that some sections of the above mentioned Muslim pressure groups have tried to take up the issues of education and employment for the Indian Muslims. Otherwise, *politics of Muslim particularism* in the recent past was organised around censorship debates of banning the texts of controversial writers on the grounds of religious blasphemy, or sticking to the demand for applying Shariah law in cases of denying alimony to divorced women like the Shah Bano case, status of minority institutions, or opposing the issue of legalising homosexuality.

The politics of Muslim particularism among a small section of Indian Muslims are nonetheless fringe elements but it has the potentiality of creating an impact over the political discourses with their sensationalism and anti-establishment rhetoric to find its niche audience among a section of Muslim community after each terrorist attacks corresponded with diabolic rightwing *Hindutva* assertion raising alarm over 'Islamic terrorism', vilifying and targeting the entire Muslim community as 'anti-national'. On the other hand, vast sections of Indian Muslims feel alienated by the overwhelming suspicion towards them as potential 'terrorists'. In this case, the political strategy of terrorism which is mostly backed and funded by outside agencies like Islamist extremists based in neighbouring countries has no concrete demands unlike the first group of *Muslim particularists* which raises community specific demands related to various issues of socio-religious and political importance for Indian Muslims through democratic means. The terrorists often have abstract justifications and represent a 'politics of revenge and hatred' with no clear objective of upliftment of socio-economic conditions or betterment of livelihood prospects for Indian Muslims. Since, the *politics of Muslim particularism* is often enmeshed into theological discourses it can be called as *theo-political articulations* among Indian Muslims.

We can further call the politics of Muslim particularism as anti-hegemonic and not counter-hegemonic to neoliberal consensus since the author would argue that anti-hegemonic politics only articulates a politics of resistance/opposition/challenge/critique to an existing hegemonic order while counter-hegemonic politics represents a 'politics of alternative/trans-

formation'. The politics of particularism is a marginal political discourse in India in general and among Indian Muslims in particular. This politics of 'Muslim particularism' often celebrates the *excluded* nature of its Muslim constituents while critiquing the power bloc. It can be best described as a *politics of exclusion* which wants to *include* itself in the power bloc by attacking it from outside without having an agenda of 'social revolution' in the Marxist sense of the term. This kind of politics thus seeks to be a part of the power bloc with some cosmetic changes in the political system and without fundamentally terminating the exploitative and oppressive nature of neoliberal capitalism. It generally tries to negotiate with the 'politics of the power bloc'. This politico-ideological position may be called as *politics of altered status-quo* (representing a mirror image of status-quo) that vacillates between collaboration and opposition to the power-bloc. Now, 'a politics of pure particularism is self defeating'[32] since it cannot ensemble 'other' particularist demands and therefore unable to articulate a Universalist political project of emancipation.

Thus, ideologically, the Marxist concept of social revolution and its Universalist political project of transcending the current phase of (neoliberal) capitalism with its normative vision of a *post-capitalist just socialist order* would be missing in such a political project of particularism. However, sections among the *Muslim particulasrists* can be also identified with Islamism that has an appeal for a section of Indian Muslims with its rhetoric for 'justice' and 'equality'. This is precisely because of a lack of progressive political articulation both inside and outside the Muslim community that could have alienated a section of Muslims from Islamist politics while providing an alternative political articulation like offering a credible Leftwing political discourse. Muslims in India have no other way but to fight like other oppressed people but since they *lack* a progressive political articulation, a theo-political articulation serves that purpose in terms of generating an anti-establishment protest discourse. The *available* political language provided by Islamist ideology prominently expressed by groups like Jamaat-e-Islami Hind against neoliberalism, imperialism and communalism have been adopted by a *section* of Muslims as a tool of protest in the midst of a political void due to an absence of a prominent progressive leadership among the Muslim community.

Thirdly, there are possibilities of constructing *progressive political articulations* among Indian Muslims. The politics of Leftwing counter-hegemony which is also *inclusive* of the livelihood issues of Indian Muslims is currently weak in India. That is to say, a Leftwing political agenda which also incorporates the democratic demands of socio-economic and political nature of the Muslim community apart from its core commitments of anti-imperialism, anti-communalism and socialist ideals is currently not prominent enough in India. Historically, the Leftwing political articulation among Indian Muslims and *serious engagement* with Muslim issues within

the Left were missing in the post-colonial political discourses in India. In other words, the 'Left' within the 'Muslim community' and the 'Muslim question' within the 'Left', is a marginalised political discourse.

The progressive political discourses have to be constructed by secular-democratic, liberal and progressive sections among Indian Muslims on one hand and initiatives of Leftwing politics on the other in trying to address various problems of Muslim minorities. The Indian Left can only possibly construct a counter-hegemonic Universalist political project by rallying the marginalised groups like dalits, tribals, women and Muslims besides the core support base of the Left: workers and peasants. The dual and combined effort of progressive Muslims and the Left to articulate progressive democratic demands before the political system is thus a necessary political task in contemporary India. Today, we can notice a crisis of progressive political leadership among the Muslims in India which could articulate democratic demands of the community besides making a broader popular appeal of changing the neoliberal status-quo. The liberal-secular Muslims have been silent in terms of consistent intervention in politics in general. One hardly listen them in public talking about a progressive politics that would organise Muslims around class issues against neoliberalism or at least that would try to address the socio-economic concerns of the community. If the democratic demands of a community lose its class character and if the secular politics of the mainstream political parties also do not address the socio-economic and political concerns of the Muslim minorities, then the conditions of possibility for an Islamist political articulation can be certainly witnessed among a section of Indian Muslims.

As Laclau argues:

> (M)ere availability is on occasion enough to ensure the victory of a particular discourse...The discourse of a 'new order' is often accepted by several sectors, not because they particularly like its content but because it is the discourse of *an* order, of something that is presented as a credible alternative to a crisis and a generalised dislocation. This does not mean, of course, that *any* discourse putting itself forward...will be accepted. The acceptance of a discourse depends on its credibility, and this will not be granted if its proposals clash with the basic principles informing the organisation of a group.'[33]

The simultaneous *availability* of a conservative-Islamist political articulation and *unavailability* of a progressive political articulation along with an absence of progressive Leftwing political leadership among Indian Muslims have resulted into the presence of an Islamist audience among a *section* of Muslims in India. This is not to say that Indian Muslims have been largely mobilised by the Islamist forces. Surely, an overwhelming majority of Muslims in India neither support majoritarianism nor minority communalism nor Islamism. But the *conditions of possibilities* for Islamist

political articulations as a prominent political discourse among Indian Muslims can become a reality if democratic demands of the community are not meted regularly by the political system.

After identifying the broad politico-ideological articulations among Indian Muslims, let us now venture out the essential crux of the debate on affirmative action for Indian Muslims with which both politics of Muslim particularism and the neoliberal status-quo can play around without a fundamental and radical transformation of the present neoliberal policy regime.

Indian Muslims and the Limits of Affirmative Action under Neoliberal Regime

Researchers have pointed out that historically, the rights of religious minorities have been ignored by India's constitutional makers, which was amply evident from the Constituent Assembly debates.[34]

> As argued by commentators on minority rights that: (t)here was no principled defence in the nationalist vocabulary for safeguards in the case of religious minorities. This marked a crucial shift from the colonial framework where the entitlement of minority groups to special representation and other forms of safeguards had been an established principle. The illegitimacy of safeguards for religious minorities within a broadly shared normative vocabulary was a crucial factor that facilitated their abolition during constitution making.[35]

Therefore, the policy of affirmative action for religious minorities with 'special representation' in fields of politics, education and employment in colonial administrative system was replaced with negation of affirmative action policy for religious minorities in post-colonial India. As a result, little benefits that the Indian Muslims were getting out of 'special representation' had been denied during successive post-colonial regimes. Instead, the focus on policy of affirmative action in the name of 'positive discrimination' shifted towards other excluded groups like Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, the traces of colonial policies of special affirmative action for religious minorities can be still found at least in three southern states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu where the majority of Muslims in these states belong to OBCs and hence get a special quota within the OBC reservation.[36]

Even in neoliberal India, when the public sector is shrinking, the political system has often addressed the issues of marginality, exclusion, deprivation and backwardness of dalits, tribals, OBCs and women through the mechanisms of varied forms of affirmative action with core focus on *reservation* in education and jobs. In the case of Muslims too, *affirmative action* is often repeated within policy debates in neoliberal India. The evidence of such a policy of affirmative action towards Muslims is visible in

the recommendations of Sachar Committee Report and Ranganath Mishra Commission Report: the most comprehensive factual analysis of Indian Muslims so far done by government appointed committees after six decades of independence. Although the Sachar Report did not take into account the land question among Muslims, the (under)representation of Muslim political leadership in various political institutions besides missing out specific problems of Muslim women,[37] it made concrete policy recommendations of affirmative action for Indian Muslims. Secondly, though Sachar Committee made a profiling of Muslim occupational groups, it has effectively reduced the Muslim question into a 'caste problem' by dividing the community into three groups of 'Ashrafs' (Muslim Upper Castes), 'Ajlafs' (Muslim OBCs) and 'Arzals' (Muslim Untouchables, SCs/STs) while prescribing 'different types of affirmative action.'[38]

Both Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra Commission Report did not specifically mention the impact of neoliberal regime on Indian Muslims although we know from the same reports that livelihood conditions of Muslims along with dalits and tribals have been the worst during the phase of neoliberal economic reforms. Wholehearted acceptance of such negative impacts of neoliberalism on several excluded and marginalized groups by the government appointed committees would mean *recognition* of an *antagonistic frontier* along with *acknowledgement* of an *adversary* of the 'people', namely the neoliberal regime, currently enjoying hegemony in governmental affairs of the country. However, acknowledgment of socio-economic backwardness and communal discrimination faced by Indian Muslims in the Sachar Report and Mishra Commission Report can open up the *conditions of possibilities* for a progressive political articulation in near future that can put forward a series of demands to resolve the problems of deprivation, discrimination and exclusion of Muslim minorities in India. In this context, a *politics of social justice* with core democratic demands for affirmative action and representation needs to be complemented with a *politics of distributive justice* that concerns with equity. Thus, in order to address the Muslim question in India, a progressive politics needs to articulate the 'issues of both "redistribution" and "recognition".'[39]

In India, one must note that the policy of affirmative action including reservation is only a *relief* rather than a *transformative change* in the affairs of excluded and marginalised groups like dalits, tribals, OBCs, women and Muslims. The *normative position* of a progressive politics cannot afford to argue against the policy of affirmative action. Rather, it can only evoke the *limits* of affirmative action that perfectly gels with the negotiated terms of the existing political system. Thus, affirmative action can benefit, empower and give relief to certain sections of the population but until and unless an alternative society is not built around the normative ideals of equality and distributive justice, the *emancipation* of the oppressed, exploited, marginalised and excluded would only be restricted to utopia. Even if

affirmative actions continue, the simultaneous persistence of neoliberal regime in India would cause havoc for the 'people'.

The nature of contemporary neoliberalism in India marked by job-loss and jobless growth trajectory along with income inequality and forced displacement inexorably worsens the living conditions of the Indian people including an overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims. Therefore, any fundamental resolution of the socio-economic deprivation of any particularist marginalised identity group like Muslims, dalits, tribals, women etc., cannot just rely on social justice politics that would argue the case for such groups in and around affirmative action and reservation. But in order to address the socio-economic backwardness of these marginalised groups, one has to think about the question of distributive justice in a possible post-neoliberal order.

Coming back to the question of democratic demands of particular identity groups, it should be remembered that fighting for mere *particularist demands* for narrow-sectarian interests of any single community is not going to help in changing the current status-quo of neoliberal dispensation. Nor such a politics of particularism would fundamentally resolve the socio-economic problems of marginalized groups. Therefore, the democratic demands of Indian Muslims should ideally be supplemented with an agenda of making an equivalential relation with other democratic demands of dalits, tribals, women, working class, peasantry etc. and transform those aggregated demands to popular demand of challenging the current political cum policy regime of neoliberalism. The accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands of various sectors of population needs to be politically articulated in the form of a much greater popular demand for social transformation so that the neoliberal regime itself becomes evidently identified as the root cause of most pressing problems for the Indian people. This is why the specific politics of *particularist demands* for and around affirmative action, and the fulfillment of the same are nothing short of a politics of *appropriation* and *accommodation* by the power bloc in order to close down the possibility of a politics of radical alternative that seeks to alter the power relations of the prevalent society in favour of the 'people'. In articulating *democratic demands* by different excluded and marginalized sections of the population, namely dalits, tribals, women and Muslims and the *fulfillment of those demands in differential manner or in isolation* by the neoliberal power bloc makes the construction of an equivalential chain of various demands and groups difficult.

Laclau observes that 'democratic demands' can be 'accommodated within an expanding hegemonic formation' whereas 'popular demands present a challenge to the hegemonic formation'.[40] In India, the policy of affirmative action is such an accomodationist strategy of the power bloc to absorb the democratic demands of various particularist groups in differential way, one isolated from the other because the unfulfilment of such

democratic demands could open up the possibility of transforming those very democratic demands into popular ones with the help of an equivalential articulation with other democratic demands of various particularist groups that together can challenge the hegemony of contemporary neoliberal regime. Much of Indian politics has been what Laclau would call the transformation from 'requests to claims' by various particular political actors and the fulfilment of several democratic demands by the power bloc in order to sustain the status-quo on the one hand, and the hindrances to the transformation of democratic demands to popular ones by the power bloc on the other.[41] It is in this context that the politics and policy of affirmative action becomes intimately connected to the politics of status-quo while accommodating/absorbing the democratic demands of various particularist groups like dalits, tribals, women and Muslims. As a result of the lack of an equivalential chain among the above mentioned marginalised and excluded groups and the absence of an equivalential chain in their articulation of demands, the construction of the 'people' and its fight against the antagonistic frontier of neoliberal regime in India also takes a back seat.[42] In India, more often than not, various excluded groups only become content with sops like affirmative action while the neoliberal status quo gets secured without greater challenge from a popular demand of transforming the system. In such a situation, the hegemony of neoliberal regime gets sustained and the counter-hegemonic politics of the 'people' becomes weaker in offering a simultaneous politics of resistance and social transformation.

Muslim Question and the Indian Left

We can possibly argue that in the past, if the Left would have understood the Muslim question from a class perspective besides secular-communal debates, then a theo-political articulation would have been relatively more marginalised among a *section* of Muslim community. Since, Indian Muslims lack a progressive political leadership, it is the historic task of the Left to provide that political leadership in directly addressing socio-economic issues of the Muslim community. If class agenda is the cornerstone of Marxist politics then in the present context, a future of Marxist politics cannot be imagined without addressing the class aspects of marginalised groups. As previously noted, a significant number of Muslims did participate in huge protest demonstrations against the visit of American President, George W. Bush in India and on the occasion of former Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein's execution. But in several other issues like fuel price hike, inflation, Indo-US nuclear deal, and in various forms of protests against neoliberal economic policies organised by the Indian Left, we cannot see much enthusiasm from the Muslim groups. That is to say, the anti-imperialist thrust of several Muslim groups in India has more to do with 'community identification' like the American repression against Muslim *Ummah* but it fails to channelise that resentment against the imperialist

system as a whole, which is the root cause of several socio-economic problems that a developing country like India and its *people* including the Muslims are facing. Therefore, Muslim groups in India although protest against military interventions of United States in several Muslim countries, but it inadequately understands imperialism as a system of economic plunder and its everyday economic impact. This is precisely because of the lack of political engagement of Indian Muslims with the Left movement and vice-versa. The inadequate political participation of Indian Muslims in the Left movement[43] in the context of an aggressive neoliberal regime, worsening the socio-economic conditions of marginalized groups like Muslims is indeed perplexing. Historically the Left has inadequately addressed the 'identity questions'. But if it now starts focussing on specific class oriented demands of varied marginalised and excluded groups including Muslims, then the project of both Leftwing politics and the prospects of socio-economic development among Muslims can have a future.

In this regard, both the Left as a political group and the Indian Muslims as a 'community' need to rethink about a possible political solidarity among them while forging out an alliance based on common interests of the Left movement on one hand and the Muslims as a deprived socio-economic group on the other. Perhaps, Indian Muslims today need more Left activists like Safdar Hashmi, communist intellectuals like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer, and communist freedom fighters and leaders like Muzzaffar Ahmed and Shaukat Usmani who although, were born in Muslim families, had donned a *progressive political identity* instead of being completely identified with a 'Muslim identity'. This is important when the country is in the making for a new struggle against neoliberal capitalism. The Indian Muslims cannot shy away from its participation in the current struggle against neoliberal capitalism, a struggle that strives to ensure the victory of Indian people for a just and egalitarian society.

The Left movement also needs serious introspection about its attitude towards Muslim minorities, especially in making an in-depth analysis of contemporary Muslim situation and understanding the genesis of Indian Muslims and its peculiar minority psyche. For these initiatives, the Left has to continuously engage and dialogue with members of the Muslim community on a daily basis at a very local level of its political operation. After all, political mobilisation of the Muslims in favour of a progressive Left movement cannot be possible with just focusing on the representational politics like that of most Indian political parties, whose strategy is to woo Muslim support by promoting a selective Muslim leadership in its organisation and fielding Muslim candidates in elections. This kind of political tokenism along with an obsession with 'politics of recognition' corroborated with affirmative action cannot fundamentally address the problems that the Muslim community is facing today. Neither, a token political leadership among Muslims attached to the neoliberal power bloc can give a call to

change the status-quo, which is essentially an unjust socio-economic and political order. However, this is not to discard the issue of representation. Rather an adequate representation of Muslims in various layers of organisational structures of the Left is surely going to have a progressive impact over the general political articulation within the Muslim community. But this representational approach cannot be an end in itself. For a fundamental resolution of the socio-economic and political problems of various marginalised groups including the Muslim minorities, and for an effective and sustained political mobilisation from those groups, the Left has to surpass representational politics and carry forward the agenda of both social justice and distributive justice apart from defending the strategic vision of transcending the neoliberal status-quo.

In this respect, a progressive politics of the Left has to offer something positive and better to the marginalised groups than the existing political parties in India. Thus, the *political appeal of the Left movement should be constructed in such a manner that various marginalised groups, by and large could identify with that political project against the common antagonistic frontier of neoliberalism.* As Laclau points out, '[t]he presence of a frontier separating the oppressive regime from the rest of society is the very condition of the universalisation of the demands via equivalences (in Marx's words: a social sector has to become a general "crime" for the aims of society as a whole to emerge).'[14] On the other hand, Indian Muslims also need to rethink, that only by greater participation in the Left movement can the socio-economic problems of the community be addressed, precisely because of the priority of the working people that Left politics adhere to and negation of oppressive and exploitative policies of neoliberal power bloc by the Left.

The emancipation of the Indian people from the clutches of neoliberal injustices can be only possible if there is united opposition from the heterogeneous sectors of the Indian people including the overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims to transcend the contemporary phase of neoliberal capitalism for a relatively just order in a possible people's democracy. When neoliberal capitalism is facing an ongoing global crisis for some time now, it is indeed irrational for several governments in the world, not to opt for an old Keynesian model of welfare state that saved capitalism from its ruins. In this respect, the Leftist progamme of people's democracy can be an answer to the problems of contemporary neoliberalism in India. In the short run, the Leftist programme of a people's democracy in India can certainly be a possible post-neoliberal order, a kind of workable welfare state, which could be a much better version of twentieth century Welfare States in the West. When neoliberalism, as a ruling philosophy, is enjoying hegemony within the governmental discourses of policymaking in contemporary India, such a proposal is surely considered to be unwelcome by the ruling elite and their salaried spokespersons. However, the limits of neoliberal India expressed by the quotidian existence of poverty, inequality, unem-

ployment and corruption that worsens the living conditions of the Indian people only creates new opportunity for the Left to launch sustained and long term militant struggles in order to ensure the strategic political vision of people's democracy. It is with such a Universalist emancipatory project for the *people* in a *people's democracy* that the varied problems of the *particularist* identity groups can be fundamentally resolved.

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granted.' See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 125–126. However, the criteria for which Laclau uses the term *democratic demand* are of the following: (1) 'these demands are formulated *to* the system *by* an underdog of sorts – that there is an equalitarian dimension implicit in them; (2) that their very emergence presupposes some kind of exclusion or deprivation' to what Laclau calls 'deficient being'. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 125.

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42 As Laclau proclaims that 'the frustration of a series of social demands makes possible the movement from isolated democratic demands to equivalential popular ones. One first dimension of the break is that, at its root, there is the experience of a *lack*, a gap which has emerged in the harmonious continuity of the social. There is a fullness of the community which is missing. This is decisive: the construction of the 'people' will be the attempt to give a name to that absent fullness. Without this initial breakdown of something in the social order – however minimal that something could initially be – there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, 'people'. This initial experience is not only, however, an experience of lack. Lack, as we have seen, is linked to a demand which is not met. But this involves bringing into the picture the power which has not met the demand. A demand is always addressed to somebody. So from the very beginning we are confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other. Here we begin to see why the plebs ees itself as the *populus*, the part as the whole: since the fullness of the community is merely the imaginary reverse of a situation lived as *deficient being*, those who are responsible for this cannot be a legitimate part of the community; the chasm between them is irretrievable...the movement from democratic to popular demands presupposes a plurality of subject positions: demands, isolated at the beginning, emerge at different points of the social fabric and the transition to a popular subjectivity consists in establishing an equivalential bond between them.' See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 85-86.

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