Taking Muslims from Servitude to Policy Making: Need to Transform Education Strategies

Paper Presented by Mazher Hussain
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Past twenty five years have seen a phenomenal transformation in the opportunities available to Indian Muslims for higher education. Scores of education institutions offering courses in medicine, engineering, management, pharmacy and other professional fields have been started by Muslim groups enabling lakhs of Muslim youth to get professionally qualified and secure good and high paying jobs not only in India but also in the Middle East and other western countries. This has improved the socio- economic conditions of some sections of Muslims and substantially expanded the numbers of the Muslim middle class that had contracted to dismal proportions after the partition of India.

Exclusion from Policy Bodies

With more and more- and the cream of Muslim youth- rushing exclusively towards professional colleges, the percentage of Muslim students in University courses offering social sciences and humanities started declining and there are hardly any Muslim students enrolling in these courses now. Muslims constitute 41% of the nearly 80 lakh population of Hyderabad, but Osmania University located in the city on an average sees an enrollment of less than 40 to 50 Muslim students in 18 of its 22 disciplines offering humanities and social sciences with a total intake of nearly 1600 students in the post graduation courses. Most of these 40 to 50 students are getting admitted thanks to the 4% reservations for Muslims being implemented by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and may not have the required capacity and genius to make a mark in the academic field and stand out to be counted.

This is having an adverse impact on the representation of Muslims in not just administrative services like IAS and IPS but also in policy making bodies at the national, state and district levels. The best of doctors or the most accomplished of engineers may be assigned the tasks of undertaking the most complicated surgeries or constructing mega projects but will rarely be included in preparation of policies. The people who devise and formulate policies that eventually lead to the setting up of hospitals that make complicated surgeries possible or construction of mega projects realizable or even provision of education, civic or infrastructure facilities to the people do not come from the worlds of medicine or surgery but with backgrounds in social sciences or humanities.

Thus with the present strategy for education being promoted by Muslim civil society organisations and blindly adopted by the Muslim community, the community is no doubt producing large numbers of professional and technocrats who are essentially high profile, highly paid servants obeying orders and implementing policies laid down by others but are unable to become policy makers themselves.

Adverse Impact on Muslim Community in General

With little or no participation of the community in policy making bodies at national state or even district levels, most government policies that are formulated for the welfare of the poor in general, or even specifically for the Muslims themselves, turn out to be irrelevant or inappropriate for the community and do not get implemented properly.

Further, with not enough human investment in humanities and social sciences, there is very little substantive research on the actual condition of the Muslim community. Hence government policy exercises remain mostly uninformed of the extreme deprivations being faced by the community (and coupled with the general atmosphere of prejudice), formulation of policy correctives to improve the lot of Muslims remains extremely difficult. In fact, The High Court of Andhra Pradesh struck down the allocation of 5% reservations for Muslims on the grounds that there is no substantiated data to support the contention of the backwardness of Muslims. Had it not been for the government of that period that reintroduced 4% reservations for Muslims through a special Ordinance (that is again challenged in the Supreme Court of India), Muslims of Andhra Pradesh could have been totally out of the ambit of reservations and may still be thrown out by the Supreme Court if they fail to prove their backwardness on the basis of rigourous scientific evidence.

Hence with the inability to scientifically establish the deprivations being faced, the Muslim community is unable to lay claims on the resources of the state for its development and is being deprived of its basic citizenship rights. But instead of challenging the state for its discriminatory practices, Muslims groups and organisations are taking the onus for the development of the community on themselves and thereby providing a very easy escape route to the government. However, irrespective of the number of schools, colleges, vocational training centers and hospitals that they establish, all the Muslim organisations put together can never replace the government in providing the variety of basic needs that are required for a decent human existence by all citizens, including the Muslims. But the hyperbolic claims of some organisations of serving the community and catering to its needs is creating a false euphoria that is making the community to depend more on the community organisations and reduce expectations from the government. While this could be very convenient for the government, it can bring nothing but misery and disaster for the community by making them to develop a mindset that would prevent them from exercising and demanding their basic citizenship right to development and services from the government.

Limitations of Muslim Organisations

Despite thousands of colleges and other institutions that have been established by hundreds of Muslim organisations across the country and the mass productions of lakhs of Muslim professionals and technocrats, the literacy levels of the Muslim community continues to lag behind the national average and over 30% Muslims continue to remain illiterate. This is primarily because Muslim organisations focused mostly on creating institutions for higher education for a variety of reasons (and some of them self serving) and failed to lay adequate

emphasis on setting up of schools, especially in rural areas where 64 % of mostly poor Muslims live. This coupled with privileging professional education and careers over research pursuits leading to the exclusion of Muslims from policy bodies and the resultant deprivation of the community from accessing the resources of the state as a citizenship right has caused incalculable harm to the poor of the Muslim community.

Net result: Muslim community as a whole remains poor and backward despite progress and prosperity of some families, especially from the middle and lower middle classes and that too mostly from urban or semi urban areas.

The Corrective

It is time that Muslim organisations revisit and revise the strategies for education they are pursuing that mostly benefit and favour the middle and lower middle classes to evolve policies and approaches that can ensure the well being of the entire community and that is possible only with outreach to and inclusion of poor and rural Muslims.

Indeed there was a time when it was needed to produce professionals and generate a middle class. But now with a vast and vibrant middle class in the Muslim community there is a need to go beyond that phase and to motivate, encourage and support the most promising youth of the community to pursue courses and research careers in humanities and social sciences to enable them to generate substantive data about the community to secure appropriate policy correctives and also equip and facilitate them to qualify for inclusion and participation in policy making bodies at different levels to influence and force allocations of resources of the state for the development of the community.

Establishment of Fellowships and Think Tanks

Apart from establishing schools and colleges, Muslim organisations should also now come up with handsome fellowship programs to encourage promising youth of the community to take up careers in academics and research and also establish Think Tanks to provide short and long term employment to the trained researchers of the community and generate all the scientific data required.

Telling Anecdote: All first class students become doctors and engineers; Second class students do MBA and manage the first class students who are now doctors and engineers; Third class students take up politics, become ministers and direct both the first and second class students; Failed students become religious heads / Godmen and the first, second and third class students prostrate before them! And everybody accepts and is happy with the system!!!

Dr. Mazher Hussain
Executive Director
COVA
Ph: +91-9849178111
Email: mazherhussain11@gmail.com