

## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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### *Abstract*

*This research is an attempt to explore the unevenness of human development among social groups in India with a view to understanding the relationship between such unevenness and structural inequality. Given the richness and complexity of Indian society, it is rather difficult to determine where the focus of such an investigation should lie. There are at least eight religious communities in India, each with sizeable populations and distinct cultures. India's Muslim community, with a population of 138 million, is the third largest Muslim community in the world and constitutes approximately 14 per cent of India's current population. In addition, there are several other communities comprised of fairly large populations characterized by distinct historical patterns of deprivation and disadvantage. Foremost among them are the Scheduled castes (SCs), who comprise about 16 per cent of the population. SCs constitute the various groups known in official Indian parlance as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and are groups which fall in the lower echelons of the social hierarchy that is premised on Bramhincal Hinduism.*

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## Introduction

Historically, Scheduled communities used to be known as the untouchables, they performed particular kinds of menial labor and suffered severe social ostracism by virtue of their association with those specific kinds of labor. Even though untouchability is prohibited by law, the persecution of SCs persists. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute yet another social group, characterized by similar forms of alienation from the social mainstream. An examination of the unevenness of human developments among these groups suggests the intersection of several axes of difference along which such unevenness is manifested. For instance, are there any significant differences in the situation of the poorest and the most disadvantaged Hindus (known as the SCs) and the poorest Muslims? Indeed, the burgeoning Dalit Muslim movement raises exactly this question. It argues for a different kind of politics, one that does not draw only upon the religious difference between Hindus and Muslims, but focuses on the structural inequality of the Muslim masses. Similarly, we see extreme unevenness of human development along gender lines within and between these social groupings. In what follows, we will discuss the differential levels of human development in India by focusing primarily on the situation of Indian Muslims, and wherever data permits, on the situation of Muslim women. For purposes of comparison, we will also draw upon the situation of non-Muslim Dalit groups, again to the extent that data is available. This comparison is important on several counts. First, both governments and the Dalit Muslim movement have drawn upon this comparison. Second, such comparisons give us further insight into human development inequalities within and between communities. These insights are critical to the kind of reconceptualization of human development. They also help us re-conceptualize religion from an inequality-centered perspective rather than an identity-centric perspective.

## Uneven Human Development in Independent India

Obviously, the story of uneven human development in India has to begin from the colonial era in particular from the specific efforts of colonial rulers to construct different 'population groups'. The interaction between colonial policy and the complex machinations of Indian political elites produced one of the greatest tragedies in South Asian history the Partition. The Partition, and the state formations that followed from it, conditioned the possibilities of human development in South Asia in very specific ways. The unevenness, as well as the gross deficits in human development, in South Asia must be understood in the context of these state formations. In what follows, we will begin from the present state of human development in India, with specific focus on the human development differentials between different social groups. As mentioned above, we will focus primarily on human development among Muslims and present comparisons of the same with other

disadvantaged groups wherever possible. A caveat before proceeding there is a serious deficiency of systematic and longitudinal data on Muslims or other minorities. The Census Commission of India collected data on religious communities for the first time in 2001. Before that, data was collected only sporadically, often by members of the Muslim community, and sometimes by commissions appointed by the government. In addition, scholars have often undertaken studies on the condition of Muslims in particular regions. The findings of these inquiries, even though diverse in their scope and analysis, have been somewhat consistent in demonstrating the extreme human development deficiencies with respect to at least three social groups Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Not surprisingly, much political debate and controversy accompanies the publication of such data. Such controversy occurred, in 2001, when the Census Commission of India released data on religious communities. At the centre of the controversy was the "unadjusted" growth rate of Muslims relative to other religious groups, in particular Hindus.

The controversy, fomented primarily by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), managed quite successfully to obscure the levels of inequality between different social groups that the data actually did reveal. There are two contradictory views about the situation of Muslims that has emerged in independent India. The first is that Muslims have been 'appeased' because they constitute a substantial vote bank. The second is that Muslims as a whole have been discriminated against, and such discrimination has directly contributed to the disempowerment of the community. The evidence hardly bears testimony to the claim of appeasement. The claim of discrimination is much easier to corroborate, although it needs to be assessed in light of the broader historical processes. Let us begin with the findings of the Sachar Committee, a High Level Committee of the Prime Minister of India, constituted in 2005 to probe the social, economic and educational status of Indian Muslims. What is perhaps most stunning about the findings is the persistence of the discrimination over time. The High Power Panel for Minorities and Scheduled Castes appointed in the early 1980s by the Government of India had almost similar findings. The most striking inequality is seen in the rates of capability poverty. The Capability Poverty Measure (CPM) reflects the percentage of the population with capability shortfalls in three basic dimensions of human development living a healthy, well-nourished life; having the capability for safe and healthy reproduction; and having basic literacy. Some further analyses of general levels of well-being between different social groups are available from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). The gaps between Hindus and Muslims begin to narrow at lower levels of deprivation but remain quite wide between non-SC Hindus and SC communities. The comparisons reveal not only the differences between the communities but also the complexity of India's landscape of social difference. How does religion as an axis of inequality compare with caste? Or, do the huge inequalities between Muslims and non-SC/ST Hindus really imply the importance of class? Now we will discuss further the

relationship between the various axes of inequality, beginning with literacy.

## Literacy

Literacy is one critical dimension of capability poverty. It shows that there are sharp differences between SCs, STs and Muslims vis-a-vis Hindus and the national average. The literacy rates for religious communities as well as for the total population as obtained by the 2001 Census shows that the national averages for the population of age seven years and above stands at 64.8 per cent. Jains have the highest rate of literacy at 94.1 per cent followed by Christians at 80.3 per cent and Buddhists at 72.7 per cent. The literacy rates among Hindus and Sikhs are marginally higher than the national average. The lowest literacy has been recorded for 'Other Religions & Persuasions' at 47 per cent. Muslims also have a literacy rate lower than the national average at 59.1 per cent. There is also considerable variation in literacy rates across states. The states of Andaman and Nicobar Islands at 89.8 per cent and Kerala at 89.4 per cent show the highest literacy rates in the country. On the other hand, as many as 16 states have a literacy rate much lower than the national average of 59.1 per cent. Haryana has the lowest literacy rate of 40 per cent, while the states of Bihar, Meghalaya, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Nagaland and Assam all show a literacy rate below 50 per cent. The literacy rate for Muslims is the lowest in the state of Uttar Pradesh at 35 per cent and highest in Kerala at 86.9 per cent. The Muslim literacy rate is lower than that of the Hindus in all states except Karnataka where it is higher than Hindus by nearly 4 per cent. In West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh the literacy rate for Muslims is close to that of the SC population or is comparable to them, with the Muslim male literacy rate being below that of the SC men in both the states.

The differences in levels of literacy are much narrower between Hindu and Muslim women, although significant differentials exist between rates of employment among Hindu and Muslim women with similar levels of education. What explains this huge discrepancy in the levels of employment of Hindu and Muslim women, despite similar levels of literacy? Several reasons are suggested in the literature, of which two are most commonly accepted. The first is that cultural norms discourage Muslim women from working. The second is that Muslim women face a 'double discrimination' as both Muslims and women. The observations regarding this suggest, quite a complex set of problems that cannot be addressed by standard affirmative action policies or educational policies. Before we leave this discussion, it may be useful to consider the gains in literacy over time. Ever since Independence, each of the major commissions appointed by the Government of India routinely underlined the disparity in levels of education between Hindus and Muslims. The most notable among these was the High Power Panel on Minorities. During the 1980s and 1990s some progress seems to have been made within each community however, the

differentials between the communities have either not changed much or worsened.

### Economic Participation and Incomes

A broad understanding of levels of income and related categories (such as consumption) for Muslims vis-a-vis Hindus can be obtained from the national sample surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization of India (NSSO). A larger proportion of Muslims relative to Hindus fall in the bottom 20 per cent with respect to consumption expenditure. The difference is much wider in urban areas as many as 40 per cent of Muslims belong to the bottom 20 per cent, nearly double the 22 per cent figure for Hindus. For the top 20 per cent in urban areas, only 6 per cent of Muslims belong to that category. The proportion is quite at par with the SC and ST populations, but is dramatically lower than the Hindu population excluding the SC and ST population. Since more than a third of India's Muslims live in urban centres, compared to less than a quarter of the Hindus, the average level of consumption in Muslim households is obviously much lower than in the Hindu households.

### Work Participation Rate (WPR)

The national average WPR is 39.1 per cent according to the 2001 Census. The highest WPR of 48.4 per cent is seen among 'Other Religions and Persuasions', while the lowest WPR of 31.3 is associated with the Muslim population, preceded by Jains at 32.9 per cent and Sikhs at 37.7 per cent. The female WPRs also show considerable variation among groups, with the lowest rate among Muslims and Jains, with ostensibly different reasons. While it is difficult to separate the effects of culture and structure on women's labor force participation, most existing studies (across a large number of countries) point to the limitations of using culture as the dominant explanation. Shariff and Azam point our attention to a number of studies in this regard all of which challenge the straightforward claim that Islamic norms and cultural values explain women's absence from the public realms. A report of the National Commission of Women on Muslim women emphasizes how the cultural stereotype actually causes the oppression of Muslim women rather than explaining it. Lateef demonstrates that in spite of purdah, Muslim women have been active in a range of socio-political activities including voting and deciding whom to vote for. Lateef's discussions with Muslim leaders pointed to the fact that poverty and unemployment were responsible for the continuation of purdah, and not the other way around as is generally believed. Lateef's survey clearly showed that it was regional and socio-economic status and not what she terms 'some arbitrary "Muslim" position' that was responsible for the so-called 'backwardness' of Muslim women. Evidence from predominantly Muslim countries also points to the inadequacy of culture as an explanation of gender relations both within and outside the household. Bangladesh, for instance, is often referred to as an example where women have responded to the growing demand for

women's labor in the garment export sector and then mobilized to acquire a better bargain. Recently Kabeer has also pointed to the fact that the success of educational interventions for women in Bangladesh owes much to women's demand for education than merely to the supply factors (such as NGOs or international institutions setting up schools in rural areas). We will return to this question later; for now we turn to the issue of unemployment and structural location of Muslims, which will also throw light on the gender question.

### Unemployment Rates & Type of Employment

There is little systematic data on types of employment according to social grouping. Whatever data is available, it shows a fairly deep divide between social groups. NSSO reports that the self-employment is the highest among Muslims in rural India. In the urban areas also a very high proportion of Muslims were self-employed. Not surprisingly, the proportion of Muslims in regular employment is considerably lower compared to Hindus. The difference is particularly significant in the rural sector, with both men and women. As with the employment situation of Muslim women, we need to consider whether this suggests that the regular employment market in India functions in a discriminatory manner towards Muslim men. As census data from 2001 shows, the distribution of religious communities is quite mixed with some clear patterns. For example, the presence of Muslims in household industries is about double the national average and people belonging to religions other than the six primary ones constitute the bulk of India's casual labor force. At the other extreme, Jains are significantly better represented in secondary and tertiary sector jobs. Further insight into the nature of work available to different communities can be obtained by looking at the ratio of self-employed to salaried work. In urban India, only about 30 per cent of the Muslim male workers are engaged in salaried work as opposed to 43 per cent of Hindus and 53 per cent Christians. Among Muslim women, only 17.5 per cent hold a salaried job in comparison with 63 per cent among Christians and 34 per cent of Hindus.

As with the case of Muslim women, we need to ask if the issue is one of simple discrimination but of specific historical patterns of structural location of Muslims within India's productive economy. To explore this question of structural location, in this section I draw upon Barbara Harris-White's work on the relationship between religion and the economy in India. Several major observations emerge from Harris-White's analysis with respect to the specific ways in which Muslims seem to be located in India's productive economy. First, we see that Muslims are clearly underrepresented in the organized corporate sector, both as employees and employers. Out of 1,365 member companies constituting the Indian Merchants' Chamber of Bombay in the 1980s, some 4 percent were owned by Muslims, and in 1988 no Muslim-owned company featured in the top 100

corporations, though some do now. Of the 2,832 industrial units listed for monitoring in the 1990s by the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, only four were owned by Muslims. Despite the entry of new entrepreneurs including Muslim women and despite the fact that Muslims have some of the most successful and dynamic IT corporations, these are still exceptions to the rule. One survey found that just over 1 per cent of corporate executives was Muslim. Given the fact that there are more Muslims in urban India than in rural India, if they are not represented in the private sector or in the public sector, where exactly are they located in the productive economy? Not surprisingly, they are located overwhelmingly in the small and informal sector.

As Harris-White observes, there are several distinctive reasons that explain this economic location of Muslims. Muslim communities have traditionally been repositories of specific skills and crafts, and many of the industries where such skills are employed are in the small and informal sectors. Harris-White further notes that, most often, the surplus in these industries is appropriated by Hindu and Jain traders/petty capitalists for investments elsewhere. As quite characteristic of this kind of petty capitalisms, Harris-White observes that these employers routinely supply production and consumption credit, raw materials, and sometimes even provide food as an advance against pay. What is critical to note here is not only the ethnicized nature of the worker/capitalist relationship, but also the feudal/semi-feudal power relationship between them. Another major element in the economic positioning of Muslims is their tendency to occupy niches historically shunned by Hindus, These involve trades related to leather and hide, and specific chemicals etc., which Hindus are prohibited from handling because of religious prejudice.

How are Muslims located in the rural economy? To answer this question, we need to examine the nature of the Muslim peasantry. As Harris-White observes, despite the significant differentiation of the peasantry in terms of landholding and labor process, the majority of Muslim cultivators work in areas of poor irrigation and low levels of technology and under conditions where "strong elements of extra-economic compulsion persist". She further observes that compared to Hindus (44 per cent), only 36 per cent of Muslims are self-employed in agriculture; the rest work, presumably, as agricultural labor. As pointed out above, Harris-White also observes that Muslims have a higher incidence of landlessness (35 per cent of Muslims as opposed to 28 per cent of Hindus), and the proportion of rural Muslims in non-agricultural wage work, artisanal craft production and what is still known as 'menial work' (services and petty trade, much of which involves high levels of skill but low levels of pay) is also greater (36 per cent of Muslims as opposed to 28 per cent of Hindus), Harris-White concludes that the occupational distribution of rural Muslims shows a distinctive 'path dependence' from the Mughal era of courtly patronage and exploitation. These patterns of social location, however, do not yield a complete picture without taking

into consideration the hierarchies within the Muslim community. As several scholars have pointed out, it is erroneous to think of Muslims as a monolithic entity. There are several levels of differentiation that characterize the Muslim community.

### Assets

While it is not sufficient to look at income alone as an indicator of inequality, examining it in conjunction with the patterns of structural location gives us useful insights. We looked at some indicators of consumption earlier. We can now examine the structure of ownership of assets. A larger percentage of Hindus, as compared to Muslims, own land. In rural India, 51 per cent of Muslim households are landless as compared to 40 per cent of Hindu households. A National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) survey, examining asset disparities between Hindus and Muslims as well as between SC/ST Hindus and non-SC/ST Hindus, presents some useful results. The study uses Hindus (excluding the weaker sections, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) as its reference group and compares disadvantaged groups to this reference group. In general, the data indicates that while for groups such as Scheduled Tribes clear patterns of disadvantage are evident, for other groups historical patterns and regional location determine much.

### Health and Difference

In this brief section on health, I have drawn upon the data from National Family Health Surveys and a number of research papers which have analyzed this data. With respect to health and religious difference, the issue that has received most attention is fertility and population growth. I mentioned at the outset the controversy surrounding Census 2001. Here I wish to explore these issues a bit further, which, needless to say, are extremely gendered in their implication. After the discussion of fertility and mortality, we will examine the two indicators of capability poverty, namely, the proportion of children less than five years who are underweight, and the proportion of births unattended by trained personnel. The general conclusion that is often drawn from these differences is that Muslims have higher preference for children relative to other religious groups. This behavior is explained in part with recourse to essentialist assumptions about Islam. As Jeffery and Jeffery have suggested, comparing Muslim and Hindu fertility or mortality entails 'a form of essentialism, presuming that Muslims as a whole share common features which set them apart from Hindus (as a whole) and make them appropriate units for comparison. According to Jeffery and Jeffery, the same problems of essentialism are revealed if one examines caste differences only. They suggest the importance of juxtaposing 'caste' categories ('Brahmin', 'scheduled tribe' or 'scheduled caste') with class, regional and locational differences. As mentioned, similar differences also characterize Muslims, and hence indicators such as mortality or fertility rates cannot be assessed on the basis of



religion alone. What other factors should we consider? Several authors point to the critical regional differences in fertility rates among Muslims; these regional differences underlie in turn differences in educational levels, which further determine fertility and mortality rates.

Jeffery and Jeffery argue that a mother's level of schooling appears as the most powerful predictor of fertility rates. In this sense, the observation that Muslim women 'bear more children' can be explained in part by the inequalities in levels of education of Muslim women and women from other religions, as well as the level of education for Muslims as a whole. These differential levels of education, together with levels of poverty, determine fertility rates. The important question then is to examine why levels of education are different. Here two sets of factors are usually considered demand-side factors (i.e. a lower preference for schooling) and supply-side factors (i.e. deficiencies in access). Jeffery and Jeffery observe that there may be some evidence for a slightly lower preference among Muslims than Hindus in similar economic conditions, especially for schooling beyond the primary level. While these observations are similar to other studies in India, they contrast quite starkly with other contexts. In the case of Bangladesh, for instance, there is quite a lot of evidence emerging that Bangladeshi women are increasingly showing a stronger preference for education. As Kabeer and Hossain show, the success of women's education programs in Bangladesh owe at least as much to the demand for education as to its supply. This raises an interesting question as to whether the minority status of Muslims in India results in different preferences for schooling. Everywhere, low preference for schooling is found to be connected to low expected outcomes from education which is more likely the case in India. Jeffery and Jeffery also see a generational pattern if parents are engulfed in the vicious cycle of low education and low income, it is much more likely that their children will be too.

In sum, the reasons behind an apparent religion-specific difference must be sought among a more complex set of factors, with a fairly consistent correlation between levels of mother's education and variables such as mortality. For instance, the four indicators of mortality show a uniform negative correlation with mother's education and general levels of well-being. The under-five mortality shows a particularly significant difference with respect to mother's education. Interestingly, all of the National Family Health Surveys find that infant and child mortality rates are much higher for Hindus than for Muslims. NFHS-II found the infant mortality rate to be 31 per cent higher and the child mortality rate to be 28 per cent higher for Hindu children than for Muslim children. As the NHFS-II report notes, the predominantly urban location of Muslims, where mortality rates are low, may at least partially explain the differentials between the two groups.

Levels of nutrition also show variation by religion and caste. According to NHFS-III, Christian, Sikh and Jain children have considerably better levels of nutrition than Hindu and

Muslim children. For Hindu and Muslim children, 23 per cent and 26 per cent are severely stunted. Almost 30 per cent of the children belonging to Scheduled Tribes, 27 per cent belonging to Scheduled Castes and 25 per cent belonging to OBCs severely stunted. Among the poorest classes (measured by wealth index), approximately 60 per cent are stunted and malnourished. Overall, 48 per cent of children under five are stunted, 43 per cent are underweight, and 24 per cent are severely undernourished. As with mortality, NHFS-III also finds strong correlations between a child's nutritional status and mother's educational level. With respect to reproductive health, we find very similar patterns. Mothers' education and general standards of living are again the most important determinants of reproductive health. The traits with respect to different religious denominations and other social groupings are also similar. Interestingly, Hindus and Muslims have a significantly lower percentage of births attended by medical personnel compared to other religious communities (35 per cent among Hindus as compared to 90 per cent among Jains, a difference which once again may be explained by the predominantly urban location of the latter).

## Conclusions

While acknowledging that there is a serious deficiency of data with respect to the unevenness of human development among different social groups, it is indeed possible to discern some traits that seem fairly constant over time. Whichever criteria we take, we see that human development in India is extremely uneven. Muslims, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes uniformly exhibit lower levels of human development with respect to other social groups, human development also remains gendered in very important ways and affects women and children across religions equally. As we saw, with respect to the two components of the Capability Poverty Measure (CPM), namely, the proportion of children under five years who are underweight, and the proportion of births attended by trained personnel, the differentials between Hindus and Muslims diminish significantly. Both groups fall below other religious groups; in one case, Hindus fall below Muslims. The broad overall picture that emerges suggests an established pattern of structural inequality between social groups. To understand these patterns of inequality, it is critical to understand social groups in a relational sense. A 'group' thus comprises people who share similar structural locations rather than ethnic, racial, sexual or cultural attributes. It is critical to understand the unevenness of human development between Indian Muslims and other religious groups in this specific sense of structural inequality. This in turn will force us to scrutinize the politics of secularism and multiculturalism as a possible way of overcoming such inequality.

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