

# Comparative Study of Muslim Minorities: A Preliminary Framework

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Most of the world's Muslims reside in countries where they are numerically predominant. As such, these Muslims possess a majoritarian outlook in sharp contrast to the perspective of minority Muslims living in India, China, the USSR, and some Western countries. In recent years, Muslim minorities have found themselves at the confluence of diverse social forces and political developments which have heightened their sense of communal identity and apprehension vis-à-vis non-Muslim majorities. This has been particularly true of the crisis besetting the Indian Muslims in 1990-91 as well as the newly formed Muslim communities in Western Europe.

The foregoing circumstances have highlighted the need for serious research on Muslim minorities within a comparative framework. What follows is a preliminary outline of a research framework for a comparative study of Muslim minorities using the Indian Muslims as an illustrative case.

## The Salience of Tradition

One of the most significant transnational phenomena in the four decades since mid-century has been the revival of communal consciousness among minorities in a large number of countries throughout the world. This tendency toward cultural regeneration has been noted among such diverse ethnic groups as Afro-Americans, French Canadians, Palestinian Arabs, the Scots of Great Britain, Soviet minorities, and native Americans. A common tendency among these groups is to reach back to their cultural traditions and to explore those roots which have served as the historical anchors of their present communal existence. Significantly, this quest for tradition has had a salutary impact upon the lives of these communities, for it has reinforced their collective and individual identities and has enabled them to confront the multiple difficulties of modern life more effectively. By according its members a sense

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of belonging to a larger whole, communal identities have tended to reduce the alienation and social atomization so prevalent in today's industrialized and developing nations.

The return to tradition has also been the distinguishing characteristic of yet another contemporary movement which has manifested itself upon the world scene with sudden force—the rise of Islamic revivalism.

The recent regeneration of the Islamic ethos caught the non-Islamic world by surprise. Few in the West or even in the Muslim world anticipated an Islamic renaissance in the modern context. The intellectual myopia induced by capitalist or Marxist materialism had effectively blindfolded both scholars and statesmen who had mistakenly disregarded or underestimated the dynamic force of Islam and its potential as a political, social, and economic determinant in human affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the two fundamental features of modern Islamic revivalism are its persistence and its pervasiveness. The belated discovery of its existence by Western governments and mass media notwithstanding, the search for Islamic roots is not a recent phenomenon; in contemporary history this persistent search harks back at least to Jamāl al Dīn al Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh, both of whom strove to render Islam applicable to modernizing environments. The uniqueness of Islam's modern revival is its transnationalism, its pervasiveness without regard to national boundaries. Indeed, it is supremely significant that the present phase of Islamic rebirth has been occurring in virtually every Islamic polity regardless of geographic, political, economic, or cultural environment. The return to the Islamic ethos is discernable not only in Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iran, and Nigeria, but also in far-off Malaysia, Soviet Central Asia, India, and the Philippines. Why is this renaissance taking place in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century? At this early phase of its development, it is difficult to identify any precise causal factors. Nevertheless, several general propositions may be tentatively advanced.

The return to the Islamic ethos appears to be a natural response of the transnational ummah to the successive pathological experiences which have buffeted the Muslim community during the last century. This protracted crisis milieu included the political, economic, and social ravages of Western and Soviet imperialism, the imperatives of "pressure cooker" development, the struggles for independence, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the loss of Jerusalem and Palestine, the two world wars, the emergence of nationalist and communist ideological movements, and the occurrence of inter-Arab and Middle Eastern regional conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed analysis, see R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-32.

All the signs of decline were already manifest during the last two decades of the nineteenth century as the power of the Ottoman Empire was successively challenged internally by such diverse movements as Mahdism in Sudan, Wahhabism in the Arabian peninsula, Egyptian nationalism, pan-Turkism, as well as Levantine Arab, Greek, Armenian, and Kurdish nationalism. Externally, the Ottoman and Persian empires beat a hasty retreat in the face of a collective European imperialism in the process of balkanizing the non-Western world. Beyond its Middle Eastern epicenter, Islamic power was defeated on the Indian subcontinent by systematic British penetration and the eventual displacement of Mogul power. Russian expansion in Muslim Central Asia and the Caucasus and French control of North Africa completed the European domination of the Islamic world. Upon the heels of Western dominance came the West's "mission civilatrice"—a distorted expansion of Europe's value system—which gradually denatured the Muslim cultures to the extent that Algerian intellectuals forgot their native Arabic and potentates like Atatürk and Reza Shah purposefully worked to reduce the role of Islam in their societies. The Islamic response ranged from the abortive attempts of Sultān 'Abd al Ḥamīd to revive political pan-Islamism to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Sudan, the Arabian peninsula, and North Africa, and Muslim reformism in Egypt in the hands of al Afghānī and 'Abduh. These developments proved incapable of confronting the new challenges of secular nationalism and modernization as the various linguistic components of the ummah went on to establish their own independent nation-states in emulation of the European model. Only in the Indian subcontinent did Islam constitute a determining factor as the *raison d'être* for Pakistani statehood.

Against the experience of a full century, the catalysts responsible for the present revival of Islam are discernable in broad outline. During this period, Muslims experimented with a plethora of ideologies, formulas, and solutions to rebuild their lives including nationalism, Westernization, socialism, etatism, and their multiple variants—all of which were found wanting. The decline of the West and the abortive application of Western-style capitalism in the Islamic world generated doubts about the blind emulation of the Western model of sociopolitical development. The socialist model proved to be equally inadequate due to its atheist-European origin no less than for its autocratic application in communist countries. Nor were the attempts to use mixed Western-socialist systems very successful in such countries as Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, all of which were reeling under the pressures of the superpowers and the Arab-Israeli conflict itself. Indeed, none of these ideological systems were able to meet or even approximate the minimum requirements of the Islamic concept of social justice nor to develop the individual and collective psychological mechanisms needed to confront the turbulent world of the

postwar years. In their dual failure to provide material solutions for human needs and spiritual solace, the very legitimacy of these non-Islamic ideological constructs came under increasing challenge. The frustration arising from pressures from the West, the Soviet Union, and Israel further deepened the Muslim's alienation from the outside world, its values, methods, and culture. Only the oil weapon was to provide a medium of self-assurance and a sense of dignity for many Muslims. In view of the failures of the past and the turbulence of the present, a return to Islam was inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

## Islamic Ethnicity in Muslim India

The persistence of an Islamic identity among India's teeming Muslim population has provided the main parameter which defines Indian Muslim ethnicity. Consequently, it is no accident that the two revivalist movements of recent times—ethnicity and Islam—have come together in mutual reinforcement to produce the beginnings of an Indian Muslim spiritual renaissance and a consequent quest for individual dignity and collective social justice. Despite their relative isolation as a minority from *dār al Islām*, Indian Muslims have manifested the same characteristics of Islamic renewal that are discernable elsewhere in the Muslim world. Yet, precisely because of their geographical isolation, the Indian Muslims' quest for Islamic renewal and growth has been stunted, particularly under the pressure of the Hindu fundamentalism of the 1990s. A sense of loneliness, dejection, and frustration pervades the Indian Muslim community, which has gone too long unnoticed by other Muslims.

## The Mosaic Model

The contemporary resurgence of ethnicity has underlined the utility of Carleton Coon's mosaic model of society. This anthropological approach views society in terms of the diversity of its ethnic components as defined by religious, linguistic, racial, regional, and/or tribal criteria. The theoretical strength of the mosaic model is that it seeks to reflect social reality as it is, without the integrational distortion implicit in many other popular theories of society. It readily recognizes that ethnic homogeneity is the rare exception rather than the rule in most nation-states as they exist today.

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<sup>3</sup>For an overview of revivalist movements in various Muslim countries, see Shireen T. Hunter, ed., *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

In developing a usable theoretical framework for the study of Muslim minorities in India and elsewhere, the mosaic approach needs to be supplemented by two additional constructs: 1) the plural society model, and 2) the pluralist society model.

As promulgated by the anthropologist Furnivall, plural societies are characterized by a process of governance based to a large degree upon the constituent ethnic groups of a given national unit. There are two ideal types of plural societies. The conflict model of the plural society is distinguished by heightened competition among ethnic groups pursuing seemingly incompatible interests within an authoritarian system. The equilibrium model of the plural society is characterized by a significant degree of consensus among ethnic groups regarding certain basic values and procedures of governance. Implicit in this model is the prevalence of intercommunal balance and ethnic accommodation in the context of a decentralized political system of minimal coercion. The equilibrium model has found its practical application in several small West European states which are categorized as consociational democracies.<sup>4</sup> According to social sociologists Lijphardt, Daadler, Lorwin, and Dekmejian, consociational systems operate effectively under the aegis of an "elite cartel"—a coterie of ethnically recruited leaders—who regulate intercommunal competition and assure a significant degree of ethnic autonomy in religious and cultural affairs. Historical experience suggests that only in highly peaceful milieux would it be possible to maintain the consociational formula, i.e., Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, Austria, and, until 1975, Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the pluralist model is prevalent in the larger national entities such as the United States, France and, to a lesser degree, the Indian Union. In pluralist societies, the process of government is not based primarily on institutionalized ethnic group participation. Consequently, authoritative decision makers perceive the ethnically salient sectors of the population as interest and pressure groups such as labor, industry, and farmers, all of which are free to participate in the process of governance without the benefit of official institutionalized anchors. In pluralist societies, ethnic interests are frequently compromised, as in Muslim India, unless specific groups are able to maximize their access to top decision-making bodies through systematic ethnic mobilization as in the case of American Jews, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics.

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<sup>4</sup>On models of multiethnic societies, see Leo Kuper and M. G. Smith, eds., *Pluralism in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and Kenneth McRae, ed., *Consociational Democracy* (Toronto: McClelland, 1974).

<sup>5</sup>The Lebanese experience is discussed in R. Hrair Dekmejian, "Consociational Democracy," *Comparative Politics* (January 1978): 251-65.

## The Islamic Theory of Religious Ethnicity

A most notable contribution of early Islamic political theory to the problem of minorities is the notion of *millah* as promulgated in the Qur'an and institutionalized in the Shari'ah. It was significant that for solid theological and practical reasons the Islamic state implemented a system of communal coexistence that recognized religious diversity and toleration many centuries before such practices became common in Christian Europe. Ironically, the Islamic prescription of religious toleration with respect to the *ahl al kitāb* was not practiced in reverse with respect to Muslim minorities living in such Christian states as Russia and Spain. To understand the dynamic factors responsible for the formulation of Islamic policy towards the *ahl al kitāb*, it is necessary to elucidate the objective theological, historical, and social conditions that prevailed in the early years of the Arab Muslim conquest.

Clearly, the foremost determinant of Islamic ethnic policy is the way in which Islam theologically orients itself as a source of divine revelation vis-à-vis other major religions. As a staunchly monotheistic faith, Islam became the inheritor of a montheistic prophetic tradition reaching back to the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. Indeed, by consciously basing itself upon the cumulative process of divine revelation, the Islamic *weltanschauung* perceived a grand dialectical process of divine design consisting of three epochal stages of revelation, each one more perfect than its antecedent. In Hegelian terminology, Judaism constituted the "thesis" which generated Christianity as its "antithesis" and then led to the Islamic "synthesis" as the highest stage of divine revelation. Consequently, as the supreme culmination of the process of divine revelation, Muhammad was regarded by Muslims as the "seal" of the prophets and indeed as the *amīr al anbiyā'*—the prince of the prophets.

Therefore, Islam's explicit recognition of its two spiritual antecedents was instrumental in defining the special relationship of the Islamic community with the *ahl al kitāb*—the Jewish and Christian communities. With the Arab conquest of the civilized world, large numbers of Christians and Jews were brought under Muslim control. While the day-to-day policies of Muslim rulers were sometimes marked by vicissitudes, the doctrinal basis of Islamic tolerance toward the *ahl al kitāb* was not permitted to erode. In contrast to other subject peoples, Jews and Christians were extended the protection of Islamic authority as a doctrinal imperative and as an expression of Muslim piety. In retrospect, had it not been for the Islamic policy of toleration, there would not have been such large concentrations of Christians and Jews in the contemporary Muslim world.

## Methodological Framework

The theoretical underpinnings as explicated above help to define the parameters of research undertaken on Muslim minorities and to identify the specific problems which require in-depth investigation and analysis. These are presented in a systematic form in the causal diagram (see attachment) that sets forth specific variables and hypotheses which are thought to affect to some degree the condition of Indian or other Muslim minorities. As independent and intervening variables, these are expected to constitute the determinants of Muslim minority life—which is considered a primary dependent variable. Once the objective conditions of the Muslim communities' environment are identified, it will then be possible to discern the basic communal needs of the Muslims who are often too inarticulate in their "demand bearing." These communal needs emerge as a second dependent variable which is causally related to the situational factors obtained in the socioeconomic milieu of different Muslim minorities. What follows is an explication of the variables as applied to Indian Muslims:

### Independent Variables:

1. **Historical Determinants.** The salient historical antecedents of Indian and Islamic history, including the Muslim conquest of India, the predominant political role of the Indian Muslims, the decline of the Moguls, the advent of British power, the Indian struggle for independence, and the bifurcation of the national elite along religious lines leading to the establishment of Pakistan. Especially important is the notion of communal historical memory based on intercommunal experiences of conflict and cooperation.
2. **Total Size.** The approximate size of the Indian Muslim community in absolute terms and in relation to other major communal groups and India's total population.
3. **Regional Distribution.** Identification of the areas of major concentration of Indian Muslims in terms of regions, states, and urban habitation.
4. **Demographic Characteristics.** Data regarding the approximate demographic makeup of the Muslim population in terms of age cohorts, longevity, and so on.
5. **Linguistic Components.** Determination of the major linguistic

groups within the Muslim community in terms of size and regional concentration.

6. **Economic Characteristics.** Data concerning the economic conditions prevailing in Indian Muslim communities (i.e., class structure based on economic roles and distribution of wealth), evidence of communally-based economic mobilization and comparative data on the non-Muslim sectors of the Indian population (particularly on class structure and per capita incomes), and the overall occupational profile of Indian Muslim communities and patterns of occupational preference.
7. **Communal Organization.** Evidence of community-based, secular, cultural, professional, and civic organizations, including organizational structures, goals, and leadership.
8. **Religious Institutional Structures.** Identification of Islamic communal organizations which directly affect religious life in terms of fulfilling the specific functions prescribed by Islamic traditions; extensive data on the number of mosques and their average attendance, the adequacy of the presiding imams in terms of numbers, level of training, intellectual competence, and spiritual dedication; evidence of clerical organizations and communication within and between geographically remote Muslim communities as well as ties with Islamic leaders outside India; data concerning the structure and administration of *awqāf* (endowments) and the extent of their impact on the community; the nature of relationships between the clerics and the lay leadership of the various communities; evidence of possible interaction between Muslim clerics and the non-Muslim clergy; and evidence of communal mechanisms of conflict resolution and *shar'ī* court systems.
9. **Educational System.** Data on the number, size, level, and location of all Muslim-supported educational institutions, including schools where Muslim students are numerically predominant; similar information on all mosque-affiliated *madrasahs* and religious seminaries; and evaluation of school curricula, instructional staffs, and physical plants in absolute terms and vis-à-vis non-Muslim educational institutions.
10. **Cultural Outlook.** Identification of Islamic and other cultural attributes which reinforce the distinctiveness of the Indian Muslim community, the dimensions of cultural diversity



between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the resulting patterns of intercultural interaction.

11. ***Civic Participation***. The extent and patterns of participation of Indian Muslims, collectively and individually, in the political life of India (i.e., voting patterns, participation in political activities, running for electoral office, appointment to bureaucratic positions, and so on), identification of attitudes and issues considered communally important, and the modalities of their articulation at the governmental level.
12. ***The Political System***. The fundamental characteristics of the Indian political system, its federal structures, institutions, and leaders.
13. ***Non-Muslim Communities***. The demographic, economic, cultural, and organizational attributes of the majority and minority communities of India and their relations with Muslims.
14. ***Muslim Community Life***. The changing conditions of the various Muslim communities in India—the main dependent variable.

The foregoing fourteen clusters of variables are to be analyzed within a dynamic framework that will focus on the mutual interaction of these variables as well as their interaction with the larger Indian sociopolitical environment—a major macrolevel independent variable in itself. This variable will include an examination of the Indian political system, its leadership and mechanisms of representation, and the formulation of ethnic policy, as this relates to all minorities as well as to Indian Muslims. Such an analysis will be expected to yield various salient situational factors which will help define the objective conditions of Indian Muslims. Once these are identified, the study can focus upon the social needs which the prevailing conditions have generated.

# METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

