

## BOOK REVIEW

Hasan Zoya and Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, Pp. 271, Price Rs 595/-.

The nineties have witnessed a bitter debate among Indian academic circles over the issue of secularism *versus* communalism. However, this debate has often been pitched more at the ideological level and less at the empirical level. Therefore, while there has been much discussion at the ideological level of the minority rights and the relations between minorities and majorities, very little actual research has gone into the politics and sociology of the minority communities. In the case of Muslims, the debate has often related itself to issues pertaining to Islam. Whether it is the question of fundamentalism, the backwardness of the Muslim community in India, or the growth of Muslim population, all these issues are seen through the prism of Islam. Then, there have been formulations that would privilege identity over everything else. This tendency in social theory further obscures our understanding of communities as they negotiate their existence in the web of social situations, where new identities are constantly formed and articulated.

Both, in the secular-communal debate and in the new formulations about identity, theorizations are weakly grounded in the empirical reality. Such weak empirical basis produces academic myths and stereotypes. The homogeneity of Muslim community is one such myth (hence our repeated references to 'Indian Muslims', 'the Muslim community' or the 'minority'). Such homogenising formulations tend to conceal more than they help reveal. For instance, it is common knowledge that the Muslims in India have many divisions, and that there is no single Muslim politics as such. But positing a homogeneous Muslim community obscures this complex reality. In the book under review, the authors have tried to penetrate one such myth regarding

homogeneous existence of the Muslim community. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, in their work, *Unequal Citizens*, present an empirical study of the Muslim women in India.

This book is based on a nationwide survey of over nine thousand women. The greatest virtue of this book is that it problematises the relative roles of gender and religion in enforcing inequalities in the Indian society. The authors avoid straightjacketing of the issues of religion and gender. It would have been very easy for them to argue that gender alone is responsible for the plight of the Muslim women, or alternatively, they could have blamed everything on Islam, or on the minority status and the discrimination based on religion. Instead this work is both theoretically sensitive and empirically accurate in locating the issue of Muslim women's unequal status at the intersection of gender and community. This helps us in realising how these two actually reinforce the inequalities perpetrated by each other.

Gender studies have been arguing forcefully that community boundaries are maintained through women and, through the maintenance of these boundaries, subjugation of women is practised and legitimised. The work of Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon provide sound empirical evidence for this argument to hold. This study avoids essentialism and delineates on the areas, where gender is the primary factor behind inequality, and areas, where the community is the basic factor through which inequality is faced. Naturally then, the story of Muslim women becomes all the more unjust because of the double disadvantage: they get unjust treatment both, as women and as Muslims. However, the book brings out two facts very clearly: one is that Muslim women do not face any special disadvantage as Muslims or because of following Islam. Barring a few peculiarities of the condition of Muslim women, their situation is comparable to the situation of women in general. Second, while there are few common characteristics of aggregate Muslim women as such, there are many

commonalities among all women, and therefore, women's situation should be disaggregated by locality and class, in order to correctly appreciate the situation of discrimination. In other words, the empirical fact of discrimination is a function of locality and class, rather than community.

#### *Survey Findings*

The Muslim women's survey (MWS) covers Hindu women as well, and it facilitates comparison among women from the Dalit, Adivasi, Other Backward Caste (OBC), and the so-called upper caste Hindu and Muslim communities. All through the book, the authors present a comparative picture, which is very useful to understand the situation of the Muslim women. The report of the Muslim women's survey begins with locating the subject matter of the study in the context of the Muslim situation in general. Thus, the entire sample is classified according to the standard of living of the household, that is, according to the socio-economic status (SES) of the household, and the authors use this classification to examine the differences in the situation of women among various strata of the SES. The survey shows that the socio-economic situation of the Muslims is somewhat analogous to that of the OBCs. Given this fact and the figures presented by the authors (p. 29), their summary observation that Muslims 'are at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and a wide disparity separates the poor Muslims from Hindus at the upper end of the SLI (Standard of Living Index) spectrum' (p. 42) is slightly an overstatement. The more robust statement would have been that the Muslims are in a similar situation as the OBCs, and that the Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs and Muslims are separated from the upper castes in terms of their SES.

The survey comes up with another interesting finding, which may not be really surprising for the students of social geography of Indian society, but nonetheless needs to be reiterated: there are

sharp regional variations in the standard of living, and these obliterate community differences. The north and particularly the rural north, is the most backward region, and the fact that Muslim population is concentrated in this region means that the socio-economic condition of the Muslim community would be considerably worse off. The present work shows that Muslims are mostly engaged in lower occupation categories and their work is often less wealth creating.

The rest of the book then examines the situation of Muslim women in terms of their work participation and role in decision-making. Muslim women do not show much difference from their Hindu counterparts, as far as the levels of education are concerned. The only major difference is with regard to the higher proportion of parental objection to the girl's education in the Muslim community. In the case of marriage, the difference among the communities does not appear to be very salient. Absence of autonomy and the tendency to marry off the girl at a young age are common to all communities, though urban location and upper class make some difference. The same is true of family size and the decision regarding number of children per couple. These are matters mostly dominated by husbands, and the observation by the women activists that women do not have control over their bodies is borne out by the survey. Here, the issue is not so much of religion but that of gender. This point needs to be highlighted in order to dispel the notion about the Hindus being more progressive and Muslims being less so. Whatever little progress there maybe, it is the function of class, and it has less to do with community. However, the survey finds that there is some community-based difference in the work participation by women. The survey records low work participation by Muslim women. This is likely to further affect the role and autonomy of the Muslim woman. The chapters on decision-making and mobility highlight the gendered nature of these dimensions of women's lives. The

survey tries to evolve indexes of role in the decision-making, and freedom of movement for women. These show that most women are at the lower ends of such indexes. Many women say that they are consulted in the course of decision-making in the family while a few state that they take decisions, but the stamp of patriarchal authority is unmistakable. Only among the more educated and the younger women, the proportion of those having slightly higher scores in the decision-making index increases a little. Similarly, the vast majority of the women respondents say that their movement is restricted by the authority of the husband. It ties in with the authority of the husband in deciding the nature of work the woman should be allowed to take up. There are no appreciable differences between the Hindu and Muslim women on both these counts. In fact, the survey repeatedly shows that there are very minor differences between the Hindu and Muslim women, so much so that it may be ungainly to use these categories for purposes of comparison. Far more salient are caste, class, age, location, and region.

Finally, the MWS also seeks to tap the extent of domestic violence against women. As the authors themselves admit repeatedly, reporting of domestic violence is very low for a variety of reasons, and as the class-caste status increases, the tendency not to report domestic violence or abuse also increases because of notions of family honour, status and privacy. Yet, the survey has been able to show that one-fifth of women reported domestic violence. The proportion of Muslim women who reported domestic violence is a little less than the women belonging to the OBCs. More women from poorer and Dalit or Adivasi households are victims of domestic violence. The survey has also tried to distinguish between physical abuse and verbal abuse. If there is one thing that is common across regions and communities, it is the fact that husbands are the most common perpetrators of domestic violence.

#### *Reviewer's Wish List?*

In the case of any survey, the investigator has to make hard choices in including or excluding certain items from the survey instrument. It is always easy to say that the survey should have included something more. Similarly, the present reviewer cannot resist the temptation to mention a few areas that could have been probed through this survey. One minor point is the question of medium of education. While the questionnaire did have a question on whether the respondent had her education in a *Madarassa* or other school, the survey does not report on this point. But more importantly, the choice of Urdu medium school for the girl child as against the choice of English medium school for the male child could indicate a discrimination against the girl child. It is alleged that the more orthodox sections from the Muslim community uphold either *Madarassa* education or Urdu medium. The survey could have thrown light on this. Second, the survey might have benefited from an investigation into the question of religious practices followed by women of different communities. Again, against the alleged backdrop of Muslims being more 'religious' and traditional or orthodox, this information could have given us some insight into the similarities across religious communities. Third, the authors have mentioned that they did not want to go into the question of personal laws. However, it would have still been worthwhile to investigate into two matters. One is the actual incidence of *talaq* among Muslim women *vis-à-vis* women from other communities and the other is the opinions of Muslim women on this issue, i.e., what importance do they attach to it as a major problem faced by them. This would have been very useful in the debates over personal laws, and the communal propaganda that triple *talaq* is the problem of Muslim women. Of course, these may be treated as the wish list of the reviewer, and such wish list may grow with every reader of the book! Lastly, the authors have done well to compare the situation and experiences of Muslim women with

those of other communities. It would have been greatly useful if they had disaggregated the sample of Muslim women by caste. This survey has shown that the situation of the Muslim community, in general, and Muslim women in particular, is very similar to that of the OBCs. Therefore, a classification of the Muslim sample by caste would have been more helpful. It is surprising that the authors repeatedly claim that community is not the only or the most sound basis for understanding the reality but at the same time desist from recognising the utility of looking at caste differences among Muslims.

#### *Question of Community*

Hasan and Menon have provided a valuable academic basis for looking at the tangle of gender, community, and communalism. Their work re-asserts what many have been arguing, albeit without much empirical evidence, that Muslim women are not very different from Hindu women, and the issue is more about gender and less about cultural or community differences. A careful reading of this book would, in fact, pose a question that is much more significant, and though the authors have kept that question outside the purview of this book, the book has contributed enormously to the debate over that question. It is the question about our whole understanding about 'cultural differences' and minority rights'. Our understanding of these questions has been too much influenced by the Western discovery of the

issue of 'multi-culturalism'. For the Western (Christian?) world, other religious communities are culturally different. Precisely the same understanding is upheld by the *Hindutva* forces, as far as the Muslim community is concerned. However, this does not hold in India. Notwithstanding the diversity that marks the lived experiences of the Indians, faith or religion do not form the bases of difference. Therefore, to argue about the difference of the Muslim from the Hindu is empirically wrong. To posit community on the basis of religion is untenable. This book, without making any tall or ambitious claims, forces this finding. Therefore, it should not be read just as yet another chronicle of empirical findings that would interest only the positivist sociologist. The students of theory and practitioners of ideology have much to learn from this book if they choose to go beyond the charts and figures presented in this book.

The authors have actually posed a teaser for anyone interested in theorising about 'difference' and 'community' in the Indian context, without being overawed by the Western or north Atlantic formulations.

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