

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



**Gospel Values**  
**Qur'anic Values For Human Solidarity**  
**The Holy Qur'an: The Word of God**  
**The Prophet Muhammad : A Beautiful Model**  
**Challenges Faced by Muslims in the Present Age**  
**Indian Muslims: Challenges and Opportunities**  
**Paul Jackson's "A Jesuit Among Sufis"**

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# INDIAN MUSLIMS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Maria Khan*

Indian Muslims constitute 13-14% of the Indian population. If you read newspapers and listen to lectures and talks on the state of Muslims in India, often by Muslim intellectuals and leaders, the perception that you will most certainly form is that Muslims in India are living in a state of discomfort, anxiety and fear. You will see that Muslims inevitably have grievances about discrimination, injustice, backwardness, and recently of an atmosphere of growing intolerance.

If you analyze the issue more deeply, you will realize that these concerns are quite unwarranted and they tell only the superficial aspect of the matter; they do not reveal the real picture or the whole picture of the Muslim community in India.

## **Socio-Economic Conditions of Present Muslims**

I was reading an interview of Mr. Abusaleh Shariff, an economist and an analyst of Muslim conditions in India. He said at a conference in 2014, "Newly educated Muslims have already become aware that future jobs and satisfying professional lives are to be found more in India than abroad." I think this one statement by an economist of great repute tells us of the enormous possibilities that are present here in India for Muslims to realize their dreams and to fulfil their potentials and aspirations. This is because of the numerous opportunities that India offers to Muslims.

"I have never come across a meritorious and diligent Muslim who has not progressed in India." This is the

observation of Raazia Siddiqui, a young Muslim woman who is currently working in a multinational corporation in Delhi. Similarly, Suhail Baghdadi, a marketing consultant from Mumbai, says, "As a Muslim I would choose to be in India rather than in any other country of the world." A Delhi-based journalist Rana Ayyub says, "Today, no one is surprised if a Muslim is progressive, if a Muslim has broken barriers. The Muslim society has moved out of the syndrome of being victims." These are real voices of Muslims who like many others are flourishing in this country.

The social, educational and economic conditions of Muslims in India have improved vastly compared to the past. If you ask any Muslim friend or acquaintance about his family's standard of living in the previous generations, he would definitely note that the standard of living of his family in the present is far better compared to the previous generations. My own family belongs to the district of Azamgarh which is in eastern U.P. After independence in 1947, Azamgarh was considered one of the backward districts of India. But today the reverse is true. Today if you go to Azamgarh, you will be amazed and surprised. English schools have opened up in almost every village. And even remote villages are dotted by schools of very high standard.

### **The Importance of Education**

The socio-economic condition of Muslims is often the subject of discussions whenever people talk about empowering Muslims. The root of everything is education. Everything is entirely dependent on education. Today if in India many Muslim families are living in poverty, it is due to a lack of education. The biggest issue confronting even Muslim women in India is not triple talaq, it is education, especially their enrolment in institutes of higher learning. Frank Islam, an Indian-American businessman and philanthropist, said in an article in the context of India, "For the individual Muslim woman, education is empowering. It builds self-esteem and

confidence. It is an opportunity creator and a bridge to the future." Education means not only religious education which the Muslims gather at the madrasa or the Islamic seminary. Education also means modern scientific or secular education which we gather at schools and colleges. Here the Christian community is, I think, a model for the Muslim community because they have established many good quality schools all over India. I myself have studied at Mater Dei Convent, which is a school run by Christian nuns. I think such educational infrastructure of very high standard needs to be established by the leaders of the Muslim community to uplift the Muslim masses.

Many a times, you will hear Muslims speaking of external reasons for the lack of their greater prosperity in India. But Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, an Islamic scholar, stresses the importance of self-reconstruction and internal consolidation. He says that if Muslims have to progress in the long run, they must develop the psyche of blame thyself instead of laying the burden of their problems on others. He says that no community advances merely by being granted favours from outside, but it advances by utmost dedication in academic and economic fields – which removes all obstacles of prejudice and discrimination.

### **The 'Intolerance' Debate**

Another issue which is very extensively covered in the media especially recently in relation to Muslims is the rising atmosphere of intolerance. This issue requires serious consideration: Has India as a country really become intolerant? Have Indian people become intolerant and are religions which are not the religion of the majority, being targeted and marginalized? I have been reading several reports and surveys. I came across these very two important reports which I think tell the real situation on the ground.

There is one report by Freedom House 2016, which ranks India as a "free" country based on political rights and civil

liberty. It says civil liberty includes the freedom of religious institutions and communities to practice their faith and to freely express themselves. The Human Freedom Index (HFI) of 2016 assigns India top scores on both freedom to establish religious organizations and autonomy of running these religious organizations.

These rights are granted to us by our Constitution. A senior advocate Arvind Datar puts things into perspective in this matter when he said that a nation becomes intolerant or a nation should be considered intolerant if its constitution is intolerant and if its institutions are intolerant, which is certainly not the case in India. There have been certain unfortunate incidents, which need to be condemned. But I think we must not generalize those incidents and form our opinions about our country based on those stray incidents.

### **Qur'anic Guidance in Times of Adversity**

And even if for the sake of argument, there is adversity and unpleasantness, and it is difficult for Muslims to stay India, then what is the Islamic way to respond? Muslims claim that they are the followers of Islam. They must refer to the life of the Prophet and their scripture to understand the guidance that their scripture gives them if they face difficulties and problems. During the Makkan phase of his mission, which lasted for 13 years, the Prophet of Islam was inflicted with various atrocities, unlike which Muslims can imagine today. What was the guidance that the Qur'an gave to him in those very difficult times? The Qur'an did not tell the Prophet to come out on the streets and to protest, complain and to speak against the opponents who were creating problems for the Prophet. Instead the Qur'an told the Prophet to perform the duty he had been assigned and "to be patient for the sake of your Lord." (74:7) The Prophet did not come out on the streets of Makkah with his Muslim followers who were about a hundred at that time. He did not gather them and started raising demonstrations and slogans against the authority. Instead he focused entirely on his mission, the result of his

patient efforts in disseminating the message of Islam was that he gained many companions who later went on to write the history of Islam.

The religion of Islam teaches us to think positively in the face of adversity. We should follow the path of reconstruction and adopt nonviolent activism for the achievement of our goals.

### **Positive and Constructive Leadership**

Today, we Muslims in India, the young Muslims in particular, do not need leaders or representatives who continually give us the dose of negativity and who repeatedly tell us that we are subjugated and suppressed in this country. We do not need such leaders. They are only doing a disservice to the Indian Muslim community. We also need to completely disown all those rabble rousing leaders who stoke the emotions of the Muslim masses and misguide them into doing destructive activities in the name of religion.

We need leaders of the like of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, who can guide us at critical moments, who can motivate us and inspire us to do something positive and constructive for our country. And if there are problems that we are surrounded by, then we want these leaders to tell us how to come out of those problems. We do not need those leaders who tell us that we are in a sorry state of affairs and that we should register complaints and protests. We do not want leaders to do that. We want leaders to provide us solutions to our problems. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan says that we Muslims in India need to live as a giver community and not as a taker community. At this juncture, we need leaders and thinkers who can develop a positive and constructive outlook in us, which is essential for the progress of both our community and country.

(Maria Khan is doing a PhD in Islamic Studies and is a member of Centre for Peace and Spirituality in New Delhi)