The publication of the Sachar Committee Report on the ‘development deficit’ among the Muslims of India in November 2006 marked an important turning point in the political history of contemporary India. It opened up new ways of talking about religious minorities and their experiences of deprivation, exclusion and marginality. The Report also generated a good deal of discussion and debate on the ‘Muslim question’ in Indian academia and the popular press. This new discourse articulated Muslims’ aspirations in a language that was closer to the everyday realities of a large majority of Indian Muslims and shifted the focus from questions of identity to those of equity and citizenship. It also provided the Religions and Development Research Programme with an entry point through which we could introduce our work to Indian academics and policy makers. We organized a two day seminar on The development experience of religious communities in March 2007. This seminar was primarily to establish communication with those within the academic community of India working on related themes.

To take this initiative ahead and to forge ways of communicating with policy makers and academics working in the area of religions and development in the country, we organized another seminar on 8th and 9th of February 2008 focusing on India’s religious minorities: democracy, development and citizenship. The seminar was jointly coordinated by the country coordinator, Professor Surinder S. Jodhka, and Professor Zoya Hasan, Member of the National Commission of Minorities (NCM).

The Sachar Committee Report provided us with an all-India picture of the development status of Muslim communities that was derived primarily from official data sets. The ground realities are, however, much more complex and diverse. The Muslim population of India is not only internally differentiated but Muslim communities also have diverse origins and important cultural differences. The experience of other religious minorities – Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and smaller groups – also merits our attention. A comparative understanding of their experience will certainly enrich our understanding of the minority question in India.

‘Minority’ and ‘majority’ are relational categories. They refer to relations of power and domination, of prejudice and exclusion, as they evolve historically in a given social and political context. Though one can identify several different matrices of majority-minority relations, it is the religious one that has come to acquire prominence in India.

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Opening session

The seminar was organized on the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and generated a good deal of interest among the students and faculty of JNU and other educational institutes of the city, which was reflected in the large turn-out. Though we were expecting around 100 people, more than 200 turned up for the inaugural session of the seminar, which was chaired by the Chairman of the University Grants Commission, Professor S.K. Thorat. The Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities, Shri Mohammed Shafi Qureshi, was the guest of honour and Professor Mushirul Hasan, Vice-Chancellor Jamia Millia Islamia University, delivered the keynote address.

The day began with a welcome note and a brief introduction to the RaD Programme and the themes of the seminar session by the Country Coordinator, Professor Surinder S. Jodhka. In his inaugural speech, Shri Mohammed Shafi Qureshi underlined that the struggle of minorities in India today is a struggle for inclusion in the political, economic and social realm. Building an inclusive society is a challenge not only for the minorities but also for the country, particularly in the new globalized era. Thus the minorities need to actively engage and interact with the state system.

While it is important for the individual citizen to respect the law of the land, he also emphasized that it is imperative for the state to build ‘a society where minority cultures are respected and where our cultural diversity is celebrated’. However, this is not merely a cultural imperative. The building of a plural society also requires giving equal opportunities for development to different communities and ensuring a life free of discrimination. Religious minorities also need to be equally represented at different levels of the democratic institutions of governance.

Professor Thorat underlined some of these points in his remarks. The available literature, he noted, clearly points to the fact that there are disparities between religious and caste groups. Mainstream development economists tend to locate the reasons for deprivation in a general lack of resources. However, there are situations which show that, even when resources are provided, inequality persists. He argued that there is evidence to show that religious minorities experience denial of equal rights and thus one can argue that their deprivations are because of their group identity. Historically and even today, some groups have been denied opportunities. However, over the last 60 years, there has been a growing awareness of these rights and various groups have begun to make demands for an equal share in development and political representation.

He also pointed to the crucial need to link social science research with policy concerns. While policy makers have the responsibility of ensuring equitable and inclusive development, social scientists need to work on different aspects of social and economic processes and identify diverse ways in which specific minority groups are discriminated against. The argument that discrimination is a source of inequality also needs to be further substantiated by empirical research.

Delivering his key-note address on the theme Future of India’s religious minorities, Prof. Mushirul Hassan talked of Islam in South Asia as a living tradition. The social and cultural contexts have changed, but the tradition remains. He said that Islam existed not through rigid negations, but rather through adaptations. Islam has been a dynamic faith
experiencing continuous change. For example, though law and religion are seen as being coterminous in Islam, law has undergone change in the face of the changing situation. There has been a longstanding tradition of interpreting Islam liberally and reformulating some of the positions of Islamic jurisprudence. He pointed out that in the past the Shariat constantly changed, although this tradition had been forgotten. This had happened because of the growing nexus between Muslim orthodoxy and the ruling elites. Those who consider Islam to be rigid and static are incorrect. He repeated that the situation in contemporary South Asia calls for reinterpretation of both theology and jurisprudence.

Referring to the nationalist freedom struggle, he argued that Muslims shared the vision of a composite nation. The Ja-maat position of unity of all the religions has been well articulated by Maulana Azad. He said that Islam was in a confident partnership with diverse religions. The spirit of service is the true spirit of religion, and it is this that brings people together. The Quran advocates multi-culturalism, which has been upheld by the Sufi tradition in India by participating in the Hindu religion. Muslim engagements with composite nationalism continue even today. Indian Muslims accept secularism and hold on to a commitment to ecumenism and social justice. Jamaat-a-Islamia accepts that democracy protects them from authoritarianism.

**Questions of definition**

Questions of minorities and minority rights have not been easy for modern democratic nation states founded on liberal values of individual citizenship and civil rights. Such questions inevitably bring in the tricky question of group rights and recognition vis-à-vis individual freedom. While it is easier for the state to deal with individual citizens, dealing with particular communities is much more difficult. However, given that multicultural and plural societies invariably have groups with unequal positions in the nation’s economy and polity, the democratic political process inevitably has to deal with such realities.

In her presentation political scientist Neera Chandhoke focussed on the question of ‘equality’ in relation to secularism and democracy. She argued that the aim of secularism as it had historically developed in India was to secure equality of all religious denominations. In other words, she saw the concept of secularism as a derivative one. It derives from the principle of democratic equality. By implication, unless a polity subscribes to the principle of equality, there is nothing that can compel it to subscribe to secularism. Conversely the principle of secularism is justified by the reference to equality. This justification carries distinct advantages. For one, thinking through the concept of equality allows us to conceptualise minority rights as an integral part of constitutional arrangements. The advantage of placing secularism within the principle of equality is that equality itself guarantees that individuals and groups who are vulnerable to majority diktats are to be protected against majoritarianism. Majorities cannot be allowed to ride roughshod over the rights of minorities. If this is so, then the grant of minority rights vide article 29 and article 30 of the fundamental rights chapter of the constitution is perfectly legitimate, simply because it protects minorities against majority opinions that can violate individual rights. Minority rights are accordingly not a violation of ‘secularism as equality of all religions’, as some political groups contended; these
rights concretise the principle of equality of all persons irrespective of what a majority believes at a particular point in time.

In another presentation Bishnu Mohapatra, also a political scientist, raised more practical questions in relation to the dynamics of minority rights in a democratic polity like India. Posing the title of his presentation rather provocatively as ‘who can speak for minorities and what is speak-able in the name of minorities?’ he argued that minority rights can be seen as part of current idiom; but it can also be seen as part of the expansion of rights discourse. He said that arguments for improved rights are weakened if someone else speaks for minorities. For minority rights to receive greater political priority, it is important to ask the question, ‘who actually speaks for minority rights?’

Mohapatra further raised a question about the nature of ‘minority’ as a political actor. In the Indian historical context one can find some interesting references to the subject. For example, in the Constitutional Assembly debates, one comes across categories like a ‘good minority’ and a ‘bad minority’. What, he asked, is the basis for defining a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ minority? A democratic citizen, he suggested, is a complaining citizen, a demanding citizen. A member of a minority as a democratic citizen is and should be a demanding citizen, but such ‘behaviour’ can also make a ‘bad citizen’.

The so-called mainstream majoritarian political culture in India has, Mohapatra argued, made some of the genuine democratic concerns of minorities ‘unspeakable’. One cannot, for example, suggest affirmative action in favour of religious minorities, because they are made to appear as ‘alternatives to the nation’. The Sachar Committee has brought the unspeakable back onto the agenda. If minorities are to participate as true citizens, they will wish that the contemporary political and economic system is sensitive to their aspirations. They will also make demands on the system and will thus inevitably be demanding and noisy citizens.

In another presentation Satish Deshpande offered a sociological perspective on ‘minorities’. Minorities, he argued, are not constituted merely by numbers. Groups or communities become minorities only when they experience social and political vulnerability within the larger society. Such a group or community also faces, or can face, discrimination, which invariably results in their economic and educational backwardness. Minorities also have a sense of being different and are perceived as such by others.

Methodologically speaking, discrimination is one of the hardest processes to analyse, while gathering evidence on backwardness is easier. However, there are also questions of internal differentiation within minority groups and evidence is often contradictory. As an example of such complexities, he presented data from the 61st round of the National Sample Survey on the manner in which scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of different religious communities fared with respect to different indicators of social and economic development.

Substantive questions of discrimination and backwardness are indeed complicated, even legally. Moreover, defining minorities has been far from easy. Responding to the recent pronouncement by the Courts on ‘who can be treated as a member of a minority in India’, Zoya Hassan dealt with some definitional problems relating to India’s religious minorities in the country’s legal discourse and the consequences these definitional problems might have for policy discourse on religious minorities. Who is a
minority in India? How is the term defined in the Constitution, or by state practices and convention? What are the criteria used? She argued that, on the one hand, judicial verdicts and political pronouncements are questioning the definition and identification of minorities and by implication minority rights and policies towards minorities. On the other hand, there is a discernible shift in the approach to minorities, as reflected in a new focus on minority welfare and the introduction of minority-targeted development schemes, even as there continues to be opposition from communal forces to the implementation of specific schemes aimed at addressing the deprivation faced by minorities.

The judicial concept of minorities in India is, she pointed out, numerical. Unfortunately the Indian Government is paying considerable attention to projecting this definition in order for minorities to be clearly defined, with the intention of obviating any confusion. Disagreeing with the official proposal to define minorities at the ‘State’ (province) level, Hassan suggested that, while the definition of State boundaries is important for the purpose of recognising the rights of linguistic minorities, there is no congruence between religious identity and State boundaries. This clearly shows that religious minorities are dispersed. For example, there are Muslims in U.P., Bihar, Kerala and Assam, but they also have a significant presence in other States. The way out of such questions will only be found if we move towards a more substantive definition of ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ in terms of power relations, she concluded.

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The Sikh minority

In terms of number, the Sikh community presents an interesting case for analyzing the question of minority status. While the Sikhs are less than 2 percent of the population of India, they are a numerical majority in the state of Punjab, where they constitute around 60 percent of the total population. Using the context of a recent pronouncement by the Courts against treating Sikhs as a minority in the state of Punjab, Surinder Jodhka and Amit Thorat asked the question ‘what makes the Sikhs a minority?’ Their main contention was that the minority question needs to be seen in a larger sociological and political context. We also need to take into consideration the processes and historical factors that have framed the self-identity of a given religious group or community. When and how do people begin to see themselves as a ‘minority’ or a ‘majority’?

Though numerically Sikhs have always been a small group, they have rarely seen themselves as a minority. Historically, they had a sense of pride and did not view their position as being marginal in the larger power structure. However, in the 1980s the internal discourse among the Sikhs shifted from ‘a discourse of pride and power’ to ‘a discourse on demographics and discrimination’. The reasons for this shift were several. First, institutionalization of the nation-state over the previous several decades had made the local and regional level identities less significant. In the larger context of national politics and the national economy, the Sikh elite realized that the community they represented was a small demographic minority.

Secondly, social and economic changes taking place in rural Punjab, from where the Sikh political elite came, aided this growing minority consciousness. Development of capitalism in agriculture helped farmers consolidate their economic position but also
brought them in touch with the larger market economy. They experienced internal differentiation. The rich and powerful wanted to move out of the villages into the larger national economy, where they had to compete with others on a very different basis. The growing fragmentation of villages and the pressure from below that accompanied the disintegration of traditional social structure, as well as growing assertiveness among Dalits, has only heightened this process.

There were two more papers on the Sikhs. Himadri Banerjee presented a paper on ‘Sikhs of Eastern and North-Eastern India’ and Virinder Kalra on the ‘diaspora and Sikh identity.’

The Sikhs of Eastern and North-Eastern India are a very small community, comprising only 1 percent of the population in the region. Banerjee said that, amongst the Sikhs of the Northeast, there are a significant number of indigenous Sikhs alongside those who have migrated from Punjab. He described the diversity amongst the Sikhs in the region, arguing that among this group are Sikhs in both urban and rural areas, and Sikhs who speak Assamese, Hindi and Punjabi. Banerjee also described diversity in terms of the religious rituals practiced by Sikhs. His research emphasizes the multi-layered, hybrid and hierarchical nature of religious organization amongst North-Eastern Sikhs. He also spoke about the importance of caste as a marker amongst this group.

Speaking about the historical evolution of this community, Banerjee mentioned in particular the mobilization of the Ramgarhia (a caste group among the Sikhs) as having had an impact on the community. He also mentioned the Sikh sweeper communities and emphasized the role of the colonial state in the development of the Sikh community in this region, including the ways in which British policy treated different groups of Sikhs differently. Banerjee concluded that the Sikhs of the North-East are a complex, fragmented, hierarchical and casteist community.

Virinder Kalra began his presentation on the influences of a growing diaspora on Sikh identity by drawing attention to the fact that nations create a majority and minorities through processes of classification, censuses and democratic politics. He emphasized the fact that majorities are also socially constructed. His paper focused on the question of how these relationships and categories get reconfigured when the nation-state is transcended. Kalra argued that religious groups in particular often transcend national boundaries both physically and ideologically. He argued that, for Sikhs in particular, transnational circuits are very important.

Commenting on the discourse of ‘minority-ism’ amongst Sikhs, Kalra pointed to struggles over the turban as an example. Such struggles have often taken the form of transnational mobilizations. The transnational nature of Sikh mobilizations may also be related to the fact that Sikhs are a religious group without a nation-state. Transnationalism has provided a framework in which such groups can operate and mobilize. He spoke about the issue of cultural rights and the fact that liberal democracy has a hard time dealing with this set of rights, briefly outlining some of the debates. He then went on to explore the question of what was ‘Sikh’ about Sikh religious minority status in the US, UK and France, and to talk about specific mobilizations amongst Sikhs in these countries.
Internal differences: minorities, genders, classes

The first session of the second day started with a focus on the issue of gender among religious minorities in India. The first speaker, Julie Thekkudan, spoke on ‘Gender and citizenship among Christians in India’, based on her empirical study of the Christian community in Delhi.

She argued that, for women, the practice of citizenship is defined and at the same time limited by religious concerns. From a feminist viewpoint, this raises several questions. Who sets the boundaries within which debates and discussions on furthering/curtailing the practice of citizenship occur? Do Christian women have the agency to question and thereby broaden the existing practice of citizenship within the community? Does the Christian Church give credence to women’s agency for re-defining citizenship? The notion of citizenship and the practice of it have historically implied a dismantling of existing structures of oppression and replacing them with more egalitarian and inclusive forms of membership in a nation state. In the Indian context, the prevailing notion of citizenship is an outcome of religious concerns within the fabric of Indian society.

As revealed by her empirical work, Christian women enjoy better status than women in other communities. Among the religious communities of India, Christians have the highest sex ratio (994 females per 1000 males), a sign that women in the Christian community have enjoyed a better status. However, she also found the Church in India to be a largely male-dominated institution. Although women constitute the majority in congregations, they are not recognized as equals with men. In rural areas, there is clear segregation during Church services. Though women are principals and managers of girls’ institutions, men nominate their boards of governors and managing committees, with bishops (all men) as chairmen. The kind of activities that fall to women are concerned with traditional programmes that have little influence on the more important sides of the life of the Church. Women serve the Church through fund raising and social service activities, but not through participating in decision-making bodies. Some women are on Church committees and councils, but certainly not in numbers commensurate with their membership in congregations. Surprisingly, the Christian women she interviewed overwhelmingly felt that women do not have the time to participate in Church activities. They seemed to be rather reluctant to initiate a debate, even amongst fellow women, on existing gender relations within the community. Gender solidarity across Christian denominations, which could provide the impetus for an overarching discourse on gender within the community, also seems to be lacking.

Nida Kirmani’s work had a different focus, as she explored the concepts of insecurity and social exclusion and reflected on the many layers within them through her analysis of narratives from the women of Zakir Nagar, a Muslim-majority locality in South Delhi. She attempted to place ‘Muslim women’ within their context by exploring the ways in which respondents constructed their identities through narratives about their lives and their neighbourhood. These narratives point to the existence of multiple and shifting identities and the different ways in which different bases, including religion, gender and class, shape women’s individual identities.

The way people experience discrimination and share their experience of it, as well as the kinds of insecurities they face had not only been affected by their religious identity, but also by their age, class and gender. For older residents, their memories of religious-
based violence often began with Partition. For younger residents, the recent Gujarat pogrom stood out as clear evidence of the potential dangers faced by Muslims in India today. For those living in the slums, economic insecurity was coupled with and seemed often to overshadow religion-based insecurities. Therefore, though feelings of social exclusion and insecurity were common to most of the respondents, there was no uniform way in which this insecurity was expressed. Thus she illustrated multifarious ways in which women’s identities interacted with each other to produce different narratives of social exclusion.

The third presentation, on ‘State violence against women in contemporary India’ had a different focus. Ritu Menon talked about the degree and extent of sexual violence faced by women of minority religions in Jammu and Kashmir and North-East India. This violence is often perpetrated by the security forces of the Indian state and is often ignored in the name of national security. Predictably, the most common response of the Indian state to such cases has been to deny that such violence occurs at all.

Dwelling on the larger context, Menon argued that, despite women having secured legal rights in modern societies, two forms of patriarchal control that mediate these rights prevail: private and public. Private patriarchy is based on the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life other than the household; in public patriarchy, while women are no longer excluded from the public arena, they are subordinated within it. Violence against women in the cases mentioned above was not only criminal and genocidal, but also shared prevailing social and psychological prejudices and became associated with communalism and ethnicity and in this way, she asserted, the state became a state above the law, with the result that there was no real hope of justice for the dead or brutalized.

In another paper on fish-workers in the south Indian state of Kerala, J John focused on the role played by a section of the Church in fish-workers’ campaigns against the marginalization induced by the introduction of new technology and modern organization of fisheries. "Religion, he suggested, constituted the consciousness of the fishermen and influenced the way they represented themselves, nature and the larger society". Traditionally, the Latin Catholic priests had been the moral and political custodians and leaders of both coastal communities and the Church. However, they often also legitimized deprivation. In contrast, in the 1980s, Kerala witnessed a radicalization of a section of the Church at parish level, which was associated with the involvement of priests, nuns and middle class professionals in mobilizing fishing communities using the idiom of faith and the institutions of the Church. This led to massive struggles by fishing people, demanding legislation demarcating zones for categories of fishers using different crafts and gear and protection of marine resources.

The fishers’ struggle in Kerala was to establish space, a territory in the sea for their livelihoods. They demanded participation and recognition in policy making; sought from the state justice in the distribution of material resources; and used the agitation as a crucible for self-realization (group identity) by articulating the state/people contradiction. During this process, they simultaneously negated and affirmed both ‘community’ and ‘class’. ‘Church’, ‘priest’ and ‘community’ were employed as organizing principles; but eventually people transcended their reliance on the Church, priest and community as agencies that construct meaning, acquiring agency for themselves. They ended up identifying a common class identity and eventually began to view themselves in terms of ‘social class unionism’.
The Muslim question

Though there were several papers on the Sikhs and Christians during this seminar, the academic and policy discourse on religious minorities in contemporary India has mostly been Muslim-centric. This was also reflected in the presentations and discussions in the seminar.

Muslims are the largest religious minority in India, with more than 13 percent of the total population. As was revealed by the Sachar Committee Report, they, as a section of the population, suffer from ‘development deprivation’. In contrast, other minorities, particularly the Sikhs and Christians, fare better than the majority religion on most indicators of development.

Using household level data generated by a survey he carried out in Kolkata, Sohel Firdos spoke on the ‘socio-spatial exclusion’ of Muslims in the city. His survey tried to find out the socio-economic status of slum dwellers, the deficiencies in public goods and services provided to them, the assets available to them and the nature of their vulnerability in situations of stress. Since there was a considerable overlap between slum areas and the areas inhabited by Muslims, he also examined how public policies are leading to the relative deprivation of Muslims, in terms of their access to a service like education. He underlined the point that the new urban economies of the city are excluding a majority of the Muslims from employment because of their association with certain traditional occupations, such as baking, garment making and kite making. His findings suggest that such processes are accentuating existing exclusion by creating it afresh, as a result of previously non-poor people falling into poverty.

Azra Razzack (Jamia Millia Islamia) presented a paper on the issue of identity and the educational discourse among Indian Muslims. The question she posed was ‘whether being a Muslim contributed to educational deprivation’. Her research found that, in many cases, religious identity does affect a person’s access to education. Razzack spoke about Muslim girls not having access to educational facilities because of hesitation amongst some families to send their daughters outside their localities. Many Muslims live in slums, which also hinders their access to education. Schools also tend to be mono-cultural, privileging one community over others, often the Hindu community, which leads to further exclusion of Muslim students. Similarly, textbooks contain anti-Muslim sentiments. She said that some of the teachers with whom she had spoken mentioned their own inability to deal with diversity in the classroom.

As a consequence of all these factors, many Muslims choose to send their children to ‘denominational schools’, the emergence of which is a reflection of Muslims’ feeling of social and political insecurity. Such schools also meet the ‘identity needs’ of the community. Thus being a Muslim remains a defining factor in people’s access to education.

In another paper on Muslims, Yoginder S. Sikand focused on the major discourses on the community with a focus on continuities, changes and challenges. First and foremost, Indian Muslims are almost always seen through the discourse on ‘majority-minority’ that has evolved historically in India. Second, the internal discourse of various
Muslim organizations and their articulations of Muslim concerns and demands are often addressed to the Indian state, and only occasionally to wider Indian society. They also use the logic of ‘minority’ rights in their articulation of ‘the Muslim question’. Finally, there is also a discourse that looks at particular marginalized groups within the larger category defined as the ‘Indian Muslims’.

Maintaining the sequence mentioned above, Sikand argued that the creation and shaping of the categories of ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’, ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ appeared to have been a careful strategy to bolster the authority of entrenched elites in the name of ‘community’. In the Hindu case, ‘upper’ caste elites, a relatively small but immensely powerful minority among the Hindus, use the logic of ‘Hindu majoritarianism’ to maintain, promote and justify their hegemony, both within the ‘Hindu’ community (vis-à-vis the ‘low’ caste majority) and in the country as a whole (particularly vis-à-vis the Muslims). Likewise, Muslim elites present themselves as spokesmen of the ‘Muslim minority’, using the logic of minority rights to garner privileges and concessions for themselves, albeit in the name of the Muslim community as a whole.

The immense and continuing significance of social categorization on the basis of religion (as opposed, for instance, to region, language or caste), that continues to be backed by the Indian state, must be seen as reflecting the efforts of Hindu and Muslim elites, minorities among their ‘co-religionists’, to promote their own respective fortunes using religion and religious-based identities. Yet, social categories, once they come into circulation and become part of the social ‘common-sense’, exercise their own influence and have their own real consequences, no matter how stiffly socially-engaged academics and activists might critique them. The same is true for the notions of ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ as representing the ‘majority’ and the single largest ‘minority’ community in India respectively.

Turning to Muslim organizations’ articulation of demands, Skiand argued that the so-called all-India Muslim leadership has always seen the problems and issues of the Muslims primarily through a religious lens. Viewing Muslims simply in terms of religion is a reflection of the fact that education in most traditional madrasas remains confined to study of the Islamic normative scriptural tradition, largely ignoring contemporary social reality and with no space for the social sciences. This reflects their view that religion should be the foremost concern to both individual Muslims and the Muslim community as a whole.

Recent years, however, have witnessed a considerable stirring for change in the Muslim community. This can be attributed, in part, to growing literacy and a gradually expanding Muslim middle-class. In addition, political mobilization across religious lines is growing, as India witnesses the growing challenge of Hindutva, which has forced Muslims to realize the importance of educational and economic empowerment if they are not to be turned into the ‘new Untouchables’. Some of this increased awareness is also attributable to work by NGOs, who belatedly have been gradually waking up to the realization that Muslims are a marginalized community with whom they need to work.

Finally, in terms of relationships between the State and Muslims, Sikand said that even when, as in the case of the Sachar Report, state-appointed commissions highlight the pathetic overall economic and educational conditions of the Muslims, and appeal to the state to live up to its Constitutional obligations vis-à-vis the Muslim citizens of India, the response of the state has been lukewarm, if not wholly indifferent. Recommendations
such as those in the Sachar Report are, he concluded, helping to shift the terms of public discourse about the ‘Muslim question’ from religion and religious identity to issues of economic, educational, social and political marginalization of Muslims.

In a related paper Christophe Jaffrelot looked at the reception of the Sachar Committee Report by the ‘Sangh Parivar’, the Hindu right-wing in India.

Locating the question of Muslim representation in a historical context, he argued that due to the growing incidence of communal violence during the 1970s and 1980s, the Muslims in India had witnessed downward mobility and had often begun to experience discrimination in the job market. The Sachar Committee Report reconfirmed this. However, given that Indian Muslims are internally differentiated and different sections of the Muslim population experience discrimination differently, it would, he acknowledged, be very difficult for the Indian government to evolve a policy of positive discrimination in favour of the Muslims as a religious minority.

Recommendations in the Sachar Committee Report have also been summarily rejected by the Sangh Parivar, which reacted to the Report by articulating three kinds of arguments: first, what was written in the Report, according to Sangh Parivar’s leaders is not true; second, Muslims had received the treatment that they deserved; third, even if the report is right, positive discrimination programmes could not (and should not) apply to the Muslims. Jaffrelot also argued that the slow implementation of Report could be because of this opposition by the Hindu right wing.

The seminar also included a paper on Muslim representation in the Indian democratic political process. Adnan Farooqui offered an analysis of the Indian electoral system from the viewpoint of Muslim empowerment and representation in the legislature. He focused specifically on the role of various political parties and the problems associated with current trend in the Indian polity, particularly the rise of Hindu right wing politics. Political systems, he argued, have the capacity to exert an autonomous effect that may foster or prevent the consolidation of democracy. The Indian electoral system is key to patterns of representation and hence to power sharing. With an emphasis on the role of electoral systems, the structure of party competition, the impact of campaign communications, and how legislative candidates are nominated and selected, he presented a picture of the relative position of Muslims in the post-independence era. Along with these effects, he also gave an account of voting behaviour, the structure of political cleavages and patterns of electoral participation by Indian Muslims.

Some of the interesting questions that his paper tried to address were ‘Is the Indian electoral system exclusionary for Muslims, who are distributed between different parts of the countries in such a way that they are a minority almost everywhere?’ Perhaps, because Muslims are fewer in number and territorially dispersed, they are systematically under-represented in relation to their actual percentage of the population. Is this the reason why in the context of the Indian polity, their voice and representation tends to be weak and invisible?

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Acknowledgements
As mentioned above, the two day seminar attracted a large number of participants from different educational institutions and activist organizations. We were able to invite a good number of scholars working on India’s religious minorities. Also several distinguished scholars participated in the seminar without presenting papers. Among those who chaired different sessions were Professor T.K. Oommen, a member of the Sachar Committee, Professor Gurharpal Singh of the University of Birmingham and some members of the Religion and Development Research Programme’s Country Advisory Group. The sessions generated a good amount of lively discussion, with students and others participating with questions and comments. The subjects of religion and the development/ deprivation of religious communities have not been talked about much in the Indian academy. Active and enthusiastic participation was perhaps a reflection of the growing interest in the subject.

Finally I would like acknowledge the active support we received from a large number of students in the organization of the seminar. Apart from Avinash Kumar, research associate in the programme, the following students worked hard to make the seminar a success: Hia Sen, Salah P., Pramod Kumar Rout, Tapsi Malhotra, Shital Aggarwal, Manjinder Singh, Niharika, Natbar Garada, Manzoor Ali, Adnan Farooqi and Pradyumna Bora.

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