

The American View of Indian Muslims

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The WikiLeaks release of the New Delhi US Embassy cables gives insight into what the US diplomats were making of conditions, events and personalities in our country. Whether one likes what they say or not, these are frank and honest opinions - they are expected to convey correct information to Washington.

The most important is a long cable on the condition of Muslims in India, dated 2nd December 2005(<http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2005/12/05NEWDELHI9127.html>), in response to Washington's request to provide information on Islamic extremist groups.

At the outset, the Embassy says: "India's Muslim population ...suffers from higher rates of poverty than most other groups in India, and can be the victims of discrimination and prejudice. Despite this, the vast majority remains committed to the Indian State and seeks to participate in mainstream political and economic life". However, the Embassy notes with approval that: "India's vibrant democracy has ensured that the large Muslim community has a voice in politics, and recent elections have demonstrated that Muslim voters are courted actively by political parties.

With a Muslim President (Abdul Kalam) occupying the highest political position in the country, Muslims have been encouraged to seek political power in electoral and parliamentary politics, all but eliminating the appeal of violent extremism." On Muslims generally: "Although there are a wide variety of Islamic religious, political and social organizations, most Muslims join or support secular groups without a specific Islamic identity. Muslims generally join secular parties as the best way to ensure that the BJP does not attain political power, although the BJP does have Muslim members as well".

It says our education system: "increasingly integrates Muslim students into the mainstream and has spawned a growing and prosperous Muslim middle class. Muslims, like Indians generally, rely on education and English language competence to provide access to increased job opportunities". On the transition from a traditional society with widespread discrimination and barriers to growth, it states that: "While Muslims are often victimized and discriminated against, traditional barriers to cultural integration are breaking down.

Young and dynamic Muslims are popular culture heroes in sports (Sania Mirza) and Bollywood (Sharukh Khan and many others). The message for young Muslims is that they are Indians first and Muslims second, and that they can fully participate in Indian society and culture and win the adulation and respect of other Indians, regardless of religion."

Kashmir is the exception: "The Kashmiri sense of separateness permeates the programs and manifestos of Kashmir's Islamic groups, and Kashmiri Muslims have not embraced Indian Muslims' aspirations for national integration. Moreover, many Kashmiri Muslims have parted company with their Indian Muslim counterparts and embraced Wahabi Islam during the insurgency. While Indian Muslims feel compelled to express support for their co-religionists in Kashmir, they tend to look upon Kashmiris with suspicion and try to keep the Kashmiri cause at arm's length." The cable states that: "In addition, Kashmiri adults have largely tired of violence and extremism and are less receptive to terrorist recruitment.

In such an environment, children are more pliable and less resistant. They can also provide a lifetime of service, in a conflict that seems to go on without end. Other Islamic extremist groups have a similar dilemma, in that Islamic extremism is not popular in India and most adults are not interested. This forces extremists to pitch to young and naive audiences who may be more amenable."

There is a considerable amount of detail about the recruitment – some of it forceful and violent - of young Kashmiri boys as "cannon fodder". Thus the Embassy remarks: "There are two distinct threads of Islamic extremism in India, which can overlap, but are largely separate. Kashmiri groups, which are both Islamic and ethnic, and non-Kashmiri groups which emphasize a primarily religious identity.

While Kashmiri groups have recruited boys under the age of 18, other extremist groups have concentrated on university students, who are often above the age of 18. Kashmir has been embroiled in terrorism for decades, exposing children to violence at an early age. Decades of conflict, a high casualty rate, and war-weariness have shrunk the pool of recruits for Kashmiri terrorist groups and they have turned to younger boys". Young blood seems easier to spill all over the country – not just in Kashmir!

The Embassy reports: "Muslim contacts tell us that young recruits in Kashmir are those who have been brutalized by violence, lost loved ones, or have personally experienced repression by the Indian security forces. Many are bent on revenge.

As in most war-torn areas, children brutalized by their environment can begin to see violence as a normal career path and can divorce it from any ideological justification. Non-Kashmiri recruits are said to be primarily from blue collar or poor families with limited education and from a rural or urban slum background.

They can find higher education to be a painful process and have trouble adjusting to a radically different environment, and can embrace radical Islam as a coping mechanism, as the Islamic groups welcome them and provide them with a warm and familiar environment."

Yet, in a cable of a month earlier 5th November 2005 (<http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2005/11/05NEWDELHI8751.html>), headed "Kashmiris quietly appreciative of Indian Army and Government earthquake aid" on the earthquake relief, it describes the excellent work and the appreciation of the locals for the Indian Army's work, and concludes: "One police contact told us quietly, " 'Now when we are alone or in private, we express thanks to God that we are Indians. We do not do so publicly.' "

The Embassy reports on extremist Indian Islamic groups, such as Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen Marqazi-Jamiyat-e-Ahal-e-Hadith (MJAHA), etc.

On the MJAHA, it states that it is "a nationwide organization for Muslims who subscribe to Wahabi Islam. Since the overwhelming majority of Indian Sunnis belong to the more liberal Barelvi and Deobandi schools, the Wahabi sect has relatively few adherents, and only a small segment of Indian Wahabis endorse the MJAHA and its views. The group is very small and press accounts have periodically linked it to bombings, most recently in Mumbai"

And that "SIMI was originally founded to provide spiritual guidance to Muslim university students, but drifted into extremist politics and terrorism, and was subsequently banned by the GOI in 2001. Individual SIMI members are periodically arrested and prosecuted, but the group is largely dormant."

The Embassy concludes by saying: "Outside Kashmir, Muslims are facing the same pressures for social mobility as non-Muslims. Most Indian children are under pressure to get into school, stay in school, and perform well there, in order to obtain higher education and access to well-paid jobs. Attempts by extremist groups to recruit children from Muslim homes are likely to run into a wall of opposition from parents who would see involvement in extremism as counter-productive and a threat to future success of their children.

This means that extremism is most attractive to children from families that are so poor that opportunities for education and advancement are all but non-existent. As the Indian economy continues to boom, the percentage of Muslim families who feel there is no hope for their children's' future is growing smaller, as is the pool of potential recruits." Amen!.

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