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# Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: The Case of Muslim Marginalisation in Kerala

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## ABSTRACT

*Separated by geography, history, language and culture from their co-religionists in other parts of India, Muslims in contemporary Kerala are in a better social position in many respects. However, within the state, compared to other religious communities, they are socially and educationally backwards. Despite their long history of socio-cultural harmonious life with other communities in the state and their share in its socio-economic development, their present situation of marginalisation in the state raises several questions regarding the links between the cultural processes and the generation, reproduction and contestation of social exclusions.*

*Analysing the marginalisation of Muslims in Kerala, this paper will try to explain the significance of the concept of Cultural capital and its interplay with other forms of capital as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1970; 1984). Considering their strong political participation and the changing economic status thanks to the large-scale migration to the Gulf country, the marginalisation of the largest minority in the state presents an interesting case for sociological explorations. This article would argue that in the absence of proper mobilisation of cultural capital, any measures to empower any community cannot be successful. It is further argued that taking cultural capital as a key concept in investigations of social inequality would help us to identify the sociocultural processes that generate and legitimise social exclusions in contemporary Indian society.*

**Keywords:** *Social Exclusion, Minority, Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Community empowerment.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the salient features of the Indian Constitution is its commitment to creating an egalitarian society on the principles of equality, freedom and social justice. It has tried to strike at the roots of traditional caste and community-based prejudices providing constitutional/ legal remedies to create new social patterns that could ensure an inclusive society. Envisaging a social system in which no discrimination based on gender, caste and religion is permitted, the Constitution is

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able to provide a clear understanding for the policy makers for addressing various problems related to poverty, relative deprivation and social exclusion. However, even after 75 years of the independence, different sections of the people in the country are still struggling to come out of the layers of social exclusion. Although various measures have been taken by the state to support such groups, the number of people facing poverty, unemployment, deprivation and marginalisation is alarmingly increasing.

As rightly noted by Yash Ghai (2001), 'In the last two decades there has been a marked shift from the limited protection against discrimination towards a more active engagement of the state in facilitating the development of minority cultures and promoting a political role for minorities.' However, in the case of India, there has always been an ambiguity in its policy towards the religious minorities. Consequently apart from the caste-based understating of the problem of social exclusion or the protective discrimination introduced in the form of reservation, a clear vision has been missing.

With the complex nature of Indian society characterised by different forms of diversities, any action aimed at bringing the marginalised communities to the centre or ending their backwardness shall be framed in the light of the multidimensionality of the marginalization. From participation in the development process to the relationship between and among the communities to the subjective sense of isolation, the focus shall be to identify the link between the economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions of poverty and deprivations. Without looking into the role of agency and social structure in creating deprivation or generating inclusion and exclusion in the society (Macpherson, 1997), the problem cannot be addressed. It is in this context that the concept of Cultural Capital as proposed by Bourdieu acquires new significance.

From Bourdieu's framework of social distinction, it can be drawn that nature of power in a bureaucratic structure and the democratic social system completely depends upon the possession of various types of capital – social, cultural and economic. Those who make better investments in culture capital may do well in accumulating economic capital and thus drawing better social networking or social capital as well. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 31) argued that cultural capital is used by dominant groups to mark cultural distance and proximity and exclude and recruit new occupants of high status positions. The power exercised through cultural capital is not a power of influence over specific decisions, or over the setting of the political agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Rather, it is first and foremost a power to shape other peoples' lives through exclusion and symbolic imposition (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Elaborating the concept, Bourdieu (1997) has distinguished between three forms of cultural capital: *embodied cultural capital*, which is the disposition to appreciate and understand cultural goods such as legitimate cultural attitudes, preferences, and behaviors that are internalized during the socialization process, *objectified cultural capital*, which refers to objects that require special cultural abilities to appreciate, such as works of art and transmittable goods such as books and computers and *institutionalized cultural capital*, which refers to educational credentials and the credentialing system such as the degrees and diplomas which certify the value of embodied cultural capital items. It is this 'institutionalised form' that serves as cultural capital used as a power resource as they determine one's employment opportunities and facilitate access to positions. How are these forms of capital distributed among the members of a social group or category may determine the level of its attainment in social distinction and consequently its chances to coming out of the margin.

## II. MARGINALIZATION OF MUSLIMS IN KERALA

Drawing the above theoretical background, the attempt is here to understand the marginalization of Muslims in Kerala. This southernmost state of India has invited international attention for its paradoxical developmental model which distinguishes the state from the rest of Indian states with consistent higher level of human development comparable with that of many advanced countries but with a much lower per capita income. The state has been ranked first among major States in India in the Human Development Index (HDI) continuously last many years. In 2021 too, Kerala has again topped the HDI among the Indian states with a score of 0.782 as per the Global Data Lab. Although the developmental discourses on Kerala model may presume that the developmental index has been representative of all the regions and the communities, several official documents and studies have exposed the disparities. The socio-economic status of Muslims in the state and the performance of the erstwhile Malabar region present interesting cases for the social exclusion studies.

Since religion has never been considered as a category to identify the problems of social exclusion in Kerala, there has been little initiative to document the marginalization of the community. And in the absence of the official data, there were no informed debates that could invite the attention of the policy makers. On the contrary, though recently, there have been attempts to exaggerate certain aspects of the development of the community and suppress any move to take up the issues related to their marginalization in the state. It was with the publication of report published by a three-member K.K. Narendran Commission constituted by the government of Kerala in 2000, and another the report by a Committee headed by Rajinder

Sachar constituted by the Government of India in 2006, the magnitude of problems related to the marginalization of the Muslims in Kerala could be brought to light.

The Sachar Committee which was tasked to study about the social, economic and educational status of Indian Muslims reported that Muslims who constitute 24.70 per cent of the total population of the state have got only 10.54 per cent representation in the State departments, the judiciary, public sector enterprises and universities and other autonomous institutions (Sachar Report, 2006). Prior to this, the report submitted by the Narendran Commission which studied about the adequacy of the representation of the backward classes in the services under public sector, found that Muslim representation in public services was in almost all cases below the reservation quota; there was an under-representation of 7,383 Muslims in the reserved quota in government services, as on August 1, 2000. The figure may be much higher after the lapse of several years of the report without implementing the recommendation of the report or any affirmative action taken towards changing the situation. The report highlighted that while the Ezhava, a major community among the backward classes secured better representation the Muslims, another major backward community has not fared so well (P.76, Narendra Commission Report).

Thus despite the overall developments of Kerala, the Muslims in the state who constitute about 27% of the population, are lagging behind all other communities. The marginalization of the community can also be inferred from the Human Development Report which has identified the district Malappuram, where 67 per cent of the total population is Muslims, as the lowest in HDI. In literacy, gross enrolment ratio, income index and education index, the figure for the district is lower than that of state average (Govt of Kerala, 2005).

### **III. CULTURAL CAPITAL AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY**

If cultural capital is to be measured by an index combining items such as the level of formal education of one's parents and grandparents and the engagements with the cultural events of the larger society (Bourdieu, 1974[1966], p. 327), it is not difficult to say that Muslims were very late to make any substantial investment in this form of capital. At the very introductory stage of modern secular education system in the state, there were problems of endowing on the available embodied cultural capital. As Professor K.A. Jaleel observed, there was some sort of inertia in the modern education because of the system's connection with the colonial interests. Since they saw their prosperity in the region ended at the hands of colonial powers, they were reluctant to have any kind of co-operation with them. Besides, the role of Christian missionaries in the secular education was also looked at with suspicion. Thus, as Jaleel pointed out, "there was a

fear among them that the new education will destroy their culture and religious faith. As English was the language of the westerners who were destroying them, it was not surprising that they showed reluctance to that also” (Jaleel, 2002).

In addition, the economic deprivations that Muslims particularly in Malabar started to experience with the colonial powers monopolizing trade and other major economic activities, made them hostile to the system and also unable to make any investment in the field. Also, there were discrepancies in the level of introduction of educational institutions in the erstwhile Malabar where majority of Muslims live and the other two regions, namely Travancore and Cochin. In fact, the initial handicaps that Malabar experienced under direct British rule has contributed to the low level cultural capital in the region. This may be further illustrated by population to school ratio in the two regions. Thus, by 1902, while it was 1,641 in Malabar, the figure was 801 in Travancore (Govt of Kerala, 2005). As a matter of fact, the differences in ratio of number of school going population to the number of schools and colleges is yet to be resolved.

The situation changed much after independence with the general concerns of cultural exclusion in the secular modern education system being allayed to a great extent. Thus, in 1948, the first college under Muslim management, namely Farook College was built near Calicut. Although such initiatives were gaining momentum in different parts of the state, the conditions of Muslims did not change much while comparing to other communities. The status of Muslim education did not change considerably mainly because they were yet to recognise the value of the cultural capital and its role in other socio-economic processes.

The moral habitus in which the particular set of axioms were operating, however started changing by the 1960s. Thus, by 1972 almost all eligible Muslim children were admitted in elementary schools while in 1960 the figure was as low as 47.30 per cent. However, they took some more time to recognise the changed conception of education as a means of placing one self in a better social position. In fact, they were to come to terms with the notion that education is no longer perceived as an end in itself but a means to an end. It is now looked at as the promoter of critical thinking and reasoning preparing a ‘good commodity’ for the market (Gore, 1975).

The perception of education as a means of inculcating values and ethics is still holding the conscience of the mass. Such a general perception resulted in the poverty of institutionalized cultural capital that deterred the chances of climbing higher social positions by capitalizing the new job opportunities opened before them. Thus, in 1977 for instance, the percentage of those

who passed class X from among the Muslims who constituted 23.30 of the total population, was 13.30, whereas the figure for Hindu forward groups was 24.6 and for Hindu Backward was 24.30 against their population percentages of 16.6 and 29.8 respectively. The figure was highest for the Christians with 34.30 percent against their population of 19.30 per cent (Nair, 1977).

Due to the poor quality and quantity of different forms of cultural capital, the community could not see any formidable middle class formation. In the absence of such a class, they were left deprived of adequate social capital, which works in any society as a social capillarity force. In fact, in any democratic society, it is social capital that plays an important role in ensuring inclusive citizenship. From a social capital perspective, the foundations of democracy are not placed primarily on citizens' beliefs, nor on their institutions, but on the relationships of each to the other. Constitutions may provide a framework and institutions with a setting, but in the view of social capitalists, it is the engagement of citizens that provides the building blocks of a successful democracy. According to Coleman's (1987, 1988, and 1990), social capital invokes three responses in society: obligations and expectations, information flow, and norms and sanctions. The first reflects the reciprocal web of obligations and responsibilities, lubricated by social trust, that structure public interpersonal relationships. The second reflects the knowledge and understandings that flow along the many lines of interpersonal connection that societies develop. The third reflects the interlocking systems of normative conventions and the penalties for their violation that also help regulate society's social relationships.

In the absence of such a strong social networking in any democratic society, any community may have to stay at the margins as a socially excluded group. The case of Muslims in Kerala is reflexive of this situation. Because of their late entry into education and their poor endowments of social capital, the community has failed to ensure their adequate representation in different aspects of social life, taking the institutional and systemic arrangements into accountability. The structure, thus formed, has been maintained by a particular exclusionary pattern in which political parties and different socio-religious communities are playing their role in subverting the social developments that Kerala achieved through different mechanisms.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The above discussion considers cultural capital at the heart of the process of social exclusion in any society. Identifying culture as an appropriate form of investment that can secure a return, the paper seeks to highlight the importance of analysing the underlining cultural and historical processes in marginalising any particular social group. The paper argues that cultural capital, as reflected in the internalised values, externalised practices and institutionalised credentials, plays

an important role in the formation of social capital, which plays a major role in maintaining a given social structure with all its forms of exclusions and inclusions. By possessing cultural capital an individual will be better related to others, and it is “these others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage” (Portes, 1998).

Similarly, linking social exclusion with social capital and cultural capital also draws attention to the importance of participating in all aspects of the particular society and the role of both the individual and the institutions that enable and constrain social and economic participation. Such a perspective calls for shifting the focus from poverty, inequality and unemployment to the social, cultural and economic processes, institutions and agents that create exclusion. This emphasis on the process helps academics and policy-makers better understand the causes and consequences of exclusion and deprivation, which in turn opens up new possibilities in terms of policy interventions.

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