

# Indian Muslims

With its profound history, India has had a distinct experience with Muslim minorities. Having been the rulers throughout the middle ages, the Muslims became the ruled following the British occupation of India. This change brought about very complex issues. The Muslim community of India was separated into two as the “Pakistani Muslims” and “Indian Muslims”, following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. This situation profoundly stunned the Muslims. The ruling elite of the past was now brought under Hindu authority. Still withholding a presence in India after almost 70 years, the Muslims experience injustices in every part of their lives, suffer from poverty and underdevelopment and continue to fight threats against their religion and cultural identity.

The second most populous country in the world with a population of 1,251,695,584, India is divided into 28 administrative regions. After Hinduism, Islam is the second largest religion in this country home to a thousand different dialects and hundreds of religions. However, despite accounting for 14.9% of the population, Muslims are in a minority position in the country. While the majority of Muslims embrace the Hanafi school of Islam, Shiites constitute a portion of the Muslim community. Dispersed throughout India, Muslims are concentrated particularly in the northern and northeastern regions, such as the disputed regions of Jammu and Kashmir (68.3%), Assam (34.2%), West Bengal (27%), Kerala (26.6%), Uttar Pradesh (19.3%), Jharkhand (14.5%), Delhi (12.9%), Karnataka (12.9%), and Maharashtra (11.5%). The country's Muslim population of 180 million accounts for 10% of the world's Muslims. Over 500 million Muslims live in the whole Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh). This makes the region a center with the world's largest Muslim population.

## The Arrival of Islam in the Region

Pre-Islam, in the 600s or thereabouts, Arab merchants established commercial ties with India and traveled regularly to and from the west coast of India. Shortly after its emergence in Arabia in the 7th century, Islam reached India during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime. Thanks both to the exemplary behavior displayed by the early Arabs wherever they traveled and to the proselytizing efforts of devoted sufis, Islam managed to spread in the region. The first mosque in India, Cheraman Juma Mosque, was built in 629 in Kerala by Cheraman Perumal Bhaskara Ravi Varma, honored as the first Muslim in the region. Islam first spread through the villages and cities of the country's coastal regions. The region was ruled by the Umayyads, followed by the Abbasids and then the Mongols, with various Islamic states founded by the 1600s, particularly in Delhi and Gujarat. However, there is serious historical debate as to how Islam arrived and spread in the region. Even though the Hindus now claim that Islam arrived in the region by force, that Buddhists and Hindus were massacred by Muslims, and that their temples and centers of knowledge were destroyed, it is a historical fact that, following the annexation of Iran by the Islamic Arab state, Islam spread eastward into India through the agency of Islamic states and Muslim merchants. Historical sources include evidence of occasional heated conflicts between Muslims and Hindus during this period.

## Caste System and Islam

Having been spread by Sufi proselytizers, Islam in India has been shaped by the influence of Sufism. The multicultural environment that has resulted from the coexistence of all the ethnic and religious groups in the country for centuries, has also played a part in the development of a common artistic and architectural culture. The dominant caste system in India is one that classifies the population into four castes according to Hindu beliefs and traditions. The highest ranking are the Brahmins, the spiritual class, following these are the Kshatriya, bureaucrats, and soldiers, the third are the Vaishyas, merchants and farmers, and the fourth are the Shudras, whose only purpose in the world is believed to be servicing the other three classes. The caste into which one is born defines one's social position, and one can neither move within this system nor possess more than one's family does. Within such a structure, people from low castes, in particular, embrace Islam to find the opportunity to hold a better position in society without having to serve the Brahmins. Because, according to Hinduism, people of other faiths are considered to form a class outside the caste system, called the Mambuzin, and are untouchable. Even though there appears to be no caste system among Muslims, they also group themselves into three groups called the Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal, and these groups have the same function as the caste system in Hindu tradition. While the Ashraf represents the highest-ranking Muslims of Arab descent, those who flee the Hindu caste system and convert to Islam constitute the Ajlaf class, and, as in the Hindu caste system, the Arzal represent Muslims belonging to the lowest social class. Despite contradicting Islam's fundamental principles, this practice

continues to be a reality for the Indian Muslim community as the outcome of a tradition-based mentality.

## **Islamic Movements**

In the 1600s, British influence started to make itself felt in this region where Islamic states based in Delhi had been founded, and by 1857 the British had taken full control of India, the world's center of trade. In this process, efforts were made to Christianize areas that became British colonies and to eliminate Islam from social life. This period saw Muslim property being confiscated, Muslim laborers and civil servants losing their jobs, and the Muslim community being thrown into a serious economic crisis. Furthermore, schools offering Islamic education were shut down and the Muslims' right to education was usurped. With the collapse of the Muslims' political power, the balance between the elements that constituted the social structure of the area was also broken. During British colonial rule, in particular, distinct sections of society were thrown into enmity. While the Muslims experienced pressure resulting from the loss of their former preeminence, the Sikhs and Hindus enjoyed the political benefits of collaborating with the British. In an effort to fight against the violent British agenda against them, the Muslims grouped together in Islamic movements such as the Tarikat-i Muhammad Movement (Syed Ahmed Bareilvi), Faraizi Movement, Deoband Movement, Tablighi Movement (Maulana Ilyas), Aligarh Movement (Syed Ahmad Khan), Tulu-i Islam, Jamaat-i Islami, Jamiatu'l-Ulama and Ahrar-i Islam.

The most distinguishing characteristic of Indian Muslims of the period was their allegiance to the Ottoman caliph. So much so that, without regard to the problems and hardships they were experiencing, they raised aid among themselves and sent it to Anatolia during the Turkish War of Independence.

## **Muslims During and After the Colonial Era**

Seeing that the British economy had been dwindling since the Second World War, the Muslims who had experienced discrimination during the British colonial era in India started a nationwide uprising against their rulers. The consensus of all the Islamic movements that joined forces during this process was that an independent Indian Islamic state needed to be founded in the region. The inability of the Hindu majority in India and of the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi to give Muslims any guarantee regarding their future, as a prerequisite of independence, led the Muslim elite to opt for another independent country with a Muslim majority. <sup>[1]</sup> There is a theory that Britain's "divide and rule" policy played a part in the emergence of this option. While the decision to found one country for Hindus and Sikhs and another for Muslims was being taken, there were Islamic groups which, against the separation of peoples and with a view to increasing the spread of Islam in the area, advocated coexistence in a united state of India.

Finally, on August 14, 1947, the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah was declared. While six provinces in the west of India were reserved for this new country, decisions regarding the future of Kashmir, comprising of fertile lands with strategic importance populated mostly by Muslims, reached a deadlock. The new borders, a product of British-Hindu collaboration, allocated the Muslim-majority Kashmir to India. Even though Pakistan took control over the area known today as Azad Kashmir at the end of the battles in 1948, the rest remained under Indian control. A subject of serious contention between the two countries to this day, the Kashmir issue is used as a source of pressure on the Muslim population in the country by those wishing to profit from the dispute.

Despite all the economic and political hardships they faced, the anti-partitionist Islamic groups remained in Hindu and Sikh-majority India and continued their proselytizing efforts. Declaring its independence on August 15, 1947, India adopted a system of secular administration whose constitution does not make a distinction between different religious groups and promises them all equal rights and freedoms, giving special protection and priority to minorities. However, the country's track record since independence proves this to be utterly different in practice. In order to maintain the Hindu influence in areas populated by Muslims, many obstructions and restrictions have been placed against Muslims standing in elections and voting. Alienated once again within the country because of their low levels of education, Muslims generally engage in trade and agriculture to make a living.

The ongoing dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the wars between the two in this process, and the worldwide effect of 9/11 have taken a toll on the daily life of the Muslim community in India. After 9/11, many Islamic institutions in the country were declared by the state to be terrorist organizations. Today, Muslims in the southern and eastern parts of India enjoy relatively better conditions than the

people of Kashmir in the north. Again, Muslims living in rural areas experience better conditions than those living in cities. Thirty-eight percent of Muslims living in cities live in poverty, and this number is greater than the number of impoverished people that constitute the lowest stratum of the Indian caste system. Even though there have been Muslims who have held important administrative positions, their number is still quite small in comparison.

Every Islamic organization in India is based on one of three ideological branches of thought. The first of these is the Daru'l-Ulum Deoband movement, originating from a conservative madrasah founded in 1867 by Maulana Muhammad Qasim for educational purposes and to fight the influence of the West. The second is Jamaat-i Islami, founded in 1941 by Abdul Ala Maududi to act as a pioneer of the global Islamic revolution. And the third is Wahhabism, which emerged in Saudi Arabia. Today, the fact that there are three distinct branches has a negative effect on the strength of Indian Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of Indian Muslims today make a living from agriculture. As they have very limited access to positions in upper administrative units in India, a country that has adopted secularism, Muslims do not attach much importance to education and try to get by in commercial life with lower qualifications.