

Muslims and Muslim Institutions in India

Thursday, June 24th, 2010

In a discussion hosted by the South Asia program, Mr. Najeeb Jung, Vice Chancellor of the prestigious Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, offered his unique perspective on the status of Muslims in India today. Mr. Jung has had a distinguished career in public service, including service as Joint Secretary in the Petroleum Ministry followed by working as a senior energy specialist for the Asian Development Bank. Mr. Jung's analysis is derived from his personal experience as well as his intellectual and professional insights.

The Beginning of the University

Mr. Jung opened his remarks with a brief history of Muslims in India. Using four poets to trace the development of Muslim culture and identity in India, Mr. Jung described the distinct nature of Muslims in India as separate from Muslims around the world. Mr. Jung then came to the year 1920, the year in which Jamia Millia Islamia University was established. He argued that the university, founded under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, had its roots in the Indian Nationalist Movement. The founders of the university shared a deep desire to create a modern school with an Islamic flavor. Such an aspiration has resulted in an incredibly eclectic student body of over 20,000. This is further characterized by such diverse areas of study as oceanography, biotechnology, and minority studies. Mr. Jung stressed that Jamia Millia Islamia University, although proud of its Muslim heritage, is not a "Muslim university" in the traditional sense. Fifty four percent of the students are Muslim, while the other 46 percent are non-Muslim. Mr. Jung described the student body as "India had there not been partition." The school celebrates both Muslim and non-Muslim holidays, such as Eid and Diwali. In fact, in 1928 when the university ran out of funds, several non-Muslims provided much needed financial support. Gandhi toured the country raising money for the university and Tata, already one of India's most famous business and philanthropic houses (and owned by non-Muslims), was another significant benefactor. Mr. Jung noted, however, such funding dilemmas are no longer present because in 1988 the institution was given Central University status, establishing a formal commitment by the government to fund the institution.

Muslims in India Post-Partition

Mr. Jung stated that after partition, the Muslim community that remained in India was by and large "a sullen community," with minimal resources at their disposal. With the destruction of the Ayodha mosque in 1992 followed by the Hindu nationalist BJP's subsequent rise to power, Muslims in India found themselves in a precarious situation. From 2005 onward, Mr. Jung said he has witnessed a restoration in confidence among Muslims in India. Mr. Jung noted that after these events Muslims can be assured that, "remedial actions will follow now." Mr. Jung sees an essential difference between Indian Muslims and the pan-Islamic whole, and further, notes they are especially divergent from the traditions of radical Islam.

Muslims in India Today

According to Mr. Jung, Muslims in India today are primarily concerned with their own general welfare. The release of the 2006 Sachar Commission Report revealed the bleak economic and social situation for Muslims in India today. As a result, Muslims have begun to make a stronger

case in demanding reservations from the Indian government. Mr. Jung noted that reservations used to be seen as demeaning, however, now they are considered necessary for the advancement of the Muslim population. Mr. Jung believes that Muslim reservations are inevitable. Mr. Jung pointed out that in several states, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, reservations for Muslims already exist. Mr. Jung noted that Muslims in India are very aware of their tactical voting power in key constituencies. They typically align themselves with parties that are able to promise concrete benefits. Concluding his remarks, Mr. Jung emphasized the continuing need for more education, political leverage, and job training skills in the Muslim community in India, given the fact that they have been historically disadvantaged.

Q&A

During the question and answer period, Ambassador Schaffer asked Mr. Jung what impact the Sachar Commission Report has had recently on government policy. Mr. Jung responded by first noting that it has empowered Muslims in India since many became aware of the report's content and mobilized in response. Prime Minister Singh has promised to take action on the report within the next six months. Mr. Jung was also asked whether he feared the radicalization of Muslim institutions in India. Mr. Jung responded that unlike in Pakistan, religious leaders using pulpits in India to disseminate political messages risk being sent to jail. In local Muslim communities in India, Mr. Jung has observed that radical elements of Islam get very little support. Mr. Jung credited a part of this to the Indian government itself, which has become less willing to immediately profile Muslims as criminal suspects. Mr. Jung was asked whether there is any Indian Muslim political leadership evolving, to which Mr. Jung stated that "tragically" there is a huge chasm between the Muslim population in India and its representation in government. Mr. Jung was asked whether the reservations are likely to empower Muslim students, to which he said that he does not want his students feeling as though they come from a "minority institution" because it downgrades the value of their degree. Mr. Jung did state, however, that unless Muslims get reservations they will "keep getting pushed back." The final question for Mr. Jung pertained to the status of Muslim women in India versus elsewhere in the world. Mr. Jung stated that he believes the status of Muslim women in India is relatively better than many other Muslim countries, however, it is still especially difficult in rural areas where women are not working outside the home and have less access to education. At Jamia Millia Islamia University itself 35-40 percent of the students are women.