India’s Muslims account for 13.4 percent of the country’s 1.2 billion population and constitute its largest minority group. Since the country’s independence in 1947 and right up to the present decade, the Muslim community in various parts of the country has suffered hundreds of violent, sectarian attacks. A recent peak involved the Gujarat riots of 2002, when 2,000 Muslims were killed in a state-sponsored pogrom. When the ruling party in Gujarat state, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was subsequently re-elected to power in the province with a larger electoral margin than before, it raised fears that the discrimination and violence were acquiesced to by the majority Hindu community.

These fears dissipated in 2004 when the BJP lost power in national elections, apparently in part because of its sectarian policies. However, the loss of life and assets in the Gujarat riots has raised the question of how the weakened Muslim community could recover.

In response, and in fulfillment of an electoral promise to Muslims, in 2005, the new national government in India, led by the Congress party, created a committee, termed the “Prime Ministers’ High-Level Committee on the Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India,” to study the status of the Muslim community to enable the state to identify areas of intervention.1 Informally known as the Sachar Committee, named after its Chairperson, Rajendra Sachar, the Committee submitted a report in 2006.

Four years after the report has been written, far from acting on its findings, not a single area of intervention has been mooted by the state, even as the report remains largely ignored by the media and other organs of civil society. Why is this and what does it tell us about the future of India’s Muslims? This article will address these topics. It is organized as follows: we discuss the findings of the Sachar Committee Report, identify why its findings are ignored, and explore the implications of these events for the future of India’s Muslims.

Key Findings of the Sachar Committee Report

The report’s key findings are as follows: (1) The socio-economic condition of India’s Muslims is near the bottom of the national ladder. Muslims are now only marginally ahead of the lowest group, the untouchable castes and tribes (known in official parlance as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribals, or, SC/ST). See the table on the following page.

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1 Government of India. 2006. Prime Minister’s High-Level Committee on the Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India.
The Muslims’ socio-economic decline is a long-term problem (p.153) rather than an outcome of recent sectarian violence. It reflects a steady decline since the country’s independence in 1947 relative to all other groups. The Muslims’ condition has declined even relative to the SC/ST, who jointly constitute 22.5% of the population. These latter groups were considered so behind at the time of independence in 1947 that the Constitution reserved 22.5% of all government jobs for them, along with other forms of affirmative action (none of which Muslims are eligible for).

This long-term decline is noteworthy because the Congress party is often blamed for the recent history of sectarian violence against Muslims over the past two decades. The reality differs however. In fact, the decline first began in British times (as pointed out in Dossani 2007, p. 146) and continued after independence.2

The demographic factors often attributed in the media to the community’s backwardness, such as low urbanization, low female ratio, high child mortality, percentage attending madarsas (religious schools) and high population growth do not explain the differentials, as the following table shows.

### Table 1: Indicators of Muslims’ socio-economic status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Muslims</th>
<th>All-India</th>
<th>SC/ST*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban poverty (% of pop.)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural poverty (% of pop.)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual per capita spending (Rs.)</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school (%)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population aged over 20 years who are graduates (%)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for 2001  
Percentage for All-India “completed high school” excludes Muslims and SC/ST*  
Source: Sachar Committee Report, p. 64, 151, 159, 299.  
Note: Rupee: dollar conversion rate, as of November 2010: $1 = Rs.45.

*Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes

(2) The Muslims’ socio-economic decline is a long-term problem (p.153) rather than an outcome of recent sectarian violence. It reflects a steady decline since the country’s independence in 1947 relative to all other groups. The Muslims’ condition has declined even relative to the SC/ST, who jointly constitute 22.5% of the population. These latter groups were considered so behind at the time of independence in 1947 that the Constitution reserved 22.5% of all government jobs for them, along with other forms of affirmative action (none of which Muslims are eligible for).

### Table 2: Demography of Muslims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>All-India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Ratio (F/1000M)</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMR*</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under5MR†</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban ratio</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% attending madarsas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for 2001  
Source: Sachar Committee Report, p. 76, 274, 281, 282

*Infant Mortality Rate  
†Mortality Rate of Children under 5 years of age

In fact, it is remarkable that given their depressed socio-economic status, women and infants are better looked after within Muslim communities than within the population as a whole.

Why is Nothing Done?

The reason for the commissioning of the Sachar Committee Report by the Prime Minister was, per the Committee’s terms of reference, to provide information that would help the government “plan, formulate and implement specific interventions, policies and programs to address the issues relating to the socio-economic backwardness of the community” (p.v). As noted above, no action followed.

It is not difficult to understand the official apathy to the Sachar Committee Report since it is the cause of the problem. The reason for Muslim decline lies in poor state investment in infrastructure for Muslims and continuing official and private discrimination. In government employment, the share of Muslims employed is 4.9 percent (see Table 3 below). Note that the government (provincial and national) is a major employer, accounting for 70 percent of all employment (p.164). In key sectors that are important for the protection of population rights, the share is also low: the proportion of Muslims in the judiciary (5 percent) and the Indian police services (4 percent) are below their share in the population and even below their share of the educated population (p.372).

The Sachar Report notes, on the consequences of official discrimination that, “The lackadaisical attitude of the government and the political mileage sought whenever communal riots occur has been very painful for the community. The governmental inaction in bringing to book the perpetrators of communal violence has been a sore point. On the other hand, the police, along with the media, overplay the involvement of Muslims in violent activities and underplay the involvement of other groups or organizations” (p.13).

The report points out that Muslims’ low shares of government employment reflect official discrimination rather than the fact that Muslims do not seek such jobs. For example, the report notes that in some states, to discourage non-Hindu applicants, the qualifying test for police force recruits includes tests of the knowledge of Hinduism (p.21). The report also notes that Muslim recruitment in the private sector is even worse than in government. The report points out that “small or medium scale companies that dominate the private sector have not extended a level playing field to Muslims” (p.21).

Furthermore, the report states that “Muslim identity also comes in the way of admitting children to good educational institutions” (p.12). The report explains that, while Muslims apparently “prefer to send their children to ‘regular mainstream’ schools” (p.12), as a result of discrimination, Muslim children must be enrolled in religious schools (madarsas).

The Law, Political Action and Civil Society

The above findings of the Sachar Committee Report suggest a pattern of state culpability in discrimination against Muslims, whether in government or private sector discrimination. It may seem surprising that the state and private sector can successfully discriminate against Muslims in a democratic country with an established rule of law. Why have aggrieved Muslims not taken their cases to the courts and won?

Muslims have indeed repeatedly resorted to the law to seek protection from discrimination. This includes areas such as accessing education and housing, as well as seeking to bring to court the perpetrators of violence against Muslims. By the provisions of the Constitution, such
Redress must be sought in provincial courts. This is a daunting challenge for Muslims, since provincial judicial action is often subject to influence by the local government. The Gujarat riots are a case in point where retraction of witness statements due to threats by law enforcement agencies and corrupt judges thwarted the investigation of those responsible.

This forces a round of onward appeals to higher courts at the national level. This becomes an arena where individuals, especially poor individuals, are likely to give up the fight. Civil society organizations could presumably carry the fight to national levels, but the general weakness of civil society combined with government apathy noted earlier remains a key barrier to success. We discuss the role of civil society in more detail below.

The Sachar Committee Report documents several case studies of the law courts’ discrimination against Muslims. One example is of a case filed in the capital city, New Delhi. In 1970, a case was filed with the local courts to transfer land originally owned by Muslim trusts and appropriated by the local government back to the trusts. The national government officially sided with the Muslim trusts. Yet, as the report notes (p.228), “due to lack of enthusiasm on the part of the government”, it did not back the trusts by appearing with them in the initial court hearings. In consequence, the hearings have been stalled, with the last hearing having occurred as far back as 1984.

A second option open to Muslims is political action. Their large size, 160 million strong, makes them an important voting bloc. This suggests that their numbers are significant enough to undertake effective political action.

This has not been the case in practice however. In part, the problem arises because Muslims are a distributed minority in most of India. The only Indian state where Muslims are a majority is the state of Kashmir. Kashmir’s ability to play a leading role for Muslim development in India, however, does not exist due to the ongoing local unrest about autonomy. This has, in effect, turned Kashmir into a near-police state with no space for political or civil society action on behalf of Muslims at large.3

At about the same time that India began its economic reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a key political change occurred: the rise of provincial political parties. In a series of elections that began with national elections in 1989 and continued in provincial elections, a dramatic

3 The estimate of Indian troops stationed in the Kashmir Valley varies depending on the source. In 2004, Times Online estimated the number at 250,000. (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article392432.ece, downloaded November 29, 2010) It is certainly higher now; some estimates state 700,000, or one for every eight residents.
rise of provincial parties occurred in some key heartland states—notably Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. These three states account for about a third of India’s population.

The rise of provincialism weakened the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, forcing them to build coalitions with several regional parties, in order to rule nationally. The rise of provincial parties represents rising opposition to the long hold on political power by upper caste Hindus that traditionally dominate the Congress and the BJP. Over the past two decades, this has led to a gradual shift in political and economic power to lower castes.

However, Muslim politicians were unable to leverage this shift to their community’s advantage. After experimenting with joining regional parties, they found that the overtly lower-caste focus of these parties and their preoccupation with confronting the upper castes left no political space for Muslims. Hence, the decline of Muslims continued even after the rise of provincialism.

Having failed to leverage provincialism, Muslim politicians returned during the first decade of this century to their pre-reform party, the Congress. Since then, their hope is that the Congress, having lost its lower caste base, would become more dependent on the Muslim vote to win power and, in return, would support Muslim empowerment.

So far, this has been mere wishful thinking. The Congress party that emerged victorious in 2004 consists of an internal core that continues to be dominated by wealthy, upper-caste Hindus, primarily from northern India. What remains in the outer core are Muslims. The wealthy upper caste Hindus of the north and low income Muslims in the Congress form a combination that does not work to the Muslims’ advantage. This subjects the Congress to frequent allegations by the BJP of being “overly” Muslim-friendly.

A third option for Muslims is to use civil society action through human rights groups. However, as noted earlier, civil society is generally ineffective in India. In consequence, most organizations that promote Muslim causes are explicitly Muslim groups, i.e., they draw their membership from the Muslim community rather than citizens generally. This reduces their effectiveness as they are regularly suspected by the media and the state of supporting terrorism or possessing other ulterior motives.

Broad-based, multi-ethnic organs of civil society, such as humanitarian aid groups, have been extremely helpful for Muslims in responding to sectarian violence. For instance, they have organized camps for persons displaced from their homes during the Gujarat riots even in the face of official hostility. However, the sort of civil society that can make a difference during normal times—think-tanks and human rights groups that cut across ethnic lines—do not generally exist in any effective way in India for any group. Meanwhile, another key organ of civil society, the national media, which is mostly controlled by upper-caste northern Hindus, follows the suit of its political brethren in the Congress and the BJP in largely ignoring the Sachar Committee Report.

Rising GDP Rates Help Upper-Class Muslims But Not the Poor

India’s rising GDP rate is sometimes viewed as the rising tide that will lift all boats. Indeed, many educated Muslims benefit significantly from India’s growth. However, rising inequality of income means that poorer communities benefit much less than wealthier communities from India’s growth. The Sachar Committee Report notes that “Fearing for their security, Muslims are increasingly resorting to living in ghettos across the country.” (p.14) India’s Muslims are thus especially excluded from national growth because of “ghettoization”, i.e., being forced to move into ghettos in order to be safe from physical violence.

In consequence, “ghettoization” of poor Muslims means that they are among the most excluded of India’s poor from growth. As the report notes “living in ghettos… has not been to the advantage of the community… (It) has made them easy targets for neglect by municipal and government authorities. Water, sanitation, electricity, schools, public health facilities, banking facilities, anganwadi (child care centers), ration shops (subsidized public food distribution shops), roads and transport facilities—are all in short supply in these areas… Increasing ghettoization of the Community implies a shrinking space for it in the public sphere.”

Concluding thoughts

Ultimately, the purpose of this article was to explore some of the factors behind the depressed socio-economic conditions of Muslim Indians. A key official document, the Sachar Committee Report of 2006, presents important information on their condition. Our analysis of the report indicated that: (a) the socio-economic decline of Muslims is countrywide and severe, bringing the community almost to the level of the untouchable castes and tribal population, i.e., to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder (b) the decline is a long-term phenomenon and is associated with special features of Muslim demography or the two-decade long rise of Hindu religious parties such as the BJP.

The causes of the decline lie in official hostility to Muslims that has led to poor state investment in infrastructure for Muslims and continuing official and private discrimination in employment and protection of basic rights such as safety.

The normal remedies of citizens in a functioning democracy with a rule of law like India are not available to most Muslims. The law is ineffective on their behalf owing to official discrimination within the judiciary and interference by the state. Political trends, resulting from rising provincialism and the rise of lower-caste parties, has hurt them. Civil society’s general weakness and media apathy has also hurt Muslims.

Finally, increasing “ghettoization” of the community excludes them from India’s high growth rate, along with isolating them from the cultural and social mainstream. Even the small gains Muslims derive from India’s growth will be at risk due to rising “ghettoization” and episodes of sectarian violence designed to destroy the community’s already meager economic base and social capital.

A conclusion from the above discussion is that, left to themselves and to the workings of regular politics and society, the Muslim community is likely to remain behind the mainstream and will, in fact, fall further behind, even as India moves ahead.