

Rethinking Muslim Political Marginalisation in Contemporary India: Between Representation and Citizenship

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Abstract

The question of Muslim political marginalisation in contemporary India has gained renewed scholarly and political attention, particularly in the context of changing electoral dynamics and the rise of majoritarian politics. India's constitutional framework emphasises equality, secularism, and inclusive representation; however, empirical realities indicate that Muslims, despite being the largest religious minority, remain significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions and continue to face persistent socio-economic disadvantages (Sachar Committee, 2006; Hasan, 2014). This article critically examines the nature and dimensions of Muslim political marginalisation by situating it within the broader theoretical framework of representation and citizenship. Drawing upon secondary data, government reports, and existing scholarly literature, the study analyses patterns of Muslim political representation, trends in electoral participation, and the structural constraints embedded in India's first-past-the-post electoral system (Farooqui, 2020). It further explores how issues of identity, security, and minority citizenship intersect with political exclusion, particularly in the post-2014 political context marked by the consolidation of majoritarian narratives (Ahmed, 2019). The article argues that Muslim marginalisation cannot be understood solely in terms of numerical underrepresentation; rather, it reflects a deeper crisis of democratic inclusion and substantive citizenship. The decline in political representation, coupled with limited access to policy-making processes and institutional structures, reinforces existing inequalities and undermines the participatory foundations of Indian democracy. By moving beyond purely electoral metrics, this study highlights the need to reconceptualise minority citizenship and strengthen institutional mechanisms to ensure inclusive and equitable democratic representation in India.

Keywords: Muslim representation, political marginalisation, citizenship, democracy, electoral politics, india

Introduction

The question of Muslim political marginalisation in contemporary India occupies a significant place in current academic and political debates on democracy, representation, and citizenship. India, as a constitutionally secular and pluralistic society, promises equality, inclusion, and political participation to all its citizens irrespective of religion, caste, or community. However, the empirical reality reveals a persistent gap between constitutional ideals and lived

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experiences, particularly for religious minorities such as Muslims. Despite constituting the largest minority group in India, Muslims continue to remain underrepresented in legislative bodies and decision-making institutions, raising serious concerns about the inclusiveness of Indian democracy (Sachar Committee, 2006; Hasan, 2014). The issue of Muslim marginalisation is not a recent phenomenon but has deep historical and structural roots. The legacy of Partition, patterns of socio-economic deprivation, and the spatial distribution of Muslim populations have historically influenced their political representation (Hasan, 2002; Varshney, 2003). Over time, these structural constraints have been compounded by changes in electoral politics, particularly the rise of identity-based mobilisation and majoritarian narratives. In recent years, especially after 2014, there has been a noticeable shift in the political landscape marked by the consolidation of majoritarian politics, which has further intensified concerns regarding minority representation and citizenship (Ahmed, 2019; Farooqui, 2020).

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond a simplistic understanding of marginalisation as mere numerical underrepresentation. While the decline in Muslim representation in legislative bodies is an important indicator, it does not fully capture the broader dimensions of political exclusion. Marginalisation must also be understood in terms of limited access to political power, policy-making processes, and institutional mechanisms that shape governance and public life. Moreover, issues of identity, security, and citizenship are deeply intertwined with political participation, making it essential to examine Muslim marginalisation within a broader conceptual framework of democratic inclusion (Bhargava, 2007).

This paper seeks to critically examine the nature and dimensions of Muslim political marginalisation in contemporary India by situating it within the interconnected frameworks of representation and citizenship. It aims to analyse patterns of political representation, explore the structural and institutional factors that contribute to marginalisation, and assess how changing political dynamics have reshaped the position of Muslims within Indian democracy. The study is based on qualitative analysis using secondary sources, including government reports, census data, and existing scholarly literature, which provide a comprehensive understanding of both historical trends and contemporary developments. The central objective of this article is to interrogate whether Muslim marginalisation is merely a question of inadequate representation or whether it reflects a deeper crisis of democratic inclusion and substantive citizenship. By addressing this question, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on minority rights, democratic participation, and the evolving nature of Indian politics. The discussion further seeks to highlight the need for rethinking institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks to ensure a more inclusive and equitable democratic order.

The structure of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on Muslim political representation and marginalisation in India. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach adopted in the study. The subsequent sections analyse patterns of representation, structural constraints, and the intersection of citizenship and political exclusion. The paper concludes by summarising the key findings and reflecting on the broader implications for democracy and minority inclusion in India.

Literature Review

The issue of Muslim political marginalisation in India has been widely discussed in academic literature, with scholars highlighting its historical, structural, and socio-political dimensions. One of the central arguments in this body of work is that Muslim marginalisation cannot be understood in isolation from broader questions of inequality and democratic representation. Hasan (2014) argues that Indian democracy has increasingly been shaped by structural inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalised communities, including Muslims. This perspective is further reinforced by the findings of the Sachar Committee Report (2006), which documents the socio-economic and educational backwardness of Muslims and highlights their limited presence in public institutions. Scholars have also examined the historical roots of Muslim marginalisation, particularly in the context of Partition and its long-term implications. Hasan (2002) and Hasan (1997) suggest that the legacy of Partition contributed to a sense of political alienation among Muslims, which has continued to influence their position in post-independence India. Varshney (2003), in his analysis of ethnic conflict and civic life, emphasises the importance of inter-community relations and institutional structures in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion. He argues that the absence of strong civic networks often leads to heightened communal tensions and reduced political representation for minorities.

Another important strand of literature focuses on political representation and electoral dynamics. Farooqui (2020) provides a detailed analysis of Muslim representation in legislative bodies and demonstrates that Muslims remain significantly underrepresented compared to their population share. He attributes this to structural factors such as the first-past-the-post electoral system and the spatial distribution of Muslim populations, which limit their electoral influence. Similarly, Bhargava (2007) highlights the persistent under-representation of Muslims and links it to deeper issues of democratic inclusion and minority rights. The role of identity and majoritarian politics has also been a key area of scholarly inquiry. Ahmed (2019) examines how Muslim political identity is shaped by both state policies and societal perceptions, arguing that Muslims are often positioned as a “political other” within the Indian democratic framework. This argument gains further relevance in the contemporary context, where the rise of majoritarian politics has intensified debates around citizenship, belonging, and national identity. Kaur (2021) explores how Muslim youth engage with these issues in digital spaces, highlighting new forms of political expression and resistance. In addition to political representation, scholars have also focused on socio-economic dimensions of marginalisation. Gayer and Jaffreot (2012) analyse the conditions of Muslims in urban India and demonstrate how spatial segregation and economic deprivation contribute to political exclusion. Menon and Hasan (2004) further extend this analysis by examining the intersection of gender and religion, showing how Muslim women face multiple layers of marginalisation within both the community and the broader society.

Despite the rich body of literature on Muslim marginalisation, there remains a gap in integrating the concepts of representation and citizenship within a single analytical framework. While many studies focus either on electoral representation or socio-economic disadvantage, fewer attempts have been made to connect these dimensions with broader questions of democratic inclusion and substantive citizenship. This paper seeks to address this gap by

examining Muslim political marginalisation through the interconnected lenses of representation and citizenship, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the issue in contemporary India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the nature and dimensions of Muslim political marginalisation in contemporary India. The research is primarily based on the analysis of secondary data, drawing upon a wide range of sources including government reports, census data, and existing scholarly literature. Key documents such as the Sachar Committee Report (2006) and the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee Report (Government of India, 2014) provide critical insights into the socio-economic and institutional conditions of the Muslim community in India. These reports are complemented by data from the Census of India (2011) and electoral statistics published by the Election Commission of India, which help in understanding demographic patterns and trends in political representation. The study also engages extensively with academic literature on Muslim politics, representation, and marginalisation in India. Works by scholars such as Ahmed (2019), Hasan (2014), and Varshney (2003) are used to contextualise the empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on democracy, inequality, and minority rights. In addition, recent journal articles, including Farooqui (2020), provide updated analyses of Muslim representation in legislative institutions, enabling a comparative understanding of historical and contemporary trends.

Methodologically, the paper employs a descriptive and analytical approach. It analyses patterns of Muslim representation in legislative bodies, examines the structural features of the electoral system, and explores the intersection of political participation with issues of identity and citizenship. The qualitative nature of the study allows for an in-depth interpretation of both statistical data and theoretical arguments, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the problem. The temporal focus of the study is primarily on the post-2014 period, which marks a significant shift in India's political landscape with the consolidation of majoritarian politics. However, the analysis also incorporates historical perspectives to trace the continuity and change in patterns of Muslim marginalisation. By combining historical context with contemporary data, the study aims to provide a nuanced and holistic account of the issue. While the reliance on secondary data enables a broad and comprehensive analysis, it also imposes certain limitations. The study does not include primary fieldwork or interviews, which may have provided more detailed insights into individual experiences of political exclusion. Nevertheless, the use of diverse and credible sources ensures the reliability and validity of the findings.

Analysis and Discussion

Patterns of Muslim Political Representation in Contemporary India

The question of Muslim political representation in contemporary India remains central to any meaningful understanding of democratic inclusion and minority rights. Despite constituting a significant proportion of the population, Muslims continue to be underrepresented in legislative bodies at both the national and state levels. Empirical studies have consistently shown that the proportion of Muslim Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha has remained considerably

lower than their share in the population, and in some recent electoral cycles, this gap has widened further (Farooqui, 2020). This underrepresentation is not merely a statistical anomaly but reflects deeper structural and political processes that shape electoral outcomes and candidate selection.

One of the key structural factors contributing to this phenomenon is the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, which tends to disadvantage geographically dispersed minorities. Unlike systems based on proportional representation, the FPTP system rewards concentrated voting blocs and often sidelines communities that are not regionally dominant. As a result, even in constituencies where Muslims constitute a significant minority, their voting strength may not translate into electoral success. This structural limitation is further compounded by the strategic behaviour of political parties, which often prioritise electoral winnability over representational diversity. In many cases, parties hesitate to field Muslim candidates in constituencies where communal polarisation is perceived to influence voting behaviour, thereby reinforcing patterns of exclusion.

At the same time, the issue of representation cannot be reduced to electoral mechanics alone. It is also shaped by broader socio-political narratives that influence perceptions of Muslim political participation. Ahmed (2019) argues that Muslim political identity in India is frequently constructed through a discourse of otherness, which positions Muslims as a distinct and sometimes suspect category within the national imagination. This discursive framing has significant implications for their inclusion in mainstream politics, as it affects both voter behaviour and party strategies. Consequently, the problem of underrepresentation is not only institutional but also ideological, reflecting deeper anxieties about identity, belonging, and nationhood.

Socio-Economic Inequality and Political Exclusion

The marginalisation of Muslims in India is closely linked to their socio-economic conditions, which in turn shape their capacity for political participation. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) provided a comprehensive account of the socio-economic status of Muslims, highlighting disparities in education, employment, income, and access to public services. These findings have been reaffirmed by subsequent studies, including the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee Report (Government of India, 2014), which indicates that while some progress has been made, significant gaps persist. Socio-economic disadvantage limits the ability of individuals and communities to engage effectively in political processes, whether through voting, campaigning, or accessing institutional channels of representation.

Economic marginalisation also intersects with spatial segregation, particularly in urban areas, where Muslims are often concentrated in specific localities with limited access to infrastructure and public services. Gayer and Jaffrelet (2012) describe this phenomenon as a form of “ghettoisation,” which reinforces both economic and political exclusion. Such spatial patterns not only restrict opportunities for social mobility but also reduce interaction with broader civic networks, thereby limiting avenues for political engagement. In this context, marginalisation operates as a self-reinforcing cycle, where socio-economic disadvantage leads to political exclusion, which in turn perpetuates economic inequality.

Moreover, the intersection of religion with other social categories, such as class and gender, adds further complexity to the issue. Menon and Hasan (2004) highlight how Muslim women experience multiple layers of marginalisation, both within their communities and in the wider society. This intersectional perspective underscores the need to move beyond a homogeneous understanding of the Muslim community and to recognise the diverse experiences of marginalisation that exist within it. Political representation, therefore, must be understood not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of whose voices are being represented and whose are being excluded.

Electoral Politics, Party Strategies, and Majoritarianism

The dynamics of electoral politics play a crucial role in shaping patterns of Muslim marginalisation. Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the nature of political competition in India, with increasing emphasis on identity-based mobilisation and majoritarian narratives. This shift has had significant implications for minority representation, as political parties adjust their strategies to align with changing electoral realities. In many cases, the perceived electoral cost of fielding Muslim candidates has led to their systematic exclusion from party tickets, particularly in constituencies where communal polarisation is a factor.

The rise of majoritarian politics, especially in the post-2014 period, has further intensified these trends. Majoritarian narratives often frame national identity in terms of the cultural and religious practices of the majority community, thereby marginalising minority identities. Ahmed (2019) argues that this shift has led to a reconfiguration of political discourse, where issues of development and governance are increasingly intertwined with questions of identity and belonging. In such a context, Muslims are often positioned as outsiders or “others,” which affects their political visibility and representation.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that Muslim voting behaviour is not monolithic. Studies have shown that Muslim voters often engage in strategic voting, supporting candidates and parties that are perceived to be most capable of defeating those seen as hostile to their interests (Farooqui, 2020). However, this strategy does not necessarily translate into increased representation, as it may involve supporting non-Muslim candidates. Thus, while Muslims remain politically active as voters, their presence as elected representatives remains limited, highlighting a disconnect between participation and representation.

Citizenship, Identity, and Democratic Inclusion

The question of Muslim marginalisation in India cannot be fully understood without examining its relationship with citizenship and identity. Citizenship, in a democratic context, is not merely a legal status but also encompasses access to rights, recognition, and participation in public life. Bhargava (2007) argues that substantive citizenship requires not only formal equality but also the effective inclusion of all citizens in political and institutional processes. However, for many Muslims in India, this ideal remains only partially realised.

Recent debates around citizenship, particularly in the context of policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have brought these issues to the forefront. These developments have

raised concerns about the selective application of citizenship rights and the potential exclusion of certain communities. While the legal and constitutional implications of these policies continue to be debated, their symbolic impact on minority communities has been significant. For many Muslims, these developments have reinforced a sense of insecurity and alienation, which in turn affects their engagement with political institutions.

The relationship between identity and citizenship is further complicated by the role of public discourse and media representation. Muslims are often portrayed through stereotypical narratives that emphasise difference and deviance, which can contribute to their marginalisation in both social and political spheres. Ahmed (2019) suggests that these representations shape not only public perceptions but also policy decisions, thereby influencing the distribution of resources and opportunities. In this context, marginalisation operates not only through formal institutions but also through informal mechanisms of exclusion.

Emerging Forms of Political Engagement

Despite the challenges outlined above, it would be misleading to view Muslim political participation in India as entirely passive or absent. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in new forms of political engagement, particularly among younger generations. Digital platforms and social media have emerged as important spaces for political expression, allowing individuals to articulate their concerns, mobilise support, and challenge dominant narratives. Kaur (2021) highlights how Muslim youth are using these platforms to create alternative forms of political representation that are not confined to traditional institutional structures.

These developments suggest a shift in the nature of political engagement, from formal participation in electoral politics to more informal and decentralised forms of activism. While these forms of engagement may not immediately translate into increased representation in legislative bodies, they play an important role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy debates. Moreover, they reflect a broader reconfiguration of political participation in the digital age, where traditional boundaries between citizens and the state are being renegotiated.

However, the impact of these emerging forms of engagement remains uneven and uncertain. Access to digital technologies is itself shaped by socio-economic factors, which means that not all sections of the Muslim community are equally able to participate in these spaces. Furthermore, online activism does not always lead to tangible political outcomes, particularly in contexts where institutional barriers remain strong. Nevertheless, these developments highlight the resilience and adaptability of marginalised communities in finding new ways to assert their presence within the political sphere.

Rethinking Marginalisation: Beyond Representation

The analysis presented above suggests that Muslim political marginalisation in India cannot be adequately understood through a narrow focus on electoral representation. While the decline in the number of Muslim representatives is an important indicator, it does not capture the full extent of the problem. Marginalisation must also be understood in terms of access to power, participation in decision-making processes, and recognition within the broader political community. This broader perspective requires a rethinking of the relationship between

representation and citizenship. Representation, in a democratic context, is not only about numbers but also about the ability to influence policy and shape public discourse. Similarly, citizenship is not merely a legal status but also involves a sense of belonging and recognition. When these elements are absent or weakened, marginalisation becomes a structural feature of the political system rather than an accidental outcome.

Therefore, addressing Muslim marginalisation requires a multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond electoral reforms. It involves strengthening institutional mechanisms that promote inclusion, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and challenging dominant narratives that exclude minority identities. Only by adopting such a comprehensive approach can the ideals of equality and justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution be meaningfully realised.

Conclusion

The analysis of Muslim political marginalisation in contemporary India highlights the complex and multi-dimensional nature of exclusion within a formally democratic framework. While Muslims continue to participate actively in electoral processes, their underrepresentation in legislative bodies reflects deeper structural and institutional constraints embedded in the political system. Factors such as the first-past-the-post electoral mechanism, strategic decisions by political parties, and the spatial distribution of Muslim populations collectively contribute to limiting their electoral success. At the same time, socio-economic inequalities, as documented in various reports and scholarly studies, further restrict the capacity of the community to engage effectively in political processes (Sachar Committee, 2006; Hasan, 2014). Beyond these structural dimensions, the study underscores the growing significance of identity and citizenship in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The rise of majoritarian politics and the increasing politicisation of identity have redefined the contours of democratic participation, often positioning Muslims at the margins of political discourse. In this context, marginalisation extends beyond the issue of numerical underrepresentation and points towards a broader crisis of substantive citizenship, where formal rights do not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or equal recognition. This paper argues that addressing Muslim political marginalisation requires moving beyond a narrow focus on electoral representation and adopting a more comprehensive approach that integrates issues of representation, citizenship, and socio-economic justice. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, ensuring equitable access to resources, and fostering inclusive political narratives are essential steps towards building a more representative and participatory democracy. Ultimately, the question of Muslim marginalisation is not only about minority rights but also about the health and inclusiveness of Indian democracy itself.

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