

Why, how and when do Indian NGOs work with Muslims? One answer: with discomfort and denial

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Writer and activist Farah Naqvi's new book 'Working with Muslims' investigates the 'Muslim question'.

Responses to the study

"We work with all poor people. We do not work with any specific community. We do not view people in terms of their religion or caste or community. We do not know the religion, caste, or community of the people we work with. We only know that they are marginalised. We do not divide people into groups. We do not acknowledge identities of caste and religion in our work. Why are you interested only in Muslims? Development is for all. This is a divisive question. This is a communal approach. We are a secular organisation."

As this précis of responses suggests, many established, mainstream NGOs responded to the objectives of this study with apprehension, judgment, discomfort, and denial. Despite working with Muslims, many denied that they did so, or denied that they knew that to be the case. Often, "being secular" seemed to necessitate a complete flattening of the identity question - or perhaps the flattening was not actually complete.

As a marker of socio-economic marginalisation, caste was often more acceptable than religion, which seemed to be a bad word ("Muslim" even more so). Invoking identity in the context of development meant, to some of our mainstream interlocutors, a downward hurtle, sans handrail, into the communal abyss... Their attitude might be summarised by this hypothetical response: "Sure, some people we work with may be Muslim, and so what? Why is this relevant?"

A reason for working with Muslims

The process of becoming aware of the Muslim question had a long, slow genesis. Many [NGOs] had engaged in broad anti-communal and pro-social harmony initiatives. Making the shift to development took a combination of factors - the polarisation of the 1990s, or the Sachar report, or the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat - which sometimes worked in tandem.

In fact, communal violence appeared to dot this narrative of development. The 1981 riots in Bihar Sharif; the 1984 riots in Bhiwandi; the 1990 riots in Hyderabad's Old City, and many more. A litany of forgotten riots emerged in interviews with NGOs as they told us their stories. And of course, Gujarat 2002 was fresh in people's minds.

In one way or another, communal violence had made its impact on development – in part by taking the issue of development further away from the minds of Muslims. In the words of Humayun Mursal, Kolhapur-based activist and member, Muslims for Secular Democracy, “After the 1992-1993 riots, the security of Muslims became more important than development. Riots targeted their very lives, [so] development seems so farfetched.”

But riots also had the opposite effect, sometimes spurring citizens to engage with development in their own ways. The Amin Welfare Trust in UP began its work in 1993, after the Kanpur riots of December 1992 (just days after the demolition of the Babri Masjid). Promoted by the Super Tannery Export House, the organisation worked in direct response to the riots, after which it “adopted” 75 riot-affected families to help them rebuild their lives. On the other hand, the Mahila Samaj Vikas Sansthan (Bihar) followed an entirely different trajectory, emerging almost literally from the debris of communal riots. After the Bihar Sharif riots of 1981, a few people came together to provide relief to survivors. Over time, these efforts crystallised into a community-based organisation for affected families, mostly poor and disadvantaged Muslims.

The same riots catalysed the emergence of the Mahila Sewak Samaj (Bihar) in 1982, making relief activists aware of the need to work with Muslims in a sustained manner. Bihar was also home to the Bhagalpur riots of 1989, among the worst massacres of Muslims in independent India; the Safali Yuva Club was born in 1990, a youth response to the fearful and polarised atmosphere that had followed.

This Yuva Club was an attempt to bring young people together to rebuild a shared sense of community, bridging the communal rift that left Muslim youth feeling isolated and removed from the mainstream.

In another state, Maharashtra, the historical narrative around riots was quite different. After the 1984 riots in Bhiwandi, the Society for Human and Environment Development (SHED) began a focused engagement with Muslims, although it had been formed two years before the riots, in 1982. The Thane District Rural Muslim Welfare Organisation, which had also started in 1982, similarly cemented its work with Muslims after the riots. Nearly a decade later, after the Bombay riots of 1992-1993, the Society for Awareness Harmony and Equal Rights (SAHER) came into being. It presented youth as the real drivers of social change, towards a better future, pushing development and governance issues while also trying to raise political consciousness.

In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, the ghosts of the 1990-1991 riots in the old city of Hyderabad surfaced in the story we heard from Mahila Sanatkar. The organisation was born against a backdrop of social rupture and mistrust engendered by the riots. It aimed to build bridges with the Muslim community in the old city, by taking women with traditional craft skills towards a viable entrepreneurship model. Aman Shanti, a programme of the Henry Martyn Institute, took the more direct approach, working on peace and reconciliation programmes in the Sultan Shahi area after the riots.

Muslim women in leadership

There was no single, replicable trajectory that had led to the emergence of Muslim women in [NGO] leadership roles. For the most part, these were individual stories, uniquely embedded in their own histories. Oftentimes, it seemed as though vagaries of chance, arbitrary acts of policy, and purposive, individual human agency came together to make a perfect storm: the opportunity to effect change.

What this tiny clutch of Muslim women shared, perhaps, was what women’s organisations the world

over share: an axe to grind. As one newspaper columnist wrote about the women's movement, "Feminism isn't just a general ideology for making the world a better place: it's a very specific ideology of liberation for the actors of the movement. It is personal by definition...For feminists, your work often feels like a reflection of who you are." In this respect, organisations including Shaheen in Andhra Pradesh, Astitva in Uttar Pradesh, Awaaz-e-Niswaan and Ruby in Maharashtra, among many others, were no different from mainstream women's groups: the personal was political for all their members. The specific negotiations differed, the characters onstage varied, and yet the struggles for selfhood were all too familiar. The dialogue of identity: universal.

Identity can be a snake pit, or a comforting cocoon – it can hold the threat of an unexpected bite, or give the succour of communitarian comfort. Identities can be equally determinants of stigma and of belonging. And they are rarely a matter of choice: lines sift insider from outsider, now pulling you in, now throwing you out – the sharper the better, for those patrolling boundaries. Many of the Muslim women leading these NGOs had to negotiate their identities in complex, even crafty ways. They had embraced dual identities as Muslims and as women (oftentimes, women who were feminists) while seeking to refashion both – having been dogged, after all, by both.

As Muslims, the women leaders we met had fought against communal stigmas from the outside world; as women and often as feminists, they had sought to redefine the meaning of Muslim-ness itself. They had had to resist, push back, and break moulds crafted by others – claiming multiple feminisms, owning many ways of being Muslim, blurring boundary lines, and destabilising the community gatekeepers.

In Uttar Pradesh, the founder of Astitva, Rehana Adeeb, faced a dual crisis in her career as an activist: too Muslim for some, not Muslim enough for others.

Coming from a fairly conservative Muslim family, and with an instinct and desire for greater personal freedom than they deemed appropriate, Rehana faced strong opposition from them when she said she wanted to work outside the home. In their worldview, her desire for greater mobility, both metaphoric and physical, was "against their tenets of Islam". She managed to overcome this opposition and joined an NGO – becoming, over the years, extremely mobile, travelling and actively participating in the women's movement. But Rehana's Muslim identity bit her in unexpected ways: she gradually felt that her issues, which were also Muslim women's issues, did not figure significantly in the larger women's rights agenda.

It was a curious conundrum. The women's movement, to which she felt a strong alternative allegiance, was led predominantly by Hindu women. At phases in this movement's history, all "personal identities" barring those as a feminist were frowned upon: culture was obsessively deconstructed and deemed oppressive, and indeed all cultural identities were presumed patriarchal constructs. Rehana felt she could find support in the women's movement only if she shed all markers of Muslimness and so, for a period, she did – donning *bindis* with careful regularity, and avoiding all references to her private cultural calendar of Eid and Ramzaan. At the same time, the Muslim community's opposition to her way of being Muslim made her feel utterly isolated – all told, she wasn't quite sure where she really belonged. It took many years before Rehana reached her own personal comfort zone of being both Muslim and a feminist – trying to raise women's issues within Muslim community spaces, and at the same time refashioning her Muslim identity to cohere with her feminist instinct, so that it was not a burden.

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Farah Naqvi

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