Leaps of faith

Forging systematic economic links between poor Hindus and Muslims through urban renewal programmes is the way forward.

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Historically, riots have been the principal expression of India's communal faultlines. Will this continue to be true? In the coming decades, largescale riots are likely to decline. We know from comparative evidence that as incomes rise above a threshold, the incidence of rioting goes down, though riots do not entirely disappear.

India's rapid economic progress, thus, has the potential of dampening old-style communal riots. Moreover, the enormous spread of technology-from TV to the ubiquitous cellphone-is also likely to constrain future rioters. Information technology is beginning to undermine the freedom to hide in a crowd. Does this mean the end of communal violence? No. The forms of violence are likely to change. The faultlines remain largely unrepaired.

- In 2007,Muslims constituted a mere 3 per cent of the IAS, 1.8 per cent of the IFS and 4 per cent of the IPS officers.
- 13.4% of India's population follows Islam. It is the country's second-most practiced religion after Hinduism.As per an estimate, India had 154 million Muslims in 2008.

The big issue for the future is how to deal with terror in the name of religion. While the possibility of Hindu terror cannot be ruled out, Jihadi terror is the more serious issue to consider. Such terror has acquired alarming proportions in Pakistan. Its Indian base has thus far been quite small. It may not stay that way however.

Research shows that terrorist networks are normally led by highly educated professionals and intellectuals, but large-scale recruitment takes place only if (a) the government neglects its welfare functions, or (b) economic despair marks a minority community, or (c) a community experiences enduring discrimination or (d) funding for recruitment and training is available. These conditions partially fit India's Muslims.

Because India's polity, economy and cultural sphere continue to produce Muslim heroes, Indian Muslims have thus far avoided a plunge into despair. India's film industry and sports are full of Muslim stars. Azim Premji, a Muslim, is a towering giant of the information technology industry. Muslim politicians have often held important cabinet positions.

India's success is partial. Muslims continue to be among the poorest and least literate communities of the nation. The report of the Sachar Committee (2006) has provided extensive documentation of the socioeconomic conditions of India's Muslims. The underlying inequities are alarming.

Muslim literacy rate is considerably below the national average, and only slightly above that for the Dalits and Adivasis. While 16 per cent Indians over the age of 23 were graduates in 2004-05, only 4 per cent Muslims were. In 2007, Muslims constituted a mere 3 per cent of the IAS, 1.8 per cent of the IFS and 4 per cent of the IPS officers. All-India urban poverty was 22.8 per cent in 2004-05; it was 38.4 per cent for Muslims, greater than the poverty rate for urban Dalits and Adivasis. Villages with Muslim concentration are disproportionately ill-served by primary schools, all-weather roads and public transportation.

It is clear that India's Muslims are substantially, if not entirely, isolated from the mainstream. A more meaningful integration is necessary. Otherwise, nursed by grievances and feelings of injustice, and financed by external

sources, a greater base for Jihadi terror may well emerge.

What preventive action can be taken? Existing research indicates that terrorism typically originates in the urban centres, not in the countryside. India's Muslims are disproportionately urban. India was 27.8 per cent urban in 2001, but Muslims were 35.7 per cent urban. An urban strategy of development has the potential to include Muslims in a national development effort.

How should we structure such a strategy? In India, a large-scale public programme focused entirely on Muslim economic empowerment cannot easily be undertaken. Not just the Hindu nationalists, but also several other political forces will bitterly oppose such a move, cleaving society further.

Moreover, such a strategy may not be desirable either. An urban project formulated in terms of Muslim economic empowerment will feed some of the worst forms of identity politics that have rocked Indian politics for three decades, something our politics appears now to be coming out of. Equally important, a strategy aimed at greater integration must seek to build links between Muslims and non-Muslims. My own research demonstrates that towns where Hindus and Muslims are integrated in economic and social life tend to be peaceful, whereas the riot-prone towns are all highly segregated.

The most sensible method, therefore, will be indirect. Programmes promoting urban renewal and attacking urban poverty are the most politically sensible way of incorporating urban Muslims into the mainstream. Rural India now has a significant welfare programme in the form of a National Rural Employment Guarantee. There is space for a welfare plan for urban India. Urban India is bound to grow in the coming years and much rural poverty will migrate to urban slums.

The fact that such a programme might end up reaching two of the poorest Hindu communities, the Dalits and OBCs, not simply the Muslims, should be viewed as an opportunity, not as a cause for concern. Forging systematic economic links between poor Hindus and Muslims through urban renewal programmes will be good for economic development as well as national security.