
Distributional Pattern of Muslims in India

Ravi Shekhar

Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Shaheed Bhagat Singh (Eve.) College, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Abstract: *The Muslims in India came first as traders in the Malabar coastal areas and as invaders from the western and north-western borders of the country and later ruled over 500 years and in due course formed majority in certain pockets of the country. In 1947 at the time of freedom from British yoke, these Muslims wanted a certain part claiming separate nationality incompatible with those of ours and got the motherland divided based on majority of religious denomination. After partition, around 8% of the total population comprising Muslims who chose to stay in India and with each census count, their relative share is increasing despite negligible conversion. In 2011 census enumeration, they formed 14.23% of the total national population. Moreover, two states and union territories and 32 districts have more than fifty percent of their population as Muslims. This paper analyses the distributional pattern of Muslims at the district level and the underlying forces responsible for this pattern.*

Keywords: *Muslims, Conversion, Distributional Pattern and Delhi-Agra Axis Belt.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-religious country with Hindus having a predominant position although, gradually and consistently, their share has been decreasing since 1951. Muslims came to India as early as 7th century as traders in the Malabar Coast and by intermarrying the local population. Second stream came after defeating King of Sindh, Dahir, in 8th century but main stream of adherents came from the north-western part of the country through Iran and Afghanistan between 10th to 16th centuries. The majority of Muslims in India are the descendants of converts of Hindus but some of them proudly press their lineage to invading Turks, Afghans, and Iranians who settled and intermarried with the local population. Generally, the invaders adopted three methods to convert local Hindu population; firstly, the threat of sword, secondly Jizya Tax levied on non-Muslims in their empire in the form of economic pressure to convert to Islam and thirdly, marrying with Hindu women and in the process converting them to Islam. Moreover, unbridled social freedom and lack of social hierarchy in Muslim society acted as attraction to low caste subjugated Hindus (as suggested by some western scholars) and some high caste Hindus, too stooped to avail political advantage. Some studies also find the weaker root of Hinduism for conversion to Islam in states like Bengal. An essential preface to the understanding of political geography of India's sub-continent is the study of spatial distribution and relationships of its major religious communities i.e. Hindus and Muslims (Brush, 1949). Thus, a proper understanding of the distributional pattern of the Muslims reveals a lot about the socio-political condition of the country.

2. SPREAD OF ISLAM IN INDIA

Arrival of Muslims via maritime routes is clearly evident along the shores of the Arabian Sea. Arabs had established themselves in the Malabar Ports as early as 636 AD to deal in local spices and to meet the Chinese traders whose junks came in their far west (W. S. Moreland and S. C. Chatterjee, 1945) and had established themselves by the end of 9th century. The surge of the Muslims overland expansion which began in the early part of 8th century in the desert of south west Asia when Hindu King Dahir was defeated in Sindh in 713 AD. But main inroads was through the land borders of north-western India until about the year 1000 when an Afghan Muslim King raided the Punjab settlement. India further successfully resisted spread of Islam into Indian territories for the next three centuries. From the beginning of 11th century AD, India began facing rapacious Islamic invaders of Turkey origin. Mahmood Ghazni invaded India several times between 1000 and 1026 AD and annexed Punjab to his empire. Muhammad Ghoris was finally able to extend Islamic conquest into the heart of India after defeating Prithviraj Chauhan in 1192. Thus, it took more than five centuries for the Islamists to break the defenses of India. From 1192 to around end of 17th century, various Islamic Dynasties ruled over large parts of India. These five centuries of Islamic rule constituted the first period in the long range and broken history of India when India was ruled by a group that did

not subscribe to the fundamental, civilizational and religious principles of India. Thus, it is the Muslims who formed the first sources of religious heterogeneity of India driving the Indian population into two distinct religious communities i.e. Hindus and Muslims and which ultimately led to the partition of the country into India and two separate and independent Islamic enclaves-West Pakistan and East Pakistan (which got separated from the western part as Bangladesh after 1971 war). The Afghans and later the Mughals extended their dominance from Delhi to eastward along the Ganges plain and southward into the Deccan Plateau.

3. DISTRIBUTIONAL PATTERN IN 1941 AND 2011

At the time of 1941 census enumeration, the inhabitants of the north-western border were nearly all Muslim. Barring a few trading centre and military ports, Islam had the adherence of the three-fourth of population in the streets of the Indus plain which skirts the mountains. In west Punjab, Muslims were numerous and they were also numerically substantive in the Upper and Middle Ganga plain and in Eastern-Punjab. The absolute density and proportion of Muslims increased towards the east in the Lower Ganga Valley and Deltaic belt (Fig 1). This eastern deltaic region was for centuries a stronghold of Buddhism and in this fact lies the explanation of Islam success in easy conversion (Moreland and Chatterjee, 1945). In this context, it must not be forgotten that centuries of Buddhist tradition led to the weakening of Hinduism which may be one of the factors for spread of Islam in this part of the country. In the twelfth century, Buddhism has lost royal patronage and the Hindu kings were found striving to impose caste upon the population which had previously enjoyed social freedom. When the conquering emissaries of Islam arrived in the thirteenth century, it is not surprising that its creed of brotherhood paved a favoured attraction. But, this point of view does not go without contestation. Some also believe that absence of strong roots of Hinduism may be one of reasons for the easy spread of Islam in Bengal.

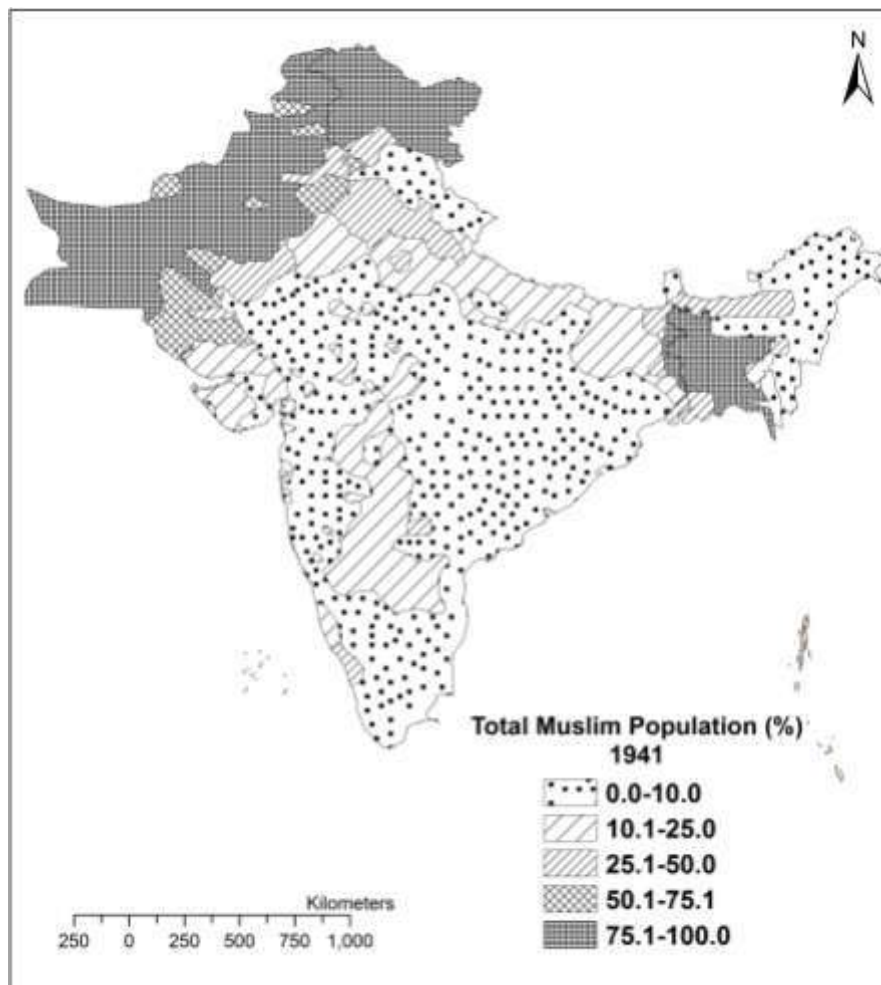


Fig-1: Distributional Pattern of Islam in India, 1941 (after Brush, 1949 with modification)

Islam's Effect is negligible along the entire eastern coast and it has scarcely reached the inhabitants of the eastern highland rim of the peninsula or the Burma Border hills. The first one was rather inaccessible due to dense forest cover and the later was not only forested but people were adherents of various types of nature worships. A small fraction of adherence was gained when the rulers established themselves as lords in the peninsular Deccan belt. Peninsular India has largely escaped Islamic domination. Islamic incursion into this part of India in early 14th century led to the emergence of mighty Vijaynagar Empire that was committed to the defense of Sanatan Dharma. About the middle of the seventeenth century, under several charismatic leaders, people began to rise against the Mughal rule, most notably under Marathas, under great leadership of Shivaji. Although they formed slightly over 10 % of the population in the Hyderabad state, the Muslims military oligarchy retained its control in the form of Nizam government in Hyderabad state. Due to greed of some of the politicians, the divide between adherents of the two major religions became so wide that ultimately the country was partitioned on 14th of August, 1947 into three parts based on the numerical majority of the adherents of two religions (Fig 1). Even then, Muslims continued to prefer to stay in India in large numbers and their figure was 9.8% in 1951 census which went on increasing census after census and in 2011 it was all time high 14.23%. Their share in national population increased from 10.69% in 1961 to 14.23% in 2011 which cannot be attributed to conversion from other religious groups as the share is now only nominal of this act. It mainly stemmed from greater incidence of poverty among Muslims, their higher level of socio-economic insecurity, whether actual or perceived and which together has contributed toward lesser adoption of family planning measures among them (Bhagat, 2013). Moreover, the Muslims do not easily adopt various measures of family planning which also is one of the reasons of relatively high rate of population growth among Muslims. Let us analyze, the distributional pattern of Muslims in the country in the latest census enumeration held in 2011.

In 2011, Muslims comprise 14.23% of the total population of the country which is all time high since partition of the county and against 13.43% in 2001. India ranks third after Indonesia and Pakistan in size of Muslim population and contains 10.3% of the World's Muslim population (Pew Research Centre, 2009). It also ranks fourth after Iran, Iraq and Pakistan so far as size of Shia Muslim is concerned (Ibid, 2009) But the distribution of Muslims is not ubiquitous and is highly accentuated in certain parts of the country whereas most of the areas are having very low Muslim concentration. Almost four-fifth of the total Muslim population is concentrated in only nine states: Uttar Pradesh (22.34%), West Bengal (14.31%), Bihar (10.19%), Maharashtra (7.53%), Assam (6.20%), Kerala (5.15%), Andhra Pradesh (4.69%), Jammu and Kashmir (4.97%) and Karnataka (4.58%). Remaining one-fifth of the Muslim population is spread over twenty six states and union territories. Thus, we find large spatial variation in the distribution of Muslims in the country. If we analyze the state- wise percentage of Muslim population, Lakshadweep with 96.58% ranks first followed by Jammu and Kashmir (68.31%), the only two Muslim dominated states of the country. The other high Muslim concentration states are: Assam (34.22%), West Bengal (27.01%), Kerala (26.56%) and Uttar Pradesh (19.26%). On the other hand, 19 states and Union Territories have less than one percent of their population as Muslims. The district-wise analysis brings us to following conclusion: out of the 640 districts in the country (as per 2011 census), 32 districts have more than half of their population as Muslims. Out of these 32 districts 12 (11 districts in Jammu and Kashmir and one in Lakshadweep) districts have more than 90% Muslim population. Another eight districts in Assam have more than half of their population as Muslims. Another 43 districts in the country have Muslim population between 25 and 50%, 67 districts have less than one percent of their population as Muslims and another 173 districts between one to five percent Muslim population. Altogether 477 districts in the country have less than 14.23% (all India average) Muslim population in the district. This data clearly reveal that there exists great degree of variation in spatial pattern of Muslims in the country. This high degree of variation is not a chance factor but caused by various historical and social reasons (Fig 2). If compared with 1941 distributional pattern of Muslims in the country (Fig 1), barring the bordering districts with Pakistan, distributional pattern remains the same to a great extent. This also reveals that a great majority of Muslims decided to remain in India rather than moving to that part which was exclusively for Muslims.

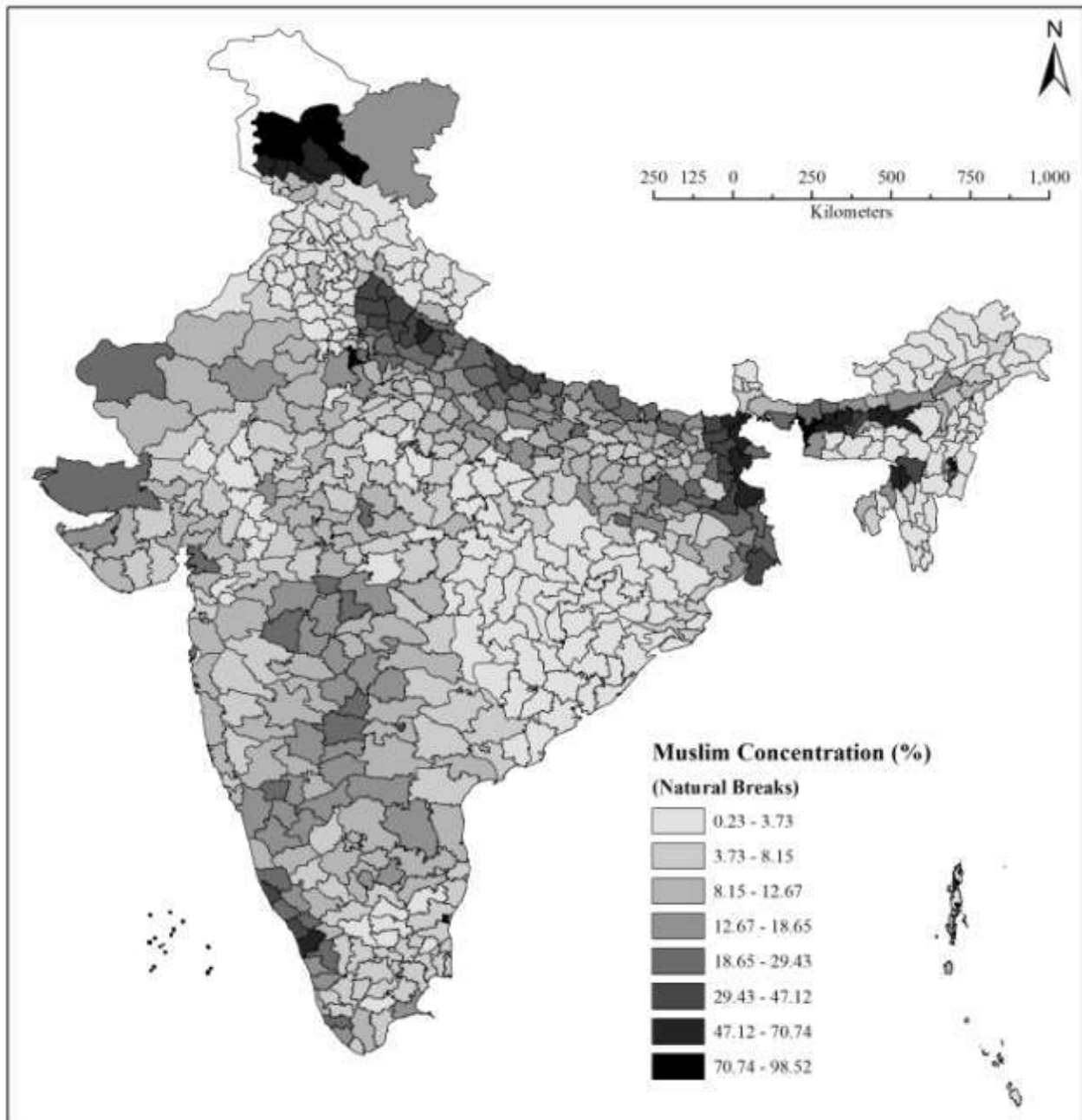


Fig-2: Distribution of Muslims in India, 2011

Even a cursory glance at the map makes it crystal clear that there exists wider variation in the distributional pattern of Muslims in the country either before partition or post-partition. Muslims form more than one-fourth of the total population in those areas where Islam penetrated, ruled and converted many local Hindu people particularly in north India or the areas that has been in touch with the Arabs for longer duration of time through sea connection like Kerala. The regional variation in these areas area caused by a host of factors such as (a) forced conversion and near isolation because of rugged terrain and inaccessibility in north-western part of the country - Jammu and Kashmir. Sufism, too, played a significant role in conversion in Kashmir valley. (b) In Malabar Coast (especially Kerala) mainly because of long seaborne contact with Islamic traders in Arabia dating back to early phase of evolution of Islam outside Arabia. Many of the Arab traders had also married in the area. Muslims had penetrated this part of the country almost two hundred years earlier than any part of the country. Northern portion of Kerala has high concentration of Muslim population mainly because of this reason. (c) Delhi-Agra belt remained seat of power for longer duration of time hence nearby areas have relatively high Muslim concentration, which gradually

expanded eastward along the Tarai belt and Rohilkhand belt remained a moderately high concentration areas of Muslims. (d) In Bengal tract, however, large scale conversion was due to two factors: (i) this tract was considered as polluting alien territory by the top layer of Hindus, that is, Brahmins till about 5th century B.C. (Sopher, 1967), and (ii) a large part of the area has stayed in Buddhist hold for longer duration of time from 3rd century BC to 12th century AD. The downfall of Buddhism created a vacuum and the egalitarian nature of Islam attracted them and people in mass converted to Islam. The lack of powerful influence of Brahmanism is also cited as one of the reasons. (e) Regional chieftains in southern part of the country like Hyderabad, and parts of Karnataka and Maharashtra have localized high concentration (Dutt et al., 1973) caused by the fear as well as greed. (f) Some areas of Assam valley has unexpectedly high Muslim concentration caused specially due to infiltration from neighboring Bangladesh. The recent National Register of Citizens (NRC) report found almost four million unauthorized dwellers in the state with questionable identity which clearly proves the claim of illegal migration which has significantly altered the demographic composition of this state. This is clear case of demographic alteration and even that a silent one by the neighbouring and friendly country. Now eight districts of the state have become Muslim majority (2011).

On the other hand, Himachal Pradesh, hilly region of Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, eastern coastal plains, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, large parts of Tamil Nadu, north- eastern part of the country (especially zone touching Myanmar border) and Punjab have very low Muslim concentration. Low concentration in Punjab is caused by large scale transfer of Muslim population to western Pakistan at the time of partition and coming of Sikhs and Hindus from West Pakistan to Punjab as this is bordering state. Remaining areas (mentioned above) had attracted little attraction of Muslim rulers as these areas posed/offered no lucrative economic incentives for the Muslim invaders and later kings. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana have low to moderate concentration of Muslims in the country. Thus, the forcible conversion caused by the threat of sword and economic persecution by the local Muslim chieftains, weaknesses of Hinduism and the absence of Hindu philosophical foundation in certain areas of the country have played vital roles in the present distributional pattern of Muslims in the country. Partition of the country in 1947, too, played a role in redistribution of Muslims in the country.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, certain historical, political and socio-economic factors may be held responsible for present distributional pattern of Muslims in the country. One thing becomes clear that the concentration is relatively high in borderland areas of the country especially in West Bengal, Assam and in recent years in the bordering districts of Rajasthan. These districts are also experiencing cross-border infiltration in recent decades which require early and urgent curbing from security point of view. This pattern is emerging especially in the last two censuses which is also a cause of concern because of earlier basis of partition.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



The author specializes in Digital Cartography, Urban and Social geography.