

Caste among the Muslims: The dichotomy of Egalitarianism and Stratification

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ABSTRACT

The Muslim society of India is divided into many parts like the other society here. Such as language, religion, region, caste, etc. But there has been a belief that since the basic education of Islam forbids any discrimination on the religious level. In such a case it did not pay attention to the social reality or was evaded if properly said. In this paper, an attempt was made to draw attention to the situation of this community in denial of caste questions within Muslims. The backwardness of Muslims was attributed to their caste, ethnic exploitation, and the denial of the government and the so-called representative of that community. However, it is not the case that it has a very wide impact. The same issue has been debated in this paper. In this, it has been tried to show that the caste debate is still in the fetal stage, primarily among Muslims. The situation remains the same even after so many years of independence. This paper is a type of analytical study. It used secondary sources such as books, articles, reports.

Key Words : Islam, Caste, Pasmanda, Muslims, Ashraf, Ajlaf, Arzal

INTRODUCTION

India is a place of diversity as we know it has a long list of various religions, cultures, languages, etc. The society in India is also divided on these bases. These divisions can be considered at two levels macro and micro-level. At the macro level the visible division like religion, languages, and region can be considered whereas at the micro level the intra-religious division like sectarian, sub-sectarian, caste and sub-caste can be considered. Many sociological studies show that caste is something that is prevailing in every religion of India. But it is also believed that the system of caste is an influence of the Hindu religion.¹ There is a debate over this that how this system has spread to other religions because caste is something that originated within the Hindu religion. However, some study finds that the caste in Muslim society is impacts of Hindu religion other reject this idea. Faridi and Siddiqui discuss,

“Islam enters India by the various group of

people like merchants, travelers, invaders, and missionaries *i.e.* Sufi. They mostly spread the egalitarian principle of Islam. The concept of *Masawat* (equality) was the core ideal of Islam. The inhabitants of India which was earlier divided into caste hierarchy attracted to this principle and hence, converted to Islam. Their main concern was self-respect, escaping from caste exploitation, or follow the religion without any hesitation. But even after the conversion to a different faith, their social system didn't change a bit. They didn't give up their profession which was related to their caste. Because there was no such economic mechanism to change the profession after conversion they had to continue their profession after reverting to Islam. It is also true that conversion in Islam was not an individualistic act; it was a collective action by the same society or caste groups. They had continued their profession. This has

become a source of caste category among the Muslims of India. We can see various occupational castes in Muslims also like that of Hindu society".²

So it is clear that Indian Muslims do have a caste system³. Nadeem Hasnain writes about the caste affiliation of Muslim society,

"The socio-cultural/ethnic heterogeneity of Indian Muslims has at least one thing in common and that is social stratification, by and large, on their lines of Hindu society with whom they have been living and interacting for more than a thousand years".⁴

Mandal Commission established by the first non-congress government (Janta Party Government), which have had collected vast data on caste among all the religious communities across the country states that,

"There is no doubt that social and educational backwardness among the non-Hindu communities is more or less of the same order as among the Hindu communities. Though caste system is peculiar to Hindu society yet, in actual practice, it also pervades to non-Hindu communities in India varying degrees. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon: first, caste system is a great conditioner of the mind and leaves an indelible mark on a person's social consciousness and cultural mores. Consequently, even after conversion, the ex-Hindus carried with them their deeply ingrained ideas of social hierarchy and stratification. This resulted in the Hindu converts inadvertently acting as Trojan horses of caste system among highly egalitarian religions such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. secondly, non-Hindu minorities living in predominantly Hindu India could not escape from its dominant social and cultural fluencies. Thus, both from within and without, caste amongst non-Hindu communities received continuous sustenance stimulus."⁵

The commission (Mandal Commission) recommended for the inclusion of Muslim backward caste into OBC category, which was however, implemented after a decade or so. This paper is about the Muslim society, their religious teaching and very nature of Muslim society that have been more alike other stratified society. This paper will further discussion the problem of not noticing the caste among the Muslim society from in and out of the society. This paper is explanatory in nature and based on a qualitative study. The objective of this paper is to examine the difference between principal and

practice and their loopholes to evade caste discourse among Muslim society. And lastly why the discourse of caste among Muslims has not been established? The paper is based on the sources like studies on caste, caste among Muslim society, research articles, reports, and censuses etc.

The sociological reality of Muslim society and the dilemma of Ashraf Politics:

As far as caste categorization among the Muslims is concerned, firstly, in the census of 1901, there were 133 castes among the Muslims got listed. Till census of 1931, we have caste census data, but after the independence, no caste-wise data collected. But first backward commission Kaka Kalelkar commission (1955) listed 2399 backward caste of Indian society in which Muslim backward caste also got listed.

Many sociological writings too such as, Ghaus Ansari (1960)⁶ gave the vast details of the caste hierarchy among the Muslim society of India. According to him, the Muslim caste system works on the same line as of Hindu caste system. Whereas, Imtiaz Ahmad (1973)⁷ explains the caste among Muslims not in the same pattern as of Hindu society. He calls it caste-like features among the Muslims of India.⁸

Notwithstanding, Indian Muslim society is divided into various lines but they hardly talk about the caste issue of the Muslim society. Indian Muslims live in a democratic society, where equality of the society is a virtue to have, but there is data available that shows the pathetic conditions of the backward Muslims whether about economic aspects, educational, employment or political representation. Without democratization of Muslim society in itself, the democratic system of government would not do any good to the society.

Indian Muslims after the partition of India, irrespective of the largest minority, went on a defensive mode. The partition of India was more tragic for Indian Muslims who decided to live in India. Because being Muslims they were being seen as the responsible community for the partition, and second, they want to live in their own home, where they were staying for centuries. Hence, it can be said that the partition harmed the Muslims more than anyone. For the partition their patriotism has always been questioned, that's why in Indian democracy they were not ready to ask anything from the government. That's why they are the most disadvantaged section of society.

The Father of the constitution, Ambedkar, gave the very clear notion of social democracy. According to him, without social democracy, there will be no guarantee of the success of political democracy. He further said, now after the implementation of the constitution, we are going into an era of political democracy, but what we need first is a social democracy. Here, social democracy provides us a broad meaning of democracy. Indian society was highly divided based on *Varna* and *caste* hierarchy, and based on it, discrimination was prevailing. This was the example of an undemocratic society, where one group/caste of people gets privileges only based on birth, where another gets discriminated against. Ambedkar himself, having great intellect been discriminated everywhere. For this reason, social democracy is needed, but we see after the long seventy years of independence, we are growing toward the biggest and successful democracy, irrespective of many hurdles, but still the people of India having great trust in democracy. But one thing anyone can claim, the democracy in society is not successful as it should be. Nonetheless, they got a reservation in the educational and economic institution, and they are (not all) developing on an economic and social basis, but still, they are not gaining any social respect. It is because of the lack of democratization. It is also a fact that the already privileged class will not surrender their advantages position easily. That's why the process of democratization among the society is not doing well.

If we talk about Muslim society, the same phenomenon exists among this community also. The hegemony of *Ashraf* on every aspect of life is continued, till the demand from the backward Muslims has started. Where the politics of *Ashraf* Muslims is based on the larger homogenized Muslim community phenomenon, the politics of the backward Muslims (*Pasmanda Muslims*) is based on social justice.

Evasion from caste debate:

Muslims of India are known as monolithic and homogeneous entities. However, neither Muslims of India nor their religion 'Islam' is homogenous as it's been presented since ever. The sectarian and sub-sectarian which are large in number division cannot be ignored. In the Shia-Sunni division, within the Sunni Muslims, there are three schools of thought e.g. Deobandi, Barelvi, and Ahl E Hadith. But at some level they do have homogeneity like, one has to pray one Allah (*Tauheed*), follow one prophet Muhammad (*PBUH*), and follow five pillars in

Islam⁹, and have to pray in one language, Arabic. But In reality, Muslims like any other society has influences of other society. The Muslims of India is no exception to it. It is also divided into various lines, like languages, places of birth, and caste. Studies show that most of the Muslims of India (almost 85 percent) converted from the inhabitant of India who was primarily divided into various occupational (clean and unclean) castes.¹⁰

But still, most of the upper castes Muslims (*Ashraf*) are rejecting this sociological reality among the Muslims of India. People have the right to choose their own identity according to their needs and demand. For a long period, Indian Muslim politics was based on their religious identity ignoring their caste identity. These are the time when among the Hindus the caste phenomenon is going to change from the disadvantaged position to the disadvantaged position by getting reservations under the various quota.¹¹

Core concern with the caste among Muslims:

The answer would be that the religious force and social force are different in Indian Muslim society. There are three social stratified groups among Muslims. The first one is *Ashraf*, which constitutes caste like *Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, and Pathan*. The second group *Ajlaf* mostly constitutes middle caste e.g. clean occupational castes. And the third is called *Arzal*¹² the lowest stratum of the Muslim society mostly comprises of unclean occupational castes. The problem arose when a group of people considered themselves as upper caste (*Ashraf*), and justifies the capturing of power, resources and exploit the rest of the population. The notion of upper caste and others as lower caste people is also an example of exploitation, which, based on this notion. They have been outcaste from the mainstream social, political, and economic benefits. There comes a question of status group and dignity. The so-called upper caste people want to live as dignified person, but do not want other people to let live in the same manner as they do.

As a system of social relations caste has a central point in Hindu society for several centuries.¹³ As we know, the Muslims of India, most of them, have been inhabitants of India for centuries. After the Muslim missionaries came to India, they got influenced by the egalitarian principle of Islam, and also consider it as a behavioral principle where all are equal in the eyes of God and religion; hence the society will be based on equality. So, they left the former religion and entered

Islam. Inasmuch, as we know most of them who converted to Islam were those who were out of the benefitted class or castes and much exploited in the social, political, and economic realm.¹⁴ It is necessary to mention that *Pasmanda* Muslims comprise converts from lower Hindu social strata with numerous clean and unclean occupational clusters. But as it is a fact that the conversion didn't change their social and economic status. They remained poor and neglected in society"¹⁵. After the conversion to Islam, they continued their occupation (clean and unclean both). Changing the religion nothing changed their socio-political and economic status, not even their culture (even now they are much influenced by the local culture, but after the recent Islamization process in the 20th century, they are more inclined towards the Islamic culture).

However, one cannot say that the conversion from the inhabitants of India always happened from the lower caste people only, not from the upper caste. This is somehow a very general argument given by the people. As we know, their social status was already higher, and after the conversion, their social status grew, but not lessened. They are mostly considered *Ashraf*¹⁶ Muslims (upper caste Muslims, who converted from the upper caste Hindu religion and those who came from central Asia and Arab). Those who converted from the clean occupational caste termed as *Ajlaf*¹⁷ (middle caste or OBC Muslims) and those of unclean castes termed as *Arzal*¹⁸ (untouchable or Dalit Muslims). These two consist of *Pasmanda* Muslims.

The two fundamental questions:

Now the question is if there were always this kind of stratification and caste division in Muslim society, why there were no outrages against this? What we have seen in Hindu society the struggle did happen. For this question, from the limited knowledge and perspective, it can be categorized into three reasons that seem relevant in Muslim society:

The first one is religious equality to all, irrespective of their caste or region, or language background. Second is, there was no such type of discrimination and untouchability against lower-caste Muslims as what we find in the Hindu caste system. The third is, there was no such leader from the backward Muslims who could mobilize against the upper caste Muslims.

In support of this view, we can go with Karl Marx's famous statement about religion that "*Religion is the*

opium for masses". In support of this argument, one can think that the problem of the masses was always the 'Religion'. One can explain that the conversion of the lower caste people was not always related to power, status, or resources only but also to religion. Hindu people, even after being a Hindu cannot be considered as those of the Brahmin or other upper caste people. They do not have the right to enter the temples or recite the *Vedas* or *Dharmashastras*. Most of the time felt isolated from their religion only. The feeling must be that they belong to the Hindu religion, but the Hindu religion does not belong to them. The alienation from their religion pushed them to accept at least that religion where they can feel their oneness.

Islam in theology never accepts any kind of stratification, exploitation, or discrimination. The Muslim society, even after the local cultural influence, never stopped anyone from practicing their religion, nor from reciting Qur'an, perform rituals, celebrate festivals, or some other religious practices. In a society, where they may be divided into gender, caste, and class level, but there is a mosque, where all are offering Namaz at the same time, in the same mosque, and in the same queue. The affinity of religion never let them felt lower-caste Muslims bad. That can be the reason the consciousness of the left out or exploitation is never born. Hence the outrages never happened.

The caste equation among Muslims is still in a stagnant position because the process of transition has not yet started. Once it starts, the violence will inevitably occur. But after that, the power equation will also change.

Whenever there comes an issue of caste or caste-like features among the Muslims of India, there raised a twofold question. First, the *Ashraf*¹⁹ Muslims who are leading in all the fields of society rejects the idea of caste among the Muslims of India. It can be taken as the rejection of the sociological facts. They take the caste issue as un-Islamic. They always denote that Islam is based on the principle of equality. But it has to accept that the caste-like feature is the reality and it has nothing to do with Islam, but to the Muslims of India. Everyone knows this reality but nobody (mainly the *Ashraf* Muslims) wants to accept it, because they think that the true form of Islam (based on the principle of equality) will have deteriorated.

The second question, what is the reality of caste among Muslims? Are they at the same level as of Hindu caste system? Is there any flexibility among the Muslim

caste system or they are rigid as the Hindu caste system? They mostly raise the question of the density of caste among Muslims and the nature of caste practice and the concept of purity and impurity. They are those who somehow accept that there is a system of caste among the Indian Muslims. But they are not very comfortable with it and being in defensive mode. It is noteworthy that Dr. Ambedkar once argued about the Muslim caste system that “the social evils in Muslim society are worse than those seen in Hindu society.”²⁰ These are all the matters of concern and the misinterpretation of the subject or issue.

But now, the question is not related to religion only. Besides all the egalitarian principles in theology, the truth is that there is caste among the society which is highly marginalized, even much from the Hindu Dalit of India. The marginalization of backward caste Muslims is a serious challenge to democracy. Now the demand rises for their upliftment at is socio-economic and political level. For the support of this cause, the first thing is to establish the caste debate among Muslims. After that, the demand for social justice for this section could be raised. Hitherto, a total of 84 castes have already got space in the OBC (NCL) category, but the fact that they are not even this ability to get the benefit of it. They seriously need special attention and policymaking to develop them. The Sachar Committee report (2006) has shown the reality of Pasmanda Muslims and the Rangnath Mishra Commission (2007) gave the cure for it. But still, after more than a decade of these two reports, the Government of India is silent on the issue of marginalization of the *Pasmanda* Muslims. The organizations and civil societies need to raise a voice against this silence. Otherwise, the phenomenon will remain as it is now.

Conclusion:

In the stratified Muslim society where a large chunk of the population is downtrodden, and hence they demand representation and recognition, from within the society and outside the society. But whenever they raised a caste discrimination issue, the *Ashraf* became angry and blame those who talk about it as anti-Islamic or nationalist. This must be deliberate or maybe lack of consciousness of the issue. Because, *Ashraf* Muslim leaders taken caste in Muslims as an anti-Islamic phenomenon. But this is something that is prevailing for centuries in Indian Muslims. This is because of the lack of democratization of society. It may be important that what *Ashraf*

demanded (the security concerns of the Muslim society), but still this is also true to the concern of the backward Muslims as they need some affirmative action from the government to uplift themselves. If a concern of *Ashraf* leaders to neglect the issue of *Pasmanda* Muslims, then there is no need for such leaders. For a long period, Muslims are being afraid in the name of religion. They didn't demand social justice for a long. There is always create a threat by the secular or communal parties to create fear among the Muslims, but it is also true that this is the demand of time to uplift the most marginalized section of the society. For this demand, the leader needs to change their concerns from security to social justice issues. This will not happen until and unless, the leader of the society, who are already in the privileged position change their concern and take these demand seriously.

The self-declared leader of the Muslims never supported the *Pasmanda* issue, because *Pasmanda* Muslim politics is based on the politics of hope (social justice), which is against the principle of politics of fear (communal-secular politics) of *Ashraf* Muslims. In a democracy, *Pasmanda* Muslims is demanding their political space and voice in the larger democratic political space, where the self-declared leader of Muslims already captured the space. They are afraid of losing their political space. Because of this, they don't want to let *Pasmanda*'s politically organize and demand social justice. The traditional leaders (*Ashraf*) of the Muslim society capture that political space and hence, they exploited the whole community in the name of security concerns and protection of religion. Thus, *Pasmanda* needs its own political space so that it can redefine its demand and concern in the socio-economic and political realm. It is a fact that the *Ashraf* Muslims never gave equal status to *Pasmanda* Muslims and always claimed and maintained their superiority over the *Pasmanda* Muslims. That's why they tried to suppress the movement of *Pasmanda* and called it an un-Islamic movement.

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5. Ibid, p. 36
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