

# SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CASTE AMONG MUSLIMS IN INDIA

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**Abstract-** Sociological understanding on the issue of caste mostly deals with the classical Hindu caste system or with its present form among Hindus. Due to the fact that Hindu social order is largely based on caste and is written into Hindu texts thus large number of literature on caste revolves around Hinduism. Seeing from this perspective, the existence of caste-like features among non-Hindu, including Muslim, communities in India is generally seen as a result of the cultural influence on these communities of their Hindu neighbours or of Hinduism itself. This paper provides a historical perspective on the issue of caste and caste based discrimination among Muslims and also providing quotations from works which were written in the so called Islamic period of Indian history. It also tried to understand that how Muslim writings, and the Muslim ruling elites more generally, in collaboration with so called upper caste Hindus supported the caste system and the oppression of the so called 'low' castes, both Hindu and Muslims.

**Key words :** Caste, Muslim, India, Dalit, Discrimination and egalitarian.

## 1. Introduction

The Muslim society is not homogenised society, the caste system, however, exists even among Indian Muslims. But many a scholar traces it to Hindu influence:

The Muslim caste system is a result of Hindu influence; the Indian Muslims have acquired the system, ..., from the Hindus through constant and continuous culture contact; the system of caste groupings itself resulted in the concept of social distance between the two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims.

Gaborieau, a British Ethnographer claims that the British took a simplistic vision of castes and presented Hinduism, taken as a whole, which hierarchical in structure, as opposed to Islam, taken as a whole, and taken to be inherently egalitarian. Any form of hierarchy in Islamic society is taken to be a relic from Hinduism. This idea has become very strong and dominated the literature on caste. Muslim scholars in the 19th century have flourished this perspective, as they defended their faith against criticism by Western scholars.

Above theory is best explained in the book by Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, for which the author collaborated with two influential Indian Muslim thinkers, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Shibli Nu'mani (d. 1914), which was written in Aligarh and was first published in 1896, says among other things: "A Hindu will naturally be attracted by a religion which receives everybody without discrimination" and: "It is this absence of class prejudice which constitutes the real force of Islam in India and which allows it to win so many converts from Hinduism".

Arnold's formulated a influential theme that had been or would be elaborated by many other scholars, such W.W. Hunter and James Rice. In the context of conversions to Islam in Bengal, Rice wrote that the Islamic armies "were welcomed by the out-cast Chandals and Kaibartha." In such claims, it could be expected that modern Muslim society in Bengal would present an egalitarian picture.

However, it turns out that such is not at all the case, and such theories have been criticized by many social thinkers like Dr. Ambedkar, Sir Denzil Ibbetson, Marc Gaborieau, Imtiaz Ahmed, Zarina Bhatti M.K.A. Siddique, Ghaus Ansari and others. In the 7th century A.D Islam entered India almost immediately after its birth and made its way into different parts of the country, the Arab traders established matrimonial relationships with the local women and had many progeny from these marriages. This resulted in the spread of Islam to different parts of the region. Many Sufi saints accompanied these traders and under the influence of their preaching and the attraction of an egalitarian faith many local people, mainly from lower classes, converted to Islam.

There is a far gap between preaching of Islam and practicing and its practitioners are not a homogeneous entity as is widely believed. In fact there is a great deal of diversity in the manner in which Islam is practiced and perceived throughout India. Islam in India is almost as old as the faith itself and that its followers in different regions of the country represent a variety of cultures. In the process of assimilation of cultures practices of Islam has got into tremendous changes and cannot be considered as single entity. As a matter of fact, Muslims in India established itself as well known minority in a religiously plural society. However, assimilation process into the Indian society for Muslims of India is not simple and they constantly face challenges with the shifting of national and international state of affairs.

## 2. Elements of Castes among Indian Muslims

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explains the existence of castes even in the lives of Muslim Bengal and Quotes the Superintendent of the Census for 1901 for the province of Bengal, Ambedkar observes:

"The conventional division of the Mahomedans into four tribes – Sheikh, Saiad, Moghul and Pathan – has very little application to this Province (Bengal). The Mahomedans themselves recognize two main social divisions, (1) Ashraf or Sharaf and (2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means 'noble' and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high caste Hindus. All other Mahomedans including the occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks, are known by the contemptuous terms, 'Ajlaf', 'wretches' or 'mean people': they are also called Kamina or Itar, 'base' or Rasil, a corruption of Rizal, 'worthless'. In some places a third class, called Arzal or 'lowest of all,' is added. With them no other Mahomedan would associate, and they are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground.

"Within these groups there are castes with social precedence of exactly the same nature as one finds among the Hindus.

After, Ambedkar, wrote these words Bengal become the seat of intense political activism and lobbying in the years. Caste would become a much talked-of political commodity, politicians would campaign for the loyalties of the masses, the province would go on to be partitioned, and yet even as late as 1973, caste would be an abiding feature of Bengali Muslim life.

### 3. Review of literature

M.K.A. Siddiqui, through a light by his essay on the caste phenomenon among Indian Muslims points out that there are several caste groups among the Muslims in Calcutta. He explained several different ways in which inequality manifests itself – restrictions on commensality, hypergamy, pollution by contact, etc. He divides the castes into three categories. The castes in any one category can accept food from the others in the category, but not from castes in lower categories.

The Dafalis who work as priests for the Lal Begis, or the Qalanders who sometimes live in their neighbourhood, refuse to accept food or water from Lal Begis.

The groups are descent groups, "with or without occupational specialization". For example, the LalBegis (who roughly correspond to the Bhangi caste in Hindu society) are generally regarded as unclean on account of their humble occupation – "they often experience difficulty in getting their dead buried in the common Muslim burial ground."

Hypergamy is widely practiced in the highest category, meaning that women from lower castes can be married into the higher castes (Sayyad and Sheikh), but not vice versa. The children of these mixed marriages are called "Sayyadzada" and "Sheikhzada" respectively. They do not attain the full status of their fathers, and are expected to make alliances of with people of their status.

Zarina Bhatta and Imtiaz Ahmad studied the case of a village Kasauli in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and in details explain that how village society is deeply caste-riven. Sayyads, and a subcaste of the Sheikhs, namely the Kidwais are at the top of the hierarchy. These were the only Ashraf castes in the village. Elsewhere in India, the Ashraf castes include Sayyids, Sheikhs, Mughals and Pathans. These are communities claiming descent from population groups hailing from outside India. Bhatta points out that all four noble castes permit interdining, but commensality with the lower castes, consisting of groups descended from Indian converts, is not allowed. Also Sayyads and Sheikhs intermarry, but marriages between Sayyads and Sheikhs on the one hand, and Mughals and Pathans on the other, are not socially acceptable. In the village of Kasauli, there are eighteen other castes, consisting of groups defined by occupation. Closely linked to occupation is a notion of pollution, depending on the materials handled by persons following the occupation. A kind of hierarchy is defined, with castes who come into proximity with the Ashraf regarded as higher. Nats, who skin dead animals and make drums, find a place close to the bottom of the scale while Julahas and Darzis are at the top end. Dhobis, who must wash soiled clothes, are closer to the Nats than to the Julahas.

Bhatta informed us about the interesting case of a divide in the musician community. The Mirasis who perform for the higher Ashraf castes, are regarded as superior to the Nats, who perform the same social functions, but for the public at large. The Mirasis have adopted the dress of the Ashraf, and have learned to speak Urdu, while the Nats converse in the local dialect. Thus the Mirasis have improved their social standing by the imitation of and association with the upper castes, who set the norms for the whole society.

Imtiaz Ahmed informs us in his article on the Siddique Sheikhs of Uttar Pradesh, of the various considerations taken into account when determining hierarchy within the status group called the Sheikhs. There are at least four of them:

- Affiliation with an Arab tribe.
- Descent from a person of Arab origin who is known to have close ties the Prophet.
- Relationship to a place in Arabia or Persia.
- Descent from someone who is said to have entered India along with the early Muslim armies.

According to Ahmed, the Sheikh subgroups emphasize their foreign origin and links to some Islamic personage of repute. The groups who claim to be descended from the Prophet's own tribe, Quraish, are regarded as the highest. Then follow the descendants of first Caliph, Abu Bakr Siddique. Next in rank are those who count the next two Caliphs, Usman and Umar among their ancestors. They are followed by descendants of the close friends and associates of the Prophet. Descendants of other Persians or Arabs who may have come with the Muslim armies are ranked last.

Ahmed makes some other very interesting observations about the Siddique Sheikhs : Convert groups to Islam are generally characterized as New Muslims and they are looked down upon by the social groups which are known to be descendants of foreign sources or who have succeeded in eliminating the stigma of recent conversion. This gave rise to certain differentiations in the adjustment of the Sheikh Siddiques after their conversion to Islam in the different villages. In villages that were largely or predominantly Hindu, the Sheikh Siddiques were excluded from the framework of interaction with the Hindu castes but they continued to enjoy a somewhat superior status as a Muslim group. But in villages where there were numerous other Muslim groups of superior status, the Sheikh Siddiques were not merely excluded from the social hierarchy of Hindu castes, but were also relegated to a somewhat lower position even within the hierarchy of Muslim castes.

Ahmed's observations regarding the inferior status of "New Muslims" seems to be applicable widely in India. We find confirmation of this generalization in places as far removed from Uttar Pradesh as the Moplah-dominated regions of Kerala. The hierarchies in Moplah society have been studied by Victor D'Souza. He reports that there are five distinct sections among the Moplahs: Thanghals, Arabis, Malbaris, Pusalars and Ossans. The Thanghals who are at the top of the pyramid, are a small group of people who trace their descent to the Prophet, through his daughter Fatima. The term Thangal is a respectful term of address, usually applied to Brahmins in Kerala. The Arabis are a group of people mostly concentrated in Quilandy (a town north of Calicut), who are descendants of Arab men and local women, but who have preserved the memory of their descent. The association of the Arabis with Arabia entitles them to a respect in Moplah society second only to that of the Thanghals. The Malabaris also claim descent from Arabs, but they are those who followed a matriarchal system – the so-called "mother-right" culture. As for the Pusalars and the Ossans, D'Souza writes:

The so-called Pusalars are converts from among the Hindu fishermen, called Mukkuvans. Their conversion took place relatively late. Because of their latter conversion and their low occupation of fishing they are allotted a low status in the Moplah society. The Pusalars are spread all along the coastline of Kerala and they still continue their traditional occupation of fishing.

The Ossans are a group of barbers among the Moplahs and by virtue of their very low occupation they are ranked the lowest. Their womenfolk act as hired singers on social occasions like weddings.

Gaborieau brings to the discussion the results of his own long years of field work in Nepal. He has seen Muslim Curautes redoing their ritual ablutions if they happened to touch a [Muslim] untouchable by mistake. He has also studied the phenomenon of ritual uncleanness associated with some professions, and social hierarchy based on profession, at work in Muslim society. One of his examples concerns the Kashmiri Muslims in Nepal who pass for Ashraf. Periodically, these high born Muslims send for a barber from India, at great expense. However, the barber becomes wealthy, and turns his back on the profession in favour of something more respectable. He refuses to perform circumcisions, and the need for another barber is acutely felt. A new barber is sent for, and he despised, he faces the same stereotypes, and the cycle is repeated. The stereotypes, applied to barbers and weavers, are an old Islamic tradition.

While individual social mobility is attested, collective mobility is virtually impossible, because there is a kind of "barrier" separating the Ashraf castes from the artisan castes:

Gaborieau calls for a frankness in studying the phenomenon of caste in Indian Muslim society. The Muslims who entered did not seem to be shocked by the institution of caste, and if they were not shocked by it, it must be that they were not unfamiliar with such arrangements themselves. Even writers such as Ansari (whom we have quoted on the first page), who trace the caste inequalities in Indian Muslim society to Hindu influence, admit however that Islam was not egalitarian when it entered India.

The ideal of equality among Muslims was practicable only in the then prevailing conditions of Arabia. In the course of the expansion of Islam and its contact with other complex cultures the democratic forms of political organization and social equality within the community gradually disappeared.

The idea of social hierarchy, Ansari says, had already become part of Islamic society by the time it entered India in the twelfth century. Over the centuries attitudes only hardened, until at last even untouchability entered Islamic society. The plight of Muslim untouchables is described by Ansari in moving detail:

A Bhangi, either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time. Although in theory a Muslim Bhangi or Chamar is allowed to offer his prayer[s] in a mosque, but in usual practice their entrance into such pious places as mosques and shrines of Muslim saints is socially disapproved and thus it is resisted. Even if they could get into a mosque or shrine, provided they have had a bath and are dressed in clean clothes, they do not usually proceed beyond the entrance steps. In contrast to the Hindu caste system, Muslim Bhangis are allowed to learn the Quran, but they are not expected to teach it. It is a common practice observed in almost all the households of Ashraf, Muslim Rajputs, and the clean occupational castes, that Bhangis, either Muslim or non-Muslim, are generally served food in their own containers. If they do not have their own bowls they are served in clay pots which are not again used to serve clean caste members. Bhangis are given water to drink in such a way that the jar does not touch even their lips.

However Ansari never explains how caste structures in India can be attributed to Hindu influence alone, if Muslim society had also stratified into hierarchies, before Islam's advent in India. Several such problems in the literature need explanation. Gaborieau offers perspective:

... While we have good contemporary studies of Hindu untouchables, no work was done on Muslim untouchables during the colonial period. The absence of work on this key point deserves reflection. This refusal to consider the reality is understandable on the part of Muslim scholars; the problem of untouchability clashes against their ideological convictions on the ecumenical character of Islam. And what is more, any conversion even of untouchables involves burning political complications. On the part of western researchers, this omission is less excusable: I regard it as a manifestation of the prejudice according to which Muslim social order must necessarily obey a different logic than the Hindu social order, and also by the illusion of believing that the enumeration of castes is done from top down, whereas in reality it happens from the bottom up, starting from the untouchables.

Scholarly writings on caste among Indian Muslims generally note the division that is often made between the so-called 'noble', 'respectable' castes or ashraf and those labeled as inferior, or razil, kamin or ajlaf. The ashraf-ajlaf division is not the invention of modern social scientists, for it is repeatedly mentioned in medieval works of ashraf scholars themselves. To these writers, Muslims of Arab, Central Asian, Iranian and Afghan extractions were superior in social status to local converts. This owed not just to racial differences, with local converts generally being dark-skinned and the ashraf lighter complexioned, but also to the fact that the ashraf belonged to the dominant political elites, while the bulk of the ajlaf remained associated with ancestral professions as artisans and peasants, and as such were looked down on as inferior.

In order to provide suitable legitimacy to their claims of social superiority, medieval Indian ashraf scholars wrote numerous texts that sought to interpret the Qur'an to suit their purposes, thus effectively denying the Qur'an's message of radical social equality. Pre-Islamic Persian notions of the deviance right of kings and the nobility, as opposed to the actual practice of the Prophet and the early Muslim community, seem to have exercised a powerful influence on these writers. A classical, oft-quoted example in this regard is provided by the Fatawa-i Jabandari, written by the fourteenth century Turkish scholar, Ziauddin Barani, a leading courtier of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Sultan of Delhi. This text is the only known surviving Indo-Persian treatise exclusively devoted to political theory from the period of the Delhi Sultanate.

The Fatawa-i Jahandari shows Barani as a fervent champion of ashraf supremacy and as vehemently opposed to the ajlaf. In appealing to the Sultan to protect the ashraf and keep the ajlaf firmly under their control and submission he repeatedly refers to the Qur'an, from which he seeks to derive legitimacy for his arguments. His is not a rigorous, scholarly approach to the Qur'an, however, for he conveniently misinterprets it to support the hegemonic claims of the ashraf, completely ignoring the Qur'an's insistence on social equality. In the process, he develops a doctrine of the ideal Muslim ruler, which, in its implications for what he calls the 'low-born', is hardly different in its severity from the classical Hindu law of caste. As Barani's translator, Mohammad

Habib, writes, 'Barani's God, as is quite clear from his work, has two aspects: first, he is the tribal deity of the Musalmans; secondly, as between the Musalmans themselves, He is the tribal deity of well-born Muslims'. Barani's was not a lone voice in his period, however, for he seems to echo a widely shared understanding of ashraf supremacy held by many of his ashraf contemporaries, including leading 'ulama.

#### 4. Methodology

The paper is based on secondary sources of information like books, journals, research reports and newspapers.

#### 5. Objectives of the study

In view of the present study intends to address the following objectives as the main objective of the present paper is to provide a historical perspective on the issue of caste and caste based discrimination among Muslims in India

#### 6. Result and Discussion

Thus it is very much clear on the face of it, the expression 'Casteism among Muslim' would appear in contradiction in terms. It is commonly held that Islam is an egalitarian religion and there is no status difference among Muslims. As such there is no question of the prevalence of social stratification on the basis of caste among them and caste inequality among Muslims cannot be said to exist. This is the standard line that is handed down whenever any reference to Casteism among Muslims is made. Now it is a well-established theory that Muslims may be a faith community, but in sociological terms are not homogeneous.

The Holy Quran says,

"O mankind! We (God) created you from a single pair of male and a female; and made you into peoples and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous among you... (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Hujurat, verse 13)

Above verse clearly depicts that though Islam accepts differentiation based on gender and tribe, it does not recognise social stratification. But in reality, the Muslim community remains diversified, fragmented and as caste-ridden as any other community of India. In fact the levels of stratification witnessed within the Muslim community of India totally negate this Quranic edict. Literature on caste among Muslims has convincingly demonstrated the reality of caste among Indian Muslims. However, it should be acknowledged that this discriminatory practice among Muslims, observed more in North India than South India, is not as much pronounced, oppressive and widespread as amongst the Hindus. But that is hardly comforting. The fact that discrimination based on caste lines exists within the Muslim community of India is cause enough for consternation.

Indian Muslims mostly traced their origins to Arab and claim a superior status for themselves as ashraf or 'noble'. which is not fact only a small minority have their origins to Arab, Iranian and Central Asian settlers and most of the Indian Muslims are descendants of 'untouchable' and 'low' caste converts. Muslims Descendants of indigenous converts are, on the other hand, commonly referred to contemptuously as ajlaf or 'base' or 'lowly'. Considering this classification 75% of Muslim population of India would fall into the ajlaf category. But conversion to the egalitarian faith of Islam has not helped their cause. The ajlaf continue to be discriminated against by the Muslim upper caste. The ill treatment meted out to the lower and backward caste Muslims has led to a movement popularly known as Pasmanda movement, "Pasmanda" is a Persian word literally means 'those who have fallen behind', broken or 'oppressed' for recognition of the lower caste Muslims or 'Dalit Muslims' as Scheduled Castes, on par with the lower castes in the Hindu society.

Broadly, Pasmanda Movement have demanded reservations for 'Pasmanda Muslims' based on the concept of positive discrimination enshrined in Article 341 of the Indian Constitution, which authorises the President to declare certain castes as Scheduled Castes for special benefits. However, one of the leaders of this movement Dr. Ejaz Ali, protested the denial of burial rights to lower caste Muslims in Bihar by stating that it was 'against the basic tenets of Islam' and that there was 'no basis of caste in Islam'. There is a slight contradiction here. If Dr. Ejaz Ali accepts the Islamic teaching that there is no basis for caste in Islam, on what grounds then does he talk about a 'lower caste' Muslim and consequently, reservations for them?

It cannot deny the fact that the despicable custom of discrimination on the basis of a person's birth is prevalent in the Muslims of India, demanding a separate identity and other benefits based on caste is no panacea for this iniquity.

But there are organisations within the Muslim community who are against the ideology of Pasmanda Movement and argue that such a move is fraught with great danger and claim that it will only end up providing another dimension to the already existing divisions within the community which is based on Shi'a-Sunni, Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl-i-Hadith, Jamaat-i-Islami etc. and do not wish to create categories like 'dalit Muslim' and 'forward caste Muslim'.

A unique 'give-and-take' formula for securing job reservations for Muslims while at the same time solving the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid tangle was proposed by All India United Muslim Morcha led by Dr. Ejaz Ali which talks about the handing over of the disputed land at Ayodhya to Hindus in return for removing religious restrictions from Article 341 of the Indian Constitution to include dalit Muslims in the scheduled caste category! All Muslims are looking for a lasting and peaceful solution for the Ayodhya problem, but this kind of 'bargaining' does nothing more than reflect the unreservedly myopic view that Dr. Ali and his supporters have with regard to the issue. From where does Dr. Ali derive the legitimacy of bartering away the sentiments of 130 million Muslims? What if after this 'deal' the VHP demands Mathura and Kashi?

Indeed a duplication of the social stratification based on caste being practised by the Hindu community of India, is the last thing that the Muslims of India need. The V.P. Singh government implemented the proposals of the Mandal Commission, which recommended reservations in government jobs and educational institutions based on caste. This was followed by large-scale pro and anti-Mandal demonstrations all over the country, largely involving the student community. While the reservations provided succour to many belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, it also sharpened the already existing divide between the caste

Hindus and dalits This was so because many persons belonging to upper castes, who could qualify only based on merit, felt that the reservations had further reduced their chances of securing jobs or seats in educational institutions. The animosity, fuelled by centuries of discrimination faced by dalits and the recent reservation policy where the caste Hindus felt short-changed, is quite visible even to the undiscerning eye.

## 7. Conclusion

The broad objective of this paper was to understand the issue of Caste among Muslim in India, in this respect paper explores universally practiced forms of discrimination and exclusion include social and cultural segregation, expressed in various forms of refusal to have any social interaction; endogamy, expressed through the universal prohibitions on Dalit Muslim-non- Dalit marriages and through severe social sanctions on both Dalits Muslim and non-Dalits that break this taboo. Social segregation extends to the sphere of worship and religious rituals being almost the norm among DMs. Occupational segregation and economic exploitation are also very common and usually related practices, though somewhat less widespread than segregation or marriage bans. It is very essential for the Muslim community to acknowledge the caste stratification and deals with its issue rather than denying the fact of its existence. Organisations like the Jamaat-i-Ulama, Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat are required to intervene and undertake awareness programmes aimed at breaking through not just the primitive mindsets but also the social barriers created in the name of caste. The 'ulama and madaris have to play their part in enlightening the Muslim masses about the 'un-Islamicness' of caste system being practised by them. Theirs is the voice most keenly heard in areas where this practice exists in reality. The dichotomy between the extreme egalitarianism advocated by the Holy Quran and its practice by Muslims of India needs to be emphasised. Moreover, this state of affairs is not only un-Islamic but also detrimental to the prosperity and security of the Muslim community in India. These fears are very real.

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