

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

Social Stratification among Muslims; A Phenomenon of Biradari in North India

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ABSTRACT:

There is a general phenomenon that the Muslim community is monolithic in nature, and among them there is no social hierarchy. This article critically examines the situation on the practical ground and countered this concept of Islamic idealism, equality and social justice. This paper defines the emergence of caste from the Varna system in Hindu religion and when the Muslims from different countries came in India how they started practicing the similar culture. The author defines that the Indian Muslims are entirely different from the other country Muslims or Muslim communities of Asia; they are more similar to Indian Hindus than the Arabs. This paper analyzes the historical background of the expansion of casteism in the form of Biradari with the conversion of Muslims. This article argued that most of the 'Ulemas' from different 'Firqas' never countered the casteism in Muslims, just because most of them came from 'Ashraaf' (Upper Caste) class not from 'Ajlaaf' (Lower Caste) and all of them are from Brahminical mindset. They are just like Muslim 'Brahmins'. More or less there are similar castes in Indian Muslims just like in Hindus. As there were so many revolutionaries and reformers born in India from which many of them were Muslims also but no one worked to remove the practice of caste system in Muslims. This was completely against the Islamic socialization which was based on equality and Pan-Islamic brotherhood. And its effect can also be seen in the practice of Marriage also. This paper concludes that what should be the role of the 'Ulemas' to remove this unethical practice in Indian Muslims in the view of Islam.

KEYWORDS: Religious Identity, Caste System, Dalit Muslims, Conversions

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INTRODUCTION

India is the country of various religious and cultural identities of the citizens. These differences originally derive from different kind of spiritual faith. The majority of Indian people have faith in so called Hindu beliefs but originally it's transformed the Vedic culture. In ancient Indian societies there was system called Varna system in 1500 B.C. This Varna system was based on the professional hierarchy. According to Rig Veda there are Four '*Varnas*' born from Lord Brahma. But in the later Vedic period near about 1000 B.C. to 600 B.C. this Varna system transformed as caste system which basically depends on birth instead of profession¹. This was the beginning of casteism in Indian society.

After that in the hierarchy of casteism the *Varna* '*Shudra*' treated as untouchable persons. This was legally protected by Manuscripts and various types of *Dharamsutra*. In the influence of this mythological ideology Indian social system constructed.

This is the scenario of Indian social background when Islam came into existence in Indian sub-continent in early 8th century by traders, Sufis and by invasions like politicians and army etc. Most of the conversions of Indians into Islam were just a change of spiritual beliefs, but not completely social and cultural change. The ways, in which Islamic culture penetrated and interacted with the local Indian tradition at the social level, the changes which came into Islam as a result of this interaction, the manner in which foreign Muslim communities became increasingly Indianized and the local converts merged into the Muslim society².

The idea of Muslim society based on equality. Although the Quran explain the differences based on gender and the tribes but it does not permit social stratification.

"O mankind! I (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 honored in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous among you..."³

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 Text.

Some of the Muslim scholars continued to deny this Quranic text.

(By contrast) Lowly, Rascal, incompetent, coward, unknown, stingy, lazy, lowborn, bazaar people do not have any association with history, neither can its study be their professional reading

and knowing of it (history) is harmful rather than beneficial to stingy and lowborn people. (Ziauddin Barni-1983:47-48)

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan also said in 1958 that “the positions of Julahas have got thoroughly undermined and this inferior lowly people (badzaat) were more active in the uproar” (rebellion 1857).⁴

Most Indian Muslims are descendants of 'untouchable' and 'low' caste converts, with only a small minority tracing their origins to Arab, Iranian and Central Asian settlers. Muslims who claim foreign descent assert a superior status for themselves as Ashraf or 'noble'. Descendants of indigenous converts are, on the other hand, commonly referred to contemptuously as 'Ajlaaf' or 'base' or 'lowly'. Going by this classification, an overwhelming 75% of Muslim population of India would fall into the Ajlaaf category⁵. But conversion to the egalitarian faith of Islam has not helped their cause. The Ajlaaf 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 for recognition of the lower caste Muslims or 'Dalit Muslims' as Scheduled Castes, on par with the lower castes in the Hindu society. The leaders of this movement have demanded reservations for 'Dalit Muslims'.

The construction of social stratification among Muslims have two principles, one of them is to claim themselves from Central Asian race, and the other one is that the people belong to upper caste in Hindus or who has the upper status in society which were Brahmins and Kshatriyas, when they converted into Islam they become upper caste Muslims and those Hindus who belongs to lower caste like Vaishya and Shudras or who belong to lower strata of the society when they converted they treats as lower castes Muslims like *Julaha, Sakka, Teli, Dhuna, Qasai, Hela etc.* This whole thing spread the concept of 'Ashraaf' and 'Ajlaaf' in Muslims. That's how Indian Islam shaped itself not only in its ideational and cultural aspects but also in social and inter-personal spheres. Muslim 'Ulema' and scholars have particularly legitimized this hierarchy all throughout history. This is clearly mentioned in the writings of Ashraf Ali Thanvi and Ahmad Raza Khan Bareilvi.⁶

This was completely against the Islamic socialization which was based on equality and Pan-Islamic brotherhood. Now the concept of casteism in Muslims took a new form 'Biradari' which plays an important role in every social institution.

Under this influence Indian Muslim Social Institutions took its shape eg:- one of the most important social institution 'marriage' completely constructed under this casteism or so called Biradari. In present time when the planning of marriage starts everyone look among their 'Biradari', whether it's about boy's marriage or girl's because it is the belief that if the marriage done in the same 'Biradari' the bond of 'Biradari' will get strong when the same will not happen if the marriage will done in the other 'Biradaris'. The other thing is mainly when a Muslim look for bride it can be

possible that he can do it in the lower 'Biradari' but in case of groom it is completely prohibited to marry their daughter in lower 'Biradari'. It is just like Hindus 'Anulomb Vivah' and 'Pratilomb Vivah'. In Anulomb vivah a boy can marry with a lower caste girl that is permissible but a girl cannot marry with a lower caste boy which is called 'Pratilomb vivah'.

The influence of 'Biradari' can also see in the settlement of town or village planning. In the towns and the villages of north India it is clearly seen that the people belongs to same Biradari lives in a particular geographical area and in villages in the same poorva, mohalla and badaas. And all the people also want to live with their Biradari members. Their social, economical, educational status constructs under this Biradari phenomenon. In the areas of same Biradari their culture are relatively same eg:- in Kasai community their culture are relatively same their social living conditions are alike, their educational status are same, they are associated with the work of meat production that's why the educational status of this Biradari is poorer than other Biradaris. And when we go in the areas of sayyed Biradari, most of the people associated with the professions like teachers, doctors and businessman. Their culture are entirely different from lower Biradaris, the social status of sayyed's in Muslim community as like Brahmins in Hindu community, the educational status of sayyeds are much better than the other lower biradaris.

This social stratification is stronger in northern Indian Muslims compare to south Indian Muslims. Eg:- In Bihar casteism in Muslim community is just alike Hindu Brahmin system. Here the people of a particular Biradari don't like to interact socially with other Biradaris they don't marry; they don't eat and even don't pray with the other Biradaris they built their own Biradari mosque for their namaz. On the other side when we look on the Muslims of Malabar coast they have more equality compare to north. There is no boundation in case of marriage. Now let's look at a hypothetical situation where the reservation system is replicated within the Muslim community of India. To begin with castes that deserves to be categorized as 'dalit Muslims' need to be identified. This process, would present a scenario where a set of Muslims, especially those coming from south India would either say that they are not 'dalit Muslims' or would express their inability to identify the caste they belong to for the simple reason that they don't have a caste. A few other perplexing situations would be thrown up. How would, for example, a Muslim from Kerala with no caste, react to his fellow 'dalit Muslim' from Bihar getting a job based on his caste? It would be nothing short of a shock for the Malayalee Muslim who shares his reverence for Allah, his Friday namaz, and belief in Islamic tenets with the Bihari Muslim but still finds that he is different from him (the Bihari Muslim) because he doesn't have a 'caste' - something which has no religious sanction at all! But most importantly, it would become the cause of much heartburn for those 'casteless' and so-called 'non-dalit' sections of the Muslim community, who would be ineligible to use the benefits of the

reservation policy, as they do not meet the caste criteria laid down to avail this privilege. Assuming that caste based reservation is extended to Muslims too; it is bound to cause further fragmentation within the community.

The upper caste Muslims comprised not more than 8% of total population of Muslims. The majority of Muslims in cities are Qureshis, Ansaris, Saifis, Rangrez, Bishti, or Alvi. Before 1990 it was unity in Muslims politically, if any Muslim candidate fights in election all the Muslim population voted for him without seeing his caste. After 1990 the differences on the basis of caste started. Every caste member voted his caste representative in elections. In 1996 All India Muslim OBC Organization organized under the leadership of Shabbir Ansari, a conference in New Delhi. Its main objective was to build public opinion in the favour of extending the existing provisions of reservation for other backward castes to their counterparts. To counter this Jamat-e-Islami Hind raised the issue on the front page of Dawat-1996 “do not create further disunity in problem ridden millat”. With this the other upper caste Muslim politicians raised the issue of total Muslim reservation which is unconstitutional and impossible. Even they know that it is not possible to give reservation to whole religious community but they raised this issue just because they did not want the lower caste Muslims upliftment, they did not want the lower caste people to get equal with them by electing in the legislative assembly.¹

The bitter truth that the community needs to square up to is that caste stratification, howsoever blasphemous, is a reality of the Muslim society in India. This obnoxious practice cannot be wished away. The community has to set its face against it and the only way to fight this inhuman practice is direct action - a jihad against anyone practicing, promoting or legitimizing caste-based stratification. It is here that organizations 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 practiced 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 emphasized. 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. Under these circumstances, the response of the Muslim community of India to this test should be one that reflects its maturity and age; a response that exhibits the collective wisdom of the community and the noble teachings of the Holy Quran and the Prophet(pbuh). A common refrain heard from many quarters of the Muslim community in India is: *'Islam khatre mein hai'* (Islam is in danger). Amazingly the danger to Islam is more from its followers than its

detractors. Muslims who have strayed from the path of Islam and failed to comprehend its essence are proving to be the real threat to Islam. The Muslims of India have gained the dubious distinction of sustaining a highly prejudiced and devious system of social stratification, which is nowhere to be found in the rest of the Muslim world. This is the brief story of existence and denying of casteism in Muslims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Imtiaz Ahmad – 1973, Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India.

This is the relevant work to understand the social stratification and social hierarchy in Indian Muslims in Gujarat. He analyzed the beginning and development of Islamic society in India. He composed the Islamic culture penetrated and interacted with the local Indian tradition at the social level. He defined that the Indian beliefs usages and practices affected the existing social institutions. He shows that the settlement of Muslims in Gujarat. Being a coastal area Gujarat had been attracting Persian and Arab traders from early times that were flourishing Muslim settlements.

2. Anwar Ali – 2001 His work Masawat Ki Jung: Pasemanzar Bihar ka Pasmanda Musalman.

This book is a ground breaking attempt to bring to light a painful reality. Originally in Hindi Masawat ki Jung highlights the evil of caste discrimination prevalent amongst the Muslims in northern India, particularly Bihar. The author has painstakingly researched the lives of the low and the backward amongst Muslims. He has discussed convincingly demonstrated the reality of caste among Indian Muslims. How they have been forced to live on the margins in sub-human conditions, how they have been systematically discriminated against by society, by the forwards, by the religious leadership, by the political parties. Islam being a religion of social justice and equity has made no difference to their lives. However, it should be acknowledged that this discriminatory practice among Muslims, observed more in North India than South India. It is not as much pronounced, oppressive and widespread as amongst the Hindus. He describes lower castes Biradaris stratified as Ajlaaf category. The majority of Indian Muslim population i.e. 75% would fall into the Ajlaaf category. The only objective of the book is to bring that question in the present Indian political and social agenda that was never allowed to come into picture by the Muslim leaders and their allies of secular and communal branded parties.

3. Salil Kader – 2004, *Social Stratification among Muslims*

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