



Pasmanda Muslims: A Case Of Double Vulnerability

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Abstract

It has been observed that Scheduled caste members following Hinduism who had been subjected to the inhumane practices of untouchability converted to other religions such as Islam or Christianity. But even after many generations they have not got rid of the shackles of caste. Only thing that has changed is the nomenclature of their classification; earlier they were Shudra or Ati-shudra and now they are Ajlaf, Arzal, Pasmanda or Dalit Muslims post their conversion to Islam. Also, there is no change in their profession, socio-economic and educational status. Contrarily, Dalit Hindus were provided benefits in the form of reservation post-Independence but Pasmanda Muslims were not included in the affirmative action. Since then, these people are facing a dual vulnerability because of their caste identity as well as their religious identity. This paper attempts to throw light on their issues of marginalization. In the process, this paper has tried to provide a detailed analysis of double vulnerability of Pasmanda Muslims and suggests some measures to ensure equal access to social and political resources.

Keywords:

Caste, Pasmanda, Muslims, Stratification, Discrimination

Introduction

With a population of more than 170 million Muslims, India has the third largest population of Muslims in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. Muslims, followers of Islam have their presence in India from the time of Prophet Muhammad himself. Muslims have ruled various parts on India from tenth to nineteenth century. They came to India as conquerors and traders, settled here and made it their home. Sikand, Yogendra (2007) writes majority of the Muslim population today is comprised of the people who converted to Islam from other religions. These people who came into the fold of Islam through conversion brought several cultural practices and features with them. One of these was caste based social stratification with its features like hierarchical

ordering of social groups, traditional occupation and endogamy in the cultural practices of Muslims in Indian Subcontinent.

Ideologically, Islam is an egalitarian religion which emphasize on the establishment of a society on the notions of social equality. Ahmed, Imtiaz (2007) mentions that the framework of Islamic thought sought to find an economic mechanism for the redistribution of wealth in such a manner that the economically marginalized meet their needs. But the ideal society as per the Islamic framework largely remained a dream for many. Indian Society had a very strong social stratification system based on the caste system before the arrival of Islam. Hutton (1963) writes that caste was so much part of everyday life that when Islam and Christianity came to India, they could not escape the infection of caste. It was because of this reason the large number of Muslims who converted from the lower Hindu Castes to escape from the social persecution and oppressive socio - economic disabilities could not do so and the search for equality proved a mirage for them.

Caste among Muslims is a reality which majority of Muslims hesitate to admit but are well aware of the fact that it plays an important role when it comes to their social roles and relations in the society. Ahmed, Imtiaz (1978) writes that caste system like social stratification among Muslims is known for a long time but only a few attempts have been made to understand this. Ansari, Ghous (1960) in his work on caste and social stratification among the North Indian Muslims provide the first major insight into the caste system of Muslims. He formulated three categories for classification of caste among Muslims i.e., (i) *Ashraf*, (ii) *Ajlaf*, and (iii) *Arzals*. *Ajlaf* and *Arzals* are also known as *Pasmanda* or Dalit Muslims. *Ashraf* includes Muslim nobility and direct descendants of early Muslim immigrants i.e., *Sheikh*, *Sayyad*, *Mughal* or *Pathan*. Second category *Ajlaf* includes Muslim *Jat*, *Rajput* Muslims, *Gujjar* etc. and *Arzal* includes the occupational castes engaged in unclean or ritually polluting classes. People who converted from Hindu lower castes expected a better social life but nothing much has changed for them except for the nomenclature of their classification i.e., earlier they were *Shudra* and *ati-shudra* now they are *Pasmanda* Muslims.

Jahan, Yasmin (2016) writes that conversion to Islam did give a sense of social equality, but it didn't bring any larger socio-economic changes in their lives. There was nothing new in their lives except for the religion. Caste structure and suffering because of it remained intact. Ali Anwar (2005) also writes that earlier they were Hindu *Dhobhi* and now they are Muslim *dhobhi*, Hindu scavenger was *Dom* and *Bhangi* and Muslim scavenger was *Mehtar* or *Halalkhor*. There was no change in the profession, socio-economic and educational status. Post-Independence, Dalit Hindus were provided benefits under affirmative action but *Pasmanda* Muslims were not made a party to the affirmative action which further pushed them to a deprived position. This exclusion from the Scheduled caste reservation pushed them to a double disadvantaged position first with in Muslim community because of their caste identity and second from the government because of their Muslim identity. This paper focuses on understanding this two-tier disadvantage of the *Pasmanda* Muslims and how it is affecting the socio-economic status of *Pasmanda* Muslims in the society.

Social Discrimination within Muslim Community

For long, Indian Muslims have been seen as a homogeneous society and defined solely on the basis of religion. But it is a myth, Indian Muslim like any other socio-religious community have multiple layers of complex identities based on language, ethnicity, sects or the school of thought they follow. Caste is also an important identity which is unique to the Muslims in Indian Subcontinent. Caste is an overarching hierarchical structure that governs almost all the social relation starting from birth to death. The various features of caste system like endogamy, occupational specialisation, status hierarchy and belief in ritual purity and pollution are found among Indian Muslims.

Siddiqui, M. K. A. (1979) in his study of Muslims of Bengal provides an insight into how caste operate among muslim and provide for a basis of inequality among the Muslims. He describes the relation between *Dafalis* and *Lalbegis*. He writes that *Dafali*, who work as a priest for *Lalbegis* (Muslim *Bhangi*) do not accept food or water from the *Lalbegis*. When it comes to marriage, these caste groups are mostly endogamous but at times hypergamy is allowed. In such marriages, where a lower caste woman is married to a *Syed* or *Sheikh* the offspring are called '*Syedzada*' who are not considered equal to the caste status of their father. Similarly, Bhatti, Zarina (1973) in her study of village Kasauli found that inter-dining was allowed between the *Ashraf* castes i.e., *Syed*, *Sheikh*, *Mughal*, and *Pathan* but commensality with the lower caste Muslims were not allowed. In the village Kasauli, there were eighteen caste groups based on traditional occupations. These groups had a hierarchical arrangement according to their caste and it was decided by the proximity of the particular caste groups with the *Ashraf*. *Nat*, who skin dead animals and make drums were placed at bottom, *Dhobi* (washermen) were above *Nat*, *Julaha* (weavers) and *Darzi* (Tailor) were above *Nat*. Ameerudheen, T A (2018) writes that *Ossans* who perform circumcision and hair cutting and *Pusulans* who make living by fishing are considered inferior because of their occupation. Even after attaining a financially well settled status, they are considered inferior to their Muslim compatriots.

Internal Democratization

Historically, the leadership of the community have been with the upper caste of the Indian Muslim community. Anwar, Ali (2005) has provided a statistical overview of management bodies of Muslim institutions how the upper caste Muslim maintain their hegemony and control over the various resources and institutions of the community such as All India Muslim Personal Law Board, *Imarat-e-Sharia*, etc. The upper caste Muslims also have their hold over various *Waqf* boards, madrasas like *Darul Uloom Deoband*, mosque, dargah, minority educational institutions, and other state constituted and aided bodies like Haj Committee, Minority Commission, Urdu Academy, Maulana Azad Foundation, etc. at both center and state levels.

The upper castes have driven their strength from the majoritarian communalism to keep the power structures of the community concentrated in their hand. Alam, Anwar (2003) writes that the upper caste Muslim leadership has consciously made efforts to keep the Muslim politics focused on the politics of identity revolving around a few cultural and emotional issues like *Babri Masjid*, *Shah Bano case*, etc. This has helped

them in keeping the attempts for internal democratization in the community at the periphery. They have created a superficial image of the community as a collective communal monolithic entity. Ahmad, Irfan (2003) writes that before 1990, quite often in elections, candidates were mostly from the upper caste Muslims and everybody used to vote for them irrespective of the caste. After 1990, in post Mandal era lower caste Muslims started contesting and putting up their candidature in the election. It was then the upper caste Muslim came up with the narrative that casteism has arrived in the Muslim community and it is harming the idea of *Millat*. Such narratives show the anxiety of the upper caste because of their fear of losing the power circles to the lower castes.

In last three decades, especially in post Mandal era which is described as the second democratic upsurge by Yogendra Yadav, *Pasmanda* Muslims have made significant efforts towards achieving the internal democratization within the Muslim Community. The outcome of these internal democratic efforts are the organizations such as *All India Muslim OBC Organization* (Maharashtra) led by Shabbir Ahmad Ansari, *All India Backward Muslim Morcha* (Bihar) led by Ejaz Ali and *All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz* (Bihar and UP) led by *Mukhtar Ali Ansari* previously by *Ali Anwar Ansari*. These organizations have challenged the social and political hegemony of the Muslim elites in last three decades and carved out a space for *Pasmanda* Muslims in the national as well as internal politics of the Muslim Community.

Denial of Scheduled Caste Reservation to Muslims

In 1950, President of India passed the “Constitutional (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950” to ensure and specify the castes to be recognized as the Scheduled Castes. However, the para 3 of this presidential order infringes upon the ‘Right to freedom’ to profess and practice any religion by limiting the classification of Scheduled caste limited to the Hindus, which was later extended to other religions of Indian origin i.e., Buddhism and Sikhism. Para 3 of this presidential order reads “notwithstanding anything contained in para 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Castes”. Later, in 1956 and 1990 this order was amended to include the Buddhists and Sikhs respectively to benefit from Scheduled Caste reservation. However, the Scheduled Caste converts to Islam and Christianity are not recognized as the beneficiary of the affirmative actions and have been fighting in the court of law to do away with this religious restriction. Deshpande, S., & Bapna, G. (2008) writes that denial of Scheduled Caste status to Muslims and Christians is a violation of Article 14 (equality before law); Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion); and Article 25 (freedom to profess and practice any religion) of constitution of India.

Ali Anwar (2005) writes that after partition *Pasmanda* Muslims and Hindu *Dalits* had started off their journeys much or less with the same Socio-Economic Status. But, now after more than seventy years of Independence no significant changes can be observed in the conditions of *Pasmanda* Muslims while their counterparts in Hindu religion have made significant progress aided by the Scheduled Caste Reservation. The reports of *Kaka Kalekar Commission* (1955), *Mandal Commission* (1980), *Gopal Singh Committee* (1983), and *Rajinder Sachar committee* (2006) emphasize on the fact that lower caste Muslims are living at the edge of society in

the condition of denial and deprivation of their basic rights and dignified life. Deshpande, S., & Bapna, G. (2008) provide an insight into status of poverty, average consumption levels, broad occupation categories and levels of education. He writes that Dalit Muslims are lagging behind in all these areas and make a perfect case for inclusion in the Scheduled Caste reservation.

Denial of Scheduled Caste reservation to Muslims do not only affect their socio-economic conditions but it also affect their ability of political participation. Although, in socio economic field, Muslims have received some benefits under the OBCs reservation but when it comes to contest election, it is only available to Scheduled Caste people in reserved constituency. The denial of reservation to Muslims deprive them of their right to contest election in 84 out of 543 Lok Sabha seats which are reserved for Scheduled caste members and similar case is there in the state assembly seats. *Pasmanda* Muslims are also deprived of the protection their Hindu counterparts enjoy under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

In the light of the above discussion it can be concluded that Indian Muslims are not a monolith community. They have multiple layers of complex identities and differences. Caste based social stratification among Muslims is a reality. Caste based social discrimination is also a reality of Muslim community however it may not be as oppressive as it is amongst Hindus. The above discussion also highlights the issues of hold and hegemony of Muslim elites on the resources and Institutions of Muslim Community. It also highlights how the attempts of internal democratization being undertaken by the *Pasmanda* Muslim to challenge the hegemony of the *Ashrafs*. Apart from intra community issues, there are serious challenges from external factors as well. Denial of affirmative action in the form of Scheduled Caste reservation which is a direct violation of their constitutional rights is one such major challenge for the community.

Government Should include Dalit Muslims into the fold of SC reservation to undo the injustice with them and formulate program and policy for this section of people to ensure equality in the socio-economic and political spheres. Leaders and Civil Society organizations working with the Muslim community should facilitate the process of internal democratization of the community and ensure equal access to resources and control of the institution of the community.

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