



The Untold Story of Watalas: Exploring Social Discrimination in Contemporary Kashmiri Society

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Abstract

Watalas, also known as sheikhs or mochi, constitute one of the most marginalised groups in Kashmir, encountering discrimination similar to caste-based biases. They practice endogamy and engage in occupations traditionally considered menial, such as shoe making, barbering, kangri making, singing, and serving as sweepers and scavengers in government sectors. Despite the majority of people in Kashmir, and specifically Watalas, adhering to the Islamic faith—an ideology purportedly opposed to discrimination—this community faces persistent social issues. Historically engaged in the craft of tanning and the production of various items from animal hides, primarily sourced from deceased animals, Watalas, despite transitioning away from this traditional livelihood and experiencing material advancement, persistently confront societal marginalisation, being labelled as impure within prevalent public perception. This paper seeks to elucidate the challenges they confront, aiming to identify and analyse the contemporary problems faced by Watalas in Kashmiri society.

Keywords: Watalas, Kashmir, Social discrimination.

Introduction

The advent of Islam in Kashmir traces its roots back to the 14th century, “not as a consequence of an external invasion but rather through a coup d’état originating within the region.”¹ Its influence and teachings had pervaded the Valley long before the ascension of a Muslim king, *Rinchana*, later known as Sadruddin, owing to the efforts of Islamic missionaries, traders, and military adventurers.² Fortunately, it encountered fertile ground in which to thrive. Brahmins, the predominant social group at the time, had wielded significant influence through their ritualistic practices, gradually imposing their customs on the populace. During this period, *Sufis* from Central Asia entered Kashmir, establishing *khanqahs* (Sufi hospices) across the region, fostering a sense of unity before God, and establishing community kitchens where individuals of all sects could dine and commune together. Indigenous Sufis, referred to as rishis, along with figures like *Lal Ded*, rebelled against the Brahminical creed, openly criticising Brahmins and their practices.³ By the close of the 15th century, the majority of the Kashmiri population had embraced Islam. Despite the conversions, people retained their caste names and adhered to certain caste-related norms, though not strictly.⁴ On this, Richard M. Eaton writes,

¹ P. N. K. Bamzai, *Culture and Political History of Kashmir: Medieval Kashmir*, vol. II (New Delhi: M D Publications, 1994), 470.

² Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam: the role of Muslim Rishis (fifteenth-eighteenth century)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), 1.

³ Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*, 1-3.

⁴ Tariq Ahmad Sheikh, “Cradle of caste in Kashmir: (From Medieval period to present day)”, *International Journal of Applied Business and Economic Research* 15, no. 21, Part 2 (2017): 376. <https://docplayer.net/103866148-Cradle-of-castes-in-kashmir.html>

“The converted Hindu communities failed to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, on the contrary, they singly carried over into Muslim society the same practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had had in Hindu Society.”⁵ While Islam believes in equality before God and rejects such distinctions, caste-like distinctions persisted in Kashmiri Muslim society. Consequently, individuals like *Hajam*, *Chopan*, *Doom*, and *Watal* continue to contend with social distinctions, with *Watals* particularly experiencing heightened marginalisation.

Social Discrimination of Watals in Contemporary Society

Among the lower social groups, *Watals* face the most significant and pervasive forms of caste-based discrimination, finding themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Predominantly landless, they engage in occupations such as scavenging, tanning, sweeping, and crafting winnowing pans and baskets. *Watals* are commonly referred to as *sheikhs* in Kashmir, though there is no consensus on the origin of this designation. Some argue that it has been bestowed upon them to elevate their societal status, while others claim that *Watals* themselves adopted this title to improve their standing. However, similar to the case of *Dums*, butchers, and gardeners in nineteenth-century Kashmir who adopted the *Kram Ganai* to enhance their status, causing some discontent among the original *Ganais*,⁶ this adoption by *Watals* might also be aimed at social elevation.

The use of the term *sheikh* as a prefix often suggests a higher caste origin,⁷ as exemplified by the late *Sheikh Abdullah*. Conversely, as a suffix, it indicates affiliation with the *Watals*.⁸ However, this belief requires re-evaluation due to its inherent ambiguity. Instances exist where people carry the *sheikh* designation as a suffix but are not identified as *Watals*. These individuals, possessing substantial economic influence, intermarry with other upper castes in society, excluding syeds who exclusively marry within their own caste. Thus, the practice of categorizing and defining *sheikhs* or *Watals* based on prefixes and suffixes lacks appropriateness.

Nevertheless, a more appropriate understanding may arise by considering it in the context of social mobility. Possibly among *Watals*, those who have accumulated significant economic influence have seized opportunities to elevate their social status and engage with other communities or castes. Although the precise interpretation of this ambiguity remains uncertain, it is evident that the paradigm involving suffixes and prefixes necessitates thorough debate.

The *Sheikhs* or *Watals* in Kashmir face significant discrimination, similar to the plight of lower castes in India, though with varying degrees of intensity.⁹ On account of this, it has become a trend in Kashmiri academia to draw parallels between the discrimination faced by *Sheikhs* and the challenges confronted by *Dalits*

⁵ Richard M. Eaton, “Approaches to the study of conversion”, in ed, Richard E, Martin, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (UK: One world Publications, 2001), 110.

⁶ Walter Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1895), 306.

⁷ Adnan Bhat, “Caste Away for Love: How Caste Bias Works in Kashmir,” *The Wire*, December 10, 2017, 03. <https://thewire.in/caste/caste-away-love-caste-bias-works-kashmir>.

⁸ Bhat, “Caste Away for Love: How Caste Bias Works in Kashmir.” 03. See also, Tabia Masoodi and Ali Misda Masoom, “We Take It Lightly—But Caste Discrimination Ruins Lives In Kashmir”, *Kashmir Observer*, June 7, 2022, <https://kashmirobsvr.net/2022/06/07/we-take-it-lightly-but-caste-discrimination-ruins-lives-in-kashmir/>

⁹ Masroor Rather, “Kashmir’s manual scavengers, facing segregation and discrimination, say society is in denial about caste bias”, *FirstPost* June 15, 2019. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-manual-scavengers-facing-segregation-and-discrimination-say-society-is-in-denial-about-caste-bias-6818501.html> See also, Dr Ab Hamid Sheikh, “Ostracism of Watals in Kashmir”, *Kashmir Reader*, September 16, 2022. <https://kashmirreader.com/2022/09/16/ostracism-of-watals-in-kashmir/>

in mainland India. However, this comparison seems somewhat simplistic, as *Dalits* experience pervasive caste discrimination and violence, a situation not mirrored in Kashmir.

Joel Lee's perspective becomes important in this discourse as he highlights the ongoing debate regarding the extent of stigmatisation and discrimination faced by different Muslim communities, challenging the appropriateness of labels like 'backward,' '*pasmanda*,' and '*Dalit*.' Consequently, categorising or labelling Sheikhs as *Dalits* or untouchables is a contentious matter, demanding careful scholarly examination.¹⁰

People of different social groups exhibit a subtle but noticeable aversion in terms of sharing meals,¹¹ and entering the homes of the *Watalas*, although not strictly enforced. This avoidance extends to communal events like *Wazwaan* notably during weddings, where people often express reluctance to partake in meals with them.¹² When questioned about this reluctance, individuals commonly attribute it to labelling the *Watalas* as '*makeer*' or impure. History bears witness that this practice was more stern and strictly maintained decades back during ceremonial gatherings or marriage ceremonies; lower castes like *Watalas* and *Dombs* were also invited but were served food separately.¹³ In a similar fashion, when *Watalas* invite upper castes for ceremonial gatherings, they would serve them food cooked by upper caste professional cooks, as noted by T.N. Madan.¹⁴

The manifestation of caste-like distinctions becomes particularly evident in marriage practices, as those from other social classes tend to avoid matrimonial alliances with the *Watalas*. Conversely, the *Watalas* themselves often opt for endogamous marriages within their community due to a perceived bias against them. They express concerns about potential mistreatment and derogatory comments if their daughters were to marry individuals from social groups considered higher in status.¹⁵ In justifying this practice, people often use the phrase "*Zash zaatt pash paat*," conveying the idea that individuals with similar backgrounds tend to associate closely.¹⁶

Watalas across Kashmir reside in segregated neighbourhoods¹⁷ where members of other social classes tend to avoid visiting, although not strictly. However, the ghetto-like situation is not universal for everyone. Some individuals within their community who possess economic resources acquire land and reside in more affluent areas. Nevertheless, these residences are often situated at a distance from areas inhabited by other social classes. Despite this change in living conditions, it does not alleviate the stigma associated with their community. These segregated neighbourhoods or localities are frequently identified by names such as Sheikh Mohalla, Sheikhpora, Watalpora, etc.¹⁸

¹⁰ Joel Lee, "Who is the true Halalkhor? Genealogy and ethics in Dalit Muslim oral traditions", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 52, no. 1 (2018): 6. <https://lms2.iba.edu.pk/vol1/2023/234/11/9442a468-d5bb-4d4d-a03c-e9da6df9bac7>

¹¹ Sheikh, "Ostracism of *Watalas* in Kashmir."

¹² Personal observation of author.

¹³ T.N. Madan, "Religious Ideology in a Plural Society: The Muslims and Hindus of Kashmir", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 1, no. 6 (January 1972): 132.

¹⁴ Madan, "Religious Ideology in a Plural Society", 132.

¹⁵ Rather, "Kashmir's manual scavengers, facing segregation and discrimination, say society is in denial about caste bias."

¹⁶ Hafsa Syeed, "The Dalit Muslims Struggle for Dignity in Kashmir", *Outlook India*, May 7, 2023. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/the-dalit-muslims-struggle-for-dignity-in-kashmir-news-284367>

¹⁷ Rather, "Kashmir's manual scavengers, facing segregation and discrimination, say society is in denial about caste bias", See also, Syeed, "The Dalit Muslims Struggle for Dignity in Kashmir."

¹⁸ Rather, "Kashmir's manual scavengers, facing segregation and discrimination, say society is in denial about caste bias."

Abandoning their traditional occupation of skin tanning, members of this community are involved in various professions within both the public and private sectors. Individuals from this community predominantly work as cobblers, kangri makers, labourers, and barbers. Moreover, they often take on roles such as sweeping and cleaning toilets in government offices across Kashmir. A few, achieving economic prosperity, have secured prestigious government positions as doctors, professors, engineers, and teachers, although such instances are rare. However, even with these achievements, they remain unable to escape the societal stigma linked to their community, continuing to face challenges in various aspects of their lives.

The term *Watul* associated with the Watal community is used as a derogatory expression in Kashmiri.¹⁹ In everyday language, Kashmiris employ phrases like *watal khasalat* (referring to quality) and *watal nasal* (pertaining to lineage) to mock or criticize each other.²⁰ The term *Watul* serves as a general word in the Kashmiri language for the Watal community. Frequently, their community name is employed in a negative context within Kashmiri society to denigrate someone's characteristics by likening them to the perceived traits associated with the Watal community.

Conclusion

The introduction of Islam led to the conversion of the majority of the population in mediaeval Kashmir. Despite this conversion, individuals retained their caste names and adhered to caste norms, albeit not strictly. Islam, in theory, rejects any form of distinction, yet evident caste-like distinctions persist in contemporary Kashmiri society. Communities such as *Doom*, *Watal*, and *Hajam* face caste-like discrimination, with *Watal*, also known as *Sheikhs*, encountering significant and pervasive biases. *Watal* are intermittently juxtaposed with *Dalits* from Mainland India and, within academic discourse, are occasionally characterised as Kashmiri *Dalits*. This juxtaposition, however, introduces a contradictory assertion that warrants in-depth research and scholarly scrutiny. No doubt, the broader Kashmiri populace consistently observes a social distance from the *Watal*, refraining from visiting their locales and exhibiting a reluctance to enter into matrimonial alliances with them. Conversely, the *Watal* adhere to endogamic practices, expressing apprehension that allowing their daughters to marry into other social groups may subject them to mistreatment and derogatory remarks. However, people from other communities justify this avoidance by stating, *Zash zaatt pash paat*, suggesting a tendency for individuals with similar backgrounds to associate closely. *Watal* reside in secluded colonies across Kashmir, identified by names like *Watal Basti* and *Sheikhpora*. Traditionally involved in skin tanning, they have transitioned to various occupations such as cobblers, labourers, and sweepers in government offices. Despite this shift, the stigma associated with their community persists, leading to ongoing challenges. The community name is symbolically used as a slur in Kashmiri society, employed scornfully by individuals against each other.

¹⁹ Hanan zaffar and Affan Qadri, "Kashmiri's Untouchables: The Untold Story of Caste Discrimination", *TheQuint*, June 13, 2018. <https://www.thequint.com/photos/caste-discrimination-india-kashmir-islam-muslims-watal-sheikhs-srinagar#3>

²⁰ Sheikh, "Ostracism of Watal in Kashmir."