

Evolution of Caste in Islam in India

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Introduction

In Islam there are no discriminations of caste, clan, creed or colour. Every human being deserves equal right in Islam. This idea led Islam to rise very quickly as one of the major religions of world. Ironically when Islam started to travel in different part of worlds it started to absorb distinct characters in distinct regions. As an evolutionary progression Islam got caste-based stratifications in the Indian subcontinent, nomadic area based stratification in Afghanistan and central Asia and language based stratifications in Europe. Islam fundamentally opposed any type of distinctions like caste, race or colour between human beings. Caste refers to " a hierarchy of endogamous groups in a characteristic division of labour"¹. While Islam stands for total equality among all human beings and group in social and religious spheres. The Quranic philosophy does not allow any type of distinctions based on caste , race and colour but when Islam spread in distant lands, some sort of stratifications emerged in the new fold of Islam and the stratifications absorbed the regional nature and create a new type of Islam which got some contradictory nature on it.

As a Muslim, I never faced inter dining problem, but why the general Muslims feels glad to eat with Syeds or others high clan's Muslims? do there are any type of discriminations? When Islam landed in India, if there were no discrimination among Muslims, then how could there existence of Ashraf and Ajlaf ? in very nascent phase, there were no distinctions. Because at that phase, there were any type of distinctions shown, Islam might not be influenced mass people. because the mass people adopted Islam to save themselves from the severity torchers of the Hindu caste system.

Research methods

I have consulted with some primary sources like some newspapers journal, and took some interviews of some syed Muslims to know the nature of endogamy among Muslims. Very first we have to remember that caste is a structure of Indian society. So, I also followed the secondary sources written on caste system in India. And I have read some article on caste among Muslims in subcontinent and some secondary sources based on Islam in India.

Caste among the Muslim in India

India had been in contact with the Arabs from the age of Harappan civilization. Islams appearance in Arabia did not disrupt this communication network. Like many other cultures or cultural goods

¹ Ahmad (1981), p.1

transactions between each other Islam was a cultural transactional item. When Islam landed in India it came in close proximity to Hinduism and in the process absorbed the caste system.

Banapperumal was the first king of India to convert to Islam. The first Muslim missionary group landed in Malabar during their visit to Adam Mountain. At that time Banapperumal, the ruler of Malabar, came to know about this new religion. Feeling attraction for Islam, he visited Arabia and converted in front of Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet renamed him Tajuddin. Tajuddin met Malik-bin-Habib to learn basics of Islam.² But unfortunately Tajuddin passed away during his return to India. After his death his companions Malik-bin-Dinar and Malik-bin-Habib came to Malabar and built a mosque at Kandungallur. Thus Islam appeared in India 3 years before the death of Prophet Mohammad, in 629 CE.

From the first quarter of the 8th century the Arabs attacked India repeatedly. The aim of these attacks, till the 13th century, was to plunder India and make the Arab world strong by their looted precious goods. During the time of early years of invasion the Islamic imperial rulers never thought about long-term establishment of an Islamic empire in south Asia. This tendency changed from the time of Iltutmish. In between this period, central Asians and Arabs started coming to India in numbers. Their imperial ventures were triggered by their interest in trade. We have to remember that the relations between India and Arabia were based on trade from very ancient time. Problems of political nature in Arabia and Central Asia can also be seen as reasons for them immigrating to South Asia which played a major role in the establishment of Islam as a major religion in South Asia. Mongol invasions formed the backdrop to large-scale emigrations of populace from that part of world. The emigrations of Muslims reached its zenith during the rule of Bahlul Lodi, and Islamic society gained solid plinth during Delhi Sultanate.

As we know Islam is new among the major religions of the world. Wherever Islam spread, it gained some new features. In the Indian context Islam received caste within its fold with Muslims gaining caste identity as part of persona. It is often assumed that a caste mentality is embedded in the Indian psyche.³ But, textually, there are no of discriminations in Islam as mentioned in the *al Quran*.

O mankind, we have created you from a male and female: and we have made you tribes that you may know one another verily, the most honourable among you , in the sight of Allah , is he who is most righteous among you , surely Allah is all knowing , all aware.⁴

This *surah* shows us there was no special importance given to colour, race or region in the Quranic injunctions, but when Islam travelled to distant lands, stratifications re-emerged into the fold of Muslim society.⁵ Louis Dumont thinks that caste was consciously adopted by the Muslims in India as a compromise which they had to make in a pre-dominantly Hindu environment. Imtiaz Ahmed considers castes among Muslims not as a cultural or structural feature but as a manifestation of the principle and feature characteristically associated with Hindu caste.⁶

To understand the features of the caste system among the Muslims it would be essential to view the developments of Muslim rule in India. The social history of the Delhi Sultanate is a story of increasing prestige of the Persian traditions and culture and the concomitant decrease in stature of the Turkish

² Shabeer (2014), p. 43

³ Jaiswal (1998), p. 11

⁴ al Quran 49:13

⁵ Ahmad (1981), p. 1

⁶ Ahmad (1973), p. xix

mores. This created the structure of the caste society⁷ amongst Muslims. Patronization by Muslim rulers created a new aristocrat Muslim groups in the areas nearby Delhi. As examples we can talk about Koil (modern Aligarh), Baran (modern Bulandshahr) or Lucknow, all located in present day Uttar Pradesh. During the period when the North Indian Politics was dominated by Muslim rulers a large number of people got government employment and were connected with the state system in many different ways. Baran, the birth place of Barani, was a thriving centre of Persian culture. These areas were uniquely placed to dominate Muslim cultural firmament well into the colonial period. When wave of reformation in Muslim society emerged in the 19th century, it was these areas which emerged as focal centres. For example. institutions such as the Firangi Mahal⁸ in Lucknow and the Dar-ul-ulum⁹ in Deoband and Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College¹⁰ in Aligarh took leading roles.

After the establishment of Mughals Persian cultural domination increased. During the Sultanate and the Mughal period Muslim population increased by the process of conversion. Those who had converted at the beginning of the period got comparatively more importance and prestige than those converted later. The titles *Saiyyids* and *Sheikhs* implied Arab origins, the former being used exclusively for claimants of genealogical inheritance from the Prophet.¹¹ When the Mughals started to allocate *jagirs*, a new prestige groups of *jagirdars* was created. Grants, especially of *al-tamgha jagirs*, created a different type of groups in the Muslim society because only those of noble birth and *alims* could get these for lifelong usufruct. Thus *Saiyyids* and *Shaikhs* rode straight on to the top of the Muslim society. Next to them in the social hierarchy were the Mughals, because of their identity as rulers.¹² Following them were the *Pathans*, given a high status for their being in the martial profession. Significantly the lower castes in the Muslim society consisted of lower castes of the Hindus.¹³ As a result we saw two major divisions among the Muslims. They were horizontally divided into *Ashrafs* and *Ajlafs*. *Ashrafs* were comparatively better educated, mostly town-dwellers and of aristocratic lineage, while the *Ajlafs* were rural denizens, mostly uneducated and poor. Large numbers of *Ashrafs* were *Shaikhs* and *Saiyyids* by title and *Ajlafs* were mainly converted so they were marginalized. Soon Muslims who converted later started to use *Shaikh* as a title.¹⁴ Such a situation led to the loss of some prestige for the title of *Shaikh*, while *Saiyyids* as the descendants of Mohammad gained more prestige. This is evidenced by the list of Muslim OBC castes published by the Govt. of India. The converted people did not change their professions which meant that they carried old caste affiliations associated with their professions from Hinduism.

The Muslims in India, those claiming to be descendants of immigrants from Arabia, Persia or Turkey are a minority, while those of indigenous origin constitute the bulk of the Muslim population in India.¹⁵ In the uprisings against colonial rule, the leaders came from the *Khan* community, it being a high-ranked post during the Sultanate period. Except for the Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion, in any movements where Muslims took part, the leader came from either Persian or Arab influenced family or from those families which had converted at the beginning of Islam's entry into India.

⁷ Bayly (2011), p. 1

⁸ Bandyopadhyay (2008), p. 355

⁹ Bandyopadhyay (2008), p. 355

¹⁰ Bandyopadhyay (2008), p. 323

¹¹ Titus (2005), p. 176

¹² Titus (2005), p. 176

¹³ Ali (2002), p. 11

¹⁴ Titus (2005), p. 177

¹⁵ Faridi (1992), p. 39

Ashrafs are seen as always enforcing strict endogamic rules. They naturally do not allow their girls to marry with comparatively lower ranked Muslims. But they allow their sons to marry among the lower position holders. The complexity of the issue can be gauged from an interview of *Syed Hilal*, a resident of Kasemnagar, Mongalkote, Purba Bardhman. When I asked him as to whether he wanted to marry his daughters with a non-*Syed* Muslim, he replied that he never expects a non-*Syed* as son-in-law (*jamaat*) but can take a non-*Syed* daughter-in-law for his elder son. I asked, as a follow-up as to the reason behind his refusal of a non-*Syed* son-in-law but accepting a non-*Syed* as daughter-in-law? *Syed* replies that if he gives his daughter to a non-*Syed* family she will settle in a non-*Syed* family permanently and her children will also belong to non-*Syed* status. This being a clear regression in the social status and an insult for his family in social terms. But in his son's case his daughter-in-law will be part of their family and his grandsons or granddaughters will have their *Syed* status retained. Thus there won't be the consequent social insult. But Shaikhs, Pathans and Mughals also tried to maintain endogamy but they are not as strict as the *Syeds*.¹⁶

According to scriptures there is no place of hierarchy in Islam but in the Indian context we can see the hierarchization based on both class and caste emerging. From the beginning the rulers were Muslims and the *raiyats* were Hindus. The early converted people did not leave their aristocratic mentality which resulted in a crystallization of the differences between the communities. Even among the Sufis most of the *pirs* came from either Persian or Arab background, or came from those sections that had converted at beginning of the Sultanate rule. Sufi saints took *nazrana* from followers but did not have social ties such as matrimonial relationships with them.¹⁷ Seems the caste identities emerged in Islam historically and the higher classes still cling proudly to this part of their tradition.

In modern India we can see a very clear division between *ashrafs* and *ajlaf*s or *pasmandas*, which means 'backward persons'. The Hindu *dalits* and the *ajlaf*s face abuse and discrimination on an everyday basis including untouchability, lack of access to education and social segregations. This was shown by reports of both Ranganath Mishra and Rajinder Sachar Committees.¹⁸ Political domination by the *ashrafs* can easily be visualized where 85% of Muslim populations are *pasmandas* or *ajlaf*s. In almost every election held in independent India most of the Muslim candidates came from *ashrafs*. As an example I can cite the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In the state of Bihar RJD-led Mahagathbandhan picked 7 Muslim candidates out of 40. Out of the 7 candidates 6 belonged to the *ashraf* category. In these elections BSP announced a single *pasmanda* candidate out of 6 Muslim candidates it fielded. The *ashrafs* are just 2.01% of India's population, but their representation between the first and the thirteenth Lok Sabha was 4.5%, i.e., simply double their population.¹⁹

conclusion

In this paper I want to show, The caste system is originally opposed in Islam, but in Indian context Islam absorbed caste system for acculturation. In very nascent phase, the people converted to Islam or Muslims comes from Arab or Parsia, caught and caring on the hegemony till this days. And the peoples, those were converted to Islam from untouchables or dominated groups, does not left there professions. They were happy with the freedom liberalism and equality, which was too important for them at that time. they never thought that more upper caste Hindu could converted to Islam. Now the general

¹⁶ Ahmed (1981), p.60

¹⁷ Pemberton (2015), p. 159

¹⁸ Patnaik (2020), p.1

¹⁹ Ashraf (2019)

questions is how can a brahmin who converted to Islam or a successor of Prophet Muhammad can agree in a matrimonial relationship with a converted Muslim who was a cobbler or tanner in established Muslim society? We have to remember that after establishing Muslim society they also started to acculturation. As a results caste system also emerged in Islam and Islam emerged as Indianized Islam in subcontinent after taking some features of Hindu society.

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