

BEYOND THE IDENTITY OF “MUSLIM”: THE DEMAND FOR RECOGNITION OF PASMANDA MUSLIMS

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Abstract

Muslim society is seen as a homogeneous entity ignoring the caste and class reality for a long period of time. However, contrary to the textual representation of Islam, the Muslim society of India is deeply divided not only on the religious and sectarian lines but also on caste and class lines. The Muslim society is divided into three categories on caste lines. The Ashraf constituted castes like Syed, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. They are elite, resourceful, politically empowered, and socially dominated section. The second category is Ajlaf which constitutes various clean occupational castes like weavers, tailors, vegetable sellers, cotton cadres, black smiths and carpenters, bracelet-makers, oil presses, Dyers etc. They are socially, educationally, economically and politically deprived. The third category is Arzal consisting of unclean occupational castes and equivalent to the Dalits of India. This category includes most marginalised castes like cleaners, barbers, washer men, cobblers, etc. In 1990 backward Muslim castes got included in reserved category under the purview of OBC. Under this purview total 82 castes were included from Muslim society. By the time various castes have been included time to time. But they have been not included in the scheduled caste category despite ample studies and justification for the inclusion. This paper primarily discusses the caste division among Muslims. Along with that the present study is an attempt to give an insight into the struggle for social recognition and redistributive justice of Pasmanda Muslims. The study is a basic attempt to find the reason of why Pasmanda Muslims have not been included in the scheduled caste category and why should they included.

Keywords: Ashraf, Ajlaf, Arzal, Pasmanda, OBC, Scheduled Castes, Recognition

INTRODUCTION

Identity is associated with every human being: society, country, community, group, gender, caste, language, and culture. Now the next question is: why is the question of identity so important? The answer is that when we talk about someone's identity, the issue of their social status, economic progress, and political representation are also associated with it. In such a situation, here comes the question of the identity of those people in the society who are different from those in the society who are resourceful people. In this aspect, the issue of Pasmanda Muslims becomes prominent. Religious identity continues to be a significant component in the deprivation of Muslims in India. Although caste and class are key determinants in determining the fate of millions of people in the country, for Muslims, these categories are confounded by their religious identity. The dominant community (mostly Hindus), the state, and its bureaucracy are more likely to identify a lower caste Muslim as 'Muslim' than as Pasmanda/Dalit or backward (OBC). The Indian Constitution does not recognize Muslim Dalits as Scheduled Castes because of their faith. In these contexts, it is important to note the failure of the system to achieve the desired representation of Muslim Other Backward Classes (M-OBCs) in government services through overall OBC reservation in government services, as well as the non-recognition of extremely lower-caste Muslims as Scheduled Castes (SCs) for reservation. It is important to note that discrimination against Muslims is primarily based on religion, even while filling the OBC quota. As a result, even when a number of lower-caste Muslims are included on the OBC list, very few are hired (See, SCR, 2006; RMCR, 2007; Rohini Commission, 2019). This shows that policies are misplaced. In the case of Muslims, the interplay of caste and class with religion results in the forms of policy errors (Shaban, 2012, p. 15).

At its most basic, recognition is concerned with "identity." Any group's or individual's identity is shaped, at least in part, by their interactions with other groups or individuals (Taylor, 1994) One's identity is only recognized

when others accept him or her as such. Recognition is not only necessary for understanding oneself, but it is also necessary for forming and shaping social identities.

“Politics of recognition” refers to the process of associating someone with their due rights, dignity, and existence. Recognition politics has two broad connotations: one is related to an individual’s or group’s dignity and self-esteem, (ibid) and the other is redistribution, which is related to an individual’s or group’s socioeconomic and political upliftment (Fraser, 2003). The latter also falls under the purview of social justice.

Since India’s independence, the Muslim community, in particular, has suffered from systemic neglect. The irony is that today’s Indian Muslims are not reasonably recognized as what they should be, as equal citizens of India and equal shareholders in all aspects of political life, but they will never be a realistic part of the political process.

However, internal segregations within the Indian Muslim community, such as caste divisions, expose the inner fragility and negligence from within and have not been discussed. Muslim society, like Hindu society, divides itself into various caste groups, with the higher castes (Ashraf Muslims) concentrating political power, economic incentives, and social capital. Lower castes (Pasmanda Muslims) have been equally marginalized and have never enjoyed political rights. Since the beginning, Pasmanda Muslims in Bihar have faced crises of due recognition and redistribution. There were always false claims about the Muslim community’s homogeneity. That is why the stark reality did not emerge until the 1980s. The agitation began in Maharashtra and spread to Bihar, primarily following the implementation of the Mandal Commission in 1990. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to discuss what Pasmanda Muslims consider to be recognition and reservation.

Question on current system of Reservation

Pasmanda Muslims structurally organized themselves for the first time after independence and raised their demands by the 1980s, which were centered on the necessity of “recognition” as backward and about a reservation. However, in 1991, the Mandal Commission report classified the presence of 82 castes among Muslims and recommended their reservation under the OBC list rather than the SC list. However, the Muslim community has the same castes that are classified as scheduled castes in the Hindu and Sikh religions. Inclusion on the OBC list never adequately emancipated Pasmanda Muslims, instead degrading their social value. As a result, the issue of recognition arose. Many organizations, including the AIPMM and AIBMM, led backward caste movements demanding that these low castes be recognized on the SC list, as they had been before independence (SC list, 1936). Pasmanda Muslims are converts from lower Hindu social strata with a diverse range of clean and unclean occupational clusters. However, as the saying goes, “the conversion did not change their social or economic status. They remained poor and marginalized in society” (Ali, 2016) The Sachar Committee report from 2006 discusses the level of backwardness among Muslims. According to the report, they are even more marginalized than India’s Dalits. Just to remind you that they are lower-caste Muslims.

The organizations responsible for negligence and misrecognition are both within and outside of the community. The government and Muslim elites and their bodies, such as the AIMPLB, Imarat-e-Sharia, Idara-I-Sharia, Muslim Waqf Board, and others, claim to represent these oppressed sections but are unconcerned about their actual situations. Upper caste Muslims (Ashraf) in particular advanced the narrative of homogeneity in order to keep lower caste Muslims (Ajlaf and Arzal) out of society’s power structures. The government also purposefully excluded backward Muslims from reservation under the presidential order of 1950, citing Hinduism as a prerequisite for reservation under the same category. In 1956 and 1990, the presidential order of 1950 was amended to include Mazhabi Sikhs and neo-Buddhist caste groups, respectively (Ahmad, 2014). In some ways, the order discriminates against Indian citizens because it openly excludes Muslims and Christians from its ranks. Because there is no homogeneity of social statuses within Muslim and Christian communities, the concept of recognition and reservation must be redefined.

Furthermore, the reservation system under this category is “communalized” by giving preference to Hindus only under the SC list. The exclusion of Pasmanda Muslims and other backward castes is justified on the assumption that existing social inequalities and depraved practices can only be eliminated through this type of reservation system for broader Hindu social reform. This kind of justification undermines the Dalit struggle for liberated identity and dignity (ibid). Furthermore, it undermines social justice within a democratic system.

Negative Discrimination in Positive Discrimination: the Question of Pasmanda Muslims Reservation

The Pasmanda Muslims' quest for political recognition and reservation is a social justice struggle, as evidenced by their inclusion of Christian Dalits in their demand for social justice. The struggle for recognition and reservation began in earnest in the 1990s. There had previously been recommendations for Muslims to be included in the reservation. The Kalelkar Commission report of 1955 exposed severe backwardness among Muslims and concluded that Muslim backwardness is comparable to that of Hindu society. It also mentioned the existence of numerical sub-communities among Muslims who face social subservience and inferiority in their community of belonging (Nayak, 2013). The commission's recommendations were deemed unsuitable, and thus, backward Muslim recognition became a distant reality. The Mandal Commission report from 1980 rekindled the debate about Muslim backwardness and the reorganization of the reservation system. The commission's recommendations secured reservation under the OBC list, but the issue of recognition for low-caste Muslims was left unresolved. At this point, backward Muslims began to understand their social position and began to mobilize around the issue of reservation and reconsideration of their social status.

In the 1980s, Maharashtra witnessed the birth of the first backward Muslim movement. It was this movement that convincingly argued that the problem of backward Muslims was economic, political, and social in nature, rather than religious in nature. For the first time, Maharashtra's Muslim Backward Movement identified the need for economic and political empowerment (Ansari, 2009)

In the 1990s, the Pasmanda movement reflected a caste-class mobilization that, at its core, envisioned a rethinking of Muslim identity in India. It directly challenged the mainstream narrative of homogeneity, pointing out that the economic and social problems were similar to those faced by Hindus. Pasmanda Muslims face a number of additional challenges. Not only do backward Hindus have better access to some privileges due to caste discrimination, "However, Muslim groups in similar social positions have been denied such opportunities because neither their religion nor the state recognize caste in principle among them" (Mondal, 2003).

Needless to say, the Muslim caste has never been considered a variable in effective affirmative action, though it was considered for general clubbing under the OBC category in the 1990s. It's never been acknowledged as a factor in political representation. Certain sections of the Muslim community benefited from compensatory policies such as reservation under the OBC as part of the larger process of affirmation. As a result, the question of Muslim identity remains a contentious issue in India.

The 1990s saw the emergence of two significant Pasmanda Muslim organizations in Bihar, namely the "All India Backward Muslim Morcha" (1994) and the "All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz" (1998), both of which invoked "caste" in mainstreaming the political aspirations of Pasmanda people. Pasmanda politics remained the importance of social justice and proportional representation in social and political structures (Ansari, 2009). Although the movement was unable to stay longer due to its meek political vision, it is true that it had a greater impact on Bihar politics in the 2005 assembly elections. The UPA-I government established the Sachar Committee and the Rangnath Mishra Commission to investigate the situation of the country's Muslims. Following the report, it was widely discussed in academia and the media, but no action was taken for these marginalized sections of society due to a lack of political will.

As a result, there is an urgent need to revise the current reservation system. The state must acknowledge the existence of the Dalit community among Muslim and Christian communities, refrain from discriminating on the basis of religion, and include Dalits on the scheduled caste list.

Epilogue

Finally, it must be stated that including Pasmanda Muslims on the SC list will be true and proper "recognition" for them. This proper recognition will pave the way for the redistribution of economic resources as well as political spaces, which will eventually lead to an honest attempt to obtain social justice. For Pasmanda Muslims to be included on the SC list, their backwardness should be measured differently than that of those already included. Because, as stated by the Sachar Committee, Muslims are more backward than Dalits in India. These are, without a doubt, Pasmanda Muslims. The earlier movement for these demands could not be sustained due to a lack of a political agenda and vision. For example, the JD (U) and RJD appointed two prominent Pasmanda politicians, Ali Anwar Ansari and Dr. Ejaz Ali, as Rajya Sabha MPs. Following this, progress that could have increased demand gradually slowed. This occurred at a time when the political equation in Bihar was changing

(the Lalu M-Y equation had failed), and the Pasmada leader was in a position of political bargaining, but it did not occur. The Pasmada movement requires broader mobilization and a clear vision for proper recognition and reservation.

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