

## **Aspect of Dichotomy between ‘Textual Islam’ and ‘Lived Islam’: Caste and Social Inequalities among Indian Muslims**

**- Nadeem Hasnain**

### **Abstract**

*The present paper deals with the existence and operationalization of caste or caste like social structure among the Muslims. The most glaring dichotomy in Islam may be seen in the realm of social equality and the accompanying practices. Islam is widely and popularly seen as a religion based on egalitarianism ruling out inequalities in social life. This is the textual view of Islam and this proclaimed egalitarianism remained largely an ideal. The ‘lived Islam’/‘Islam in practice’ exposes this contradiction. According to Islamic faith as seen in the dictates of their holy book Quran and the life, teachings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad every Muslim is born equal in the eyes of God and thus any religious practice or any aspect of social life cannot be used to justify the practice of social inequality.*

**Keywords:** *Textual Islam, Lived Islam, Social Inequalities, OBC Muslims*

Not to speak of the findings of this study but derived from a region of north India and the entire Muslim population of South Asia, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, demonstrate the presence of social stratification in the form of caste system. Muslims are neither socially homogenous or monolithic nor a ‘cultural community’ in the sense that they possess different cultures in regional variations. They live through layers of identities in a complex society. At some places they may be seen through a provincial -linguistic/ethnic category as in Ladakh (Jammu & Kashmir) where they have mongoloid physical features, a tribal-*biradari*/kinship group as in Lakshadweep (where they live as, perhaps, the only known matrilineal Muslim community of the world), through such tribal groups as Gaddi and Bakriwal (in Jammu & Kashmir where they come under scheduled tribes), through such sectarian divisions as Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Bohra etc. or through various Islamic schools/*maslak* such as Deobandi and Barelvi. In this socio-cultural/ethnic heterogeneity as described above, there is at least one thing in common and that is the practice of social inequalities, by and large, on the lines of Hindu caste system.

### **Islam, Muslims, Caste and Social Stratification**

The question whether the concept or the idea of caste can be applied to a system of social stratification of a community professing a faith other than Hinduism has often been posed. It is true that the egalitarian social order of Islam stands in sharp contrast with the ideology of caste, yet the 'Indian/South Asian Islam' and 'Hindu caste system' have been able to achieve a substantial compatibility. Hutton (1951) sounds convincing when he says that when Muslims and Christians came to India, the caste was in the air and the followers of even these egalitarian ideologies could not escape the infection of caste.

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**Nadeem Hasnain**, Ph.D, Former Professor of Anthropology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India.

**Email ID:** [nadeemhasnain@gmail.com](mailto:nadeemhasnain@gmail.com)

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Moreover, an overwhelming majority of Indian Muslim population come from the lower Hindu castes who have been coming into the fold of Islam to escape from social persecution and the oppressive socio-economic disabilities. They were also attracted and lured by the social egalitarianism of Islam but the search for equality proved a mirage. In many cases, there were improvements in their socio-economic conditions, yet the goal of social equality remained elusive. Moreover, in most of the cases, the people embracing Islam gave up their religious faith but not the caste that was brought forward even to a new socio-religious milieu. Thus, it would be apt to say that while Islam may not be having castes or caste-like groupings, the Indian Muslims do have. Thus, the interface between ideology and social structure in the context of caste may be full of academic issues requiring discussion.

But, the present paper stays clear of the issue whether the model of social stratification among the Indian Muslims is the replica of the Hindu caste system or not and, consequently, the terms such as caste and caste system among the Indian Muslims would be used in a conveniently loose manner. It is undisputedly true that there are groups of people among the Muslims who are organized more or less like the Hindu castes but this is also true that they are less rigid because Islam, theoretically at least, permits marriage between different classes of believers. Nazir (1993:2898) takes a fresh look on this whole issue:

*"It is necessary to make a distinction between a caste system and caste labels: the former refers to a local system of hierarchically ordered corporate groupings involving social division of labour, occupational specialization, unequal dependence,, and recruitment by birth only; the latter refers to a set of non-local, non-corporate named group which provide a ranking hierarchy, and which do not involve occupational specialization, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only "*

Perhaps, the 'caste system' and 'caste-like groupings' among the Indian Muslims with all their fluidity may be better analyzed and understood through this observation. Even within this framework there might be regional variations in the nature of Muslim stratification in India.

The popular hierarchical model may be classified, loosely and broadly into three groups:

- *Ashraf*
- *Ajlaf*
- *Arzal*

Ashraf includes the Muslim nobility that claim to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants, either Sayyad, Shaikh, Mughal or Pathan, as well as descendants of higher Hindu castes such as Muslim Rajputs. Clean occupational castes, such as *Julaha* (weavers), *Darzi* (tailors), *Qassab* (butchers), *Hajjam* (barbers), *Kunjra* (green grocer), *Mirasi* (bards, singers and musicians), *Manihar* (bangle sellers), *Dhuniya* (cotton carders), *Gaddi* (graziers,

milkmen), etc. were included in the category of Ajlaf (mean). The third category of Arzal (literally very mean) includes the unclean or ritually polluting castes such as Bhangi or Mehtar and Lalbegi (sweepers and scavengers). Like the Hindu caste system there is a hierarchy among *ashraf* and non-ashraf castes and all of them are traditionally endogamous i.e., as per norm they are supposed to marry within their castes.

### **Muslim Backward Castes, Compensatory Discrimination and Related Issues**

Three backward segments of India's population were identified and targeted for special treatment with the advent of independence and subsequently promulgation of the Constitution of India. These were Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Various compensatory discrimination policies are directed at these categories related to job, education, welfare and development. If we try to situate Muslim population in these categories, we find that SCs cannot be Muslims as this category is restricted to Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. The STs can be Muslims but Muslim tribes are few such as a microscopic population of small tribal groups of Lakshadweep and Gaddis and Bakrewals of Jammu and Kashmir. This obviously means that only the third category of OBCs seems open to them. For a long time, the Muslims, despite their socio-economic backwardness, could not take advantage of this mainly because it remained a vague category and criteria for inclusion in this category were not specified in the Constitution. Although some states had implemented reservation for OBCs on the basis of recommendation of the state-level backward classes commissions, the reservation issue for OBCs attained centrality only in 1990 when V.P. Singh government decided to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation for government jobs at the national level. The Mandal Commission had declared 82 Muslim groups as backward.

Dwelling upon the status of OBCs among the non-Hindu communities (mainly Muslims), the Mandal Commission (1980) observed:

*"There is no doubt that social and educational backwardness among the non-Hindu communities is more or less of the same order as among the Hindu communities. Though caste system is peculiar to Hindu society yet, in actual practice, it also pervades the non-Hindu communities in India in varying degrees. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon: first, caste system is a great conditioner of the mind and leaves an indelible mark on a person's social consciousness and cultural mores. Consequently, even after conversion, the ex-Hindus carried with them their deeply ingrained ideas of social hierarchy and stratification. This resulted in the Hindu converts inadvertently acting as Trojan horses of caste system among highly egalitarian religions such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. Secondly, non-Hindu minorities living in predominantly Hindu India could not escape from its dominant social and cultural influences. Thus, both from within and without, caste amongst non-Hindu communities received continuous sustenance and stimulus."*

After giving a good deal of thought to these difficulties, the Mandal Commission evolved the following rough and ready criteria for identifying non-Hindu OBCs:

- (i) All untouchables converted to any non-Hindu religion.
- (ii) Such occupational communities, which are known by the name of their traditional hereditary occupations and whose Hindu counterparts have been included in the list of Hindu OBCs (e.g. *Dhobi, Teli, Nai, Kumhar, Lohar, Darzi, Badhai* etc).

Though we do not have any separate census enumeration for Muslim OBCs, those engaged in advocacy for them claim their population to be of the order of 80-85 percent of the total Muslim population of India. In sociological terms, in the *Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal* categorization, all the Muslim castes/groups coming within *Ajlaf-Arzal* social categories qualify for the status of OBCs.

### **Muslim OBCs: Empowerment and Communal, Quota**

Though a majority of Muslims are already covered under the existing provisions of reservation for the OBCs, there has always been a grouse among them that they would not be able to compete with the educationally and economically advanced Hindu OBCs like Yadav, Kurmi, Koeri, etc of north India or similar castes from south India who are able to swallow their share of the common cake just as what they have done in relation to the Hindu 'most backward classes/castes' (MBCs). On the other hand, there has been a general hostility among the relatively more advanced Hindu OBCs to the idea of a separate sub-quota for either the Muslim OBCs or the Hindu MBCs. Significantly, for some time now, a section of Muslim leadership has been demanding a separate quota in reservation for Muslims as a whole despite the fact that the Muslim OBCs, constituting an overwhelming majority of the entire Muslim population of India, are already covered under the existing provision for the OBCs. The liberal-secular Muslim opinion is opposed to this demand on two grounds: it will provide a ready issue and handle to the aggressive *Hindutva* forces to promote hostility towards the Muslims and it is unjust because some groups within each religious community are traditionally 'forward' and socially, educationally and economically advanced as compared to the rest of their population as well as in the absolute sense of the term. The Sayyed, Sheikh, and other *Ashraf* castes of north India, the Thangal, Arakkal, Koya and Keyi of Kerala Muslims, the Khatri and Jat among the Sikhs, the Syrian among the Kerala Christians and so on are the advanced higher castes. Thus, the argument that an entire religious community is socially and educationally backward negates the sociological reality and goes against the principle of social justice and moreover it will be unconstitutional too.

The response of the leadership of Muslim OBCs is also very meaningful and significant. They are strongly apprehensive that if Muslims as a whole, as a religious community, are extended reservation, the relatively better off caste groups shall be cornering and gobbling up most of the opportunities for educational and economic advancement. This

provides a fertile ground for intra-community competitiveness leading to bickering and social conflicts. Moreover, this also goes against the very objective and rationale of empowerment of relatively weaker and backward segment of Indian society. Thus, the demand for a communal quota finds hardly any takers among the Muslim OBCs and this has also contributed to the mobilization of Muslim OBCs against the upper strata of Muslims.

The efforts for the empowerment of Muslim OBCs, along with Hindu, Christian and Sikh OBCs, have exploded the myth (perpetuated largely by the Muslim elite) that the entire Muslim community is a monolith devoid of any economic, social and cultural complexities. The report of the Mandal Commission has also contributed to the politicization of the internal social classification of the Indian Muslims. One of the significant fallouts of this phenomenon is the decreasing political power of the higher caste Muslim leadership who enjoyed a virtual monopoly over Muslim leadership. As the trend indicates, the Muslim OBCs shall produce their own leadership not only at the grassroots level but also at the provincial and national levels encompassing all the institutions of Indian society. However, the present scenario of growing ascendancy of militant *Hindutva* forces and its fallout such as the Gujarat carnage of 2002 and state-sponsored terrorism against the Muslim minority seems to be the last hope of the Muslim elite. Obviously, an overriding sense of insecurity leads to ghettoization at both physical and mental levels and the entire population tends to close down their ranks and the traditional elite usually grabs the leadership. Incidentally the separatist-communalist-fundamentalist leadership among the Indian Muslims has always come from the feudal and elite; segment playing the politics of identity.

In his article, published in a booklet brought out by the *Centre of Backward Muslims of India* (2000). Sheth rightly points out:

*"The proponents of reservation for all Muslims should, in the interest of intellectual honesty and political candour, make their demand as a "religious minority" but not as a backward class. Even this would mean a major amendment to the Constitution: one that would violate the secular spirit of the Constitution. India's Constitution recognises the cultural rights of minorities as fundamental rights and forbids discrimination on ground of religious affiliation, but it is foundationally opposed to any idea of "communal quota"*

The new demand of Muslim reservation is simply a strategy to introduce through the backdoor the principle of communal quotas into the Constitution.

Even if the allegation of some of the Muslim leaders about substantial discrimination and bias against Muslims in the recruitment in some areas of government jobs is true, the remedy seems to be more detrimental to their interests than the problem.

## Political Mobilization of Muslim OBCs

In the socio-political mobilization of today's Muslim OBCs, Muslim weavers' movement seems to be the first attempt by any such Muslim group. Although the origin of this movement is shrouded in controversy and difference of opinion, Ansari (2000), in a richly documented work on Momin Ansars and their movement, writes that some leaders founded, informally, in 1912 in Calcutta, a forum that was largely welfare-oriented organization. The first convention of Momin Conference was formally held in Calcutta in 1928 and from this year onward the Momin Conference gained an all-India stature and became the representative organization of 3-4 crore Momins of undivided India.

Since handloom industry was first to be hit in the Indian cottage industry sector by the East India Company, weavers were threatened by impoverishment. So, social humiliation and struggle for existence seems to be the prime motivating forces behind this pioneering movement. It mobilized not only Momins but also other Muslim artisan castes. It used to hold an all-India convention every year in major cities of India and for the first time, perhaps, Muslim weavers along with some other artisan castes started looking to the future with hope and motivation for empowerment.

Commenting on the changing profile of Momin Conference, Anwar (2001) points out that up to 1937 its activities were confined to promoting social consciousness and welfare among the Momins. The turning point came in 1938 when it started assuming political overtones when the Muslim League came out with the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims. The backward Muslims adopted an aggressively nationalist posture and opposed the demand for Pakistan. Right from its very inception the Momin Conference was convinced about the caste/class character of the Muslim League and its leaders, and it had no doubt that the League and its demand were promoting the feudal and elitist vested interests and the lower strata of Muslims were only being harnessed as cannon fodder. The feudal lords, capitalists, *nawabs* and *jagirdars* felt threatened by the mass upsurge of Indian masses and they knew that the Indian National Congress had not much in its socio-economic and political agenda for these vested interests. Its corollary in the post- independence Indian polity may be seen in the form of promotion of Ayodhya issue by the RSS/BJP and its affiliates to blunt the impact of implementation of Mandal Commission's recommendations. It was a wily and intelligent diversionary tactic. Together with Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Hind, the Momin Conference exposed the claim of the Muslim League of representing the entire Muslim population and promoted the nationalist- secular agenda of the Congress party. The Momin Conference aligned with the Congress Party along with the Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Hind backed by the *Ulema* of Deoband who contributed significantly to the freedom struggle opposing Muslim League for its divisive agenda. With the passage of time, the Momin Conference lost its strength and became almost defunct. Besides the Momin Conference, the



Raen Conference representing the caste of vegetable vendors and the Mansoori Conference representing the oilseed pressers, also played their role in the socio-political mobilization of Muslim OBCs between 1930s and 1950s.

The period between 1950s and 1980s witnessed hardly any notable movement of Muslim OBCs. Commenting on the post- independence backward classes movement, especially among the Muslims, noted political commentator Bidwai (1996) says:

*"The Muslim OBC initiatives go back to the 1980s in activism in Maharashtra inspired by Lohia and Karpoori Thakur. However, as a movement the initiative has gathered strength only in the last few years, partly under the intellectual impetus provided by the Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad, first organized in 1990 and held four times so far. The Maharashtra organizers borrowed heavily from the Bahujan Samaj, social reform legacy of Shahuji Maharaj and Jyotiba Phule and the modernist views of Ambedkar. The All India Muslim OBC Sangathan held its first convention on August 29, 1996. The convention was a success. Although uneven, the delegates' composition revealed the commonality of interests and concerns between Qureshis (butchers and meat sellers) and Julahas (weavers), Nais (barbers) and Raeens (vegetable growers or Malis), Dhobis (washermen) and Telis (oil pressers). The convention's demands include, predictably, extension of Mandal Commission recommendations to all Muslim OBCs, more scholarships, etc., and less predictably, land reforms, funding for small entrepreneurs, and restoration of concessions to scheduled caste (i.e., non-OBC) Muslims which were withdrawn in 1984."*

There also seems to be a conscious effort to relate to *dalit* Muslims and Hindu OBCs and create bonds of solidarity across religious divides. The trans-religious subaltern solidarity could be the nemesis of the religion-based identity politics pursued by the communal and fundamentalist organizations of Muslims such as *Jamaat-e-Islami*.

In this series of political mobilization of Muslim OBCs, the latest is the establishment of *Pasmanda Muslim Mahaaz* (Backward Muslim Front) in a convention on 25 October 1998 at Patna. Though its activities, till date, seem to be confined to Bihar, it has set in motion the efforts by the politically conscious Muslim OBCs in other states.

### **Muslim OBCs as Ethnographic Categories: A Brief Overview**

It is now historically established that most of the Muslims in India did not come from Arabia or other regions from where the message of Islam came. Muslim traders represented the earliest phase of Islam in India and nomadic Sufi saints who were instrumental in attracting the oppressed and exploited lowest strata of Hindu society into the fold of Islam. Making a very interesting and significant observation on the transformation of a lower Hindu caste into a lower Muslim caste, Eijaz Ali (1997) reveals:

“Most of the religious conversions among the Hindus occurred in Harijan castes and not from such backward castes as Yadav, Kurmi or Koeri. The converted castes/biradaris changed their names from Julaha to Momin, Khatik to Kunjra, Pasi to Dhuniya, Chamar to Qasai and so on. But the names of occupations and structure of Julaha are found in both (Hindu and Muslim) communities, Kunjra are still known as Khatik in some regions and Qasab or Qasai (butchers) have come from the Chamar caste. The fact of the matter is that it is the Chamars who had a great expertise in skinning and butchering and after conversion they started butchering live animals except pig. They were already expert in other related nuances. Even today, at several places, the settlements of Chamars and Qasais are adjacent to each other” (translated from Hindi).

When we look at the occupationally specialized backward castes of both Hindus and Muslims, we can identify three categories. Ghaus Ansari (1960) and others have also substantiated this:

- (i) Castes that are now entirely Muslim.
- (ii) Castes that have larger Muslim than Hindu sections.
- (iii) Castes that have larger Hindu than Muslim sections.

In the first category come those occupational castes that are now entirely Muslim; their corresponding Hindu castes either do not exist, or if they exist at all, they have altogether different names. Some such castes are *Atishbaz* (firework makers), *Bhand* (jesters), *Bhishti* (water carriers), *Gaddi* (graziers), *Mirasi* (musicians and singers), *Qasab* (butchers), *Momin Julaha* (Muslim weavers), etc.

In the second category, which have larger Muslim than Hindu share, include castes such as *Darzi* (tailors), *Dhuniya* (cotton carders) *Kunjra* or *Kabariya* (green grocers), *Manihar* (bangle/bracelet makers), *Saiqalgar* (metal sharpeners) and *Rangrez* (dyers and cloth printers).

The third category may contain those castes that have a larger Hindu than Muslim share. In this category of clean occupational castes come *Kumhar* (potters), *Nai* or *Hajjam* (barbers), *Teli* (oil pressers), *Dhobi* (washermen), etc. The Muslim *Bhangi/ Mehtar/ Lai Begia* (sweepers and scavengers) constitute, perhaps, the only untouchable section of the Muslim population.

A significant aspect of the occupational castes among the Muslims is the disappearance of certain caste groups due to social or techno-economic change. The Rangrez (dyers and cloth printers), Bhatiyara (inn keepers) and Saiqalgar (metal sharpeners) have almost disappeared as social units. The ‘Peoples of India Project’ carried out by the Anthropological Survey of India gives brief but rich and reliable ethnographic accounts of all the castes and communities of India including the Muslim OBCs.



A notable fact about the Muslim OBCs, especially the relatively larger caste groups, is that though some members may have moved out from their traditional occupations, still most follow their forefathers. This occupational mobility has been detrimental, yet it has another dimension that is equally important. Like their counterparts in the population, they have been hard working from the beginning. Many enterprising members of different caste groups made the best of professions and attained prosperity. The Ansaris and Qureshis of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan are the obvious examples. Some of the other groups among them who upgraded their technology and adopted new marketing strategies and showed competitive entrepreneurial skills, prospered such as the artisans/entrepreneurs of Meerut, Moradabad, Aligarh and Firozabad from western Uttar Pradesh and Bhadohi and Varanasi in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Yet, at the same time, we find a vast multitude of masses living in impoverished conditions in rural as well urban areas of the country. These ‘technological communities’ of India and their Hindu counterparts deserve a better deal from the society and the state.

### **‘Ashrafization’ for Upward Social Mobility**

With reference to the Hindu caste system MN Srinivas has empirically established that in order to achieve upward social mobility/status elevation the lower castes have this strong tendency to emulate the language, lifestyle, religious practices/rituals and cultural norms of the local highest caste or the dominant caste and he coined the word Sanskritization for this process. In the Muslim context the same process may be described as *Ashrafization* i.e., a process through which the non-ashraf groups try to elevate their social status by emulating the norms, values, customs, traditions, language, naming, clothing etc. of *ashraf* groups. For instance, as soon as a lower caste group is able to make some money and property it enforces *pardah (burqa/naqaab)* for its women and takes to *Haj*, adopts caste surnames of the *ashraf* groups and various other markers of social identity. The weavers (Julaha groups) takes the surname Ansari referring to the *Ansars*- Prophet Muhammad’s companions, *Qassab/Chikwa* (butchers) add Qureshi (the tribal group Quresh, Muhammad came from), Khan (claiming Pathan or Afghan ancestry, *Hajjam* (barbers) become Salmani, *Kunjra* (Vegetable vendors) become Raeen, *Darzi* (tailors) become Idrisi, *Bhisti* (drawers of water) become Abbasi, *Lohar* (iron smith) and *Badhai* (carpenters) Saifi and so on. These occupational caste groups organize themselves into caste-based organizations or Jamaats/biradaris and then go for political empowerment. Significantly, in this part of the country such non-ashraf groups takes to speaking chaste Urdu and adopts Islamic/Quranic phrases such as *Inshaallah* (if God wishes), *Khuda-na-khwasta* (God forbids), *Jazakallah* (God shall give reward) etc. The naming also undergoes changes. New adopted names are either on revered Islamic personalities or the first name being literary (in Urdu) followed by new caste surname.

It is to be noted that any attempt for status elevation by the non-*ashraf* castes invite ridicule by the *ashraf* castes. Following are some of the most quoted poetic lines which sufficiently show the superiority complex, arrogance and the mindset of the *ashraf* castes:

*Awwalam naddaaf boodam*

*Baadahu gashtam sheikh*

*Ghalla arzaan chee shaved*

*Imsaal sayyed nee shavam*

These Persian lines when translated mean “I was a *dhunia* (cotton carder) earlier, then became shaikh; if the cereal crops get cheaper this year, I will become a sayyed.” Though sociologically it signifies upward social mobility, it is derogatory and in a bad taste. Another similarly sounding piece is:

*Pehle they hum neem-julahe*

*Baad me ho gaye darzi*

*Ulat palat ke sayyed ho gaye*

*Yeh allah ki marzee*

(Earlier, we were semi-*julahe* (weavers), later became *darzi* (tailor), after shuffling and scrambling we became sayyed by the grace of God)

Another popular saying displaying vulgar arrogance is as follows:

*“Julaaha-dhunias ka beta, Julaaha-dhunias hi Rahega bhale hi woh taraqqi kar ke cotton factory aur powerloom hi kyon na bitha le, usee tarah sayyed ka beta sayyed hi kahlaaega bhale hi woh Joota hi kyon na banaata aur bechta ho”*

(The son of a *julaaha-dhunias* shall remain a *julaaha-dhunias* even if he successfully installs a cotton factory and power loom; likewise the son of a sayyed shall remain a sayyed even if he takes to making shoes and selling it in the market)

Significantly, most of the sarcastic and contemptuous remarks and jokes are directed towards the *Julaha* group (weavers) largely because of two reasons. First, they are the largest among all the Muslim caste groups, politically organized right from the days of the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and they have achieved relatively high economic mobility, education, jobs in administration (of course supported by reservation policy for the OBCs) and political empowerment. They opposed the demand for the creation of Pakistan, and showed more confidence and faith in a ‘Hindu’ Gandhi than a ‘Muslim’ Jinnah. They along with the Qassab/Chikwa (butcher caste) have made lot of progress in all spheres of life while the higher *ashraf* castes lost heavily in the wake of *zamindari* abolition and experienced rapid decline in economic and political power. Thus, the traditional power

structure in this part of the country got radically altered and the *shurafa* (nobility) could not reconcile with these changes. Several non-ashraf respondents bitterly complain that the *ulema* (religious leaders/cleric) failed in their duty to spread the true spirit of Islam in terms of social equality and non-discrimination.

This state of affairs prevails despite the Quranic dictate of social equality among the Muslims backed by a number of anecdotes from the life of Muhammad and the irony is that all Muslims claim that Muhammad is an exemplar for them. The intellectuals among the non-ashraf castes and the socially progressive people from among the ashraf elite may be frequently seen commenting sarcastically that the Muslims want to follow the physical appearance of Muhammad (e.g., style of beard and moustache, hair style etc.) but not his teachings. There is a wide gulf between the ‘textual Islam’ and the ‘lived Islam’. Ironically, even the Islamists are comfortable and reconciled with such social inequalities.

### **Discrimination and contemptuous behaviour towards the non-Ashraf**

Whenever it is pointed out in social science discourses or other fora, the ‘purists’ counter by saying that Islam stands for equality among the *ummah* and there is no caste system in Islam. True, there is no caste system in Islam but South Asian Muslims do have a caste system with all the concomitant evils- hierarchy, discrimination and contempt for the lower strata of the Muslim society and the ulema have never embarked on a sustained, strong movement except the occasional feeble attempt towards *Islah-e-Muaashra* (social reformation). Perhaps there is no more glaring gap or contradiction between the textual Islam and the lived/local Islam. The very mention of ‘Backward Muslims’ and ‘Dalit Muslims’ speaks volumes of the stories of discrimination, deprivation and marginalization.

In the traditional Indian society the litmus test for social equality is based on *Roti-Beti Ka Rishta* signifying sharing of food and giving one’s daughter in marriage. Like the Hindu society endogamy (marrying within one’s caste group) is the established norm. A sayyed does not like to establish matrimonial alliance with non-sayyed ashraf castes such as sheikh or pathan and vice versa not to speak of matrimonial relations with non-ashraf castes. As for as rules of commensality are concerned, usually the ashraf castes do not sit with non-ashraf to share food. Such a social norm is still quite strong in the villages and towns. In the cities, because of ‘urban anonymity’ and secularization they may be eating together in marriage feasts and parties but this is not to the liking of many.

In day-to-day social interaction in villages and towns the exchange of greetings is interesting. Usually, a person of *ashraf* strata does not take initiative in greeting a person of lower social groups with *Salaam alaikum* or *Adaab arz* but expect the other side to initiate salutation but not the usual way of greetings as described above but by uttering *Bhaiyya Salaam* or *Salaam Huzoor/Sarkar* and the other party just acknowledges it with the nod of the

head and usually does not reciprocate with the word *Salaam*. This may also be due to class/status consciousness as the ashraf came from the background of landlords/landowners.

The vast majority of *ashraf* Muslims are still not reconciled to the lower strata going for education especially higher education and that is why it immediately invites sarcastic remarks and ridicule. Of course the scenario gets changed when some of them, largely because of reservation of seats for OBCs in educational institutions and government jobs, attain success and upward social mobility. Till recent times many among the prosperous *ashraf* elite used to maintain private mosques within their larger houses for offering *Namaaz* (prayers five times a day) to not only to maintain social distance and elitist aura but to avoid a close company with the low status believers. In several villages and towns even today, the lower social groups offer prayers in the last rows but never in the front row along with the the Sayyeds and Shaikhs while in some others the non-ashrafs have their own graveyards for burial. Also, if at all a person from non-ashraf section becomes a cleric he does not command the same respect. Sometimes they are referred to as '*domva maulana*' (Dom being one of the lowest untouchable castes of Hindus). Among the Shias a non- Saiyyed *mujtahid* (cleric getting higher religious education in Iran or Iraq) dons a white *pugree* (turban) while one coming from Saiyyed background wears a black turban as a mark of identification. Moreover, in a *majlis* (mourning discourse) where everybody is welcome irrespective of caste and religion the lower caste groups, locally called *kaddar* in towns such as Rudauli and Sandila are expected to sit near the entry/exit points and never in the front rows on the carpet. Of course, this is not seen in large congregation in the *imambaras* of Lucknow or elsewhere largely because of 'urban anonymity' Among all the Muslims even a decently constructed house by a non-ashraf was ridiculed or simply not permitted but during the last 4-5 decades the economic and political status of the *ashraf* castes declined and the non-ashraf achieved rapid ascendancy as a result of economic mobility and political empowerment. The result is that the arrogant sections of the erstwhile ashraf elite just sulks nostalgically recalling their past dominance and glory. Following are some of the popular sayings showing the arrogant, derogatory and contemptuous attitude of the *ashraf* elite:

*Soot na kapaas, julahon me latham latha*

(Julahas are quibbling and quarrelling when there is still no trace of cotton or yarn)

*Jo razeel ko muh lagaaye*

*Apni izzat aap ganwaye*

(One who interacts intimately/friendly with the person of a lowly caste loses his own honour/prestige)

*Mere laal ke sau sau yaar*

*Dhuniye, julahe aur manihaar*

(My son has a hundred accomplices – cotton carders, weavers and bangle sellers)

*Kya tumne mujhe julaha – kunjra samajh rakha hai?*

(How dare you think I am vegetable vender or weaver?)

*Kya bhatiyaron ki tarah lad rahe ho?*

(Why are you fighting like bhatiyars?)

Not only this, many among the *ashraf* make stereotypes of certain non-ashraf castes as bufoons and idiots and there have been a number of jokes ridiculing them. The butt of joke have been mostly the *julaha*(weaver) community perhaps because, among the so called ajlaf castes, this caste is now most educated and politically visible and empowered. They have emerged as the centre of envy and jealousy for the ashraf elite. It is largely believed that folk songs and folk sayings and proverbs do not lie as these are the spontaneous expressions of inner feelings.

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