

Caste System and Geographical Shaping of Indian Islam

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Abstract

Caste system is one of the various models of social stratifications practiced in the world. The system was widely practiced in Indian subcontinent. The birth status of people determined the caste affiliations and insisted on hereditary occupation. Caste system was inducted to the Hindu religion after Aryan people migrated from Persia and hijacked the indigenous Dravidian culture in post Vedic period. Rather than the postulates of Hinduism, caste system is common geographical feature. As part of assimilation process, new converts introduced caste system in Indian Islam. This article studies the history and expansion of caste system in India and various religions. Special attention has been paid to elaborate on caste system among Indian Muslims and the relation between caste system and Islam.

Introduction

Muslims constitute a major part of Indian population and are the largest minority in the rainbow nation. Islam is rich in Indian tradition and is considered to be the one of formidable religious institutions of the nation. After the invasion of Aryans of Persia to the settlements of primitive *Dravidians*,¹ Indian society and their religion Hinduism underwent major changes and were later transformed into elitist form of religious manifestation.

In due course of history, the concept of varnas or cast discrimination based both on birth and profession was introduced in Hinduism. This led to the entrenched social discrimination among the native people and practically hampered the inclusive growth of the society.

The advent of Islam that promotes the equality of human kind and negates the segregation based on cast into India in somewhat eleventh century was perceived as harbinger of new revolution in the social apparatus of Indian society. The increased voluntary conversion Indian people to Islam, both from higher and lower ranges, posed direct to the egalitarian world view of Islam, tragically, among Indian Muslims there has been social discrimination based on caste and other consideration. Muslim scholars hold divergent views about the status of castes', in Islamic frame work about its permissibility and contextual reading. This study comprehensively analyses the views of Islam on caste and varnas,² giving special focus on the evolution of Islam in India and the practices of caste system among Indian Muslims.

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¹*Dravidians* are the primitive people of Indus Valley Civilization. The advent of Aryans destructed their social life plunged into ruin.

²Literally it means color

This study analyses the Islamic concepts regarding the caste system and the social discrimination based on advantages of birth. In all senses, Islam outright repudiated the notion of social discrimination and pious forefathers have assaulted the social elitism wherever they go.

According to the geographical variance, changes could be seen in the performance of Islam as a religion. Although Islam denies the caste system vehemently, this practice is followed by Indian Muslims throughout the nation. There exists a dichotomy between the religious commandments and the practices of the followers. Class discrimination among Muslim could easily be traced in the form of various classes like *Ashrafi*, *Sheikh*, *Ajaf*, *Anvari*. This paper seeks to analysis the concept of Islam towards caste system and explains its evolution among Indian Muslims.

A detailed study of caste history has been mentioned in this paper, along with the Hindu religious stance towards this institution. This study confines primarily to the caste system prevalent in India, but a short comparative descriptions of other religions have also been explained. A comprehensive conclusion has been drawn about the evolution, history, legality and frame work of caste system among Indian Muslims.

By the religious tenets, it is plainly demonstrated that Islam disowns the concept of caste system, and the resultant human discrimination based on birth and profession. While Islamic principles assert the caste system void and illegal, social discrimination based on castes is prevalent among Indian Muslims and is practiced even today. This irony caused classical and modern scholars blame Islam for the social discontent under the Muslim rulers. Scholars like Irfan Habib, Imtiaz Ahmed, Ranajit Guha and Christopher Jafferlot blame the Islamic jurisprudence and the codes as responsible for the inculcation of the caste system among the Muslims, thus alluding to the fact of being this practices part of religious framework, like Hindu community. Actually, the practice of social discrimination crept into the folds of Indian Muslims thorough the adherence to *varna* system even after the conversion to Islam

Definitions of the Caste

Many sociologists have given different definitions for the caste. Report on the census of India for 1901 provides various definitions in a great deal. M. Senate says in his book written in French:

“Caste is a close corporation in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary, equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization including a chief and council. Meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals; bound together by common occupations which related more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling the members by the excise of

jurisdiction the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and, above all by final irrevocable exclusion from the group”.³

According to Kroeber “castes are a special form of special classes, their customs and laws are vivid and separated from one another.”⁴

A caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community.

Although in India, caste system is the inseparable part of Hinduism its emergence is not totally limited to Hindu texts like Manusmriti.⁵ If studied, various thoughts are found about the origins of caste system in India. Varna is not completely promoted by rigorous religious practice, but it had another many connotations also including social and cultural.

The exact origin and time period is not found by historians. It is said in India this system started for the first time after the advent of Aryans.⁶ From the records of India-Aryans, earlier information about caste is inferred. There are major seven theories regarding the origin of caste system in India.

According to the Dr Mazumdar⁷ the caste system took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India.⁸ In order to maintain their spatial diversity they introduced Varna to identify their favourites and enemies. Rig Vedic literature⁹ is an offshoot to intellectual and religious hegemony Aryans occupied after their settlement in India and it is replete with such references.

This theory states that caste system is a clever device invented by Brahmins in order to seizure higher ladders in social stratification. Ghurya states “caste is a Brahminical child of indo- Aryan culture gathered in the land of Ganges and hence transferred to other parts of India”.¹⁰

³ Report of census of India for 1901, volume 1

⁴ Kroeber, *Caste in India*, Edwin and Johnson Alvin.

⁵ Manusmriti is the ancient Indian law texts that defines the matters regarding the governing of Hindu life. The first man according to the myth, Manu, is believed to have written this text.

⁶ Ghurye, G.S, *Caste and Race in India*, p-26-39

⁷ Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar is a famous post-colonial historian (1888-1980) and extensively studied about the ancient India.

⁸ It is estimated that in 2500 BC Aryans migrated to India from the present day Iran and inhabited the Indian subcontinent after defeating the local people. Anne Ferguson Jensen. *India: Its Culture and People*. (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991) p- 96-158. The book *Ancient India* by Romila Thaper also discusses the issue in detail.

pp. 31-36.

⁹ Ancient Indian literatures are believed to be written at this period. The period spans the time period between 5000 and 2500 BC. Four major Vedas are said to be composed during this time.

¹⁰ Ghurye, G.S, *Caste and Race in India*, p-139

Brahmins demarcated the social conditions and laws who themselves was privileged to many monetary assistance and religious hegemony. Others are commanded to follow the same skirts without disputes. The eschatological belief woven by Brahmins made the segregation based on caste system sanctified with religious teachings and moorings.

Hocart¹¹ and Senart¹² are the two main advocates of religious theory. Hocarts says that social stratification originated on account of various religious customs and principles. In ancient India, kings and priests enjoyed maximum freedom and accorded to others the duties guaranteed by the birth and asserted by religion.

Senart attributed the origin of caste system to the prohibitions regarding the sacramental food. He holds that due to different family duties there grew up certain prohibitions regarding that sacramental food offered to deities.

Major Features of Caste System in India

Rigorous stratification of people is found everywhere in India, especially among adherents of Hinduism. Caste system as a means of social stratification is deep grounded in rural areas rather than among the urban people. There is a common misunderstanding that class is found only in urban societies and caste is more entrenched in rural societies. The fact is that there are classes in a caste and there are castes in communities also¹³. Few argue the caste system has no any base in Hinduism or Vedic religion but was introduced later by the interested people.¹⁴

Although in post independent India considerable changes took place in caste system and could be seen in various parts of the country in different forms. Important features of caste system like occupational mobility, prohibition of inter caste marriages are still practiced.¹⁵ Fervently, caste system in India is studied on the basis of structural and cultural aspects. Endogamy, caste hierarchy and caste occupation are some of the structural problems of caste system.

1. Rules of Endogamy and Exogamy

Regarding the marital status of the community, a lot of caste based laws are in force. Endogamy is a practice of marriage within a specific ethnic group, class or social groups; rejecting others unsuitable for marriage of caste are forbidden and the person who infringed the law is physically tortured or excommunicated.¹⁶

¹¹ Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883-1939) was a famous anthropologist who studied about the eccentric works of Sri Lanka the book Caste posthumously published in 1950 is well acclaimed work.

¹² Emile Senart (1847-1928) was a French Indologist who studied about Indian social system.

¹³S.I Doshi, P.C Jain, *Rural Sociology*. p 154

¹⁴ Panikkar K.M. *Hindu Society at the Crossroads*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1955), p. 121

¹⁵ Deshpande, M. S. (2010). *History of the Indian Caste System and Its Impact On India Today*. (New York: California University Press.). This book analyses various aspects regarding the caste system in present day in dia.

¹⁶*ibid.*, 163

2. Inter-dependence of Occupations

Social stratification based on occupation is the essential feature of caste system. The economy of village is bound by the occupational guilds built by the caste system.¹⁷

3. Fixed Occupation

Member of one caste is mandated to perform only the occupation to which he was born. Occupational mobility was a closed chapter as law permits not to switch. From hereditary occupation, Varna system stipulates the closure of occupational choice condemning the people to follow the birth jobs.¹⁸

4. Hereditary Rights and Occupation

In caste system everything is determined through hereditary lineage. i.e., the caste into which he was born. Personal achievements and efforts do not offer the choice to grapple more social status.

5. Important of Caste in Various Stages of Life

The entire life cycle of a person is strongly regulated by caste traditions. From birth, education, death and marriage everything is regulated by caste laws. Hindu *dharma* governs the all aspects of a believer from birth to death.

6. Restricted Food Habits

To maintain the purity of caste system, special food habits were adopted by various societies according to their status. Thus Brahmins are supposed to take only vegetable food to denote their non-violence and compassion to living beings. Likewise, food can be accepted only from the members of same society.¹⁹

7. Untouchability

In Indian caste system, Shudras, people in the lower range of the society are considered untouchable. It means someone from a higher caste if comes into touch with inferior, he has to purify from the filthiness of the inferior. Low caste people are considered pollution to be cleansed.²⁰

Various ritual purifications existed among the Hindu community regarding the Untouchability. This insistence compelled the low caste people and the outcastes to keep safe distance from the high caste peoples.

¹⁷ In caste-ridden rural economy, interdependence in occupation leads to poverty trap.

¹⁸ For example a farmer is supposed to take up the job of farmer only. Switch over to another job was possible.

¹⁹ For example meat was prohibited high caste Hindu people like Brahmins. Professor Jha of Delhi University has explained in detail in his book 'Myth of Holy Cow'.

²⁰ It is the worst form of caste discrimination in India. Vicziany, O. M. *The Untouchables*. (New York: McMillon and Company, 1998).

8. Joint Family System

In areas where caste system is found, joint family system is also prevalent as every community tends to live en masse. It naturally leads to joint family habitation.²¹

9. Absence of Vertical Mobility

In caste system there is no mobility movement, whether occupational or status, of its members, up and down. A person's status at birth is his life time status. Economic mobility of a person is determined by his caste traditions.

10. Reinforcement by Religious Beliefs

Religious practices and beliefs have played a critical role to make caste system unavailable. Brahmins using their religious autonomy exercised the power to institutionalize the caste system by making it an essential component of religion.²²

Existing Perspectives on Caste

Historians of caste since the 19th century had long studied the various mentions in the ancient Indian texts to decipher riddles surrounding the caste system which is supposed to be devised in India only after an Aryan invasion from the North West around 1500 BC and after which they prevailed upon the local people and subjugated them both physically and intellectually. Shafer²³ and Sahoo firmly confirm that the caste system in India was an ancient indigenous development, not one imposed by alien foreign invaders. This theory has gained ascendancy in the contemporary debates.

Prominent theory of caste system in anthropology is of Dumont who took the twin concept of purity and pollution as a key to caste system.²⁴ Economists consider caste system as a strong refutation of inclusive forward development and outright denial of occupational mobility. Indologist Olivelle²⁵ says:

“We can consider impurity rules as a system of socialization. Individuals within the society must be made to acknowledge and support social boundaries imposed upon them and this is affected primarily through social rituals”.²⁶

Mukesh Eswaran says in his article named “A gender based theory of the origin of the caste system in India” analysis the concepts of economists regarding the caste system.

“Among economists attempts to explain caste system are few, in the first formal treatment of caste. Akerlof shows how obedience to a discretionary caste code can be supported as equilibrium”.²⁷

²¹ The joint family system is found in all rural communities.

²² Hindu religious texts like Manusmriti and Rig Veda are abundant with such references and the history of Hindu religion testifies this fact.

²³ Shafer is a retired social worker who took up the case of caste system globally

²⁴ Dumont, Louis. *Indian Caste System*, p 96

²⁵ He is British Indologist

²⁶ Olivelle, Patrick, *Caste and Purity: A Study In The Language of Dharma Literature*, Sage Journals, p 13

Analytical Study of Caste System Among Indian Muslims

Unlike the general idea of Islam being homogenous entity, Indian Islam shows the trait of south Asian geography, assimilating regional features. Likewise, it also showcases many regional accretions which could be distinguished from the linear theology of Islam. Caste system is one among this South Asian social structure.

Pattern of Conversion

Unlike Hindu preachers who migrated from Aryan origin, Muslim preachers focused on the conversion of low caste people who were heavily disenchanted with rigorous caste system and admired Islam for its ideal of social equality and egalitarian religious outlook. Spread of Islam among the masses was in the lower rung of society. A point mentioned by MN Roy: to set equal social treatment low caste people embraces Islam, still maintaining the traditional spatial practices.²⁸

Islamic preachers were social reformers who disowned caste discrimination and monopolistic religious practices. Romila Thaper in her book on medieval India has appreciated the contribution of Islam in generating ethnicity feeling among low caste people. It has been generally admitted that Islam posed challenge to Brahminical hegemony rather than Buddhism in fifth century B.C. Dalit people took resort in Islam to escape the caste vices.²⁹

In the book on Mappila uprising, K.N Panicker has meticulously studied the conversion of low caste community into the fold of Islam. The conversion trends show that in Malabar region of Kerala, at the outset conversion was limited to the coastal areas and urban locations. But later the activities of Mampuram Sayyid AlaviThangal³⁰ and his son Sayid FazlThangal,³¹ Islam started to make inroads into suburban areas.³²

Likewise in North India also low caste people followed Islamic teachings but this does not necessarily mean that Islam was inaccessible to the noble high caste people. While comparing the conversion rates of two groups, the number of Dalit conversion weighs high in the pan of scale. Dr Mazumdar³³ has historically testified this fact. The negligent attitude of the high caste people towards the welfare of the low caste people also motivated the spread of Islam among the working class.

²⁷ Eswaran, Mukesh, *A gender based theory of the origin of the caste system in India*, research journal, p 45

²⁸ Roy.M.N. *The Role of Islam In History*, Delhi, p 18

²⁹ Kennedy, Hugh. *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007). P. 197-205

³⁰ Mampuram Sayyid AlaviThangal came from Yemen in pursuit of preaching of Islam. He is known as the social reformer of the Malabar and revolted against the nexus between British and high caste Hindus.

³¹ Sayid FazlThangal is the son of Mampuram Sayyid AlaviThangal who followed the footsteps of the father and was exiled in 1856.

³² K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 49, 58, 121. The history of Sayid of Mampuram is explained in the book.

³³ Madan, T. N. (ed.) *Muslim Communities of South Asia: Culture, Society, and Power*. (New Delhi: Manohar. 1995) p. 79

Even after the conversion of low caste people into Islam they only constitute only quasi-Muslims continuing many practices of erstwhile Hindu community. K N Panicker³⁴ stresses this social dilemma of setting associated with new belief system while taking forward the old traditions. Caste system enjoyed the similar status among the converted Muslims, even though it goes against the spirit of Islamic precepts of social equality and just treatment.

Imtiaz Ahmed and Irfan Habib have found this dilemma for the continuation of caste system among converted Muslims. Besides the aggressive attitude of higher sections among the Muslims like the descendants of Arab migrants and the converted from the upper class Hindus also successfully foisted the eradication attempts from the parts of Islam. Ills of Hindu community were brought into Islamic framework through the conversion of low caste people.³⁵

Composition of the Muslim Community

Various anthropologists who have studied the caste system among the Indian Muslims have divided the Muslim community into three broad categories:

- 1- Radical division of Muslim community
- 2- Tribal division of Muslim community
- 3- Social stratification of Muslim community

Each of the three has been again classified into subsections. The mind boggling caste system is not deeply rooted among Indian Muslims as it is in Hindu community.³⁶

Radical Division of Muslim Community

Some scholars have identified following radical groups among Indian Muslims.

- 1- Mughals: they are the descendants of Babur, the first Mughal emperor who established Mughal kingdom in India. They are from a region named Turan.³⁷
- 2- Iranians or Persians: Persian or the land south of Oxus is called Iranians or Persians. They came to India in various times for various purposes and settled.
- 3- Pathans³⁸ or the Afghanistani: these are the descendants of migrated Afghani people not belonging to Mughal family.
- 4- Arabs: even before the advent of Islam people from Arabia came to India for trade and settled here. A Few of them married Indian women.

³⁴ K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 134

³⁵ Ahmad, Imtiaz (ed.) *Family, Kinship, and Marriage among Muslims in India*. (New Delhi: Manohar. 1976) p. 245-246

³⁶ Ashraf, KM, *Life and Conditions of the Peoples of Hindustan*, PhD Thesis, (London: University of London, 1932) p. 186

³⁷ presently this falls in Afghanistan.

³⁸ They are also known as Pakthoons

- 5- The Indian Muslims: this section includes those people converted into Islam from among the native people of India. Native converts constitute this section and they constitute majority among all Muslim populations.

4.4.2. Tribal Division of Muslim Society

- 1- Pathans: they are the community migrated from Afghanistan. They are divided into two: Sarabin and Kalani. Sarabin is the superior caste.
- 2- The Saiyids: this clan attains prominence in 18th century and that was of the Saiyid of Bohra³⁹ who started this tradition. They claim their lineage to the Prophet of Islam.⁴⁰
- 3- The Bulochis: this is Sunni clan worked under Mughal dynasty and it refers to many people who migrated from sub Saharan lands.
- 4- The Shaikhzanas: all the Indians Muslims who were not saiyyids were known as shaikhzanas, connoting descendants of the saints. They were reputed for their intelligence and piety.
- 5- The Mewatis: the Meo Muslims live in the Mewat region presently situated in Haryana. They claim to be Rajput with military tradition. Their many practises resemble the Hindu society.
- 6- The Gakkars: they inhabited the regions of Chenab river and were occupied with military.
- 7- The Bohras: this is Shiite community engaged in trade and business activities.⁴¹

Social Stratification of Indian Muslims

Social stratification of Indian Muslim on the lines of Hindu caste system is widely discussed. Various scholars have differently perceived various strata among Indian Muslim community.

One classification is based on profession and affiliation:

1. Ahl-i-Saif: (men of sword). They are occupied with military and administration. Rulers and statesmen belonged to this group.
2. Ahl-i-qalam: (men of pen). This group was constituted by scholars and intellectual activists of various times.
3. Awami-i-Khalq: (common people). All other people who are not under the first two categories are considered under this group. They were peasants, artisans, vendors, merchants and religious mendicants.⁴²

³⁹A Shiite community in Indian Muslims and North Africa.

⁴⁰Qamaruddin, Dr. *The Mahdawi Movement in India*. (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi. 1985) p. 57

⁴¹Anthropological studies by Imtiaz Ahamed give detailed information about various classifications of Indian Muslims.

⁴²Madan, T. N. (ed.) *Muslim Communities of South Asia: Culture, Society, and Power*. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995) p.134

Another classification concerns the social status of people:

1. Ashraf (elite people): this group included all major elite groups among Indian Muslims and were regarded superior to others.
The Mughals, the Afghans, the Sayyids and the Sheikhs are the four groups in this section.
2. Ajlaf (inferior people): this group consists of people with low status like converted native people. They were treated the same way Hindu people dealt with outcastes people. K.M Ashraf has mentioned another social stratification creates under Muslim rule:
 - a. The upper class
 - b. The domestics and slaves
 - c. The masses⁴³

Four Major Upper Castes Among Indian Muslims

I. The Sayyids:

Literally Sayyids means leader or lord. This group's genealogy is attributed to Prophet Muhammad through his beloved daughter Fatima. By this virtue they wield high influence and command respect among people. This reverence is more perceptible among white community.⁴⁴

II. Sheikh:

Literally the word Sheikh means respectable leader. The title Sheikh is specially applied to three branches of Quraish tribe⁴⁵ from which the prophet sprang. The honorary titles of Siddiqui, Faruqi and Khalifa are under this category.

III. Mughals:

This is attributed to the dynasty started by the advent of Babur. They constitute ruling castes of India intangible from the Hindu population".

⁴³ Ashraf, KM, *Life and Conditions of the Peoples of Hindustan*, PhD Thesis, (London: University of London, 1932) p. 157-168

⁴⁴In Malabar region, they are known as *Thangals*.

⁴⁵Genealogy of prophet originates from this tribe and the people born to this tribe are considered superior to the others in social status. Few scholars have misinterpreted this social superiority as the tangible elements of caste system among Muslims.

Caste System among Mappila⁴⁶Muslims, According to D'souza⁴⁷

D'souza has studied deeply the caste system among Muslims of South India. He has specialization about the social stratification among the Mappila community of Kerala. He has stratified Mappila community into five ranks:

1. Thangals: (Sayyid family) descendants of Prophet Muhammad. They occupy the superior position in caste system.
2. Arabis: the people from Arab countries who migrated to Kerala to preach the religion and trade.
3. The Malabaris: the native people converted to religion for the local traditions. Their religious embrace caused the hybridity in Indian Islam.
4. Pusalars: new converts from lower rungs of caste system
5. The Ossans: barbers and occasional cleaners

Elements of Caste Among the Muslims

Although caste system and related social order and practices are somewhat looser among Muslims, both share a lot of similarities with abundant differences.

1) Hierarchy

Several authors considered hierarchy to be an important feature of caste system among Indian Muslims. Studies of Dsouza articulate the hierarchical division among Indian Muslims. Unlike Hindu caste system it is not associated with purity and pollution.

D'souza who studied about caste system among Mappila Muslims reached the conclusion of hierarchy in four categories:

1. Hypergamy
2. The amount of dowry payable by the husband
3. Use of special articles of distinction
4. Restrictions on social intercourse⁴⁸

Although the caste practices in Muslim community is milder, it is widely celebrated and enforced upon.

⁴⁶Mappila Muslims are the converted native Muslims inhabited Malabar region of Kerala. Pilla is a term of endearment and intimacy and the Nairs of Travancore even now use this honorary title with their names. The Christians of Travancore are called Nasrani Mappilas while the Muslims called Jonaka or Chonaka Mappilas. For the details of various theories of origin of the term Mappilas see, William Logan, Malabar Manual, Superintendent, Government Press, Madras, vol.I, 1951, p-191;

K.P. Padmanabha Menon, A History of Kerala, Cochin, Government Press, Ernakulam, Vol-1, 1924, pp 534-537; Roland E Miller, Mappila Muslims of Kerala A Study in Islamic Trends, Orient Longman, Madras, 1976, pp 30-32; P.A. Said Muhammed, Kerala Muslim Directory, Cochin 1960, pp 482-486.

⁴⁷ D' Souza, Victor S. "Kinship Organization and Marriage Customs among the Moplahs on the South-West Coast of India." In Family, Kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India, edited by Imtiaz Ahmad, 141-167. (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1976). P.345-367

⁴⁸ Various social restrictions had in practice among the Mappila Muslims like fisher folk was alienated from the mainstream community.

2) Endogamy

Another important feature of caste system among Indian Muslims is endogamy. Imtiaz Ahmed in his study of Siddique Sheikh of UP found the extent of endogamy practices among Muslims of India. The social status of each clan prevented the other group to have marital ties between them.⁴⁹

The major distinction of this feature among others is that it is mentioned in Islamic texts and was approved by jurisprudential discourse. This is not to discriminate the people but intends to keep the marital ties firm and stronger. **This has been misinterpreted by various scholars. A reason for the practice of endogamy is not to maintain purity of blood but to match spouse who share same economic backgrounds and the cultural and religious traditions.**⁵⁰

3) Occupational Specialization

Each clan found in various parts of the nation is by birth assigned to hereditary occupations of mendicancy, weaving, butchery, painting and so on. Dube asserts this fact through studying the occupational services and crafts have been confined to the lowest group of Laccadive Muslims. The inferior status of each group is determined by the occupational relation of each group. **Unlike in Hindu caste system, it is easy and non-punishable to break the occupational specialization and take new one.**

4) Restrictions on social commensality

Studies by Bhattacharya show the social restrictions among Muslims have declined considerably in the last decades but it is still practice widely. He has pointed out that the social relations are not elaborately structured among the Muslim castes like the Hindu castes in his study, while there has commensality and social restrictions between the upper castes. There is no commensality between the upper castes and the lower castes.⁵¹

Food restrictions and inter dining restrictions are also found among few Muslim groups. To practically limit the social interaction upper castes refrain from the programs of lower caste people. Siddique observes that restrictions in interdining among Muslims of West Bengal are limited to clean castes who will not dine with unclean castes.⁵²

Absorption of Caste in Muslim Culture

Tara Chand in his well-documented book “Impact of Islam on Indian Culture” has vividly explained the process of cultural diffusion between the two communities. He writes that “the Muslims of India made it their home. They lived surrounded by Hindu people and a state of

⁴⁹ Ahmad, Imtiaz, *Endogamy and status mobility among the Siddiqui Sheikhs of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.*” In Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims.* (Delhi: Manohar,) p. 326

⁵⁰ Beteille, Andre *Caste in contemporary India.* In C. J. Fuller (ed.), *Caste Today:* 150–179. (Delhi: Oxford University Press. Brass, Paul, 1978) p. 365-386

⁵¹ Ahmad, Imtiaz, *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India.* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981)

⁵² Srinivas, M. N. *Social Change in Modern India.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1966).

perennial hostility with them was impossible. Mutual intercourse led to mutual understanding. Thus after the first shock of conquest was over Hindus and Muslims preferred to find a viable media whereby to live as neighbours. The effect to secure new life led to new culture which exclusively neither Hind nor Muslim. This was purely Hind-Muslim culture".⁵³

Both Islam and Hinduism absorbed various elements of each other in art, spiritual and social conduct. Both traditions thrived through the mutual acceptance. Dumont observes that caste was consciously adopted by the Muslims in India as a compromise which they had to make in pre-dominantly Hindu environment.⁵⁴ He took induction of caste system into Islam as a tacit approval of approving of Hind hegemony. Likewise Hindus also adjusted to local Muslim rulers who criticized Brahminical religion of social separation.

Another major reason for absorption of caste system among Muslim was the massive conversion. As Imtiaz Ahmed observes the large majority of Muslims in India were originally recruited from intermediate and low rungs of Hind society where in status was rigidly defined in terms of birth and maintained by strong social relations. When these groups were incorporated to Muslim society through conversions either by peaceful persuasion or by threat of force or by offers of material and political advantage or by aspirations of social mobility, they must have imported their social system with them. Since much of the early conversions to Islam were a group process, this must have been easy. Some acculturative influence of Hinduism was thus inevitable.⁵⁵ Davis makes a similar statement: "it is not surprising that many of the nominal converts retained much of their former religion and that indeed Islam underwent considerable Hinduisation in India.

A Comparison Between Hindu and Muslim Caste Systems

In general sense stratification among the Muslims is looser taking into consideration of rigorous caste adherence in Hindu community. Caste practices among the Muslims are mild and not enforced forcefully. The caste system is the essential part of Hinduism unlike it is in the caste of Islam.

The major difference is that the caste system is the fundamental principle of Hinduism, modified after alternations by Aryan immigrants during Vedic age. It constituted major part of religious tenets that all people who believed in Hinduism needed to strictly follow while in Islam social discrimination is aggressively opposed and countered. Islamic principles advocate social equality, the caste practices seen in India among Muslims was motivated purely by regional generalization. The conversion brought the caste system into the folds of Islam.

⁵³ Tara Chand, *Impact of Islam on Indian culture*, p 189

⁵⁵ Ahmad, Imtiaz, *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims*. (Delhi: Manohar.1996), p. 59

Another major matter of difference is purity regarding caste system. Purity concerns in Islam are less important while considering with the Hindu practices, Hindu tradition keep strict regulation on purity and it is considered on essential part of religion. Untouchability was widely practiced among the Hindus which stipulated that if a higher caste came into contact with low caste people only after ritual purification the higher caste people would be reinducted into society. Physical purification serves as precept of Hindu tradition. Among Muslims there exists neither the concept of impure cast system nor Untouchability, the concept of purity occupies a noble distinction between Hinduism and Islam.

Social mobility is another food for thought. In Hindu caste system the birth status is accorded to a person for the whole life. Caste system seen among the Muslims of India makes no such distinction. In case of caste system among Muslims the personal achievements and efforts are potent to break the cycle of inferior birth. Social mobility is allowed in Muslim caste system and is not too vigorous. Upward social mobility is possible in Indian Islamic caste system while Hindu religion does not permit anything like this.⁵⁶

Needless to say religious prohibition and inhibitions are also utterly different; while caste system in Hindu is an essential part of religion. Caste system in Islam was inserted only as part of social integration and assimilation of geographical characters in religion. Hindu religious texts are replete with the references that say the discriminatory system is to be rigorously followed; Islamic postulates are vehemently against any kind of social discrimination.

Conclusion

As mentioned by Shahab Ahmed in his book ‘What Is Islam and The Importance of Being Islamic’, Muslims across the world do not constitute a homogenous community in practice and culture and even in the creeds they are heterogeneous community. Case of Indian Muslims is not an exception. The process of cultural assimilation and integration has been the hallmark of Indian Islam. Anthropologists and the sociologists who studied Indian Islam like Imtiaz Ahmed , Ghaus Ansari and Srinivas have found this stunning process of cultural integration. Unlike the blunt arguments of radical Salafis, Islamic presence in various parts of the world was against the Salafi concept of imagined global community with adequate assimilation without compromising the basic ideals.

Islam in India made inroads through two various sources; in south India Arab traders and the Sufi preachers popularized the Islam and conversion while in the north military expeditions and the quest to establish ruling castes introduced Islam to the Hindu dominated masses. The rapid Islamization of the subcontinent was due to the large scale assimilation of the local culture. Retaining the core principles of the religion, preachers of the religion demonstrated the flexibility of the Islam.

⁵⁶ Ansari, Ghaus, *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study in Culture Contact*. (Lucknow, India: Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society. 1960) p. 158

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