

## Issues/Discussion Forum

### Two Currents of the Pasmanda Movement: Left vs. Right

- **Abhay Kumar**

It is true that the upper-caste Muslim leadership remains unwilling to acknowledge the voices of the Pasmanda movements, let alone treat lower-caste and Dalit Muslims as equals within society or provide them with effective and proportionate representation in the community's social and religious organizations. When questioned publicly about the underrepresentation of Pasmanda Muslims in these institutions, the Ashraf leadership often resorts to the well-worn argument that Islam does not recognize the caste system and that Muslim organizations do not discriminate against their members based on caste identity. However, in private conversations, the same upper-caste Muslim leaders demonize the Pasmanda movements, portraying them as divisive efforts intended to weaken the unity of the Muslim community. Their discomfort with the criticisms raised by Pasmanda activists is not difficult to understand—numerically a minority within the community, Ashraf Muslims are reluctant to share power with Pasmanda Muslims.

There is no doubt that upper-caste Muslims exhibit hypocrisy: while they demand equality from the State, they are unwilling to extend the same fairness to their subaltern co-religionists. Despite frequently citing the revolutionary and egalitarian teachings of the Holy Quran, they have largely failed to implement these principles in their lives and within the social system. Data indicates that most of the social, religious, and educational institutions of the Muslim minority continue to be dominated by upper-caste Muslims. To maintain their caste purity, Ashraf Muslims discourage inter-caste marriages, despite the fact that Islamic teachings do not prohibit such unions.

It is often observed that upper-caste Muslims consider themselves culturally superior and frequently mock the languages, dress, and lifestyles of Pasmanda Muslims. Their sense of caste superiority is so deeply ingrained that they even ridicule the Urdu pronunciation of Pasmanda Muslims, conveniently ignoring the fact that many eminent Urdu writers and poets have emerged from the Pasmanda community. In essence, upper-caste Muslims largely share the same discriminatory practices against Pasmanda Muslims that upper-caste Hindus impose on lower-caste Hindus.

It is important to note that the term *Pasmanda* has Persian origins and means those who have remained backward. Lower-caste and Dalit Muslims face dual discrimination—both from the State and Hindu upper castes, as well as from their own Ashraf-caste Muslims. Having endured exploitation and discrimination on multiple fronts, Pasmanda Muslims remain socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged. Due to their exclusion from

the development process, lower-caste and Dalit Muslims are collectively referred to as Pasmanda Muslims.

While the history of Pasmanda movements can be traced back to the colonial and post-colonial periods, these movements gained renewed momentum during the Mandal movement. Consequently, numerous Pasmanda organizations emerged in the 1990s. Inspired by the politics of social justice, Pasmanda leaders became increasingly vocal in both regional and national politics. In their struggle for equality, they not only demanded justice from the State and the upper-caste Muslim leadership but also established their own cultural and literary icons to challenge upper-caste Muslim hegemony. In regional and national politics, several Pasmanda leaders openly criticized Ashraf-led leadership for overemphasizing religious and emotive issues while sidelining critical social, educational, and economic concerns.

Since the majority of Muslims belong to backward castes, tribal groups, or Dalit communities, political parties could not afford to ignore the demands of the Pasmanda movement. The Mandal Commission's reservation policy also included a significant portion of Muslims within the OBC (Other Backward Classes) category. However, the long-standing demand to include Dalit Muslims within the Scheduled Caste (SC) group remains unfulfilled.

In response to the growing influence of Pasmanda movements, some political parties rewarded a few Pasmanda leaders with lucrative positions. However, these rewards were limited to a select few individuals who, once they gained proximity to power, largely neglected the broader concerns of the Pasmanda community. As a result, the welfare of the Pasmanda population remains an unresolved issue. This is why the relevance of the Pasmanda movement is even more pronounced in the contemporary period.

The Pasmanda movement's critique of Ashraf leadership is not unfounded. Historically and sociologically, it is evident that the ruling classes in post-independence India have been predominantly Hindu upper castes. The upwardly mobile segment of Muslim upper castes, eager to gain access to corridors of power, has often aligned itself with Hindu upper castes rather than embracing Pasmanda Muslims. A stark reality is that upper-caste Muslims frequently take pride in inviting Hindu upper castes to their festivals and are more open to intermarriages with them than to inter-dining or inter-caste marriages with Pasmanda Muslims.

This reflects the undeniable influence of class hierarchy, which often takes precedence over religious unity. Furthermore, it has been observed that upper-caste Muslim leadership remembers Pasmanda Muslims only when mobilizing them for religious rallies or securing their votes for particular political parties. With a few rare exceptions, Pasmanda Muslims remain largely absent from the ideological and social framework of the upper-caste Ashraf Muslim leadership.

While the goal of Pasmanda movements is to achieve social justice, they are divided in their strategies for accomplishing it. While some Pasmanda movements genuinely fight for social justice, others, despite their claims, seem to compromise on the larger goal. In the discussion that follows, two currents within the Pasmanda movement are examined to distinguish genuine organizations from opportunistic groups. To explain the difference, I have categorized them into two groups: the left-wing and right-wing Pasmanda movements. While the categories of Left and Right are often difficult to define in political discourse, many ideologues from social justice movements do not associate themselves with either term. I am fully aware of these limitations. By using the terms Left and Right, I aim to differentiate these movements based on their approach to the State and their relationship with broader social and economic issues. My classification of Pasmanda movements along these lines also reflects their capacity to connect their struggles with the larger fight for the rights of oppressed communities.

### **(1) Left-wing Pasmanda Movements**

The Left-wing Pasmanda movements are genuinely committed to social justice. They draw inspiration from the egalitarian teachings of Prophet Mohammad, Kabir, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and other modern thinkers. Their defining characteristic is their ability to position Ashraf dominance within the broader landscape of national politics, linking identity issues with larger social and economic structures. Ideologically, they align with Ambedkarite and leftist thought. This is why Pasmanda movements dedicated to social justice have always taken state-led discrimination into account while critiquing upper-caste Muslims. A genuine Pasmanda movement never loses sight of the composition of ruling classes in the Indian state and places Muslim upper castes far lower in the hierarchy of power.

For the Left-wing Pasmanda movements, the issue of secularism is non-negotiable. As staunch believers in Ambedkarite principles, they understand the dangers of *Hindu Raj* and, therefore, maintain a strong distance from communal organizations that advocate for a Brahminical social order. They are certain that the Brahminical social order, which is the ideal of the Hindu right wing, cannot ensure justice for anyone. Their critique extends beyond mere identity politics, incorporating broader social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

While they demand proportionate and effective representation for Pasmanda Muslims, they are equally concerned about the marginalization of minorities in national politics. They criticize upper-caste Muslims and political parties for discriminating against Pasmanda Muslims, yet they remain acutely aware that, since independence, Muslims have been underrepresented in Parliament, state assemblies, higher education institutions, and the bureaucracy. The Pasmanda movements for social justice do not overlook the fact that Muslims have been victims of systemic discrimination. In other words, while these genuine Pasmanda movements strongly articulate their identity, they also strive to look beyond immediate identity politics.

This is why the genuine Pasmanda movement seeks to forge broader alliances with all oppressed castes and economically marginalized groups, cutting across religious boundaries. They take deliberate steps to make their movement inclusive, emphasizing a shared identity rooted in marginalization. The authentic Pasmanda movement, therefore, is far from being sectarian or inward-looking. Its struggles are not directed against any particular caste or community. Instead, it acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of non-Pasmanda leaders, activists, writers, and civil society members who have strengthened the movement.

This is why allegations from a section of upper-caste Muslims, claiming that all Pasmanda movements are driven by communal forces, hold little merit. However, it cannot be denied that a segment of the Pasmanda movement has been co-opted by ruling classes, who have little interest in the true development of Pasmanda Muslims and are instead more focused on diluting genuine Muslim concerns.

Even during discussions on the Waqf Amendment Bill, Hindu right-wing leaders have justified an unconstitutional bill by arguing that it would empower Pasmanda Muslims. Similarly, when the Muslim community opposes the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), the Hindu Right claims that such opposition is neither genuine nor representative of the entire Muslim community, asserting instead that Pasmanda Muslims support the UCC. On matters of Muslim personal laws, the Hindu Right legitimizes its anti-minority agenda by falsely stating that Pasmanda Muslims are aligned with their views.

Simply put, the discourse surrounding Pasmanda Muslims has been strategically used by the Hindu Right to dismiss the genuine grievances of the Muslim community, portraying them as concerns raised only by the elite religious leadership. By claiming that Pasmanda Muslims are on their side, the Hindu Right has weaponized this narrative to divide the Muslim community and delegitimize the serious concerns of the minority.

The Indian Constitution is based on the principles of democracy, secularism, and minority rights, yet the Hindu Right seeks to impose a draconian form of majoritarianism. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar repeatedly emphasized that democracy cannot exist without protecting minority rights, but those on the Hindu Right—despite frequently calling themselves the biggest followers of Babasaheb—are determined to reduce minorities to second-class citizens in the country. The imposition of the Waqf Amendment Bill is nothing more than a blatant display of brute majoritarianism.

## **(2) Right-wing Pasmanda Movements**

While the genuine Pasmanda movement has consistently criticized majoritarian politics and has never overlooked the dangers of Hindu Raj, even as it critiques Ashraf dominance within the Muslim community, several opportunistic and Right-wing Pasmanda organizations have adopted a narrow approach to larger socio-political issues. These groups often focus solely on targeting upper-caste Muslims while ignoring other contributing factors. They argue that Ashraf Muslims ignite communal tensions, which are then exploited by

Hindu fundamentalists. However, this simplistic notion—that Ashraf Muslims prepare the ground for Hindu Right-wing forces to take over—oversimplifies a far more complex reality. Such sweeping statements frequently serve the interests of the Hindu Right, which weaponizes these arguments to further its communal agenda.

The Right-wing Pasmada movements fail to acknowledge the historical realities of South Asia. Over the past 150 years, thousands of communal riots have taken place, leading to the rape, killing, and displacement of millions of Hindus and Muslims. Since India's independence, the vicious cycle of communal riots and pogroms has resulted in significant loss of lives and property, with Muslims bearing the brunt of these tragedies. The flames of communal violence have been burning since the days of Partition, and history makes it clear that the majority of victims have been Muslims. However, Right-wing Pasmada leaders conveniently ignore the reality of communalism, failing to address its deep-rooted impact on Muslim communities in India.

The Right-wing Pasmada movements fail to recognize the broader reality that Muslims continue to face discrimination in jobs and public institutions. Even when they manage to secure a livelihood, they are often targeted under the pretext of security. Many Muslims have been murdered in police custody, serving as clear examples of systemic discrimination and the victimization of Muslims by Hindu communalism. Unfortunately, Right-wing Pasmada leaders overlook the role of state oppression and majoritarian communalism in this dynamic.

The problem with the simplistic narrative of Right-wing Pasmada movements is that it reduces discrimination solely to an Ashraf versus Pasmada identity. While caste discrimination within the Muslim community is undeniable, other forms of oppression also exist—based on class, gender, religion, and institutional biases. The *Sachar Committee Report* is a crucial document that powerfully testifies to the perception of discrimination among Muslims. The report observes: “In general, Muslims complained that they are constantly looked upon with a great degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures... Some attributed it to historical reasons and referred to it as the usual developmental lag.”

Thus, it would be naïve to deny that Muslims face the dangers of Hindu communalism and are victims of state discrimination. However, instead of addressing caste-based discrimination alongside other forms of exploitation and marginalization, Right-wing Pasmada leaders tend to overlook the threat of majoritarian communalism, state oppression, and anti-people economic policies.

This argument does not suggest that the Pasmada movement should focus solely on security concerns and state discrimination. Rather, it emphasizes that Pasmada Muslims must articulate the reality of caste-based discrimination at the hands of upper-caste Muslims, as it is a serious issue. However, this struggle should not be framed in isolation, as if it exists

independently of external socio-political forces. No one denies the radical potential of identity politics, but if it is disconnected from broader social, economic, and political issues, it will fail to achieve the liberation it claims to be striving for.

Right-wing Pasmanda movements, however, remain myopic in their vision. They have rarely confronted the ruling classes or expressed solidarity with other marginalized groups fighting for their livelihood and environment. These movements often ignore state oppression, resource exploitation, and corporate greed, failing to take a stand against market-driven exploitation and business-class interests. Some allege that their limited agenda is due to backing from Hindu Right-wing forces. Critics argue that while Hindu upper castes have historically been responsible for discriminatory policies toward Muslims—particularly lower-caste and Dalit Muslims—they are now manipulating the Pasmanda discourse to further marginalize the larger Muslim community.

The Right-wing Pasmanda movements have hardly exposed the double standards of the Hindu Right. While the Hindu Right-wing ideology was responsible for removing Dalit Muslims from the Scheduled Caste category and denying them reservation benefits after Independence, the Hindutva party now claims to bring Pasmanda Muslims into its fold.

Although post-Independence anti-Muslim policies pushed the community to its knees—by failing to provide security during riots and perpetuating systemic discrimination in education and employment—the Hindu Right now sheds crocodile tears for them. While top Hindu Right politicians have expressed sympathy for Pasmanda Muslims, their government has actively opposed the long-standing demand to include Dalit and Christian Muslims in the Scheduled Caste list.

The Hindu Right outfits criticize secular forces and Muslim leadership for failing to deliver justice to Pasmanda Muslims, yet their own government has failed to implement the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra Report recommendations—measures specifically designed to uplift marginalized Muslims. Sociological studies of Right-wing Pasmanda organizations reveal that they have little real influence among marginalized sections. Although these groups claim to have large memberships, the reality is that they are small and fragmented. Often, a single caste dominates the organization and leadership, leaving little room for other marginalized castes within the Pasmanda community to rise to leadership positions.

The leaders of Right-wing Pasmanda movements are mostly active on social media, where they expend more energy attacking mainstream Muslim leadership than posing serious challenges to the Hindu Right. They view Muslim leaders with suspicion but remain largely uncritical of Hindu Right-wing politics.

As the saying goes, “missing the forest for the trees,” these groups fail to engage with broader national issues, focusing only on immediate benefits for Pasmanda Muslims. They overlook the fact that if the overall well-being of the country deteriorates, no marginalized



community can achieve justice. Yet, for these groups, larger socio-political questions seem irrelevant.

The politics of Right-wing Pasmanda movements often revolve around statements made by individual leaders rather than structural issues. They tend to accept the Hindu Right's claims uncritically while consistently finding fault with secular voices. Issues such as rising attacks on Muslims, growing communal tensions, economic challenges, and the overall marginalization of the Muslim community take a backseat to their narrow focus on so-called Pasmanda interests. For them, secular politics matters less than securing immediate benefits. Their political approach is highly personalized, often marked by contradictions.

While fighting for Pasmanda Muslim rights is necessary and justified, this struggle cannot take place in isolation. Take the example of the Waqf Amendment Bill: a Pasmanda group supported it, hoping it would empower Pasmanda Muslims, yet they ignored the broader assault on the Muslim minority that the bill represents. This selective approach highlights the myopic nature of their politics—one that fails to recognize the bigger picture of social justice and inclusivity.

As the saying goes, “all that glitters is not gold.” Similarly, we must be wary of opportunistic Pasmanda Muslim groups whose political strategies lend credibility to the allegation that they are backed by the Hindu Right, which uses them to weaken minority rights.

However, Muslim upper castes and other secular forces must exercise caution—they should not make the mistake of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” A broad rejection of the entire Pasmanda movement would be counterproductive. Instead, there is a need to support genuine organizations working toward democratization while isolating opportunistic groups driven by self-interest.

Identifying opportunistic and Right-wing Pasmanda organizations is not difficult. Just as secular politics is incomplete without social justice, the struggle for social justice cannot succeed without secularism. Any Pasmanda group that fails to take a firm stand against communalism and avoids placing Pasmanda issues within the broader national political framework should be viewed with scepticism.

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