

Caste Assertion and Issues of Identity among Ashrafs of Sagar, Madhya Pradesh

Manu Gouraha

Lecturer, School of Studies in Sociology,
Vikram University, Ujjain, MP

Abstract: There is variation between the preaching of Islam and the behavioural practices of Muslims. Though the religion is based on the principles of equality but in reality there is a great distinction between various caste categories. These differences also have regional impact. In the district of Sagar, the various caste groups exercise their efforts to uphold their caste identity intact. During the research of Muslims of Sagar district, it was found that Ashrafs consider themselves as superior and therefore maintains superiority by keeping a distance from other caste groups. This forces some non-Ashraf groups to strictly follow the practices of Islam in order to gain entry to the Ashraf, that is, superior group.

Key words: Caste identity, Caste Assertion, Ashrafazation,

The information obtained from the Muslims of Sagar of Madhya Pradesh establishes that the behaviour and practice in reality is not exactly similar to the religions prescription. Some existing practices strengths the notion of superiority and inferiority among different groups. The consciousness of superiority and inferiority has a direct implication on the assertion of identity of various caste groups that live in Sagar. The behavioural practice of Muslims thus is quite contrary to the religious prescriptions. Scholars have unanimous opinion that Muslims society cannot be understand by reading their religions text. Authentic understanding about them can be obtained by investigating their behaviour as they exist in reality. Fazalbhoy¹ has coined an appropriate term “Lived Islam” to give expression to the study made on the basis of observation of field reality.

Dividing the people in consideration of birth and occupation is a vivid case of discrimination. It has been well established by the research that there is a visible difference between textual prescription of behaviour and actual behavioural practices of Muslims of Sagar. In spite of this kind of rigid mandate, a great variety of variation is found in the behavioural practices of Muslims. The reason for difference may be attributed to regional variation in interpretation of text and variation in the perspective of scholars. Due to this Fazalbhoy says, “Islam in India have provided ample evidence to show that the Muslims in India displayed a variety of practices”².

The religions texts of Muslims proclaim equality, thus leaving no room for hierarchical ranking. In Sagar people of Muslim community is

divided in various groups and subgroups. In India, ranking is generally seen in “Dumotian Perspective”. The ‘Dumontian Perspective’ examines social ranking through the principle of purity and pollution. In secular perspective, as J.J. Cove³ remarks that Judicial-Servitude principle also creates social division of people equally strong as in the case of Hindus. As such caste can also be defined independently without relating it to the Hindu social system. In this way caste can be defined in terms of G.S. Pillai as, “Caste is a form of social assortments based on herd instinct or innate desire among the primitive people to group together on high ideals of mutual assistance and social service”⁴. A rigid hierarchy is maintained by the Muslims of Sagar exactly on the principle of purity and pollution, the Muslims can be divided into three categories. Each of these broad categories includes in them more than one caste. Each group is accorded a definite place in the hierarchical order of Muslim society. For all practices, each group exists as endogamous caste; Muslims of Sagar constitute a caste group. The basis of division of caste group of Ashraf category is the notion of purity and pollution, while for others if is occupation based division. People of occupation-based caste are socially treated low from that of the people of Ashraf category. What is important here is that on the basis of caste (*birader or jati*) among that Ashraf’s proclaims their superiority but it is equally accepted and recognized by the people of lower caste groups. Some individual dissent does not cut much ice to disturb the institutionalised position of the castes falling in Ashraf category. Precisely this kind of situation prompted David G. Mandelbaum⁵ to say that the study of Muslim Society should proceed

with recognition of existence of 'jati' (Caste) among them.

The Muslims of Ashraf category keeps vivid distance from Muslims of Ajlaf and Arjal categories. They have a strong feeling of asserting their caste identity. Social division is one important point in the organization of intra-community relations. Muslims of Sagar are no longer satisfied with their division in three broad categories of Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arjal. There is an under-current of discount among the Muslims falling in middle range. They argue that the existing division is confined to draw line only between high graded upper caste Muslims and low graded lower caste Muslims. This kind of two fold division is seen harmful for the Muslim falling in middle range among the two. People of some caste vehemently oppose as higher caste but certainly they cannot be placed in the category of socially degraded caste like elsewhere is India. A general consensus is arriving among Muslims in Sagar of to be recognized as backward caste. For our purpose here we want to emphasise the reality that apart from broad division in terms of high graded and low graded caste, people of each caste want to define their specific place in the hierarchical division of Muslims of Sagar. The emergence of the phenomenon of backward caste is a living example to this fact. Thus caste not only exists among Muslims but its root is getting deep and becoming more and more institutionalised.

The raising consciousness among the backward caste is not only confined in Sagar, it is equally found in other parts of the country also. In his study, Fazalbhoy⁶ has noticed the growing feeling of Marginalization among Muslim backward caste in other parts of the country also.

In Sagar, the Muslims of the different castes recruit their members in respective group by way of birth. Kolenda⁷ give high importance to the recruitment by birth as a necessary condition to recognize a caste.

So, what the difference we find between Muslims and Hindus is the use of terminology to denote the various groups in hierarchical order. M.K.A Siddique⁸ has that in some parts, the Muslims use the term '*quom*' and very rarely also '*birader*' and '*jati*' to mark social division among them. Therefore it is not correct to say that '*jati*' is an alien term for recognition of social division among other communities, more particularly among Muslims.

Lower caste Muslims are now aware that cause of continuation of lower position of their caste lies in the mechanism of conversion and settlement. The ancestors of the Muslims of lower caste embraced Islam through 'mass conversion' (N. Jayaram⁹). Their ancestors were from the same region living very much in Sagar district. They recall that all the persons of their caste collectively

converted to Islam as economically and socially they had miserable condition in native place. They left their native place and settled in Sagar town with a hope to get more job opportunity. After conversion also, they did not find more rewarding jobs and thus compelled them to carry their traditional occupation. People of Muslim community and others in general knew about the relationship between occupation and caste. Though their ancestors changed their original caste name and adopted Islamic name to escape social disabilities attached with Hindu system, but that did not work well to conceal their traditional occupation and caste identity. This feeling is much more among the educated persons from low graded caste. One educated Muslim from lower caste explained the cause of their lower position to the ignorance of their ancestors; they thought that the caste names of Ashraf categories must have emerged from the religious scriptures of Islam. Being a new convert and also illiterate their knowledge about Islam was limited to the motivator's of conversion who had assured them to provide equal social position as Islam believed inequality and universal fraternity. By the time they realized that they did not have equal social status even after conversion, it was too late for them to go back as they had already been delineated socially and religiously from neighbour and other section of their community.

Social mobility of different caste group is rigidly restricted. People of lower castes are undergoing tension to climb up but, their this kind of efforts are strongly resisted by Muslims of upper caste. Caste consciousness is very strong among higher caste of Ashraf category. They may in rare cases permit inter-caste marriages within the caste from Ashraf fold but they are rigid about inter-caste marriages with non-Ashraf caste. Ashrafs make distinction on the basis of practice of Islamic rituals and observance of purity (*paksaf*). The Ashrafs claim that non-Ashrafs follow certain Hindu rituals like applying Tumeric (Haldi), bringing water from tank, during marriage wearing, wearing Mangal Sutra, etc. These, they say is un-Islamic and therefore refrain from marrying with non-Ashrafs. Un-Islamic practice among Muslims follows the caste line. Muslims from Ashraf category are conscious not to practice anything that may become a sign of their Hindu origin.

Muslims of Ashraf category are believed to be descendants from the ancestors of foreign country. Many Muslims of Sagar claiming to be Ashraf also emphasise the foreign origin of their ancestors. Muslims of four lower caste do not accept their assertion. One educated respondent from Behana Caste firmly opines with few exceptions, all Muslims of the Ashraf category have adopted only caste name, such as Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan, etc. There has been a long controversy about genuineness of the origin of Muslims of Ashraf categories. And this kind of

controversy is an all India phenomena. Concentrating on Sheikh caste of Ashraf category S.C. Mishra¹⁰ makes a divide in them in terms of “Spurious Sheikh” and “Genuine Sheikh”. This terminological divide can well be extended to explain real situation of all the castes of Ashraf category. The categorization in terms of spurious and genuine is applicable for all castes of Ashraf category living in Sagar town. It is commonly held by non-Ashraf Muslims that the cases of spurious are more than the genuine. The basic attribute of Ashraf is that they are not indigenous convert. Those who are not indigenous converts are addressed as “genuine Ashraf” and the converts are recognized as ‘spurious Ashraf’ in Mishra’s terminology.

Possibly, the Ashrafs of Sagar are aware of this distinction of being ‘spurious’. Therefore they make conscious efforts to establish themselves as ‘genuine Ashraf’ by rigorously following behavioural practices as is prevalent among “genuine Ashrafs” living in India and abroad. They do not do anything which may give a sign of being spurious. In tune with the concept of ‘sanskritization’ of M.N. Srinivas¹¹, they depict a situation where people of lower caste adopt the behavioural practices of higher caste. In context of Indian Muslims, Imtiaz Ahmad¹² uses the term ‘Islamization’ to explain the situation where converts adopt Muslim customs and practices to prove themselves as Muslims. ‘Ashrafization’ explains a new type of situation, where ‘spurious’ section of Muslims makes conscious efforts to adopt behavioural norms and practices as those prescribed for ‘genuine’ Ashrafs. This they do by two ways: First, strictly adhering to the behavioural prescriptions of Ashrafs, and second, through maintaining obvious distance from common Muslims.

Hypergamy is by and large an accepted practice among Muslims. In spite of that, the

Muslims of Ashraf category do not give recognitions in their own behaviour. In Sagar, a person from Sheikh family married to a girl from Behana caste. Behana is treated low among Muslim community in Sagar. The family member of the boy did not accepted the marriage and got the marriage terminated. This they did to prove themselves as ‘genuine’ Sheikh. This incidence is a clear example of existence of process of Ashrafizations among the ‘spurious’ Ashraf of Sagar town.

The process of Ashrafization and Islamization, both are in practice among the Muslims of Sagar. In Ashrafizations the ‘spurious’ section Ashraf make conscious to efforts to adopt rules and practices prescribed for ‘genuine’ Ashraf. In Islamization, (Imtiaz Ahmad) the converts try to translate Islamic behaviour is their actual life.

The surname ‘Khan’ connotes the meaning of being in Ashraf category. Muslim scholars say that ‘Khan’ is not a general word to be used by common Muslim. It should be used to address the people of Mughal and Pathan of Ashraf category. Using the word ‘Khan’ as suffix to the name has become a quite common among Muslims of lower castes. It is in a way process of Islamizations as well as sanskritization of lower caste Muslims. Similarly, the higher caste name, such as Quareshi is now days frequently used by Muslims from the lower caste as their caste name in an attempt to upgrade their social position in eyes of others.

Although, the Muslims falling in the category of non-Ashraf group has a tendency of adapting the practices of Ashraf groups in anticipation of membership to that group, their claim to Ashraf caste is vehemently opposed by the Ashrafs. The Ashrafs are able to maintain their caste identity by way of rigidly following the preaching of religious texts.

References:

1. Fazalbhoy, Nasreen, ‘Sociology and Muslims in India : Directions, Trends, Prospects’, Sociological Bulletin, Vol. 54 No. 3, September-December 2005, pp. 496-513.
2. Fazalbhoy, Nasreen, op. cit., p. 503.
3. Cove, J.J., ‘A Multi-dimensional Model of Caste Ranking’, The Eastern Anthropologist, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1973.
4. Pillai, G.S., “The Origin and Development of Caste”.
5. Mandelbaum, David. G., Society in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1876, 1970.
6. Fazalbhoy, Nasreen, op. cit., pp. 505-507.
7. Kolenda, Pauline, “Caste in Contemporary India”, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1984.
8. Siddiqui, M.K.A., ‘Caste Among Muslims of Calcutta in Cast and Social Stratification Among the Muslims’ in “Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims”, Ed. by Imtiaz Ahmad, Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, 1973.

9. Jayram, N., 'Emancipation Through Proselytism? Some Reflections on the Marginal Status of the Depressed Castes', -, *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, and 3, 1992, 68.
10. Mishra, S.C., "Muslim Communities in Gujarat", Bombay, 1964.
11. Srinivas, M.N., "Social Change in Modern India", Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1966.
12. Ahmad, Imtiaz, 'Endogamy and Status Mobility among the Siddique Sheikhs of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh' in "Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims", Ed. by Imtiaz Ahmad, Manohar Book Service, Delhi, 1973, pp. 175-177.