

Practice of Caste and Hierarchical Division among Muslims of Sagar

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Abstract: The present study explores the existence of caste among Muslims of Sagar. In spite of the claim of Islam being based on egalitarian ground, there is caste like structure and hierarchical division among its members. These caste features follow the line of Hindus. Through study it was found that there is vertical division among members of Muslim community living in Sagar. The caste features are so rampant that membership is restricted by birth and endogamy is maintained. The full paper deals with the caste intricacies associated with Muslim community living in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh.

Key words: Caste, Hierarchy, Ashraf, Ajlaf, Arjal, endogamy,

This research paper attempts to investigate caste like hierarchical divisions among Muslim society of Sagar region of Madhya Pradesh. The issue of caste is very delicate and complex. The religious believe have made the matter more complex. There is a pressure on Muslims to give their views on caste like practices because their theological principles proclaim equity for all persons. People are placed on horizontal, not in vertical order. Therefore every respondents who were put to task for the purpose of research, was hesitant to give clear answer on this issue. Therefore, efforts were made to extract the practice of caste among Muslims by observing their behaviour in actual situation with regard to marital alliance, participation in festivals and religious ceremonies. Information on this kind of sensitive issue is generally obtained through informal discussions.

Discussions made on caste in preceding pages clearly establish that the caste is not necessarily linked with Hindu hierarchical system. Various studies on Muslims society clearly express that the term caste may not be found in those societies but the features associated with caste are explicitly found in their society. So at times it appears that it may be variation in use of the term to depict the similar situation. Thus, it can be said, citing Merton's¹ view, there could be diverse terms to describe a situation of common characters.

Muslims of Sagar, selected for the present study, belong to nine caste groups. For the purpose of study, the author has used common noun Muslims to denote Muslims of Sagar town. The Muslims form nine distinct groups are given specific place in the hierarchical division of society. Each group is recognized by specific distinct name. The hierarchical placement of the

Muslims has been demonstrated in the following chart.

Caste Hierarchy in Muslim Household

Main Division/ Category in Hierarchical Order	Caste	Total No. of Households	
Ashraf	Sayyad	8	70
	Sheikh	24	
	Mughal	6	
	Pathan	32	
Ajlaf	Kasai	2	6
	Makrane	4	
Arjal	Rangrez	6	24
	Behana	16	
	Bhisti	2	
Total		100	100

As it has been demonstrated in the chart, the Muslims form three broad divisions– Ashraf, Ajlaf (or Atraj) and Arjal. Undisputedly Ashrafs are considered highest in hierarchy. Next to them are Ajlaf. The Arjal is the lowest in this divisional scheme. Each of these categories comprises more than one sub-caste and each sub-cast in given a definite place in their hierarchical division.

Ashraf claim their origin from foreign country, though their this claim is highly disputed by Muslims of lower ladder. Muslims of Ajlaf, category often question the superior status of Ashrafs. However they do not question the highest place of Sayyad from the Ashraf category. Ashraf comprises four distinct caste groups. Here appears to be some arguments about the use of the term caste and sub-caste. If we call the three broad divisions of Muslims as a caste, then groups within

each sub-divisions automatically becomes sub-caste. But if we use the term category to address the broad divisions of Muslims, then other groups in each division can be referred to as caste. In course of analysis of information the broad division seldom comes on the picture. For, all the analysis is based directly on sub-divisions. Therefore it is more situationally correct to use the terms category for broad division of Muslims and term caste to denote people belonging to sub-division within the broad division. We have been following this terminological scheme for analyzing the subject matter of the thesis.

The categorization of Muslims appears to be similar to the system of Varna Vyavastha of the Hindus. Imtiaz Ahmad² is firmly of the view that this categorization of Muslims is true version of Hindu Varna system.

Ashraf comprises four castes groups. They are Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. These four castes are considered highest in comparison to all other castes falling in Ajlaf and Arjal categories. Castes of Ashraf category claim, as has been stated, superiority on the basis of foreign origin. Muslims of other caste dispute their claim. Generally, they do not create controversy in according highest place of Sayyad. But they do not accept claim of superiority of other three castes, of Ashrafs. According to many Muslims, some persons may have descendants from foreign ancestors but majority of them are converts, who have taken indigenous those honorific names as their surname. The surname creates good impression among the people. They receive respect and are evaluated superior by other Muslims and other non-Muslims. Whatever may be the actual position of these four caste groups, their highest place in hierarchical division is to a greater extent accepted by all.

The category of Ajlaf includes great variety of occupational castes, which are identified by specific caste name expressing their traditional occupations. Local people may further subdivide the castes under this category. This sub-division is based on the consideration of purity and impurity associated with them.

Two castes found among Muslims of Sagar, namely, Kasai and Makrane are considered to be the caste of Ajlaf category. The Arjal includes three castes—Rangrez, Behana and Bhisti. Rangrez has 6 households, Behara 16 and Bhisti 2 households. In the Ajlaf category, Kasai is accorded highest position. Then comes the position of Makrane.

Category wise the household of Ashraf is largest. They constitute 70 percent of the household. Numerically, the people of Arjal constitute second place by constituting 24 percent of household. Ajlaf's have the lowest number of household comprising only 6 percent of the total household. It is noteworthy that Ajlaf's are also

addressed as Atrah. Two features important with respect to caste is also practiced among Muslims. One, that in all the castes the membership is obtained by birth. And second, each caste practices endogamy, though marriages between two different caste members are not completely rare. It is said about Sayyads that they can bring daughters from Sheikh but they never prefer to give their daughter to the persons of three castes of Ashraf category. People of three other caste groups of Ashraf also avoid bringing daughter from Sayyad. It is believed that Sayyads are descendant of Prophet Muhammad through His daughter Fatima and son-in-law, Ali. Therefore people of other three castes do not consider it proper to bring daughters from Sayyad caste. After marriage the daughter will have to do household work like washing utensils or washing clothes. Getting low-key job done by descendants of Sayyad is considered an insult to Prophet Muhammad.

Hierarchical placement is third important attributes of a caste. The Muslims also maintain strict caste division among them. Under any condition, the four castes of Ashraf group would not establish marital relation with persons from Ajlaf and Arjal category. There is by and large occupational prescription for each caste, more particularly from the caste of Ajlaf and Arjal category. Thus, it can be rightly concluded that caste related all essential features are found in the organizational division of the Muslims. They may use different term to address the constituent group or may provide any other justification but in functional perspective, they follow the activities of caste, and the hierarchal placement of the people play role to define their intra- group and inter-group relations.

Except caste of Ashraf category all the other castes still follow their traditional occupation. Observances of traditional occupations appear to be main reason for differential placement in the Muslim hierarchical division. In a Hindu system, each caste has a fixed prescribed occupation. These occupations are classified in terms of ritual purity and pollution. Thus ritual is the key factor to determine the place of a caste in ritual hierarchy of in Hindus. An occupation which is considered low and impure by the Hindus that occupation is treated low also by non-Hindus (Pauline Kolenda³). This appears to be main reason for the emergence of occupation based social hierarchy. Occupation based social hierarchy, though has no place in Islamic text, but ritual division in terms of superior and inferior does find place. The notion of *Kafa'a* is one such case in point. Through *Kafa'a* or matters related to marriage, one is able to understand the division in Islamic society. This division is attributed to different opinion of Islamic scholars with regards to *Kafa'a*. Yoginder Singh Sikand⁴ in his article on Castes in Indian Muslims recalls Qur'anic views on *Kafa'a* by Ziauddin Barani. According to Sikand, Ziauddin Barani was

a well-known fourteenth century Turkish scholar and a prominent courtier in the court of Delhi's Sultan Muhammad Tuglaq. In his famous book *Fatawa-i-Jahandari*, Barani interpreted *Qur'anic* views of 'piety' (pious) and 'faith in partner' as ideal for marriage, as creating divisions of high and low. He interpreted *Quran* as saying that good blood is drawn in high born as they are virtuous and loyal while in a blood flows in vice and therefore wildness and destruction originates. Barani further says since *Quran* opines that piety is found only in noble blood and lowborn do not have piety. This suggests that for ideal marriage, piety is necessary and since piety is found in noble blood, therefore marriage should be between people of noble blood only. Thus notion of *Kafa'a* suggest superiority of blood. Quoting Yaginder Singh Sikand, "Most Indian *Hanafis* seem to have regarded caste (*birader*), understood here as hereditary occupational group, as an essential factor in deciding *Kafa'a*, and in their way have provided *Fi'qh* legitimacy to the notion of caste".

Regarding notion of *Kafa'a* as interpreted by Indian Muslim, he writes "By restricting marriage to ones occupational and ethnic group, caste, which is, in theory, an endogamous birth based occupational category, came to be regarded as essential to establishing *Kafa'a* for the purpose of marriage." Sikand further writes, "In this way, the notion of *Kafa'a* helped to provide legitimacy to the existence of caste among the Indian Muslims by effectively restricting marriage within the endogamous caste circle". (All quotations from Sikand⁵).

Practice of endogamy evidently substantiates the existence of caste in Muslims. The information obtained from the head of each household about the caste of his wife, it was found, with few exceptions, almost all the heads have married in their own caste. The following table presents the marital alliance of head of the household.

Marital Alliance of Head of Household

Caste	Sayyad	Sheikh	Mughal	Pathan	Kasai	Makrane	Rangrez	Behana	Bhisti	Total
Sayyad	4	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	8
Sheikh	6	16	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	24
Mughal	-	4	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
Pathan	4	8	4	16	-	-	-	-	-	32
Kasai	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	2
Makrane	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Rangrez	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	6
Behana	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	16
Bhisti	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Total										100

The five caste groups belonging to lower order of Ajlaf and Arjal category strictly followed the rules of endogamy. Not a single head had married with women of other caste. There are some cases of inter-caste marriage among the caste categorized in Ashrafs. By and large, they have also tended to restrict to the rules of endogamy. Practice of hypergamy existed among Sayyad and they were freely marrying women of other three castes of Ashraf's category. The analysis of the marital alliance clearly reveals the existence of two facts among Muslims. One, inter-caste marriage

may be done but only among higher castes of Ashraf category. There is not a single case where the Ashraf man has married with castes from Ajlaf and Arjal category. Two, endogamy is more strictly followed by the people of lower caste. We have not found any head who has married outside their own caste. This is the proof of not only the existence of practice of endogamy but also a proof of rigid observances of the notion of purity and superiority of caste. Whatever the Muslim may claim overtly, in practice they were quite similar to that of the caste ridden Hindu society.

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