
Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

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Abstract: *The Muslim society in Bengal suffered from caste distinctions. The caste system of Hindu society is at the root of the caste system organization and title identity in Bengali Muslim society. The Census Report of 1911 referred to 80 castes in the Muslim society. The Indian caste system came to the developing Muslim society of Bengal as the Muslim community in Bengal was engaged in their previous profession. Due to the fact that their social status remained unchanged due to professional reasons, the converted Bengali Muslim society did not get social status. Converting Bengali Muslims have not been integrated into the traditional larger Muslim society as there is no social force, i.e. education, to transform the patriarchal professions. Due to the lack of social mobility in the Muslim society, professional groups including weavers, archers, dyers, tailors, butchers, butchers, barbers and musicians started falling behind the fragmented part of the Muslim society. The intermarriage between the upper and lower castes existed. The rigidity of the caste system was not severe like that of the Hindu society. The organization of caste system and the identity of the title of Bengali Muslim society is still present on the basis of title identity.*

Keywords: *Ashraf, Atraf, Dargah, Mullahs, Manat Mana, Morsiya Gaan, Pir Puja, Taziya*

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Introduction

The study of the composition of the Bengali Muslim society would reveal its composite character. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were two main divisions among Indian Muslims - Shia and Sunni. Patrons of the Shias were the royal families of Golconda, Lakshau, Murshidabad and the Nawabs of Dhaka. The Sunnis were patronized by the royal families of Hyderabad, Tank and Bhopal. In India, Shia domination disappeared amidst the

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

political turmoil and anarchy of the eighteenth century. In Bengal, the Sunni-Shia ratio in the 1872 census report was 80: 1. The number of Shias was relatively high in Murshidabad, Malda, Hooghly, Rangpur and Dinajpur.¹ The number of Sunnis continued to increase throughout Bengal, and various classes emerged among them. The first part of James Wise's book 'Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal' in 1883 mentions the Muslim caste system and surname. Wise divided the Muslim community of Bengal into various sections - Shia, Sunni, Faraji, Taiyuni, Rafiyadayin, formerly.² In 1926, Mohammad Yaqub Ali, a former headmaster of Rajarampur High School in Murshidabad, published a book entitled '*Musalamānēr jātibhēd (Muslim Discrimination)*', and discussed in detail the caste system of Muslims in Bengal. He considered this casteism to be an unprecedented event in Muslim society. Because no other country in the world has such a caste system in the Muslim society.³

I

In the late nineteenth century the issue of foreign origin of the Muslims of Bengal created a stir in the thought process of the Muslims. The observations of some British officials that a large number of the Muslims were formerly of the Hindu community created resentment in the Ashraf Society.⁴ The anthropometrical observations revealed that the foreign element among the Muslims of East Bengal was very small.⁵ The local conversions helped the derange of Muslims in Eastern Bengal.⁶ Some writers viewed that Hinduism could not pervade beyond western Bengal which possessed a self-sufficient economy.⁷ The democratic liberalism of Islam attracted the low caste Hindus which helped to increase the number of converts. The higher rate of birth among the Muslims than the Hindus in the first three decades of the twenty century helped the Muslims to get the majority position in Bengal. There were no influx of foreign settlers and conversions during the period (1891-1931).⁸ The theories and observations of the British officials regarding the origin of the Muslims were challenged by Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee, Dewan of Murshidabad Nawab in his Persian work entitled "Haqiqat-i-Musalman-i-Bangala" published in 1895. Fuzli Rubbee maintained the view that the strength of the sword did not play a vital role to spread Islam in Bengal.⁹ During the Muslim rule a large number of foreign Muslims from Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan came to settle in Bengal. The theories of Fuzli Rubbee at the end of the nineteenth century profoundly influenced the thoughts of the Muslims and made them

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

conscious about their separate existence.¹⁰ Some liberal Muslim writers criticized the contention of Fuzli Rubbee. The Bengal Muslim aristocracy found pleasure in tracing their foreign origin. This tendency kept them aloof from the impact of English education and retarded their socio-economic progress.¹¹

From the social point of view, the Muslim society in Bengal may be divided into three categories. In the first category the Ashraf or Sharif or upper class formed the group. The word Ashraf or Sharif meant noble or persons of high extraction. It included all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from the higher castes of Hindus. This group included Syed, Sheikh, Pathan, Mughal, Malik and Mirza. This group enjoyed prominence due to their relationship to the Prophet or his tribe. Like the Brahmins of Hindu society, the Syed held a position of high esteem in the Muslim society. The Sheikh of this category was stated as genuine Sheikh. In some areas the Pathan and Mughal races were included in the category of Ajlaf Muslims (lower class Muslims). It depended 'on the extent to which their females observe the parda. The urban Ashraf were very much concerned about their racial superiority. After the consolidation of the British rule the Ashraf lost prominence in the society. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement (1793), the Resumption Proceedings (after 1828) and English language did not bring any change in their outlook.¹² The Ashraf were educationally advanced than the lower occupational groups such as Nikari (fish dealer) and Muchi (shoe-maker). The Ashraf class was very much conscious about selecting a career. They avoided physical labour, dishonourable profession and a career of service.¹³ The 'lesser Ashraf in the rural areas included Khondkar and Syed. They claimed equal status with the urban Ashraf. They claimed their foreign origin, showed favour to Islamic languages and opposed widow re-marriage. They were indigenous in character and participated in religious service. The Mullahs and Maulavis belonged to this category and played a prominent role in the society by moulding the thoughts of the rural Masliras.¹⁴ The Moghul Ashraf were Shias but the rural Ashraf were Sunnis. The rural Ashraf or the Mofussil gentry tried to maintain link with the Mughal Ashraf by marriage in order to establish link with the people of foreign extraction.

The respectable and educated Bengali Muslims tried to link their origin with the non-Bengali Muslims, such as Quraish, Pir, Maulana and Syed. They separated themselves from the lower order of the Muslims the descendants of the low caste Hindus, the professions and

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

appellations of the low caste converts did not change with their conversions.¹⁵ The Ashraf class consisted of both Urdu speaking elite and Bengali-Urdu speaking rural landlords. They fostered a separate culture from the low born Muslims and the peasantry. The Ashraf class patronized Arabic-Persian, Urdu culture and looked only to their well-being. They never tried to educate the uneducated masses about their origin and to permit them to enjoy the same privileges with them. The Ashraf even opposed to the study of both the upper and The Ashraf class pleaded for the cause of Urdu, they lost their privileges during the British rule and found satisfaction in their separate religious identity and noble birth by clinging to the Arabic-Iranic-Turkish traditions. They only maintained relations with the low class Muslims in the name of preserving purity and cohesion of Islam and to bargain better advantages for themselves by competition with the educated Hindus. Sometimes, the Ashraf class associated themselves with the lower orders to secure better advantages from the Government. The lower orders accepted Bengali as their vernacular in place of Urdu which the Ashraf condemned as the language of the Hindus. The attempt to link up the lower orders with the Arabic-Irenic-Turkish culture failed to get adequate response, in order to maintain separate identity and unity of the Muslims, the Ashraf class developed a Bengali language coated with Arabic and Persian words.¹⁶ The Urdu educated elite made no attempt to involve themselves with the aspirations of the rural mass. The Muslim writers felt the necessity of maintaining a link between the elite and the rural masses. This retarded in a way to develop a rational trend in the political thought process of the Muslims. In the twentieth century a transformation took place in the composition of the Muslim community in Bengal, the rigour of categorization of the Muslim society into Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arjal groups was minimised.¹⁷

The caste system of Hindu society is at the root of the caste system organization and title identity in Bengali Muslim society. Before the arrival of Muslims in Bengal, the social system was class divided during the Sena period. Inspired by the communist spirit of Islam, the common people of Bengal were attracted to Islam in the hope of liberating social bonds.¹⁸ Even after the Muslim conquest of Bengal, there was no change in the social structure. As a result, the converted Bengali Muslim society was divided into classes. At that time the Muslim society of Bengal was divided into Ashraf, Atraf, Ajlaf and Arjal classes. In the newly formed Muslim social structure in Bengal, the caste system of Hinduism changed the names of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras to Ashraf, Atraf, Ajlaf and Arjal. The

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

word Sharif (Arabic) means sacred, the plural of Sharif is Ashraf, the word of labor is Atarf, the word of Atarf is inferior, Arjal is the word of vulgarity.¹⁹ Ashraf or elite class belonged to Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan and other foreign aristocratic Muslims. The Atraf, Ajlaf and Arjal classes were generally regarded as converts. Atraf and Ajlaf were a non-aristocratic class - the local inhabitants of the profession of weavers, weavers, tailors etc. were included in this class.

II

Ashraf, the upper class of the Muslim community, was made up of high-ranking government officials like Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan etc. Syed, a descendant of Hazrat Mohammad, was sent by his followers, the Sheikhs, Turks and Afghans, and the Mongols became known as the Mughals. The descendants of Syed had the titles of Hosseini, Rizvi, Naqvi, Ismaili, Bukhari and Kirmani. Sheikh's descendants used the titles Siddiqui, Farooqi, Abbasi. Muslims of Afghan or Turkish descent held the titles of Khan, Shur, etc., Mughals Mirza, Beg, Mir, Mallick, Lashkar. Religious leaders used the titles Shah, Khandaker, Khan, Mirza, Beg, Lashkar Prabhuti. Syed, Sheikh, Khan, Shah, people with titles were employed in laborless work like teaching according to social status, Rajpad Dharmacharcha.²⁰ There were different gradations in the Ashraf class. Some of them had no racial or historic identity with the Ashraf class but were regarded as a section in this group. Some belonged to the Urdu speaking urban Ashraf group, while others belonged to the Bengali speaking rural Ashraf. The Ashraf class lived in large numbers in the districts of North and West Bengal.²¹ The second category comprises the Ajlaf or Atrap or lower class Muslims. All converts from the lower castes of the Hindus belonged to this category.²² The word 'Ajlaf means wretches or mean people. They were called 'Kamina or Itar, a corruption of Rizal, worthless. They did not give up local names and appellations which were condemned by some writers in the present century.²³ The Ajlaf Muslims were divided into certain sections.²⁴ The third category is known as Arjal or degraded Muslims.²⁵ They lived under social disabilities. They were not allowed to visit the mosque or to use the public burial ground. The Ashraf and Ajlaf groups did not involve in any social transactions with them. The higher class Hindu converts were taken as Ashraf Muslims and the low class Hindu converts were taken as Ajlaf or lower class Muslims.²⁶

III

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

The Muslim society suffered from caste distinctions. The Census Report of 1911 referred to 80 castes in the Muslim society. The intermarriage between the upper and lower castes existed. The rigidity of the caste system was not severe like that of the Hindu society. The influence of the Hindu caste system was found visible among the Muslims. The mobility in the Muslim society was feasible because a large number of the low caste Hindus like the Pods, Chandals, Raibanshi and Kochea of East and North Bengal preferred Islam to avoid social disabilities. Their inclusion in the Muslim society gave it a composite character.²⁷ Sometimes, internal divisions were found very rigid in the Muslim society. These divisions often stood in the way of establishing unity in the Muslim society. This prompted some writers to describe the Muslim community as an aggregate of believers'.²⁸ We have to rely on the 1871-1931 census report to find the source of the title identity of the Muslim society of Bengal. The 1871 and 1881 census reports do not provide sufficient information on the status of Muslim nations. The 1891 census report is incomplete. From the time of the 1911 census, Indian Muslims began to oppose the collection of ethnic information. As the movement intensified in the 1920s and 1930s, data collection stopped after the 1941 census. The census report from 1941-2011 did not collect any information on Muslim ethnic identity. But in the Bengali Muslim society, the organization of caste system and the identity of the title is still present on the basis of title identity.

This idea was later established in the census. According to the 1891 census report, 102 professionals were named, most of whom belonged to the Muslim community.²⁹ The occupations in this census report are- Ābadāla, bādyakara, bājikara, bakali, bākhō, bōrā'i, bōdrajiba, bēhārī, bēpāra, bēsāti, bēśyā, bhāṇḍa, bhāṭa, bhātiyā, bhisti, cāmāra, caudhurī, cikapigāra, citrakara, cunāri, daphāli, dāhiyā, dā'i, dālāla, daphatara, darji, dhari, dhā'ōyā, dhōpā, dhuniyā, phakira, phēruśa, gādī, gajanabhī, gōlāma, hājāma, hijarā, gōladāra, gōyālā, jamā, jharudāra, jōlā, jōlā, khōyāji, kāhāra, kayāla, kalu, karadāra, kārigara, kasā'i, kasabi, kājī, khōmjā, khandakāra, kasiyārā, lāhēri, mahaladāra, lāhiruśa, mēriyāsi, mālā, māla-baidya, mā, byākhyā, maṇḍala, mājhi, maśālici, maulabi, mēthara, mē'ōyāphēruśa, mistri, mṛdhā, mukōda, mō. , Nagaraci, nalabānadha, nīlā, nikāri, nurāpha, pāsi, pāṭini, paṭuyā, pāṭuriyā, ghēriyā, pēsākāra, ranrēja, rasuyā, sāgāga, sarakāra, sā'ina, śikalagara, śikāri, sinali, taraphadāra, tākalihāra, tutiyā. The census report of 1891 mentions 20 titles of Muslims of Bengal - Akhandji, Ataraf, Khan, Gazi, Chowdhury, Dafadar, Dewan, Nayak, Pathan,

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

Biswas, Beg, Mir, Mirza, Mughal, Sheikh, Shana, Sardar, Syed and Hazara. The census of 1901 mentions 44 professional groups. Numerically notable among these groups are: Jolaha, Nikari, Kullu, Behara, Mahiferush or Pajhara, Abdal, Dai, Mughal, Dhunia, Kunjra, Beldar, Bedia, Natua, Hajjam, Dhobi, Patua, Sherisabadia, Laheri. Bharora, Dakali, Kahar, Bazigar, Mehtar, Fakir, Sai, Nateya, Chunari, Faraji. The census of 19011 traces 70 ethnic groups of Muslims in Bengal. The divisions of the caste identity are- Abdal, Ajlaf, Akhunji, Bedia, Behara, Beldar, Bhat, Bhatia, Chatua, Churihar, Dafadar, Dai, Darji, Dewan, Dhawa, Dhoba, Dhunia, Fakir, Gain, Hajjam, Jala, Kagji, Kalan. Kan , Nikari, Pathan, Powaria, Pirkodali, Rasua, Syed, Sheikh, Sonar, Afghan, Ashraf, Bakli, Bakho, Bari, Bhuiyan, Chowdhury, Chunari, Dafali, Gaddi, Golam, Halalkhor, Hijra, Haseni, Kharadi, Korashi, Laheri, Manta, Mehna, Mirdeh, Miriasin, Mina, Naomoslem, Pateya and Sunni. Some other Muslim ethnic groups are also found - Pathan, Kala, Pathan, Kanchi, Madari, Chishtia, Naxbandi, Kalandar, Kaderia, Mattari, Kagji, Kasai, Lalbegi, Chuhar, Pasi, Muslim Kartabhaja, Chowdhury, Nikiri, Muslim Malla, Gazi, Sardar, Muslim Chai, Khulu, Bede, Phulbaria.³⁰

IV

The Indian caste system came to the developing Muslim society of Bengal as the Muslim community in Bengal was engaged in their previous profession. Due to the fact that their social status remained unchanged due to professional reasons, the converted Bengali Muslim society did not get social status. Converting Bengali Muslims have not been integrated into the traditional larger Muslim society as there is no social force, i.e. education, to transform the patriarchal professions. Due to the lack of social mobility in the Muslim society, professional groups including weavers, archers, dyers, tailors, butchers, barbers and musicians started falling behind the fragmented part of the Muslim society.³¹ Some of the jobs were exclusive to Muslims, such as masons, khalasi-sareng, tailors, butchers, sahis-kochowans, butlers-cooks, vists, merchants - most of whom were Bengali Muslims. During the Muslim period, the middle and lower classes belonged to the middle class and were subordinate to the administration, the revenue, the judiciary and the army. Kotwal, Kayal, Kalamchi, Kagji, Khajanchi, Khalasi, Khansama, Khasanbish, Gomasta, Changdar, Chaprashi, Chowkidar, Jamadar, Jalbas, Dehidar, Tabakchi, Tablachi, Tahsildar, Talukdar, Dafadar, Darji, Dastidar, Darog, Bengali Muslims who have converted with foreigners also

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

get opportunity to work in the titles of Pike, Payada, Peshkar, Barkandaj, Baburchi, Bildar, Visti, Mashalchi, Mahlanbish, Muhuri, Moktar, Mollah, Sharaf, Sarkar, Sareng, Serestadar, Hawladar etc.

The social and economic factors made the Muslim society flexible and less rigid than the Hindu society. An Ajlaf Muslim could get a place in the Ashraf society by a matrimonial transaction. In the urban areas the society was not conservative and it was easier for a degraded Muslim to enter into the ranks of Ashraf or Ajlaf groups. Moreover, the rigid caste system could not function properly due to operation of the Muhammadan Law of Inheritance. The Ashraf family could not maintain its status due to economic impoverishment. Very often the Ashraf Muslims had to take refuge in the Ajlaf family due to economic reasons. Sometimes, on political considerations the Ashraf included the Ajlaf or Atrap in their group.³² In the non-Ashraf categories the occupation generally used to determine caste and hierarchy. The caste hierarchy based on occupation did not last long. In the late nineteenth century many non-Ashraf Muslims changed their occupation due to economic causes. Some Jolahas (weavers) took the profession of cultivators as they became unemployed due to influx of the Manchester cloth.³³ Of course, this classification was not as strict as the caste system of Hindu society. The class system was not inviolable in Muslim society as there were no restrictions on social class judgment from the point of view of religion. If the lower class people could improve their professional or social life, Ashraf could be entitled to the same status as the class. The titles of Sheikh, Syed, Mir do not mean ethnic differences, these divisions are not races in any sense. These titles were given in honor of elderly, pious and virtuous Muslims. This classification of Bengali Muslim society was strictly adhered to in some areas when it came to socializing, establishing marital relations, eating and drinking.

In two proverbs the form of relaxation of caste system in Muslim society can be seen-

(1) 'Pesh aaj in kasab bunde

Badajan Gushten Shaikh

Bala Chum Abjan Shawad

Isa Sal Meshawen '

(First year we were butchers, next year sheikh, now if we get price then we will be Syed)

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

(2) 'Ullah Tulla is first, then Uddin

Mamud goes upstairs as long as his forehead goes back. ³⁴

Both proverbs mention increasing social status through financial improvement. In the last half of the nineteenth century, when some of the Muslim jute farmers became wealthy, Khan used to associate the surname Syed with his name in the hope of establishing a high position in the society. There is no religious basis for caste system in Muslim society. Because there is no example of such social discrimination in the Muslim society of any other country in the world.

In some cases, if the Muslims of Bengal had followed the caste system of Hinduism, they would not have been bound by any restrictive rules for subsistence. Hakim, Hafiz, Khondakar and Munshi scholarships were generally regarded with respect. Scholarships for tailors, bakers, cobblers and refugees were reserved for Muslims. Dhopa, Dhunia, Jola, Jale, Bildar, Nil-Rangkari were the professions of the poor converted Muslims. These scholarships were not viewed with dignity. At present Kutti Muslims are given the opportunity to worship in the mosque. Bedia Muslims are still untouchable in the eyes of society. This classification was strictly observed in some areas when it came to socializing, establishing marital relations and eating. Arjal or itar class members could not enter the mosque. The corpses could not be buried in ordinary cemeteries.

Conclusion

Actually the upper sections in the Muslim society did not find themselves comfortable by regarding them as a part of the Bengali society. They tried to maintain their non-Indian identity and to preserve the theory of foreign extraction. This social differentiation was found in existence in the medieval period in the days of Firus Tughluq (1353). The Indian Muslims imitated the caste distinctions of the Brahmins and the exclusiveness of the Rajputs.³⁵ The Ashraf Muslims, unlike the upper caste of the Hindu society maintained their caste structure intact, allowed the lower sections to enter into their class and to identify themselves with the Muslims of foreign extraction. By converting to Islam, the newly formed Muslim society of Bengal did not acquire any distinct character in terms of culture. At that time, Pir Puja, Kabar Puja, Manat Mana, Morsiya Gaan, Dargah construction, procession with Taziya, offering of

Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

Manasa-Shitala, participation in Jatra-Mela, observance of folk rituals in marriage etc.³⁶ were prevalent in the Muslim society of Bengal. The advent of Islam in Bengal did not bring any serious change in the life of society and culture. Ashraf used to be engaged in laborless work like Rajpada, religious practice, teaching. The work of the other three classes was to do manual labor. Those who were engaged in agriculture considered themselves more important than the weavers, weavers and tailors. The people of Jola, Tanti and Darji classes were considered as inferior to the people of Jale, Majhi-Molla, Kalu, Kasai, Kamla, Khalasi and Dhunuri. The lowest occupations in Atraj are shoemaker, dafali, hajjam, bhat, dhobi, ghesera, nat, badia class. In addition, people engaged in low level occupations like Bhangar, Mehtar, Kasbi, Hijra, Mangata class were considered as arjal or itar class.

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Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

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Ethnic Identity & Social Stratification of Bengali Muslims: An Inquiry

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