Caste system among South Asian Muslims

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Muslim communities in South Asia apply a system of social stratification. It developed as a result of ethnic segregation between the foreign conquerors (*Ashraf*) and the local converts (*Ajlaf*), as well as influence of the indigenous Hindu culture. Islam does not recognize any castes.

Contents

Historical development

Islam does not recognize any castes,[1] however, by the time it came to Persia and India, the existing divisions in these regions were adopted among the local Muslim societies. The ancient Persian society had a social stratification system analogous to the Indian varna system. The Sasanian society retained this system with some changes, even after the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century. Evidence of social stratification can be found in several later Persian works, such as *Siyasatnama* of Nizam al-Mulk (11th century), *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (13th century), and *Jam-i-Mufidi* (17th century).[2]

The Muslims who came to the subcontinent during the 12th century Muslim conquest of India were already divided into social classes such as priests, nobles and others. Further, a racial segregation demarcated the local Muslim converts from those of foreign origin. The foreigners claimed a superior status as they were associated with the conquerors, and categorized themselves as Ashraf ("noble").[3] Over time, the Indian Muslim society also split on the basis of the existing Hindu caste system.[3] According to M. N. Srinivas (1986), Indian Hindu converts to Islam brought their original caste system to the Muslim society in the region. On the other hand, Louis Dumont (1957) believes that the Islamic conquerors consciously adopted the Hindu caste system.[4]

Ziauddin Barani, the 14th century political thinker of the Delhi Sultanate recommended that the "sons of Mohamed" (i.e. Ashrafs) "be given a higher social status than the low-born (i.e. Ajlaf). His most significant contribution in the fatwa was his analysis of the castes with respect to Islam. His assertion was that castes would be mandated through state laws or "Zawabi" and would carry precedence over Sharia law whenever they were in conflict. According to Barani, every act which is "contaminated with meanness and based on ignominity, comes elegantly [from the Ajlaf]". Barani also developed an elaborate system of promotion and demotion of Imperial officers ("Wazirs") that was primarily based on their caste.[5][6]

History of research

There are various definitions of the term "caste", and therefore, various opinions on whether this term can be used to denote social stratification among non-Hindu communities. Ghaus Ansari (1960) uses the term "caste" to describe the Muslim social groups with following characteristics:[7]

- endogamy within a given social group

- hierarchical gradation of social groups
- determination of the group membership by birth
- in some cases, association of an occupation with the social group

Beginning in the 19th century, the British scholars of India first catalogued the various Muslim castes:[7]

- Henry Miers Elliot's *Supplement to the glossary of Indian terms* (1844), later amplied into *Memoirs on the history, folk-lore, and distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India*
- John Charles Williams's *The Report on the Census of Oudh* (1869)
- Denzil Ibbetson's Census Report of Punjab (1883), later adapted into *Panjab Castes*
- John Nesfield's *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1885)
- Herbert Hope Risley's *Tribes and castes of Bengal* (1893)
- William Crooke's *The tribes and castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh* (1896)

Nelson's book, in particular, included a whole chapter dedicated to the Muslim castes. In the 20th century British India, a number of works included the Muslim social groups in their descriptions of the Indian castes. These included H. A. Rose's *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911).[8]

In independent India, Ghaus Ansari (1960) initiated academic discussion over the Muslim caste system. Subsequently, Imtiaz Ahmed elaborated the topic in his *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (1973).[9]

Divisions

Ghaus Ansari (1960) named the following four broad categories of Muslim social divisions in India:[10]

- *Ashraf*, who claim foreign-origin descent from Afghans, Arabs, Persians, Turks etc.
  - E.g. Mughal, Pathan, Sayyad, Sheikh
- Converts from upper castes
  - E.g. Muslim Rajputs
- Converts from other "clean" castes
  - E.g. Darzi, Dhobi, Dhuniya, Gaddi, Faqir, Hajjam (Nai), Julaha, Kabaria, Kumhar, Kunjra, Mirasi, Manihar, Teli
- Converts from untouchable castes
  - E.g. Bhangi

The non-Ashrafs are categorized as *Ajlaf*. The untouchable Hindu converts are also categorized as *Arzal* ("degraded").[11][12] They are relegated to menial professions such as scavenging and carrying night soil.[13][14]

In Pakistan, various social groups (called *quom*s) display a social stratification comparable to the Hindu caste system. The various *quom*s differ widely in power, privilege and wealth.[15] Both ethnic affiliation (e.g. Pathan, Sindhi, Baloch, Punjabi, etc.) and membership of specific biraderis or zaat/quoms are additional integral components of social identity.[16] Within the bounds of endogamy defined by the above parameters, close consanguineous unions are preferred due to a congruence of key features of group- and individual-level background factors as well as affinities. McKim Marriott adds that a social stratification that is hierarchical, closed, endogamous and hereditary is widely prevalent, particularly in western parts of Pakistan.[17][18][19]

Discrimination

Over the centuries, like other South Asian societies, the Muslim society in the region has evolved into the concept of caste purity and pollution.[20][21] Hence, the low-class (*Ajlaf*) Muslims in the region have faced other kinds of discrimination. Though religiously, prayer is offered generally in the same mosque, however in the recent years, separate mosques have been enacted by the "untouchable" Muslims against the rest, similar to

what Indian Christians have in South India. In 20th century India, the upper-class (*Ashraf*) Muslims dominated the government jobs and parliamentary representation. As a result, there have been campaigns to include the Muslim untouchable and lower castes among the groups eligible for affirmative action in India under *SC and STs provision act*.[22]

In Bihar state of India, cases have been reported in which the higher caste Muslims have opposed the burials of lower caste Muslims in the same graveyard.[23]

See also

- Caste system in India
- Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz
- Islam in India
- Caste system among Indian Christians
- Social class in the United States

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