

Muslim at the Margin: understanding their changing occupations in Hyderabad

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Abstract

The historical background of Hyderabad city shows the existence of glorious society in past. The hierarchies among Muslims were not based on caste identification but it happens to be on the bases of occupation. Of the various social groups of Muslims in existence in Andhra Pradesh, only Dudekula or Pinjari or Nurbash has been known, identified and referred to since a long time. Two recent accounts of social groups of Muslims of Andhra Pradesh mentioned one in 'People of India' series volume of Anthropological Survey of India on Andhra Pradesh. Saheb, mentions that "the Indian Muslims also have caste-like groups" but he distinguishes them from Hindu caste in that Muslim caste lack an ideological frame comparable to the traditional Hindu varna model. The paper will draw a brief profile of the Muslim scavengers and those engaged in unclean occupation in the district of Hyderabad. This will enable to explore the various aspects of societal intercourse and interaction of this community with the larger society and also social exclusion how the field creates challenges to the fieldworker.

Keywords: *Muslims, Occupation, Hyderabad, Caste, manual scavengers*

Introduction

The historical background of Hyderabad city shows the existence of glorious society in past. The hierarchies among Muslims were not based on caste identification but it happens to be on the bases of occupation. Of the various social groups of Muslims in existence in Andhra Pradesh, only *Dudekula or Pinjari or Nurbash* has been known, identified and referred to since a long time. Two recent accounts of social groups of Muslims of Andhra Pradesh mentioned one in 'People of India' series volume of Anthropological Survey of India on Andhra Pradesh. Saheb, mentions that "the Indian Muslims also have caste-like groups" but he distinguishes them from Hindu caste in that Muslim caste lack an ideological frame comparable to the traditional Hindu *varna* model and does not have the tendency towards rigid elaborateness characterized by institutionalized inequality or hierarchical relations found in the Hindu caste system. According to him, "the Muslim castes are occupationally and culturally different".

The purpose of the paper was to understand and draw a profile of the Muslim scavengers and also those engaged in unclean occupation in the district of Hyderabad. It brings the reader to explore the various aspects of societal intercourse and interaction of this community with the larger society. The very crucial part of the study is to understand the perception of the community on the changing system of caste and their traditional occupation. The growing of the city from traditional to modern and hi-tech has played a pivotal role to make the life of traditional occupational groups better. The study to understand the socio-economic conditions of the Muslim scavengers and those engaged in unclean occupations in the city and brings a different perspectives how they were perceived by the other caste groups in the city and also the kind of social interaction and association found outside the caste and religious boundaries. There is a comprehensive methodology that has helped such community members to narrate their perceptions about health and illness- a closely linked phenomenon to the core of community and occupations. In viewing this narratives, in-depth interview and personal interviews were used.

Introductory Background: The notions and understanding of margin nowadays appears very significant to explore the process of exclusion and inclusion of certain communities across the geo-physical boundaries. The approach to social exclusion focuses attention on new and emerging social problems by highlighting the process that excludes social groups, individuals or region in Europe. India is not an exception but the process of exclusion is entirely different from the European approach towards exclusion. This refers to the point of margin when certainly any social group is excluded and the shift of humanitarian paradigm is witnessed into discriminatory arrangements. The reasons are the socio-cultural and political difference among all different social groups and India is superlative example since time immemorial. To say, the systematic marginalization in the form of caste and gender has been a few of them. It is not left within the Hindu four-fold society but this adds to the tyranny among Indian Muslims which is in principle supposed to be an equalitarian and egalitarian society. But the principles of Islam could not transcend the prevailing caste and occupation based hierarchical division of Indian society. The impact of Hinduism and conversion added the continuity of perception found in earlier community to the other is also profoundly reflected.

If we see, after the Gopal Singh Committee, Sacchar Committee report also reveals the same perennial socio-economic conditions of Muslims in India, though it is the nation having one third of the worlds' Muslims population comprising 13.5 per cent of the total population. The everyday experience of life is much significant to understand the practice of Islam among Muslims in India. However, large number of meaning attached to the Muslims may help to see the reflection of Islamic tradition but definitely they are part of Muslim traditions. The monolith expression of Islam may be accepted at one level but there is space to discuss whether there is any single driven monopolized Islam exists at all¹.

¹ Ibid.

New social order and converted Muslims: The sufficient population in Indian society in the context of conversion during Muslim rule in India has motivated by the aspiration and desire that too realizing some possibility of change in their social status. This could have been possible when the largest land/area was dominated and ruled by Muslims in Indian sub-continent. In fact the process of conversion which began with the advent of Muslim rule in India should be seen in the context of the social and cultural conditions prevailing in the contemporary medieval Indian society. The Islamic message of equality and universal human brotherhood was of immense appeal to those sections of Indian society which were going under the oppressive weight of the caste system².

This would be a matter of social fact that the cultural aspects and features which the converts carried over with them after conversion, played crucial role into blurring the cultural divide between the two sections upper class and the marginal communities. Yoginder Sikand has discussed on the aspects of Muslims who live their everyday life more in the context of rites, rituals, customs and traditions, so called 'little tradition'. Let us believe that numerous beliefs and practices may not be the Islamic way of living life rather borrowed from the earlier religion, in the case of the converted or rightly said by Imtiaz Ahmad that the customs and rituals observed by the Muslim communities at the time of marriage are adaptations of the customs and rituals observed by the Hindus within the region³.

This is an acceptable fact that the caste has been deeply rooted phenomenon of Indian social structure and this has deeply affected the Indian Muslims. This pervasive phenomenon may not be a significant fact affecting the lives of Muslims in Hyderabad. But there is no doubt of accepting the existence of caste and occupation a significant phenomenon among Muslims in Hyderabad in particular and Andhra Pradesh in general. The section of Muslims who carried the work of manual scavenging for long period, historically walked equally with Hindu manual scavengers. Some of them, choose to practice and belief Islam but as a matter of fact could not live the life world with dignity and esteem. Most of them have done or tried to blanket their identity of previous belongingness and shifted to other occupational category.

As we know the Imperial Gazetteer of India (1907) records the division of Muslim communities in India into Ashraf and Ajlaf. Ashraf were considered having foreign extraction and called as Sayyid, Shaikh, Mughal and Pathan. The Ajlaf comprised of those engaged in various lower kind of occupations, as artisans, potters, bangle setters and scavengers. The low caste converts with menial occupations could never get equal status among Muslim social hierarchy; precisely understood the lowest the occupational category, the lowest the social status. Ghaus Ansari clearly argued the existence of social division and categorization that Muslims in India were divided into three broad categories whom he called

² Momin, A R., p 84 in Robinson, Rowena. 2004. Sociology of Religion in India, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

³ Ahmad, Imtiaz. Ed. 1976. Family, kinship, and marriage among Muslims in India. New Delhi: Manohar Book Service.

the *ashraf* (noble born), *ajlaf* (mean and lowly) and the *arjal* (excluded). Each of their categories was further divided into a number of groups for which, following the practice of the decennial censuses, he chose to designate as caste. Imtiaz Ahmed critically appreciates and observes that how this hierarchy was constituted and what was the basis on which the rank order was settled were questions that Ansari could not discuss on account of the limitations of the data he has used⁴.

Popular impression associates Islam in India with Muslim invasions and forcible conversions. But the matter of fact is that initially spread of Islam in the peninsula and also in other parts of the country began with the gradual beginning of traders largely by Arabs and the itinerant Sufis. The first Indian mosque at Kodungallur (today in Thrissur district), Kerala in seventh century shows the arrival of Islamic followers and channel of Arabs opening in Malabar region of Kerala. (Kerala State Gazetteer: 284). The growth of Islam extended into the adjoining Telugu areas of Nellore and Penukonda in Andhra Pradesh and this progress took place in the region before the earliest military foray of a Muslim ruler of the Delhi sultanate into the Deccan.

The motivation for conversion began during the political patronage of Muslim rulers but it is empirically reflected in several studies that a numbers of traditionally disadvantaged and deprived section of Indian society moved to Islam to escape from the miserable and coercive social system. The untouchable and out-castes across the country are the live example of this process. Even Swami Vivekananda (1897) writes, the Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor. It would be height of madness to think that it was all work of sword....was there ever sillier thing before in the world than what I saw in Malabar country? The poor pariah is not allowed to pass through the same street as the high caste man uses there....”

The “Report on Identification of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes in the Muslim Community of Andhra Pradesh and Recommendations”, prepared by P S Krishnan and furnished by the government of Andhra Pradesh in June 2007, shows that most of the converts to Islam were form the Chandal (Bengal ‘Sharal’) and Rajbansi/Koch in Bengal;Thiyya/Ezhavan and Pulaya/Cheruman in Kerala; Mala, Madiga, Adi-Andhra and Arundatiyar in Andhra; Chuhra and Chamar in Punjab (Ahsan, 1960).

Imtiaz Ahmad (2007) mentions that *Arjal* group engaged in the lowly occupation of scavenging, confined their marriages within the group and were excluded into separate residential quarters in the villages as well as the towns in which members of the other categories did not live. But what was found in my research is contrary a different situation; the existences of Muslim scavengers in Hyderabad are not identified and open to others. There is a conscious and continuous effort to shift the social identification from scavenging to other occupational groups.

⁴Ahmed, Imtiaz, ‘Recognition and Entitlement: Muslim castes eligible for inclusion in the category ‘Scheduled Castes’, in Ashfaq Hussain Ansari, 2007, Basic Problems of OBC & Dalit Muslims, New Delhi: Serials Publications.

The dichotomy between the social ideology of Islam and existence of a caste-like stratification in Muslim society in India has been noticed by many scholars, namely, a few are; J. H. Hutton (1946), N. K. Bose (1951), M. N. Srinivas (1968), Louis Dumont (1970), Imtiaz Ahmad (1978), M. K. A. Siqqiqui (1974) and most recently Omar Khalidi. The common features arises out of all these writings noticed the hierarchy, occupational specialization, traditional occupation, endogamy but the doctrinal justification and sanction does not get noticed. The observation and mention about social division among Muslim in the Census Report 1901 is of significant note. Dr. B R Ambedkar notices this census and writes that caste among Musalmans has remained (1990, 1940). Further he points that Bengal census is illustrative and census reports of other provinces show similar facts and he underlines that Muslims society is not free from well-known social evil of Hindu society⁵. I wonder, was this also been one of the reason for Ambedkar to rethink when he appealed Mahars and untouchables to convert to Buddhism!

In brief, what I think that the conversion theory of non Muslims into Islam has several explanations and theories. Whatever the reality, although, yet to be studied. Sufis played remarkable role as multicultural institution in India who sanctified and legitimized folk religious and cultural practices making it possible for intermediate and low castes to be drawn into the Islamic fold. My idea is to link these historical processes on the practice and existence of Muslim scavengers in my study. It is another fact that the lowliest Muslim castes comparable to 'untouchable' castes among Hindus constitute a small fraction of the total Muslim population.

The study of Zarina Ahmad (1961) and Imtiaz Ahmad (1976)⁶ describes this phenomenon in the northern part especially Uttar Pradesh of India but may not be accepted in the pan India phenomenon. The hierarchy based on caste is not as an accepted reality in Hyderabad in terms of differentiating the inequality however this has been a helpful component to understand the Muslim and their occupations in the region.

Mehtar as a community has been studied for People of India by S.S. Sastry. The references cited by him are Thurston, Syed Siraj Ul Hassan;⁴⁸ the Report of Census of India in 1901;⁴⁹ Census of India 1961⁵⁰ and Census of India 1981. The name Mehtar means a prince or a leader or a great man. It is a name given ironically or in compensatory consolation to the community engaged in sweeping and "scavenging". According to Syed Siraj Ul Hassan, those Mehtars are called Lalbegi, who are the followers of the patron-saint Lalbeg, is considered to have been Ghazi Miyan and a saint much worshipped in Punjab among the Lalbegis wherever they are. By faith, Mehtars may be either Muslim or Hindu. This report is concerned with Muslim Mehtars. According to the Census Ethnographic Notes on Mehtar, Mahar, Mang, Mang Garodi, Dhor and Dakkal (Dakkalwar), out of the 533 sweepers and scavengers in the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation in 1966-67, 93 were Muslim by

⁵⁵ Samiuddin and Khanam, 2008, Global Encyclopedia of Indian Muslims, India.

⁶ Ahmad, Imtiaz. Ed., 1976. Family, kinship, and marriage among Muslims in India. New Delhi: Manohar Book Service.

faith. This gives an idea of the proportion of Muslim Mehtar/Lalbegi in this traditional occupational community. In assessing the population of the community, it must be remembered that among Muslims, as among Hindus, all members of an “occupational community” are not engaged in the traditional occupation, and among Hindu as well as Muslim members of communities of “sweepers and scavengers”, actually engaged in the occupation, not all, often not even a majority, are on the rolls of Municipal bodies. Their population was 4,553 in 1981 Census. It is well known that this community is treated as “untouchable” and they are the worst victims of this practice.

But it is really difficult to find out the number of Muslim scavengers in Hyderabad because they never registered themselves in the rolls of municipal corporations and those practicing or practiced don't identify. The repeated trial of accessing the registered scavengers in the rolls of municipal corporations failed due to unavailability and other undefined reasons. For classical example, Dudekula Muslim in Andhra Pradesh have started to forego the old age traditions with Islamic rituals, traditions, customs and manners in the hope of securing a higher social status⁷.

Alienation or exclusion, scavengers and Muslims!

Alienation⁸ is a state in which the environment we create takes on a real solidity, comes to seem unchangeable-when it takes on the sense of what *Lukacs* called a second nature. The system we create acts back on us to form and control us, and it alienates us from our own collective nature as beings who work together to transform our world and ourselves. Marx was concerned with the particular form of alienation brought about by capitalism. My concern is the contemporary form of alienation of Muslim brought due to multi-featured socio-political reasons of Indian social system⁹. Post independence era has unheard the growing voices of Muslims as community rather increased the anxiety and tensions in the mind of Muslims. Exclusion and alienation has bombarded the wishes and optimism of the Muslim community/*Biradari* (I call Muslim as group of *biradaris*).

Ghettoisation also leads to a steep reduction of opportunities for social interaction between members of different communities and, consequently, to the strengthening of insular mentality, because of which the community is not able to properly articulate its views and concerns before the wider public. It also strengthens the hold of conservative religious forces¹⁰.

⁷ Saheb, S A A. Economic and Political Weekly. Samiksha Publications, Vol. 38, No. 46 Nov. 15-21, 2003.

⁸ Craib, Ian..... ‘Classical Social Theory: An introduction to the thought of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel’, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Abraham, Francis and John Henry Morgan, 1985 reprint 2002, ‘Sociological thought’, Delhi: Macmillan.

¹⁰ Ali, Imran and Yoginder Sikand, 2005, Ghettoisation of Muslims in India, www.countercurrents.org

The deprivation of Muslim scavengers is closely linked with the processes of occupation and caste based exclusion, leading to alienation as well¹¹.

Scavengers at the margin: Another interesting fact is that all scavengers are not Scheduled Castes. According to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950 as amended from time to time “*no person who profess a religion different from Hindu, the Sikh or Buddhist religion shall deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Castes*”. A simple instance is, Mosalli mehtars- dalit converts to Islam who were scavengers in Hyderabad before Delhi and Haryana Mehtars came in during Nizams 1855-60. The other best examples are Halalkhor and Lalbegi among Muslims. In these cases, none gets the constitutional benefits due to the socio-cultural changes within and in the communities of manual scavengers.

Demographic and Physical features of the city: I do not have data for the Muslim’s population with caste categorization but the total number of Muslim population ranges at 41.17 per cent of the total population in Hyderabad as per census 2001 figures out of total 15, 76, 583 minority populations. The minorities’ data shows as 2.13 per cent of Christians, 0.29 per cent Sikhs, 0.02 per cent Buddhist, 0.43 per cent Jains, 0.03 per cent others and 0.23 per cent religion not stated.

The Scheduled Castes comprises 8.02 per cent of the district population. There concentration is largely in the slum habitation which is estimated to be 811 slums. In the total slum of the district, almost 71.5 per cent of them belong to Scheduled Castes population and the rest are scattered in the twin cities. In comparison, only 0.90 per cent belongs to Scheduled Tribes population of the total population largely living in slums. We do not have data for Muslims living in slums of Hyderabad. The quick view of literacy has little better status at 68.80 percent out of the total literacy of the state which is 61.11 percent.

The twin cities of the district has two development authorities namely; Hyderabad Urban Development Authority constituted on 2nd October 1975 and the other in August 1981 as Quli Shah Urban Development Authority especially focussing the planned development of the old city of Hyderabad. Apart from this, there are 16 revenue Mandals and two revenue divisions in the Hyderabad district. In the words of Patel¹² (1994, 2006) word, ‘it put my skills as a fieldworker to real test’ that has been found in the field of Hyderabad.

Caste and occupation are entwined concepts and reality of the field. The classical narration of Omar Khalidi¹³ that ‘the Muslim population of towns consisted mainly of artisans, with a floating population of traders’. But significantly the modern states of Andhra Pradesh,

¹¹ Ziyauddin, K. M. ‘Framing Dalits in the context of Social Exclusion-conceptualization in Indian perspectives’ in D Rajasenan, “Inclusion of the Excluded: Dynamics and Challenges”, Kochi: CUSAT, Directorate of Public Relations and Publications,

¹² Patel, Tulsi. 1994, 2006. ‘Fertility Behaviour: population and society in a Rajasthan village’, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.229.

¹³ Khalidi, Omar. 2006. Muslims in Indian Economy. New Delhi: Three Essays. p.10-11.

Karnataka and Maharashtra represent the Deccan region, distinct from both northern India and the deep southern India (ibid p.139).

The most serious concern came in the field and the fieldwork was about the respondents and the notions about the Scavenger's occupations in Hyderabad. It is entirely a very difficult job to explore out the Muslim scavengers who are carrying this occupation. First most of them have shifted to some other occupations which were easily available to the scavenging families. Second, a very few families are still doing scavenging and sweeping work but finding their identity or them as Muslim comes out as a toughest component in doing fieldwork.

Conclusion:

The Muslim scavenging communities in Hyderabad are historically not recorded. In the operation polo era, many poor families who had some kind of employed in the Nizam state shifted to other occupations. Vast majority of Muslim labourers in the city of Hyderabad are semi-skilled and unskilled workers. As Omar Khalid notes, virtually unknown to the Muslim leadership, several thousand Muslims have become *dhobi*, washer men and *Hajjam* (barbers¹⁴) during the transition period of Hyderabad. Some of the respondents shared in the field that it was the poor economic conditions responsible to adopt the occupation of manual scavenging for large number of Muslim scavengers in Hyderabad but this is not the only reason. Muslim rulers also wanted to have scavengers from the Muslim community, this was due to cultural similarities a Muslim workers would have with them. Another school argues that rulers of Hyderabad were not Indian origin and their culture was entirely a different phenomenon to any Indian neither they were Muslims nor Hindus.

The words of Saheb¹⁵ A few Muslim scavenging families were originally Hindu who converted to Islam a few generations ago as we do find among Dudekula. However the process of exclusion is not a day phenomenon rather it is the process which usually happens in the longer period of time. The present initiative in the form of small study tries best to engulf the dearth of research works needed on Muslim scavengers in Hyderabad. Sociologically this study will be an important and crucial breakthrough in the life of the poorer and excluded groups of Hyderabad Muslim at the margin and may be able to raise a few questions in future researches of academia, researchers and the field practitioners.

¹⁴ Khalidi, Omar, 2006. Muslims In Indian Economy. New Delhi: Three Essays. P.56-157.

¹⁵ Saheb, S A A -- 15-11-2003. 'Dudekula Muslims of Andhra Pradesh An Ethnographic Profile' [SPECIAL ARTICLES] Issue : Economic and Political Weekly, VOL 38 No. 46 November 15 - November 21, 2003.

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