

Islam and Muslim Society: From Equality to Inequality

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Abstract

The present account is a modest attempt to examine the issue of egalitarianism which Islam strongly advocates in its ideology that there is neither the concept of pure and impure nor high and low among its followers and also there is no place of inequality based on language speaking, place of origin, occupation, racial affiliation and other ethnic diversities or qualities in humankind. An emphasis has also been given to explore and highlight the forbidden and menace of greatly prevalent inequality among the Muslims who are differentiated in a lot of groups and subgroups along the lines of socio-cultural and ethnicity well-organized in a stratified social order resulting in social stratification among them within the context of the larger Indian society from empirical point of view.

To deal with these, the present paper is based on facts gathered through both secondary sources and primary sources of data gathering.

Introduction

Muslims constitute the community that adheres to the religion of Islam, which stands for coexistence and brotherhood and an egalitarian society. It is a champion of democratic governance. It does not believe in discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or colour. The democratic norms that Islam holds fast are those cherished values that Mahatma Gandhi wished to be adopted in this country. His observations in the Calcutta session of the Indian

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National Congress is still fresh in records and a reminder that Islam not only conforms to a democratic regime, it is a fashioner of democratic governance. Islam presents the example of mutual tolerance for peaceful coexistence in a plural society. The co-existence of minorities with the majority in many parts of the country is a living testimony of the same (Muzammil 2006: 296). There is a great debate in the country about the backwardness of the Muslims in India. Mostly it is theorized that it is their religion which is primarily responsible for this state of affairs. Such theorization, to say the least, is utterly faulty and reflects either the anti-Islamic bias of the theorist or their lack of understanding of social roots of a problem. No religion can be held responsible for backwardness of its followers. This amounts to mixing up religious category with that of social one. Also such a theorization seeks simplistic explanation. Any social phenomenon is a pretty complex one and traced by a sophisticated social theorist has to look into various factors- social, economic, cultural as well as religious. Also, no religious community can be treated by a sophisticated social theorist as a homogenous one. All religious communities are invariably divided in various groups, sects and classes and these groups, sects and classes have specifics of their own. No community can be either entirely backward or forward. If a section is backward another section will be forward. It hardly makes any sense to say that all Muslims in India are backward. A section howsoever small, will be construed as forward. Thus when we say Indian Muslims are backward, we mean a larger section of them compared to the Hindus, the majority community, is backward. And when we say Muslims are backward it should not imply that all Hindus are better off and have made it economically. There are millions of Hindus even from upper castes who are illiterate and poor in addition to those belonging to the scheduled castes, i.e. *dalits*. It is necessary to point this thing out in order to fight the stereotypes widely prevalent both among the Muslims and the Hindus (Engineer 2010: 263-264). Evolution of common national ethos in a situation of plurality, within the boundaries of a state, is a problem of paramount importance. It can be done through efforts to dilute the boundaries to the extent it is possible or making people more tolerant of diversities. Projection of a national goal that accommodates the aspiration of all becomes absolutely necessary. Efforts to obliterate boundaries by force are less desirable than retention of individuality.

Cultural variation and diversity in our country from long past led to the emergence of the virtue of toleration, but the colonial rule utilized this diversity for bringing about conflict and division, and used this division to weaken us to strengthen the empire.

The real meaning of integration should be clear to us. It may mean linking the parts within the whole to build a pattern. It may also mean dissolution of the parts which lose their respective shapes and form a single whole.

The genuineness of assimilations is not in question but the possibility of its counter productivity should also be kept in mind. It has to be thought twice to plan any assimilation programme for a sizable minority. Let there also be no mingling and confusing between nation a political term or assimilation and integration a cultural concept.

If in the functioning of a state a spirit of involvement and a sense of involvement and a sense of participation in administration and economy are created among the diverse segments of its population, the nation is bound to get integrated and remain so (Siddiqui 2011: 70). Although the Muslims in India form a single religious community sharing basic Islamic precepts, they do not form a 'community' in anthropological/sociological terms. They are differentiated into various groups and sub-groups along ethnic, social and cultural lines and are organized in a stratified social order. Only in recent years have various marginalized Muslim groups begun to struggle for empowerment and self-development. The nature of their struggle has created a complex situation under the pluri-cultural set-up of the Indian nation state (Mondal 2003: 4892).

Discussion

The distribution of Muslim population in India today is the result of a process extending over almost a millennium. They have been living for ages as an inseparable part of rural and urban social milieus and bound together by the age-old ties in economy, customs and traditions. Significantly, Muslims in India are neither a cultural community nor a compact ethnic population. They live through layers of identities in a complex society. At some places, they may be seen through a provincial-linguistic/ethnic category as in Ladaakh (Jammu and Kashmir), a tribal-*biradari*/kinship group as in Lakshadweep and through such tribal groups as Gaddi and Bakrewal in Jammu and Kashmir, through a sectarian perspective such as *Sunni*, *Shia Ismaili*, etc., or through various Islamic schools such as Deobandi and Bareilvi.

The socio-cultural/ethnic heterogeneity of Indian Muslims as described above has at least one thing in common and that is social stratification, by and large, on their lines of Hindu society with whom they have been living and interacting for more than a thousand years (Hasnain 2010: 32-33). Social structure of Indian Muslims was largely composed of Turks, Afghan, Persian and Arab immigrants and large numbers of natives who had embraced Islam in different regions and circumstances. Turks, Afghans and Persians came through land

to North India (Hindusthan) as conquerors. They spread over different parts of the country as invading armies marched in different directions and established their suzerainty. Most of them were warriors and administrators. They felt proud to call themselves as *Ahl-e-Saif* (men of Swords) and *Ahl-e-Qalam* (men of pen, administrators). Among them were also writers, poets, *sufis* and *ulema*. They brought with them characteristic features of their societies. Many of them were similar to Indian society. For example, the notion of social hierarchy on the basis of “blood purity” (*Hasb-e Nasb*), patriarchal and patrilineal system of family and inheritance, classes and tribes were all similar to Indian social organizations of family, caste and tribe. While retaining their religious identity, they also evolved, through interaction, indigenous life style and socio-cultural traditions. They had influenced Indian social environment and in turn, got influenced by it. As rulers they had displayed themselves as protector of *Shariah* but never followed it in their administration. They constituted upper strata of Muslim society in Medieval India. During early Medieval period they were called by their different military and administrative designations like *khans*, *maliks*, *amirs* etc while during the reign of Akbar, they came to be known as *mansabdars* (Waheed 2006: 171-172).

Basic Tenets of Islam

Islam means peace. Muslims are the followers of Islam, the second most practiced religion of India. The most sacred text is the *Quran* and Prophet *Muhammad* is considered as the last and greatest prophet in Islamic ideology. Islam prescribes five essential duties commonly known as the five pillars of Islam: belief in *Allah* (the almighty God), prayers five times in a day, giving of alms to the destitute, one month fasting in the month of *Ramzan*, and making a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible (or when one can afford) to the devoted Muslims. Islam advocates for equity and universal brotherhood and strictly opposes and condemns inequality between rich and poor, high and low, superior and inferior, and pure and impure in society. In the Islamic precept there is also no place of discrimination on the ground of language speaking, race, ethnicity, property status and such other criteria in humankind. Domination of one group over other and class or caste conflicts are extraterrestrial to the sphere of Islam (Hossain 2013: 83-84). As a central discipline, Islam is known to have some basic tenets including belief in the unity of God, the finality of the Prophethood of Hazrat Mohammed and belief in after life, which can not be compromised. Many other tenets follow from these three. It is noticeable that soon after the formal acceptance of these basic tenets a change in the pattern of nomenclature, in the choice of food, selection of mate and life cycle rituals, generally takes place and the groups entering into the

fold of the new creed assume a kind of distinct identity. However, the heavy load of traditional cultural heritage, not only relating social structural norms, and the pattern of social organisation, but also the economic life of the new entrants into the fold of Islam, in the context of the regions, continue functioning among them. The ‘prescriptive’ and ‘tabooed’ ranges of the *Shariat* namely ‘preference’ and ‘discouraged’. The adjustments do not take place in all the groups in a uniform pattern. The traditional cultural heritage has remained integrated into the totality of life and had been the only known and meaningful pattern of thought and action, right from the unknown or very remote past. Also a radical change is unlikely to be affected in the absence of any agency to lead them to greater Islamization. But what is specially noteworthy that Islam is tolerant of a large variety of structural norms and social customs and practices and does not demand change in all these unless they are in conflict with its three cardinal principles namely the belief in the unity of God, the finality of Prophethood and in after life. A large body of persisting elements of pre-Islamic culture may not necessarily be deemed to be at variance with Islam or un-Islamic (Siddiqui 2004: vi-vii).

Social Hierarchy and Inequality

Though the Islamic tradition is based upon non-hierarchical world view with monotheistic ideology of one God (Allah), worshiped in one language (Arabic), and its followers abiding the common code of conduct applicable to the peoples of all colours and creed, yet pluralism in Islam has gained impetus. It never remained confined to a region for long and it spread from Arab to various other countries in successive stages.

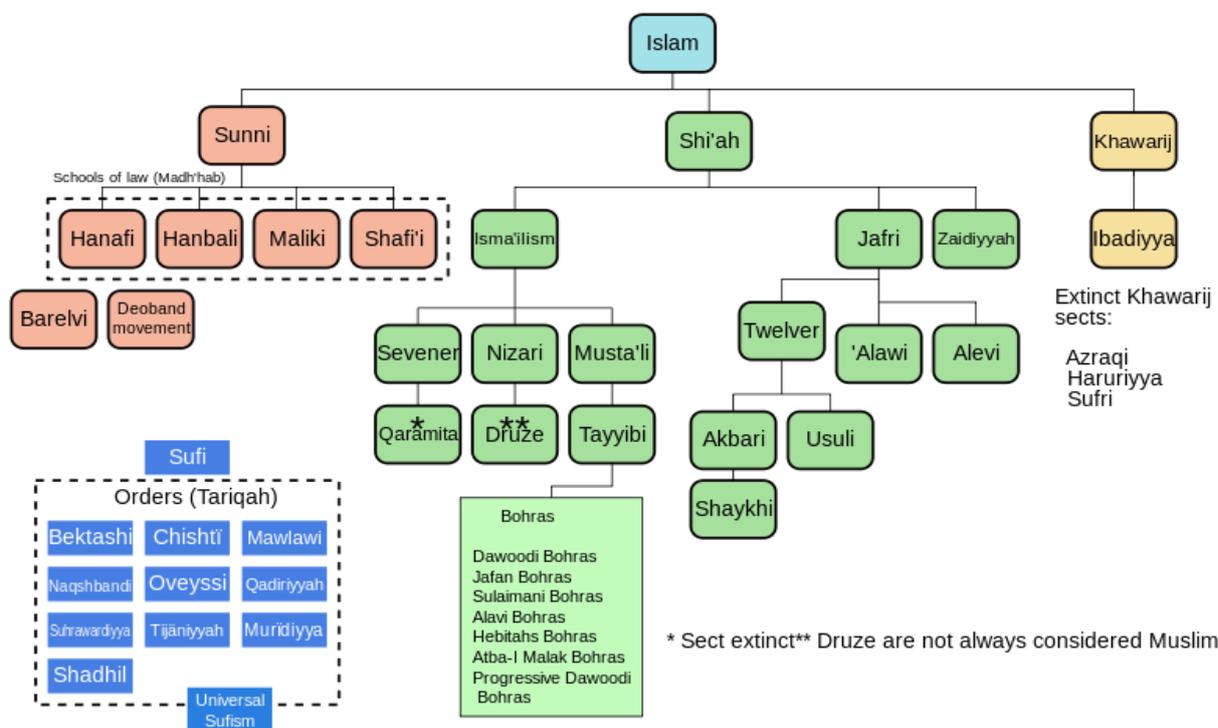
When Islam first reached the various nomadic bands of Arabia, their society had been changed from a kin oriented egalitarianism to religion-oriented egalitarianism. However, the latter did not last for a long time and the structure of democratic egalitarianism was soon transformed into a feudal-authoritarian pattern.

The Islamic conception of democratic form of Government and social equality existed among the various tribal or folk communities of Arabians. The clan organization was the basic of social structure of the Arabian folks. Among them all the members of one clan considered each other belonging to the same blood. This blood relationship provides the basis for a consideration of the whole community.

Though the Islamic egalitarianism suggests the equality of all individuals and groups, yet in pre-Islamic tradition of the Muslims there are rules regarding birth as a basis of individual and group distinction. Owing to this notion the early Muslims classified themselves according to their lineal and social connections with the Prophet, the Caliphs and other

important Muslim personnel. Later, when Islam spread from its original homeland to distant places, some sort of complex group identity emerged among its members which resulted in the system of social stratification in the Muslim society. This system of stratification in various successive stages took various shapes according to the modes of adjustment with the local and regional traditions (Mondal 1994: 47 & 48). The decisive bulk of the Muslims in India have been drawn from the diverse segments of the Indian population. In terms of numerical strength the immigration of the Muslims from outside the country has been insignificant. Among the small number of Muslim migrants, who trickled into this country from time to time, the *sufi* saints or holy men as well as traders were the first. They arrived long before conquerors, and their presence in the country had an impact on the people. Their style of life, their love for oppressed humanity, attracted the masses towards them and their creed. From the distribution of the Muslim population in the country it is evident that people in areas distant from the locus of Muslim power entered into the fold of Islam in significantly larger number. Any significant role of power in drawing the people to the creed can be ruled out, on the basis of this evidence, though in some individual cases power or intensity of contact may not be altogether absent (Siddiqui 2004: iv). Muslims belong to one of two major sects, the *Sunni* and *Shi'a*. Both *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Muslims share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith. The difference between these two main sub-groups within Islam initially stemmed not from spiritual differences, but political ones. Over the centuries, however, these political differences have spawned a number of varying practices and positions, which have come to carry a spiritual significance (Rahaman & Bhuimali 2011: 3-4) (Figure 1).

Figure: 1. Islamic branches, sects, sub-sects, theological schools of thought & laws



Source: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed on 1st April 2013 and available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Islam_branches_and_schools.svg#file

Salience of Caste-Analogues in Muslim Society

The complexity of social organisation among Muslims exhibits the impact of Hinduism in various forms and intensity. The social life of the Muslims presents a dichotomy between the Islamic world view of an egalitarian society and the social hierarchy based on the birth of the individual. However unlike the caste system among the Hindus there is no complete segregation or untouchability among Muslims.

The sections of Indian Muslims, who were converted to Islam from the indigenous population, retained some of their social customs including the caste structure and occupations and this introduces the counter-part of Hindu Caste System into the social structure of Indian Islam.

Table: 1. Social Hierarchy of the Muslim Groups

Rank or Stratum	Status in local society	Name of the Social Groups	Nature of Traditional occupation	Relative Position in Social Hierarchy	Religious Sects
Upper	<i>Borojat or Miya or Mina (Aristocrats)</i>	<i>Sayyed</i>	Landowner Priesthood Religious teaching	Highest	<i>Hanafi</i> <i>Sunni</i>
		<i>Mir</i>	Landowner Priesthood	Comparatively Highest	" "
		<i>Shah Fakir</i>	Religious mendicants	High	" "
		<i>Sharif-Shaik</i>	Landowner Businessmen	High	" "
		<i>Sharif-Pathan</i>	Ruler, Warrior Soldier Landowner	High	" "
Lower	<i>Nichujat or Garosthi</i>	<i>Common Shaik</i>	Cultivators and workers	Intermediate position between High and Low	" "
		<i>Common Pathan</i>	" "	" "	" "
		<i>Bakho</i>	Growers and Vegetable sellers	Low	" "
		<i>Julaha</i>	Weavers	Low	" "
		<i>Dhunia</i>	Cotton Crushers	Low	" "
		<i>Osta or Hajam</i>	Berber (performing circumcision or <i>Khatna</i> rite of the Muslims)	Low	" "

Lowest	<i>Chhotojat</i> or <i>Katua</i> (Degraded)	<i>Dhai</i>	Scavenging	Lowest	"	"
		<i>Fakir</i>	Begging (Professional beggar)	Lowest	"	"

Note: The group *badia* Muslims are considered as different category as they belong to the *Ahel-e Hadith*.

Source: S. R. Mondal, "Social Stratification Among the Muslims of North Bengal" in *Social Stratification, Hierarchy and Ethnicity in North-East India*, eds. R.K. Bhadra and S.R. Mondal, Delhi: Daya Publications, 1991, p. 220.

Religion, Class, Ethnicity and Cultural Diversity

Generally speaking Muslims who belong to the higher caste maintain an attitude of superiority as against the lower ranks. Among themselves they have a fairly free social intermingling although with varying degrees of endogamous customs which differ from place to place and family to family. Some families which give undue importance to purity of blood are far more strict in contracting marriage outside their own caste or perhaps even outside their family circle. Others among the 'Ashraf' ranks, however take wives of the castes next below to their own, but do not as a rule give their own daughters in marriage to them. Despite these customs, the one redeeming factor among Muslim caste as has been mentioned earlier, is that there has never been any social hierarchy among Hindus (Omer 1992: 66 & 67). Sociological studies on the social structure of Muslims in India have emphasized on the presence of descent based social stratification among them. Features of the Hindu caste system, such as hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation have been found to be amply present among the Indian Muslims as well. The Census of India, 1901 listed 133 social groups wholly or partially Muslim. The present day Muslim Society in India is divided into four major groups: (i) the *Ashrafs* who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan, (ii) the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam, (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes, *bhangi* (scavenger), *mehtar* (sweeper), *chamar* (tanner), *Dom* and so on.

These four groups are usually placed into two broad categories, namely, 'ashraf' and 'ajlaf'. The former, meaning noble, includes all Muslims of foreign blood and converts from higher castes. While 'ajlaf' meaning degraded or unholy, embraces the ritually clean

occupational groups and low ranking converts. In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal, *sayyads*, *sheikhs*, *moghuls* and *pathans* constitute the '*ashrafs*'. The '*ajlaf*', are carpenters, artisans, painters, grazers, tanners, milkmen etc. According to the Census of 1901, the *ajlaf* category includes 'the various classes of converts who are known as *nao muslim* in Bihar and *nasya* in North Bengal. It also includes various functional groups such as that of the *jolaha* or weaver, *dhunia* or cotton-carder, *kulu* or oil-presser, *kunjra* or vegetable-seller, *hajjam* or barber, *darzi* or tailor, and the like. The 1901 Census also recorded the presence of a third category called *arzal*: 'It consists of the very lowest castes, such as the *halalkhor*, *lalbegi*, *abdal*, and *bediya* (GOI 2006: 192-193) (Table 1). Muslims, therefore, are not a single homogenous community in India. According to the Anthropological Survey of India, over 350 regional or ethno-linguistic Muslim groups exist in India. A majority of Indian Muslims are Sunni, existing mainly in northern India while, according to one estimate, approximately 10–15 per cent of Indian Muslims are *shias*. There are four major Sunni schools of law – *hanafi*, *hanbali*, *maliki* and *shafi*. *Shias* follow their own codified laws, which differ from Sunni interpretations.

Cultural diversity among Muslims – including attitudes, habits, languages and traditions and a non-uniform diffusion of Islam over the centuries has resulted in a variety of Muslim laws and customary practices within Muslim communities in India. There is a general notion that the Muslim family is influenced by Muslim law or *Shari'a*. This implies that Muslim families and communities are, in some way, uniquely different from non-Muslims. A closer scrutiny, however, does not bear out this assumption.

With reference to law, a woman's right to family property – pro-women legislation from classical Islamic law – is seldom practiced, due to social prejudice and resistance towards the notion of women's property rights. Yet the Hindu practice of dowry – with its extremely negative implications for women – has been adopted by Muslim communities in Bihar, for example; and by *moplah* Muslims in Kerala. Assamese Muslims have incorporated Hindu marriage customs where marriage dates are fixed in consultation with an astrologer or *panjika* and the ritual purificatory bath given to both bride and bridegroom derives from Hindu practice; and the *sakka* community from Uttar Pradesh combines the symbolic fire ritual (a traditionally Hindu custom) with Muslim practices as part of its wedding ceremony.

The wide variety of customary practices indicates that Muslim communities have either discarded strict adherence to the *Shari'a*, or reconciled customary practices with it. By doing so, they have preserved a Muslim identity which is in consonance with and closer to the dominant (i.e. Hindu) culture. Such a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultural practice is a

distinctive feature of Indian composite culture and belies the notion that Muslim communities or Muslim women's status in those communities is defined solely by Islam.

Islam, therefore, in practice is rich and diverse, and more eclectic than its orthodox theological dimensions (Kazi 1999: 04).

Conclusion

The preceding discussion clearly reflects, despite egalitarian teaching of Islam, the fact that owing to divergent origin of the Muslims of India in general and West Bengal Muslims in particular either the descendents of various social groups of ethno-social background of foreign origin or local converts from various social backgrounds or castes and the combination of both, the Muslims of this sub-continent are both horizontally and vertically separated in to diverse ethnic, caste, class, status groups, sects, sub-sects, school of thoughts, linguistic groups and so on. These groups and sub-groups are arranged in a stratified hierarchical order confirming rampant inequality. So far Islamic ideology and Muslim society are concerned, there is a vast lacuna and immense loophole in our information and perception between textual Islam and lived Islam which are not the one or same thing. The reality is that the Islam and Muslims are not monolithic. Moreover the live Islam has a great diversity and heterogeneity. Due to such internal enormous diversity and heterogeneity within the community, their problems are also not similar and are compelled to suffer from diverse socio-economic-political setback.

Unfortunately, in social science discourses as well as in political arenas, it has been a tendency to represent this theoretically monolithic and empirically diversified community as a monolithic, single, homogeneous group. Due to materialization of the outlook of understanding Muslim society from the below, it has been facing a severe challenge in recent times. Again due to lack of sufficient research studies, despite a large number of the studies which mostly advocates towards Islamic theology, ideology, laws, religious reformatory movements, historical perspectives and the like, we do not know much about the socio-political dynamics, social structure, social organization, social problems, subsistence economy, culture, process development, social change, and also the issues of gender studies of this community. Social scientists including social anthropologists and sociologists, scholars, researchers, academicians, administrators, planners, policy makers, social activists etc. have also not paid much attention as it deserves to explore the Muslim community as a whole from an empirical point of view.

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