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A Different Jihad

Dalit Muslims' Challenge to Ashraf Hegemony

This article discusses the issue of caste, in the context of the backward Muslim communities of Bihar elucidated in Ali Anwar's book, and the complete marginalisation of the groups at the bottom of the pecking order. The book, by focusing on the plight of backward and dalit Muslims, has the potential to redefine the very grammar of Muslim politics in favour of a progressive agenda, thus moving away from the now-prevalent reactive politics.

IRFAN AHMAD

(By contrast) lowly, rascal, incompetent, coward, unknown, stingy, lazy, lowborn, *bazaari* people do not have any association with history; neither can its study be their profession... Reading and knowing of it (history) is harmful rather than beneficial to the stingy and lowborn people.

— (Ziauddin Barni¹ 1983:47-48)

The position of the *Julahas* had got thoroughly undermined and this inferior-lowly people (*badzaat*) were most active in the uproar (1857 rebellion).

(Sir Syed Khan 1958:60)

Gentlemen! So long as religious knowledge was with the Sheikhs and other nations (read castes) remained under subjugation, there was no disaster. However, ever since qasaai, naaee, teli, lohaar bisaati, kalaal, julaha etcetera have become mauvi, mudarris, qari, sufi, hafiz, the wave of problems has begun to arrive because Hadis proves that those who would believe in dajjal would verily be *julahas*.²

(Ahmad Usmani quoted in Ansari 2001:30)

Introduction

Aligarh, February 12, 2002. On a pleasantly cold winter evening, otherwise politically hot because of the upcoming UP assembly elections, I walk down to the Muslim-populated Upper Fort neighbourhood of the old town, locally known as Sheher. Preparations are underway for the election meeting of G M Banatwalla, a sitting member of parliament and a prominent leader of the Muslim League. His supporters are enthusiastically erecting the stage adjacent to the Jama Masjid, an imposing, magnificent, medieval mosque. For Muslims of Sheher, the space surrounding the Jama Masjid represents, to invoke Jurgen Habermas, a coffee house (an open one, though) and hence a public sphere in its Indian incarnation. As dusk draws closer and the muezzin calls out for prayer, it gradually turns into a debating plaza where everything is discussed: from light social gossip to serious political issues. Taking me for a journalist, a group of young men walk towards me. I introduce myself. And then discussion takes off, mostly about elections.

The most vocal among the youth remarks, "Muslims are facing the toughest time now and this election would be really decisive." In a tone marked by deep lament, he adds that Muslims in Sheher are not united: 'Musalmanon men iteehad nahi hai; aapas me hi tafarqa hai' (Muslims are not united, they are divided among themselves). There are four Muslim candidates belonging to different castes. And their respective supporters will only vote

for their own caste candidates, no matter whether this leads to the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

"Casteism", he goes on, "has deeply also crept into Muslims. They do not act like a 'millat'. We were united before, but especially after 1990 caste divisions have grown stronger among Muslims. Prior to 1990 we used to fight elections collectively. All Muslims used to vote for one Muslim candidate. But ever since the rise of casteism, we have often lost (except in the last election when a candidate belonging to the qureshi community got elected to the state assembly) and BJP has won instead. They (low-castes) are indeed 'jahil', ignorant".

Denial and Anxiety

The upper castes comprise no more than 8 per cent of the total population. The majority of Muslims in Sheher are qureshis, ansaris, saifis, rangrez, bishtis or alvis. Before 1990, candidates were often from the so-called Ashraf classes and Muslims in general supported them. But after 1990, that is, since what Yogender Yadav has described as the 'second democratic upsurge' [1996:101] inaugurated by Mandal and the ascendance of the other backward classes³ (OBCs), low-caste Muslims started putting up their own candidates and asked the Ashraf to vote for them. In the narrative of the upper castes, it was then that casteism began within Muslims and the imagined millat got severely wounded.

Such an impression, as given to me by my young friend, a Khan by caste and whose father had migrated from an erstwhile princely state to the town some three decades ago, is most common among the Muslims elites.⁴ However, this is not unique to Muslims. Upper caste Hindus too hold the same opinion [Goradia 2001]. As a matter of fact, the classes in power and with privileges have always dismissed resistance to them as a ploy to sow the seeds of disunity, now in the name of nation now in the name of community, both of which are more imagined than real. The dismissal is accomplished by a variety of strategies. I will focus here only on two important strategies.

The first, and also the most effective one, is by denying the very existence of the problem.⁵ A characteristic example in this regard is the response one often encounters from the diasporic Pakistanis in the west. Ask any of them about the presence of castes among Muslims, her immediate and most likely reply is 'no'.⁶ The naïve assumption behind this denial is that Islam does not sanction caste system. And if there is one, it was a Hindu influence that has disappeared after 'Islamic' Pakistan was created.

And those few who accept its presence feel embarrassed to acknowledge it: 'Hindu' feature in 'Islamic nation'. But it is a stunning reality that caste is perhaps more prominent in Pakistan than in India. The birth certificate issued by municipal offices in Punjab has a distinct compulsory column for caste. It is called 'qaum'.⁷ One certificate (issued in Circa 2000) that I examined was issued by the Rawalpindi municipal office, and under the column qaum was written 'Hun Rajput'. The denial by the Indian Ashraf runs almost along the same lines even as its framing is anchored in a markedly different political context.

The second one is by a fervent invoking of the slogan 'unity in danger' or 'conspiracy to divide the qaum/millat'.⁸ Consider the response of a revivalist Muslim organisation to the struggle launched by the All India Muslim OBC Organisation (AIMOBCO). On August 29, 1996 AIMOBCO organised, under the leadership of its convener, Shabbir Ansari, a conference in New Delhi's Maolankar Hall. Its main objective was to build public opinion in favour of extending the existing provision of reservation for other backward classes to their Muslim counterparts. Barely a week after the conference. *Dawat*, the biweekly Urdu organ of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind [JIH], front-paged an alarming story – "Do not Create Further Disunity in Problem-Ridden Millat" [*Dawat* 1996].

As JIH ideology stands, it seeks to fashion a bounded, unified, homogenous Muslim *Qaum* regardless of all its glaring social differentiations based on caste, language, ethnicity, region, gender and class⁹. No wonder, it first rejects the very existence of castes among Muslims. However, in the same paragraph it makes a paradoxical statement (and paradox is inherent in the ideology of such movements) that admits the presence of caste among Muslims. But this is immediately dismissed saying that "now such things (caste divisions among Muslims) are fading away". Referring to the specific demand raised in the seminar, *Dawat* sees it with absolute suspicion and as a design of some sort to divide Muslims:

Therefore to link issue of reservation to caste is akin to permanently dividing the Muslim society along the caste lines [Souvenir of AIMOBCO, undated: 11]

It concludes:

There is no gain in further dividing the Muslims who are already ridden with problems [ibid:11].

It would not be out of place here to mention that even as in JIH's grand ideology there is no recognition of caste, sentiments, solidarities and marital alliances based on caste do exist in practice within its own organisation and members. It is rarely visible and articulated in public, though. The last page of *Dawat* carries matrimonials. Most of them clearly mention the caste of the bride/groom. During my fieldwork, one of its members narrated to me in anguish how the marriage alliance for his sister was repeatedly turned down once it came to be known that he was an ansari, a julaha. This was despite the fact that he was economically well-placed. Those who declined the marriage proposal (on the singular basis of caste) also included members of the JIH (field notes).

Cast in this wider context, Anwar's (2001) book *Masawat ki Jang* ('Battle for Equality') is a remarkable piece of work. It brings into sharp focus the dark-lived experiences that may shame the upholders of vacuous scriptural equality. Consisting of eight thematic chapters, the book is about the backward Muslim communities of Bihar. In the first chapter – 'Bahas', discussion

– the author makes a strong case for constitutional recognition of the reservation of non-ashraf, dalit Muslims by countering two popular arguments put forward by the ashraf. First, it persuasively contends that caste among Muslims has arisen not because of government policies of independent India; rather it has been there for centuries. Second, it sees with suspicion the demand for reservation for Muslims as a whole. According to the author, the idea of 'total Muslim reservation', as advocated by the likes of Syed Shahabuddin, is both unconstitutional and impossible. Moreover, it will strengthen the forces of Hindutva. Given this, he wonders if the demand for total Muslim reservation is not a conspiracy to deny what the backward and dalit Muslims indeed deserve.

The next chapter – 'Haqeeqat', reality – presents existing conditions and hardships faced by low-caste Muslim communities such as julaha (weavers), halalkhor, lalbegi (scavenger), bhatia, gorkan (grave diggers), bakkho, mirshikar, chik (butcher), rangrez, darzi and nat. He shows how these castes are discriminated against and frowned upon in everyday life by the ashraf. Such discrimination persists in mosques and even after one's death. The detailed description of the plight of pamarias in a pathan-dominated village of Bhojpur district is heart-rending. Islam's slogan for equality notwithstanding, pamarias are not allowed to bury their dead in the pathans graveyard. Methodologically, this chapter is quite rich. It uses popular proverbs and stereotypes about the so-called low-born Muslims and dissects them with dazzling clarity.

In the following chapter – the longest of all – there is a comprehensive history of Islam as an ideal and Islam as a lived reality. The author says that though Islam does not recognise hierarchy and differentiation based on birth, in practice it has existed among Muslims, both in India and also in Arab lands. Muslim 'ulema' and scholars have particularly legitimised this hierarchy all throughout history. Among the former, he discusses the writings of Ashraf Ali Thanvi and Maulana Ahmad Raza Khan Brelvi (Chapter Four) and in the latter Ziauddin Barni, the medieval historian. Ali thinks that Barni was almost like 'Muselman's Manu'. The author makes a sweeping jump from the medieval to the modern era and discusses how British rule badly affected the dis-privileged sections of society – weavers, ansaris – especially. It was during this period – the first two decades of the 20th century, to be precise – that the Momin movement was born. It is not well known that this movement never supported the Muslim League. Indeed, its leaders such as Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, always opposed and debunked Jinnah's two-nation theory. The author draws our attention to a striking fact: both the Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League opposed the enumeration of caste in the census arguing that it would weaken the 'community'.

The fourth chapter – 'Virasat', heritage – deals with the ways in which Muslim religious fora and government institutions meant for Muslims in Bihar have been monopolised by the Ashraf. The fora and institutions discussed in the chapter include Imrarat-e-Sharia, Phulwari Sharif, Idar-e-Sharia, Patna, All India Milli Council, All India Muslim Personal Board, Urdu Academy, Suuni Waqf Board, Minorities Commission, Madarsa Board, and Urdu Advisory Council. In support of his argument the author furnishes meticulously gathered secondary data that vividly depict the absolute marginalisation of the groups at the bottom.

Titled as 'Pyar Nikah par Zaat ki Pahredaari' (Caste Surveillance on Love Marriage), Chapter five is most interesting. It

presents one case of unsuccessful and four cases of successful inter-caste love marriage. Through these stories, Ali Anwar intends to show how deeply entrenched is the caste feeling among the Muslims of Bihar, particularly among the traditional elites. He notes with a sense of irony that we all listen to the immortal love stories of Sheerin-Farhad, Laila-Majnu and none of us perhaps ask which caste they belonged to. In Bihar, however, we do when it comes to inter-caste marriage.

From the open streets of love Anwar jumps to the closed corridors of power in the next chapter – 'Seyasat', politics. The crux of this chapter is how and why backward Muslims have been deliberately kept out of legislative assembly and government services, IAS and IPS, and upper-caste Muslims promoted in their place. This is tragic because most upper caste Muslims in pre-independent India sided with the Muslim League and its two-nation theory. The backward Muslims, under the leadership of the Momin conference and Abdul Qaiyum, by contrast, firmly stood for a united India. This historical fact apart, the Indian National Congress in the post-1947 phase promoted erstwhile Muslim League leaders at the expense of those who lent rock solid support to the Congress. As a result, backward Muslims never got their due, politically as well as economically, even though they numerically form 80 per cent of the total Muslim population. This situation has continued, says the author, even during the regime of Laloo Prasad Yadav, the messiah of the backward in Bihar. Anwar sharply criticises him for his refusal to support the cause of Muslim backward castes in the same way as he does for their counterparts among Hindus. He, however, notes with a sense of satisfaction that the scenario is now changing and there is a great social churning within Muslim society with the solid assertion of the backward Muslims. And this augurs well for the next century.

The penultimate chapter – 'Shakhsiat', personality – is devoted to the political-social biographies of four members of the ansari-dhuniya communities whom author describes as "source of inspiration" (p 205) – Maulana Ateequr Rahaman Arvi, Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, Battakh Mian and Bismillah Khan. Ateequr Rahman was an 'alim' by training and profession but he was an open critic of the Muslim League. Because he believed that Hindus and Muslims were one and that god did not differentiate between them, the Muslim League disgustingly called him a 'Domwa Maulana' (p 208). Abdul Qaiyum Ansari was the architect of the Momin conference in Bihar. Battakh Mian, the least known among the four, was the man who refused to poison Gandhi in Champaran despite the offer of wealth by the British. Bismillah Khan, as we know, is a living Bharat Ratna shahnai player. It is not known that he was born into a poor backward family of the present-day Baksar district.¹⁰

Debating the Issue

I can hardly disagree with what the author has said so far. Undoubtedly this is a splendid book in social criticism and each of us, certainly the students of sociology, should read it. It makes the unseen glaringly visible; and the unconscious conscious. It lifts the veil off the dark realities we seek to conceal. That said, the book is also about several silences. I will discuss here only three of them.

First, endogamy, the most agreed upon element of caste stratification among Muslims! It is not sufficient to say, and this is what the author does in several places, that ashraf do not marry

their daughters off to sons of ajlaf. It is equally true that one caste among ashraf generally does not have a marital alliance with another caste even if it is ashraf. Likewise, a lower caste such as dhuniya will rarely marry his son or daughter to a person belonging to the lalbegi or nat caste. The point I wish to make is that there is not one continuous, singular hierarchy that defines castes among Muslims. Rather, hierarchy is multiple and each caste is a discrete category. Put differently, the ashraf-ajlaf dichotomous approach to understanding social stratification among Muslims, though it is useful, is also extremely restricted in unravelling many nuances. This approach privileges the ashraf view of the caste system and fails to account for the view from the bottom.¹¹

While interviewing low caste Muslims in Delhi for a Delhi government project to assess if they should be included among the OBCs,¹² most of them narrated their respective stories of the fall from grace. Invariably, each of the lower castes that we interviewed said that long ago they were indeed Shaikh and enjoyed considerable economic prosperity. Gradually their status began to dwindle. The chicanery by the so-called ashraf accentuated the decline. And thus over a period they became what they are today. For example, a leader of the ansaris in Salempur area said their lineage went back to Aiyub, who welcomed prophet Muhammad in Madina, and thus they were in no way inferior to the ashraf who called themselves Siddiqi or Faruqi. Be it noted that prophet Muhammad called Aiyub¹³ and others who supported him in Madina as ansar and hence the caste title Ansari. Similarly, a leader of the qureshis said their ancestry went directly back to the tribe of prophet Muhammad and therefore they were in no way inferior to the so-called 'sharif zaat'.

From the foregoing, it is more than evident that if we look at the caste system from the perspective of the non-ashraf, we notice that each caste has its own sense of being proud and superior. Further, it is quite misleading to say that the so-called ashraf always serves as the point of reference for all non-ashraf castes. On the contrary, each caste has its own sense of pride and differentiates itself from other castes without necessarily considering it either inferior or superior. This seems to be working mostly at the middle levels. When it comes to a relation between two or more levels, one notices an extremely powerful notion among each caste that there is at least one caste below and inferior to it. Of many other reasons, this is perhaps the most important one why endogamy persists even today. Otherwise, how can we explain the opposition to marriage between a pathan boy and a shaikh girl, as cited by the author himself (p 163), even though both of them are ashraf? What is also strikingly absent from the author's otherwise brilliant account is the mention of even a single story of conflict over marriage, for instance, between an ansari boy and a dafali or lalbegi girl. I assume there are possibly several stories of this nature in a patriarchal, feudal society like Bihar.

Second, Anwar does not give any significant weight to the political economy of caste. On page 31 he says, "...Where caste is decided on the basis of one's birth, change in economic position does not alter the caste status." While making this argument, I think, Anwar unconsciously falls in the very ashraf trap that he seeks to overcome. The birth thesis is what ashraf would always employ not to recognise the changed status of the ajlaf as it so glaringly defies the belief (unexamined as always it is) of the former. This is exactly the way racists in the US sought to muffle the egalitarian voices of the blacks – a person born black remains

- 11 This argument is modelled on that of Gupta (1993, 2001) as outlined in the case of the caste system among Hindus. My debt to him is thus obvious.
- 12 This project was undertaken under the directorship of J S Gandhi of JNU during 1998-1999. The fieldwork in Muslim-dominated areas was carried out for 2 weeks and I worked as a member of the team.
- 13 To escape the pinching stigma, fashioned and perpetuated by the self-proclaimed superior ashraf, many people from ansari caste have recently begun to delete 'ansari' from their names and have instead added 'Aiyubi' as suffix. It should be recalled that the title 'Aiyubi' is derived from Aiyub Ansari who welcomed prophet Muhammad in Medina. Field note.
- 14 Howard Becker discusses the issue of race in a different context. The reason why I invoke him here is that the underlying nature of arguments appears to be almost similar in both contexts.
- 15 In conversation with Abdul Waheed, March 18, 2001, Aligarh.
- 16 Ahmad (1973) touches upon this aspect. An in-depth study is still wanting, however.
- 17 Stating the objective of his book, Dirks writes that he hopes to "weave an argument far more complicated than that the British invented caste, though in one sense this is precisely what happened" (2001:9).
- 18 Ghurye's explanation is worth noting here. He observes: It is difficult to see any valid public reason for this elaborate treatment of caste in the census reports...The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the census...The total result has been, as we have seen, a *living-up of caste spirit* (1932:158, italics mine).
- 19 There seems to be an unhindered continuity between the position of the then Mahasabha and that of the present RSS parivar. Both RSS and BJP simply deny caste identity. See Kanungo (2001:140-48) and Jafferlot (2000).
- 20 It is surprising that Dirks does not deal with caste among Muslims. One must acknowledge, however, that Dirks' book is immensely thought provoking. It is ruthlessly brilliant in establishing the intimate relations between technologies of knowledge production and colonial power. So is its powerful critique of the Cambridge school.
- 21 Anwar does not exactly use the term Jihad. To plead precisely this case, Ejaz Ali, convener of the all-India Muslim Backward Morcha that has the same cause as Anwar's, however, calls for a jihad. See his pamphlet Jihad (undated).

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