

POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: MUSLIM NAT COMMUNITY IN BIHAR

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Abstract - This paper deals with understanding the conditions of Muslim Nat community with respect to their poverty, inequality and social exclusion in Paschim Champaran, Bihar. The methodology will be participant observation and interview schedule. Nat, a nomadic community is primarily involved in singing, rope dancing and juggling. H. H. Risley and R. V. Russell demonstrate that this marginalised community has multiculturalism as an important aspect of their society. The conditions of Marginalised sections in the wake of Globalisation have been discussed in detail in recent years by Dr Davindera, Manjur Ali, R. C. Swarankar, Ali Anwar and Linda E Lucas. However, these scholars have not taken into account the condition of their marginalisation, education and health belonging to Nat community in contemporary times. This paper brings into discussion the aspects of their deprivation of basic amenities, inequality and social exclusion which leads the foundation of their backwardness in the contemporary society. Historically, they are acrobat. They were traditionally patronized by the Rajput rulers. Nats were especially invited at the time of new born baby, marriage and on special occasions by the Jagirdars. After a passage of time and due to some factors, these skills have not been seen relevant to the contemporary society. This community have slowly shifted from being mere entertainers and now acts as labourer, rickshaw puller, contractual animal husbandry and agricultural labourers. They are illiterate and no facility for health care. Poverty makes them alienated from main stream society. Now, they are socially excluded and compelled to live in the subsistence way of life in Bihar. The enrolment ratio of Muslim Nat children is worst in schools and Madrasa in Paschim Champaran. The miserable socio-economic conditions faced by the Muslim Nat community on the one hand and the religious and socio-cultural fabric of the Muslim upper caste people do not want to see them empowered community.

Keywords - Muslim Nat Community, Poverty, Inequality, Exclusion, Mechanical Solidarity

Marginalized sections of society experience religion in a different and multiple way as compared to the centre-stage sections of that very society, where latter also conceptualize religious experience for the marginalized through a separate, discriminatory and alienated context. Indian society being multi-religious¹ and multi-cultural presents this diversity especially through the traditional conduct towards the various tribes and castes.

Various scholars have studied religion and existence of excluded social groups and debated over the notion of caste among Muslims.² Many studies of caste among Muslims argue for its Indian roots and its similarity to Hindu caste. Luis Dumont (1980:210) finds that caste among Muslims is “weakened or incomplete, but not lacking altogether.” Imtiyaz Ahmad (1978a:12) similarly asserts that caste exists among Muslims as a basis of social relations, but its form has been greatly weakened and modified. It differs from the Hindu caste model in certain details: for example, Muslim caste is not as elaborated; there is no sense of purity and pollution; occupational specialization is not as well developed; and restrictions on who can and cannot exchange food are not as well developed. Further, any Muslim, without restriction, may enter mosques (Hindus, in contrast,

still in many places do not allow Dalits entry into temples), and among Muslims there is no ritually pure caste such as the Brahmins. Others argue that caste among Muslims may be derived from Central and Western Asian influences. While not called caste, the existence of hierarchical, endogamous status groups among Muslims across the Middle East is common (e.g., Lindholm, 1986).

Issues relating to Dalits, Adivasis and Nat have acquired centre stage in contemporary political, socio-cultural and religious scenario. Multiple factors have contributed in contemplating issues relating to identity, culture, religion, language and region. Nat community offers an interesting study area as this community acquires various identities in different regions of North India like Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Uttrakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, based on religion, culture and traditions. They are scattered in various areas of North India. A few are also found in the terai region of Nepal. It has been said that Muslim Nats were converted from Hindu Nat community. They are considered semi-nomadic community and have no permanent settlement in a particular region. They are traditionally associated with rope dancing, juggling and begging.

Muslim Nat of Nat Mohallah, Sathi, Paschim Champaran, Bihar, who live at subsistence level constitute marginalized Muslims of the region dwelling on the outskirts of Semri village. They live in a secluded corner of Sathi. Muslims in India are heterogeneous rather than monolithic homogenous

¹ Eight major religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism, and many sects.

² Ali, Syad (2002). Collective and Elective Ethnicity: Caste Among Urban Muslims in India. *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 2002. pp.593-620.

community with multiple sects and denominations. It is asserted that three caste/class blocks—namely, ashraf (elite upper-caste), ajlaf (middle caste or shudra) and arzal (lowest castes or dalit)—exist among the Indian Muslims.³ The norms for identifying Indian socio-cultural institutions get defined by the vast variation across regions and time period. Variations are common to all communities and institutions. Thus caste itself being dynamic varies enormously. The prevalence of social disability links economic or social status to caste identity and its multidimensionality which is causal and not correlative amongst various religions in India. Tangled inter connectedness exists within pure caste identity poverty, illiteracy, backwardness, caste inequality, discrimination or prejudice educational, economic, occupational besides differential access to community resources and so on. Thus, there is considerable regional variation but social segregation and economic discrimination get aligned with the caste hierarchy based on the relative importance of different aspects and features of caste in different communities and regions.

Justice B Sudershan Reddy in *T Muralidhar Rao vs State of Andhra Pradesh* (2010), wrote that: “Non-Hindu religions like Islam, Christianity and Sikh do not recognise caste as such, but the existence of caste-like social stratification among the Muslims is well-recognised that in spite of egalitarian philosophy of Islam, which opposes all kinds of discriminations, almost all types of caste groups have emerged in the Muslims. The Muslims have developed different caste-groups at different places, but they call themselves as Jamat or Biradari and do not use the term Jat or caste e.g. Nadaf or Mansoori Jamat or Biradari, but in actual practice, they possess practically all the traits of caste structure such as endogamy, stratification, occupational, monopoly, dress-code and their own different Mosques.”⁴

The population of Muslims are about 15 per cent in India which is equal to the population of scheduled caste.⁵ According to Sachar committee report 2007, the conditions of Indian Muslims and Dalits are similar but in some condition Muslims are worse than Scheduled caste. The practice of untouchability has been observed, which Islam condemns. This is not the spirit of Islam but replaced with rituals of Islam. Ejaz Ali has criticized the upper caste Muslims, who look down upon lower caste Muslims as inherently inferior because of conversion into Islam from lower caste of Hinduism.

³ Ali, Anwar (2001). *Masawat Ki Jang (The Struggle for Equality)*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan. p. 16.

⁴ For details see, Andhra High Court, Justice B Sudershan Reddy in *T Muralidhar Rao vs State of Andhra Pradesh* (2010). <http://www.scconline.com/DocumentLink/2As26tMj>

⁵ Ali, Manjur 2010. *Politics of Pasmanda Muslim: A case study of Bihar. History and Sociology of South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE. p.136.

Indian Muslims do not form a monolithic community and follow the notion of biradari, and classify the society into stratification. Even there is problem in 'Dalit' Muslim that they do not have unity among them and they are also divided on the basis of biradari, caste, sectarian, linguistic, ethnic and other differences in Indian society as it is present in Hindu so called upper castes. However, Islam has fascinated the entire world on the basis of monotheism, brotherhood and social justice, which try to lay the foundation of egalitarian society, but in Indian society, it has been observed discrimination on the basis of castes among Muslims and many Muslims do not want to acknowledge these problematic divisions. Upper caste Muslims consider themselves as descendants of the ruling class of the past, and hence they do not want to see unity with 'Dalit' Muslim in their own interests. Although the Holy Quran and Hadith give message to radical equality to all Muslims but caste system like Zat, Jati, Biradari became an important characteristic of Indian Muslim society with regional variations.

The arduous journey of the Nats from being a 'Nat' to a 'Nat Muslim' and then to a 'Dalit' and 'Pasmanda Muslim' tells a tale of shifting identities and a changing lived tradition of the Nat community. The marginalized aspect, however, remained a constant feature of this community, cutting across all their identities whether religious, cultural, social, racial, gender etc. Another important feature of this journey is the discriminatory attitude of the upper echelons of society (irrespective of what religion they belonged) towards the Nat community. Moreover, this discrimination, instead of just being derogatory in nature, was actually a tool for social exploitation for multiple benefits. Thus, the marginalized Nats may very well be situated outside the village, but were never indispensable. This is important in understanding the journey of these Muslim Nats and their future trajectory in contemporary times.

CONCLUSION

The Nat community is considered one of the oldest nomadic communities of India. Muslim Nat community is seen as marginalized, socially excluded and compelled to lead a hand to mouth existence in Sathi, Paschim Champaran, Bihar. Economist Amartya Sen defines social exclusion as every kind of possibility contributing to making of deprivation and poverty. Muslim Nat community of this village is facing acute poverty, inequality and economically backward. They do not have enough resources to get the basic facilities like health facilities, education, water supply, electricity etc. The literacy rate is very low among them. They are aware of the benefits of providing education to their children. But, their economic conditions do not allow them to think about

education. Due to poverty, their parents are forced to drive away their children from reading, writing and passing their examinations and their children find the easy work, which can be helpful to get food. The lack of education ultimately creates poverty, inequality and unrefined socialization, which leads social exclusion from main stream society. Dr. Davindera has analysed that the incidence of child labour is very much high among this community. The increasing cost of day-to-day and low level of income from their traditional professions have compelled the Nats and Natanis (Nat Women) to take up agriculture labour, contract animal husbandry, paid domestic work in houses of the financially better. Unfortunately, Nats and Natanis can be found begging in other villages, on roads and religious places. It is difficult to say that the local government and the government of Bihar have done anything concrete to render proper basic infrastructure, socialization and uplifting from poor conditions.

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