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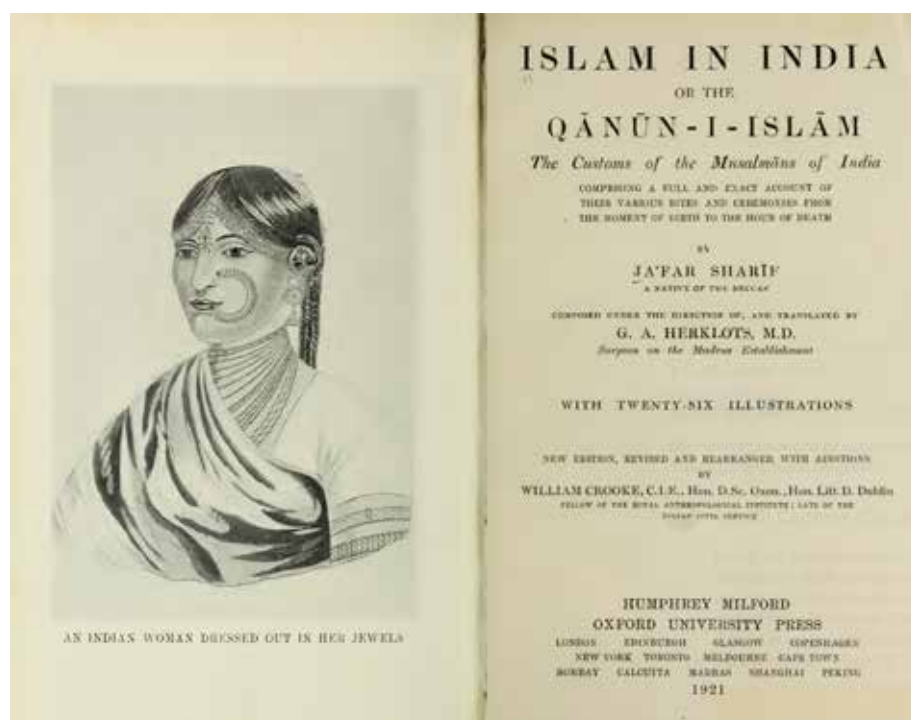


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DEBATES ON MUSLIM CASTE IN NORTH INDIA AND PAKISTAN: FROM COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHY TO *PASMANDA* MOBILIZATION

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Debates on Muslim Caste in North India and Pakistan: from colonial ethnography to *pasmanda* mobilization

Julien Levesque*

Abstract: From colonial census administrators to social scientists, scholars have debated whether Muslims in the subcontinent can be said to have castes. In recent decades, the discussion also entered the political arena over the issue of reservations in India. In order to offer an overview of the debates concerning caste among Muslims, mainly in North India and Pakistan, this article first shows that colonial scholars and administrators tended to understand the phenomenon as the product of a history of conquest and miscegenation. I then turn to socio-anthropological debates of the second half of the twentieth century that opposed scholars on whether a caste system existed among Muslims. Finally, I explore how new legal conceptions of caste among Indian Muslims became a stepping stone for political mobilization from the 1990s.

Keywords: caste, social stratification, Islam, South Asia, India, Pakistan

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From a textualist point of view, Muslims, in the South Asian subcontinent or elsewhere, can hardly be said to have castes. Islam as a set of beliefs and religious practices based on the foundational Quranic text and the subsequent Islamic tradition (*hadith, sunna, fiqh*) excludes the possibility of a caste-based social order, which can then only appear as an unorthodox deviation from the Islamic ideal of equality among believers. Proponents of this view thus describe caste among Muslims as the result of an “acculturation” through which a supposedly pure Islam—champion of an egalitarian ideal—adapted to local cultural contexts as it spread across the world (G. Ansari 1960). However, social scientists have criticized such a dichotomous view that pins a pure Islam against multiple local deviations. Relying on empirical observation, they have argued against making hierarchical judgements between the many ways of being Muslim, differentiated by language, cultural habits, sects, beliefs, religious practices, and social stratification. To reconcile the contradiction stemming from the identification of multiple practices as Islam by the practitioners themselves, one position has been to “adapt the Orientalist distinction between orthodox and nonorthodox Islam to the categories of Great and Little Traditions” (Asad 1996, 6). This implied that anthropologists should refrain from judging what is Islamic from what is not. In other words, “anyone who tried to look for any hierarchy or truth-value in various Islams was trading in theology” (Anjum 2007, 657). In order to reject both “the idea of an integrated social totality in which social structure and religious ideology interact [as well as the idea that] anything Muslims believe or do can be regarded by the anthropologist as part of Islam”, Talal Asad proposes to conceptualize Islam as a “discursive tradition” (Asad 1996, 14). According to Ovamir Anjum, “Paying attention to a discursive tradition is not to essentialize certain practices or symbols as being more authentic but to recognize that the authenticity or orthodoxy of these has to be argued for from within the tradition and embraced or rejected according to its own criteria” (Anjum 2007, 662).¹ The question for scholars becomes, then, not whether caste exists in South Asian Muslim societies, but how Muslims in the subcontinent engage with caste practices and discourses. To use Talal Asad’s formulation, how are Muslims inducted

¹ Talal Asad suggested in his work that assuming the existence (or the non-existence) of “Islam” as an object of study for anthropologists relied on problematic premises. Adopting a Foucauldian and a postcolonial stance, Asad highlighted that the anthropological study of Islam reproduced Orientalist tropes and thus discursively maintained a power imbalance both between the Muslim World and the West, and within Muslims. In order for anthropologists and social scientists not to endorse particular readings of Islam in their conceptualization of their object of study, Asad proposed the notion of “discursive tradition”, which he defined as a concept that “connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges” (Asad 1996, 7). After September 11, 2001, Talal Asad turned to the critical study of secularism, in an attitude that David Scott and Charles Hirschkind described as “systematically throwing doubt on Enlightenment reason’s pretensions to the truth about the reasons of non-European traditions” (Scott and Hirschkind 2006, 1).

into caste practices and discourses *as* Muslims? Can caste practices be argued from within the discursive tradition of Islam?

Caste is also the object of conflicting definitions. The term encompasses two indigenous notions: *varna*, that designates the four broad Hindu caste-families (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra), and *jati*, or the caste that is part of one's lived experience and to which are attached a number of prescriptions and prohibitions regarding social behaviour and intercourse (endogamy, commensality, occupation). Muslims themselves generally use the terms *zat* and *biradari* in the northern parts of the subcontinent (Alavi 1972), which are somewhat comparable with the notion of *jati*. Moreover, as we will see in greater detail below, scholars have identified three broad categories—*ashraf*, *ajlaf*, *arzal*—that are evocative of *varna*. Other terms may be employed by Muslims across the subcontinent, such as *qaum*, *sampraday*, *samuday*, or the English word “community”. Social scientists are divided between those who see caste as a cultural phenomenon restricted to the Indian (Hindu) sphere, and those who define caste as a conceptual tool for socio-anthropologists to describe a similar structural phenomenon in various parts of the world. The first tend to conceive of caste holistically as a system, while the latter see it interactionally as a set of practices.

From colonial census administrators to social scientists, proponents of these two positions have debated whether Muslims in the subcontinent can be said to have castes. More recently, the discussion also entered the political arena over the issue of reservations in India. In order to offer an overview of the debates concerning caste among Muslims, mainly in North India and Pakistan,² I first show that colonial scholars and administrators tended to understand the phenomenon as the product of a history of conquest and miscegenation. I then turn to socio-anthropological debates of the second half of the twentieth century that opposed scholars on whether a caste *system* existed among Muslims. Finally, I explore how new legal conceptions

² While there are commonalities across South Asia, such as the valorization of Arab descent, there are important variations that distinguish the dynamics of social stratification among Muslims according to socio-cultural and linguistic environments. These differences notably include the predominance of the Shafi school in parts of South India (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, but also Konkan Coast), to be contrasted with the adherence of North Indian Muslims (and in places in South India with a strong historical connection to North Indian Muslim rule, such as Hyderabad and Aurangabad) to the Hanafi school of law (*fiqh*). As a result, the major theological debates of North India, and notably the Barelvi-Deobandi dispute, did not take place in a similar way in South India. Local categories of social stratification also differ from North India, as they do in other parts of the subcontinent. The North Indian pattern, however, is sometimes approached unproblematically as valid for the whole of South Asia. Moreover, North Indian Muslims tend to dominate the political and religious arenas and are accused by Southerners of believing that they incarnate the standard of South Asian Islam. In order not to reproduce this bias, the discussion in this article remains largely limited to North Indian dynamics, although I make occasional reference to empirical studies on South India, Bengal, or the Maldives. A cross-regional comparative study of variations in social stratification among Muslims in the subcontinent would be a great addition to our understanding of the phenomenon.

of caste among Indian Muslims became a stepping stone for political mobilization from the 1990s.

Conquest and miscegenation: Muslim caste in colonial knowledge production

Among historians, much of the debate on caste has centred on the extent to which colonialism shaped what we now know as caste. Contrary to some colonial writings that lauded the British presence in India for curtailing the oppressive role of caste, recent historiography has highlighted the deep impact of colonization in the transformation of social categories. Scholars of the postcolonial and the Subaltern schools consider the colonial enterprise of Orientalist knowledge production and the subsequent use of caste as an official administrative category responsible for what we now know of as caste (Dirks 2001). Other accounts—historians of the “Cambridge school” in particular—see the advent of colonialism not so much as a sharp rupture than as a process, and consequently throw light on developments at work before the colonial period (Bayly 2001). However, as noted by Margrit Pernau, historians have not specifically examined the ways in which colonialism transformed social stratification among non-Hindus (Pernau 2013, 62).

In the first half of the 19th nineteenth century, British knowledge of social distinctions among Indian Muslims relied on the “uncoordinated efforts of [...] regional datagatherers” (Bayly 2001, 103). Locally prominent figures composed reports or volumes, often on the request of colonial administrators. Consequently, such accounts of South Asian Muslim life shared the perspective of dominant groups. In 1832, two such books targeting a British audience described the ways of life of Indian Muslims (Shurreef 1832; Hassan Ali 1832). They offered much details about the higher social groups among Muslims: the four categories that claim foreign descent—Sayyid, Shaikh, Mughal, Pathan—and form the *ashraf* or *tabqa-i ashrafiyya*. However, they almost totally disregarded artisan or service castes. In his *Qanoon-e-Islam, the Customs of the Moosulmans of India*, the Hyderabad notable Jafar Sharif explained in a footnote running several pages that “Mohummudans are divided into four great classes, distinguished by the appellations *Syed*, *Sheikh*, *Mogol*, and *Putt’hans*” (Shurreef 1832, 8). The original manuscript in Dakhani Urdu having been lost (Vatuk 1999), we are bound to rely on the translator’s rather interchangeable use of “castes” and “tribes” (Shurreef 1832, 16), as we learn for instance that there are no ways to determine a person’s “tribe”: “It is, therefore, only by inquiring after their tribe, that it can be learned such a one is a *Syed*” (Shurreef 1832, 12).

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, the English wife of a Lucknowi Shi'a aristocrat of *sayyid* lineage, was mainly interested in religious practices, but acknowledged in her *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* the existence of social ranking among Muslims, including “poorer classes of the people” (Hassan Ali 1832, 21). She only rarely used the term “caste”, and then only for Hindus. Mrs Meer Hassan Ali conceived of Muslims and Hindus in dichotomous terms, distinguishing the “aborigines” from the “invaders”. Yet she observed instances of “borrowings” or acculturation: commenting on the reaction to lunar eclipses, she noted that “Many of the notions entertained by the lower classes of Mussulmauns upon the nature of an eclipse are borrowed from the Hindoos” (Hassan Ali 1832, 158–59).

In spite of the differences in their regional (Lucknow, Hyderabad) and sectarian (Shi'a, Sunni) contexts, these two accounts of South Asian Muslim life share commonalities that set the tone for later colonial scholarship. They adopt the perspective of dominant groups, in which “true Muslims” were those whose ancestors supposedly came from outside as “invaders”, while other Muslims were examined in a way that sought to gauge the extent to which Islam transformed itself through extended contact with Hinduism. In this narrative of “pure origins” and subsequent mixing, Muslim caste, described in a variety of terms that included tribe, class, and race, appeared as the typical product of the civilizational encounter between Islam and Hinduism, each assumed to possess their own social structures.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, colonial scholarship aspired to greater representativeness. It began relying on large-scale surveys put in place by the “ethnographic state” (Dirks 2001, 43–60). From 1844 to 1941, the nearly fifteen “castes and tribes” surveys all included Muslim groups in their listings, while the Census, starting in 1871, allowed for the quantification of these group populations (G. Ansari 1960, 2). Regarding Muslims, such surveys helped abandon the *ashraf*-centred perspective by including other groups and complexified the simple Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. In 1869, the *Report of the Census of Oudh* by J. Charles Williams, in a section dedicated to detailing the different “classes of Muhammadans”, identified three broad categories: the “higher castes of Muhammadans” (the four *ashraf* groups), the “Muhammadans descended from high caste Hindu converts” (mostly Rajput), and the “lower classes of Muhammadans”, the latter “split up into thirty-five different castes” (Williams 1869, 1:74–82). In the revision of [Henry Miers] Elliot’s *Glossary* by John Beames, the author noted that in the variety of artisan and service castes such as Julahas, Nais, Bihistis, and Dhobis, each “had Hindu counterparts—or Hindu members” (Lelyveld 2003, 13). Hence, not only did such surveys point to the divisions within Muslims, they also

indicated overlaps between Hindu and Muslim social groups and provided an explanation for the origin of castes among Muslims. In his report, J. Charles Williams felt the need to justify the use of the term “caste” for these groups, unlike in the case of “higher castes”: “I use this word advisedly and in opposition to mere professions”, for “the converts to Muhammadanism (of Northern India at any rate) did not, when adopting a new religion entirely abandon the habits and prejudices of their forefathers—on the contrary they remained in many respects observers of caste customs” (Williams 1869, 1:79).

William Crooke, one of the major voices among British administrators-ethnographers, extended the use of the term “caste” to all Muslims. In his massive four-volume study on the religious and social customs of caste groups, Crooke adopted an inclusive, non-cultural definition of caste. He did not see it as “confined to the votaries of the Hindu faith”. According to him, “Islam has boldly solved the difficulty by recognising and adopting caste in its entirety. Not only does the converted Rājput, Gùjar or Jāt remain a member of his original sept or section; but he preserves most of those restrictions on social intercourse, intermarriage and the like, which make up the peasant’s conception of caste” (W. Crooke 1896, 1:xvii).

Crooke thus acknowledged the scale of conversion to Islam but retained the narrative of conquest and intermixing. Almost a hundred years after their original publication, he reedited Mrs Meer Hassan Ali’s and Jafar Sharif’s books. He presented the latter as an authoritative description of “Islam in India”, the new title for the book. One of Crooke’s numerous edits was the addition of an initial chapter entitled “Ethnography”, which once more described the “four [*ashraf*] classes”. But the “ethnography” was actually preceded by an historical account of the spread of Islam in India in the form of a listing of the various Muslim conquests and kingdoms. For Crooke, South Asian Islam seemed best understood as the result of the encounter between Hinduism and a foreign religion along a linear north-west to east axis: “Thus the present distribution of Islam has followed the course of the Muhammadan conquests from the north and west, and they are strongest in proportion to their vicinity to the head-quarters of the Faith in western Asia” (Sharif 1921, 1).

The underlying racial assumption that associated physical with cultural traits appeared even more clearly in the first full chapter dedicated to analysing “Caste and Islam” in Edward A. H. Blunt’s volume *The Caste System of Northern India*. Although Blunt counted as an opponent to the racial and anthropometric theory, his deterministic vision combined cultural, religious, behavioural and physical traits, and was expressed in terms of pure origins,

conquest and miscegenation. He narrated the spread of “the new militant religion of Muhammad” in India through a “fresh series of invasions” (Blunt 1931, 161), and its subsequent decay to the point when the “Muhammadan domination, in short, had become the rule of the half-caste; and Muslim, like Saka, Kushan, and Hun before him, was in danger of being absorbed into Hinduism” (Blunt 1931, 173). After considering the “ethnology of the Muslim invaders of India”, Blunt examined “how far these different racial elements [were] traceable in the Muslim population of to-day” (Blunt 1931, 177). For each group and subgroup, assumed to act as a collective body, he compared various theories about their origins, mentioned their participation in historical events, and occasionally provided census data about their numbers and current location.

With Blunt, the conception of caste among Muslims as the result of a civilizational encounter came to full fruition. Colonial writings saw Hinduism and Islam as two fundamentally antagonistic religions, rooted in different scriptures and civilizations. Caste among Muslims could only appear as an anomaly due to Hindu influence, conceived by its degree of resemblance or difference with the Hindu standard. The various colonial understandings of caste among Muslims tended to be influenced by racial conceptions and sought evolutionary explanations based on notions of purity and intermixing. What emerged was the “*ashraf-ajlaf* dichotomy”, that is, the distinction between the four “higher classes”, or those who claimed foreign descent, and the descendants of converts, the latter being more likely to follow caste practices retained from Hinduism (I. Ahmad 1966). These conceptions informed the anthropological debate on Muslim caste after India and Pakistan’s independence.

Muslim caste as a system and the socio-anthropological debate

After independence, social scientists studying Muslim social stratification followed the changes of Indian anthropology and sociology, which experienced “a transition from a descriptive to an analytical period” (Keda and Gupta 2004, 231). In 1960, the first monograph on caste among Muslims focused on Uttar Pradesh and reignited the debate on the applicability of the term “caste” for South Asian Muslims. Its author, Ghaus Ansari, adopted a structuralist and holistic approach, insisting that caste worked *as a system* among Muslims:

Caste attitude and behaviour among the Ashraf castes can only be analysed in relation to the Muslim community as a whole. [...] If we once accept the fact that the Indian Muslims in general have a caste system, however modified, we must come to the conclusion that the Ashraf constitute the highest stratum within this structure. [...] Thus both the Sayyid and Shaikh, as competent religious pedagogues and priests, are almost identical with the

Brahman; whereas both the Mughal and Pathan, being famous for their chivalry, appear to be equal to the Kshatriya. (G. Ansari 1960, 39–40)

Building on colonial sources, Ansari proposed a general picture of a South Asian “Muslim caste system” composed of four broad categories: the *ashraf*, supposed to be the descendants of Muslim immigrants and divided into the four categories Sayyid, Shaikh, Mughal, and Pathan; the *ajlaf*, descendants of converts from service or “clean occupational castes” (such as Qasab or butcher, Hajjam or barber, Darzi or tailor, etc.), sorted according to their level of proximity with their Hindu counterparts (by the degree of conversion of their members, which seems more or less correlated with the degree of Islamization of their customs); and the *arzal*, or untouchable castes (notably the tanners or Chamars and the sweepers or Bhangi or Lalbegi). The fourth category stands somewhat separately from the others, as the Muslim Rajputs, who retain many Hindu practices, do not wish to be associated with lower castes, yet are not considered suitable marriage partners by the *ashraf* (G. Ansari 1960, 40–41). Thus, Ansari depicted the “Muslim caste system” as an inter-connected hierarchical chain that runs from the *sayyids* on top to the untouchable castes at the bottom. If Ghaus Ansari’s study had the merit of seriously raising the question of Muslim caste, it may be criticized for its lack of attention to contemporary developments (such as Partition-induced migration or the effects of the Zamindari Abolition Act) and its rather uncritical use of colonial sources. Thus, Ansari’s work appears as little more than a final synthesis in a long line of British surveys.

Starting in the 1960s, however, several scholars broke from the survey tradition and conducted empirically-grounded ethnographic research in South Asian Muslim contexts. While earlier scholarship on social stratification among Muslims tended to adopt a static, atemporal vision, most of these case studies sought to grasp observable transformations rather than unchanging patterns. They included village ethnographies (Eglar 1960), regional studies (Misra 1964), or monographs on marriage customs and gender-relations (Vreede-de Stuers 1968). From the 1970s, the discussion took the form of a four-volume series edited by sociologist Imtiaz Ahmad (1973, 1976, 1981, 1983), as well as articles in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (see for instance Gaborieau 1972; Madan 1972; Mauroof 1972; Gaborieau 1978; Robinson 1983; Kurin and Morrow 1985; Lindholm 1986), later compiled as a book (Madan 1976; 2001). These authors were divided on whether Muslims could be said to have castes. The central premise of Imtiaz Ahmad’s work was that Muslims and Hindus, being part of the same society, shared the structural features of their social organization. By arguing that caste existed among Indian Muslims, Imtiaz Ahmad’s endeavour stressed their “Indian-ness”, challenging both the position of the Hindu Right (who saw Muslims either as foreign invaders

or as converts bound to revert back to Hinduism) and the religious scholars among Muslims (who tended to highlight the egalitarian norm in Islam and downplay inegalitarian practices or discourses).

Imtiaz Ahmad's research also contradicted Hindu-centric visions of caste among scholars, not least French anthropologist Louis Dumont's then recently-published systemic theory that defined caste as the concrete transformation of the ideological principle of purity and impurity, embodied in the figure of the Brahmin at the top of the hierarchy (Dumont 1966). Authors adopting a holistic approach, such as Dumont or Célestin Bouglé, used the terms "caste system" to insist on the idea that castes only make sense in hierarchical relation to each other. Therefore, one particular occurrence of caste cannot be conceptually detached from the working of the integrated whole that the "caste system" forms. For Dumont, caste only exists in Hinduism and in the Hindu cultural sphere, or what Edmund Leach called the "Pan-Indian Civilization" (E. R. Leach 1960, 5). Caste, then, is an Indian or South Asian specificity. Others have argued, to the contrary, that caste should be conceived of as a social structure rather than as a culturally-embedded system (Berreman 1979). Therefore, one could well apply the word caste to various forms of social stratification, for instance in Africa (Todd 1977), in the Americas (McCaa, Schwartz, and Grubessich 1979), or in other parts of Asia (Barth 1960; Potter and Potter 1990, 296–312). South Asia would be only one among many "caste societies", and "the similarities between South Asian Muslims and Hindus [could thus be argued to be] not a result of assimilation, but rather of structural correspondence" (Lindholm 1986, 67).

For many scholars, the absence of strict notions of ritual purity and untouchability seems to be a distinguishing feature of caste among Muslims (Barth 1959, 16–22). Noting divisions between scholars on this point, Imtiaz Ahmad concluded that "the notion of ritual purity and pollution is not as elaborate among the Muslims as it is among the Hindus. As a matter of fact, it is considerably weak, so weak that it is not immediately obvious and must be inferred from indirect evidence" (I. Ahmad 1973, 9). For Dumont, the principle of purity and pollution gives ideological cohesion to the caste system. To him, because of the absence of the Brahmanic figure, caste among Muslims appears as "truncated", and therefore "not caste at all", as in the case of the Swat Pathans (Lindholm 1986, 68). Instead of apprehending the system from the top, French anthropologist Marc Gaborieau pointed to documented cases of untouchability among Muslims. He argued that Muslims "retain certain elements of caste hierarchy to the extent that these elements allow for the exclusion of lower impure service

castes” (Gaborieau 1993, 292). Some recent scholarship has attempted to provide broader evidence of the practice of untouchability among Muslims (Trivedi, Srinivas, and Kumar 2016).

Some empirical studies focused on the local level to see how caste functions as a system among Muslims. Zekiye Eglar’s village ethnography of a Punjabi village in Pakistan described in a static way the system of exchange based on contractual functions similar to the complementary relations described as the *jajmani* system in North India or *bara balutedar* in Maharashtra (Eglar 1960). Unlike previous scholars, Eglar did not delve into the historicity of Muslim caste, made no attempt to explain its origins or to compare it with Hindu caste, and did not even discuss the pertinence of the term “caste” in a Muslim context. In the contractual relationships (*seyp*) between a landholding or *zamindar* family and a number of artisan castes or *kammi* families (Eglar 1960, 28–41), the latter provide goods and services to the *zamindars* in exchange for grain, and perform a number of other customary and ritual roles (for instance, the barber cooks in the house of the *zamindar* on special occasions, acts as messenger and matchmaker, and performs circumcision). By shifting the focus away from identifying the elements of a graded hierarchy, Eglar showed that the Muslim context did not fundamentally change inter-caste relations. This conclusion was later criticized by sociologist Hamza Alavi, who rejected the “assumption that these [South Asian rural] societies are structurally similar, if not identical in every detail, and that the distinguishing feature of the structure of social institutions in those societies is their focus on caste and the related *jajmani* system as bases of social organization” (Alavi 1972, 1). He argued that in West Punjab, “it is the kinship system rather than caste which embodies the primordial loyalties which structure its social organization” (Alavi 1972, 1). According to Alavi, the crucial social unit is the *baradari* (brotherhood or patrilineage), a term which describes various circles of kinship relations. However, Alavi’s description of *baradari* relationships does not depart greatly from descriptions of caste relationships elsewhere in South Asia, especially if combined with contractual relations.

Scholars also paid attention to dynamic transformations among South Asian Muslims, such as social mobility. To describe such changes, Cora Vreede-de Stuers drew on M. N. Srinivas’ analysis of “sanskritisation” to introduce the distinction between “Islamization” and “ashrafization”. She calls “‘ashrafization’ [the] attempts at social climbing by groups or individuals through hypergamy and adopting the way of life of higher classes”, to be contrasted from Islamization, that is, when “groups or individuals [...] wish to distinguish

themselves clearly from non-Muslims by purifying themselves of so-called un-Islamic customs and practices” (Vreede-de Stuers 1968, 6). Several subsequent studies have examined the upward social trajectories of Muslim caste groups, such as the Shaikh Siddiquis (I. Ahmad 2018), the Julaha/Ansari (Mehta 1997), or the Qasai/Qureshi (Z. Ahmad 2018).

Among the wide range of case studies, several scholars also highlighted regional variation to argue that caste was not an accurate paradigm to describe social stratification among Muslims in South Asia (Wakil 1972). Scholars of South India, in particular, questioned the dominant, North-India centric trope. Mattison Mines wondered why Tamil Muslims, unlike Hyderabad and North Indian Muslims, do not seem to fit in any definition of caste (Mines 2018). Also in the Tamil context, Frank Fanselow invited scholars to examine how Muslim converts have “disinvented” caste (Fanselow 1996). Observations of Muslim social stratification in the Konkan, the Malabar coast, or the Maldives also challenge the tripartite framework—*ashraf*, *ajlaf*, *arzal*—drawn from the North Indian situation. For this reason, some have suggested alternative terms to describe Muslims’ caste-like practices. Pervaiz Nazir, for instance, spoke of “caste labels” (Nazir 1993), while Leela Dube preferred “caste analogues” (Dube 1973).

The socio-anthropological debate on whether castes exist among Muslims has not led to the emergence of a clear consensus. Driven by the intention to construct “a comprehensive and systematic coverage of all the facets of Islam in India” (I. Ahmad 1981, 3), the debate on Muslim caste has been useful in fostering a wide range of empirical research highlighting regional variations and examining contemporary observable dynamics. Such a project, however, seems to have stopped inspiring new empirical studies since the 1990s. As a result, some, like Syed Ali, argued that “the question of the existence of caste among Muslims in India is no longer fruitful” (Ali 2002, 602). Ali further stated: “How much Muslim caste is similar to, or different from, Hindu caste gives us no better understanding of how caste functions for Muslims, or of how and why it is or is not important in different contexts” (Ali 2002, 603). Syed Ali’s statement echoes an earlier suggestion by Sylvia Vatuk (1996, 229). Vatuk invited scholars to explore research questions that allow them to address Muslim social stratification in South Asia “in its own terms”—for instance by focusing on the notion of *khandan*—and to look at the justifications offered by Muslims themselves for social distinctions. In recent decades, social scientists focusing on South Asian Muslims have avoided overarching or systemic representations—abandoning any project of a “systematic coverage”. Instead, the interest for social structures among Muslims has been included in

broader ethnographic studies of “lived Islam”, “Muslim lives” (Shaban 2012), and “Muslim belonging” (Dandekar and Tschacher 2016; Sherman 2015), without necessarily attempting to synthesize distinct situations.

Caste as legal category and political platform amongst Muslims

According to Joel Lee, “the prominence of caste in South Asian Islamic life has been almost entirely obscured in global representations of the region [by, among several factors, the] non-recognition of Muslim caste by the postcolonial states of India, Pakistan, and their neighbors; to be ignored by the census and related technologies of modern governance is in significant ways to be rendered invisible to the world” (Lee 2018a, 168). The question of caste remains largely taboo in Pakistan, whether among Muslims or between Muslims and low-caste non-Muslim groups, in which case caste hierarchy reinforces the exclusion of minority religious groups (Gazdar 2007; Hussain 2019). In India, the political environment of the 1980s and 1990s sparked new conceptualizations of Muslim caste that served an agenda of collective mobilization and made Muslim caste visible. On the one hand, the rise of the Hindu right jeopardized Muslims’ situation by eroding communal harmony following the destruction the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the 2002 Gujarat pogroms (Roy and Hasan 2005), while official and scholarly reports highlighted the “marginalization” of Muslims in India (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2011). On the other hand, in the wake of the 1980 Mandal Commission report (B. P. Mandal Commission 1980), lower castes (especially, in India’s administrative categorization, OBCs or Other Backward Classes) became powerful political forces (Jaffrelot 2003).

The main problem for lower Muslim castes was their exclusion from caste-based government benefits, in particular quotas (reservations) in public service and universities. The Presidential Order of August 1950 stated that “no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste”. However, later official reports noted that some Muslims were also victims of caste discrimination, despite their exclusion from the Scheduled Caste and OBC categories. The Mandal Commission report, which recommended a quota for OBCs, stated that “Though caste system is peculiar to Hindu society yet, in actual practice, it also pervades the non-Hindu communities in India in varying degrees” (B. P. Mandal Commission 1980, 55). Referring to sociological literature, the 2006 Sachar report concurred, noting “the presence of descent based social stratification among [Muslims]. 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” (Sachar Committee 2006, 192). Finally, the 2009 Ranganath Commission report recommended a 10% quota for Muslim OBCs, as well as the abrogation of the 1950 Presidential order.

This indicated a shift in the official understanding of caste by the Indian state, from a religiously sanctioned to a socio-economic definition not specific to Hindus. In line with this change, the central government and several states introduced affirmative action for certain Muslim castes as part of the OBC category in the 1990s. The legal translation of the official recognition of Muslim caste has, however, been ambiguous: in the 1992 *Indra Sawhney* case, the Supreme Court “recommended the inclusion of only those Muslim castes whose analogous Hindu castes had been included in the backward class category” (Bhat 2018, 184). The public debate on whether Muslims should benefit from reservations still opposes proponents of religious-specific quotas to those who argue that some Muslims should be included in SC and OBC categories if they fit certain socio-economic criteria but more importantly if they are victims of particular exclusionary practices.

Since the 1980s, a new voice emerged in this debate when several groups were established to represent lower caste (OBC) and Dalit Muslims (SC)—often denoted by the general term *pasmanda* (roughly translated as “marginalised”). Caste-based organization among Muslims—such as the Momin Conference or the Jamiat-ul Quresh, representing respectively the weavers (*julaha*) and the butchers (*qasai*)—had since the early decades of the twentieth century acted as platforms of solidarity and catalysts of social mobility for specific “*jati*-clusters” (Manor 2010, xix). However, some now argued in the pages of the magazines *Dalit Voice* and *Muslim India* that Dalits and Muslims shared common interests—countering Hindu high-caste domination—and should therefore unite (Marková 1990; Sikand 2001; 2004). Others stressed the need for *pasmanda* Muslims to break the monopoly of the *ashraf* over the representation of Muslims as a single community (Anwar 2001). This was the line of the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (PMM), founded by Ali Anwar in October 1998 in Patna (Bihar). When several Muslim organisations demanded reservations for Muslims as a whole in the Muslim Agenda 1999, the PMM released its own Pasmanda Agenda 1999 and lobbied for caste-based reservations applicable to Muslims (Alam 2007; 2009; K. A. Ansari 2009; Waheed and Mujtaba 2017, 121–22). Similar demands were put forward by the All-India Muslim OBC Sangathan in Maharashtra and by the All-India Backward Muslim Morcha, set up by Aijaz Ali in Patna in 1994 (Khanam 2013, 136). Such groups helped making Dalit Muslim voices

heard and led to a few electoral victories, notably in Bihar, but have not profoundly changed the composition of the leadership of the Muslim organizations.

Yet such movements renewed the historical and socio-anthropological debates on caste among Muslims. The dispute among social scientists became irrelevant as a section of Muslims themselves started denouncing the domination of higher castes in the name of representing the “Muslim community”, without focusing on matters of definition. By stepping into the political and scholarly debate, *pasmanda* Muslims organizations defended the idea that caste exists as a tool of oppression among Muslims and should therefore be combatted. They targeted the religious and political leadership, mainly of *ashraf* extraction, accusing it of perpetuating inequality among Muslims by denying caste-based exclusion. Their argument in favour of equality drew on the same normative principle often put forward by *ulama* as one of the core tenets of Islam—that of equality among believers. At the same time, *pasmanda* intellectuals investigated the justifications provided for caste practices within South Asian Muslim thought, such as the concept of *kafa’a/kufu* invoked by *ulama* in support of endogamy (Sikand 2004, 27–43). Interestingly, the most comprehensive argument denouncing caste practices among Muslims came from an *alim* associated with the Jama’at-I Islami, Masud Alam Falahi, who nonetheless rejected sectional interest groups like the various *pasmanda* organizations (Falahi 2009). Falahi notably brought to light the writings of medieval *ulama*, hence showing that caste practices and discourses among Muslims could be traced to precolonial times. The critique addressed by *pasmanda* scholars like Falahi and Ali Anwar to the Muslim leadership is also indicative of the failure of Islamic reform movements to tackle the *de facto* inequality within Muslims and its perpetuation through hierarchical social practices.³ Overall, the emergence of *pasmanda* demands has thus contributed to fostering new research on Muslim social stratification. Its political relevance brought activists on the academic stage (Quadri and Kumar 2003), while new investigations by anthropologists provided historical depth as well as ethnographic thickness to our understanding of Muslim caste (Lee 2018b).

³ This observation, however, calls for a deeper investigation. No scholarship so far has explored how various Muslim sectarian groups and reform movements have addressed intellectually and practically the question of social stratification among Muslims.

Concluding remarks

Muslim caste can no more be a fruitful object of scholarly enquiry if it consists of assuming an underlying social structure that researchers should unearth or delineate. The debate on the applicability of the term “caste” to Muslims or on whether castes existed among Muslims largely relied on just such an assumption. Scholarly exchanges on the question became an exceedingly redundant discussion over the years. This does not mean, however, that scholars should shun from examining caste practices and discourses among Muslims. First, we may heed Sylvia Vatuk’s call for appraising social stratification among South Asian Muslims not only insofar as it relates to Hindu caste but in Muslims’ own terms (Vatuk 1996). Second, following Talal Asad, caste should be seen as “an instituted practice (set in a particular context, and having a particular history) into which Muslims are inducted *as Muslims*” (Asad 1996, 15). This implies that caste among Muslims should be seen as a dynamic process that needs to be studied in its relation to Islam as a discursive tradition, rather than as a static core structuring principle that would impose itself on people in the subcontinent, Hindu or not. This forces us to consider seriously the dynamics of social distinction in which Muslims actively participate: at the discursive level (discourses, texts, visuals that construct representations about caste practices), in daily practices (the maintenance of occupational professionalization, endogamy, or caste-based exclusionary practices; or, conversely, the active engagement in egalitarian endeavors), and in collective and political mobilization, where the goal of dismantling caste privilege becomes a way of engaging with the state.

Scholars should seek to further our understanding of Muslim social stratification in the subcontinent. Historians could throw light on the evolution of caste categories over time, the position of religious and political authorities with regard to Muslim caste, and the trajectories of “Muslim communities of descent” (Pernau 2013, 62). Social scientists with their range of methods—ethnography, life-stories, mixed methods, experiments, or surveys—could provide insights into contemporary usages of caste among Muslims as marker of social distinction, political platform of mobilization, or legal category, as well as into the intersection of caste with other social identities—gender or sect (*maslak*). I would suggest three possible avenues for further study on Muslim social stratification in the South Asian subcontinent. First, scholars could look at tangible, observable manifestations of caste dynamics, by studying formal caste associations or organizations. Since the late 19th century, countless *anjumans*, *sabhas*, *panchayats* have been established for collective solidarity and occasionally provide organizational platforms for mobilisation. A second option for researchers willing to

investigate the question of caste among Muslims could be the exploration of the intersection of caste and sect. How reformist and sectarian Muslim groups differ (or not) in their attitude towards caste hierarchy, and how they have sought (or not) to bring greater equality among their followers, needs to be better understood. Third, comparative studies across religious groups (and particularly with other non-Hindu religious groups, like the Christians) and across regions of the subcontinent (North Indian trope vs other regions, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the Konkan coast) could help paint a more nuanced picture of caste practices and representations. This list, of course, is not exhaustive, but scholarship on these questions would no doubt enhance our comprehension of the way South Asian Muslims produce and reproduce their categories of social distinction, including caste.

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