Social Stratification among Muslims

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The article "Does Untouchability Exist among Muslims? Evidence from Uttar Pradesh" (*EPW*, 9 April 2016) fails at both the methodological and policy levels.

The article "Does Untouchability Exist among Muslims? Evidence from Uttar Pradesh" (*EPW*, 9 April 2016) by Prashant K Trivedi et al ably demonstrates the presence and practice of untouchability among Muslims by using empirical data from 14 districts of Uttar Pradesh (UP). This study is different from earlier studies on caste and Muslim society—such as by Nazmul (1959), Zarina (1962, 1972), Ali (1965), and Imtiaz (1967) —which were written either from the accounts of personal experiences of scholars, or from small-scale surveys. While the study under consideration claims to fill the gap, regrettably it fails at both methodological and policy levels.

Caste and Islam

According to Islam, every Muslim is born equal in the eyes of god and a Muslim can find no refuge in religion to justify the practice of social inequality (Ahmad and Chakravarti 1981: 56). Hence, at least textually, Islam explicitly rejects caste or social stratification as an aspect of social life. However, many studies conducted during the past five decades examined the prevalence of casteism among Muslims in India and concluded that there is a caste-like or caste-analogous system among Muslims influenced by birth and descent.

These studies saw social stratification among Muslims in two broad categories, as Ashraf and Ajlaf on the basis of birth and descent (Imtiaz 1967: 887). This simplistic distinction that Ashrafs are pure and of foreign blood, while Ajlafs are impure and are Indian Hindu converts continued for long, until the early part of the 21st century when new studies came to challenge this simplification and its universalistic usage. These later studies, though hesitantly, brought out new dimensions, such as occupation, residential proximity, regional habitations, *bhagidari* system, etc, in the formation of caste-like endogamous communities among Muslims in India.

The study by Prashant K Trivedi et al (2016) neither engages with the changing nature of community formation among Muslims nor does it give any historical account of the invasion of Muslim conquerors to India, and hence, the interaction between Islamic equalitarianism and the rigid and customary Hindu caste system. For a scholar of sociology of minorities, it would have been illuminating to know the changing nature of identity formation along caste lines among Muslims and how that relates to the Islamic great tradition and Indo–Islamic small tradition in the present context. The omission of these argumentative engagements in the historic as well as the current context makes it nearly impossible to comprehend, with adequate justification of caste-based mobility of specific Muslim communities, which is at the crux of identifying untouchable castes among Muslims.

Attempts to place Islam in the domain of the caste system in India, both in theoretical and empirical terms, have come into conflict with the so-called conscience-keeper of Islam. As past studies indicate, Ajlafs consist of converts of backward and untouchable Hindus who were termed as *desi* and impure. Untouchables constituted a significant portion of Ajlafs including other low-esteemed occupational communities such as weavers, fisherfolk, shopkeepers, etc (GOI 2008: 13). While these lower-caste Hindus converted to Islam—either due to the fear of torture from many Muslim emperors or to ensure their social mobility outside the Hindu caste system—most of them remain socio-economically and educationally backward to date. Given the caste-based practices among various Muslim communities converted from Hindu religion, it can be argued that, neither have they been able to completely disassociate themselves from Hinduism to claim complete "Islamisation," nor has Islam done anything substantial for their socio-economic and

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educational progress, except strict guidance to their faith. The article rarely engages with these debates and it is more obsessed with the empirical data.

Methodological Shortcoming

The study uses primary data collected from UP, consisting of 7,195 households scattered across 14 districts in four regions of UP. Undoubtedly, it has made some empirical advances in terms of the collection and use of primary data from a large-scale household survey, as against past studies on social stratification among Muslims in UP. However, there is no mention of the districts and regions considered for this study and no explanation as to why these districts and regions were chosen and not others. The authors mention that due to numerous castes and sub-castes in UP which posed serious practical challenges for sample selection, it was decided to adopt a multistage stratified systematic random sampling design (Trivedi et al 2016: 33). It is therefore, not clear if the nature and extent of problems in sample selection determined sampling frame or vice-versa. Given that UP is the most populous state in India divided across 75 districts, it would have been made clear by the authors that how a sample of 7,195 households becomes a sample representative of the state.

The article sets the tone and rightly so, when it argues that unit-level data on individual sub-castes within the category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is critical. It includes castes that have been grouped together as "Dalit Muslims" more so because the practice of untouchability towards Dalit Muslims needs support of the anti-discrimination laws of the Constitution. The article has used two approaches to identify Dalit Muslims in UP. First, it examines occupation of Muslims that is matched with the occupation of Hindu castes included in Scheduled Castes (SCs), and second, it takes into account previous studies in identification of Dalit Muslims. On this basis, the article comes out with 16 Dalit Muslim communities in UP.

To me, this process of identification can have several shortcomings. First, the traditional occupations of many Hindu lower castes have significantly changed to date due to changes in the macro socio-economic structures, widening provisions for literacy and education, and spread of technology. Moreover, the influence of Islamic faith and sociocultural tenets of Islamic traditions have an effect on the occupation and lifestyle of newly converted lower-caste Hindus to Islam. This makes it more complex for identification than it appears to be. Unless one traces the time period and specific regional history that influenced a particular caste community to adopt Islam, it would be difficult to identify Dalit Muslims by their occupation alone.

Second, sub-castes such as Qalander, Qasab (Qassab) and even Sheikh Mehtar within the larger descent of Ajlaf are also considered Dalit Muslims in UP (Ahmad and Chakravarti 1981: 57). While Qalanders are beggar saints, Qasabs are butchers (beef) and Shekh Mehtars are sweepers in UP. These sub-castes have not been taken into account.

Finally, while Ajlaf is considered impure and inferior to Ashraf, not all sub-castes under Ajlafs experience the same degree of untouchability. Hence, it would have been reasonable to show which sub-castes experience higher or lower levels of untouchability within the Ajlaf community and why so.

The findings of the study are informative and substantial enough to claim that the practice of untouchability towards Dalit Muslims by both non-Dalit Muslims and Hindus in UP exists. For instance, one finding of the article is that those respondents who studied in madrasas experienced a higher proportion of untouchability practice in seating arrangements as compared to respondents from other types of schooling. Similarly, households with higher levels of education and wealth, and even from urban localities, reported a higher proportion of untouchability practised towards them. These findings are illuminating but, unfortunately, there is no further discussion. Does it mean that social mobility in terms of attainment of higher education, better income and urban residence is not helpful to counteract the effects of untouchability? Moreover, it would have been helpful for the reader to know how the practice of untouchability towards Dalit Muslims is qualitatively different from untouchability practised towards Dalit Hindus, if at all.

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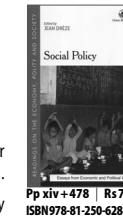

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