BOOK REVIEW

Social Stratification Among Muslims

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SOCIOLOGISTS and social anthropologists have not paid much attention to the study of Indian Muslim social structure. While in recent years they have made systematic field studies of several Hindu communities which have enriched our understanding of Hindu social structure, few attempts have been made to study Muslim communities. Even students of village communities in which Muslims constitute a substantial proportion of the total population have neglected the analysis of Muslim social institutions. They have generally treated Muslims as a single and an undifferentiated social entity and have paid little attention to the examination of social groupings and patterns of social stratification and inter-group relations among them. In the situation this study of the history and social organization of Muslim communities in Gujarat is bound to be received as a significant contribution to Indian sociological literature.

The study is primarily concerned with a socio-historical analysis of the social organization of Muslim communities in Gujarat. The author tries to examine the ways in which Islamic culture penetrated and interacted with the local Indian tradition at the social level, the changes which came into Islam as a result of this interaction, the manner in which foreign Muslim communities became increasingly Indianized and the local converts merged into the Muslim society and, finally, how Indian Islam shaped itself not only in its ideational and cultural aspects but also in social and inter-personal spheres. In short, the book is concerned with an examination of the process of adoption of the Islamic Great Tradition to the Indian Little Tradition.

Two Approaches

The problem which the author attempts to examine here can be approached in two different ways. It can be approached from a historical point of view by making a study of the rise and development of Muslim society through the centuries. One can study the various social institutions and ways of life which Muslims of foreign origin brought with them when they migrated to India, the manner in which Indian beliefs, usages and practices affected these social institutions and ways of life, the factors which led to the conversion of local Hindu population to Islam, the extent to which social institutions, beliefs and religious practices of the early converts became a pan and parcel of Muslim society and the adjustment which Muslims made with Hindus in the regions where they settled. In other words, one can examine the forces which acted and inter-acted in the formation of Muslim society through centuries.

The other approach is sociological. One can select a community or group of communities of Muslims, spend sometime living in it and make a systematic study of its various social and cultural aspects. One can, for example, examine what are the social institutions of that community and the specific functions they perform in the total social system. One can also compare the social institutions of the Muslim communities with the social institutions of Hindus and examine the pattern of interaction between the two societies. Although a sociological study can provide greater insight into the internal and external structure of social relations within the society, its usefulness in understanding the dynamics of Muslim society is very limited.

However, neither approach is adequate when used alone in understanding the complex nature of Muslim social structure. Muslims had already possessed a flourishing civilization and an elaborate socio-cultural system before their contact with India. A knowledge of their past history is, therefore, necessary for the analysis of their social structure. At the same time, since their establishment in India, Muslims have been living side by side and in close contact with Hindus and the two societies have interacted upon one another in several important ways. In order to understand the nature of this interaction it is necessary to study actually existing social relations between them in a contemporary setting. For a proper study of Muslim social structure it is necessary that an analysis along historical lines should somehow be combined with an analysis along sociological lines. In this book Misra tries to bring together the different approaches of history and sociology.

The book is divided into three separate parts. In the first part the author presents a brief sketch of the rise and development of Islam in Gujarat and discusses the Bohra and Khojah missionaries. He shows that the settlement of Muslims in Gujarat dates back to a very early period. Being a coastal area Gujarat had been attracting Persian and Arab traders from early times and in the ninth and tenth centuries there were flourishing Muslim settlements. The Muslim trading communities lived in close proximity with Hindus and the relations between the two communities were cordial. TV Hindu rulers were tolerant and secular in their treatment of Muslims. During the reign of Sidharaj Jayasingha (1094-1443), for instance, a mosque demolished by fire worshippers was reconstructed at state expense and the miscreant, were severely punished. The charm of Sidimaraj Jayasinha's personality among the Muslim subjects was such that three of the major Muslim communities in Gujarat, namely, Bohras and Sunnis claim to have converted him to Islam.

Treatment Inadequate

The author's treatment of the history, political aspects of Islam in Gujarat seem, extremely inadequate when it is recalled that his objective in the book is to study the social aspects of Indo-Muslim contact. He merely presents an account of the presence of Muslim communities in Gujarat and discusses the Bohra and Khojah missionaries on the basis of historical sources and local traditions. He does not deal with the specifically social aspects of the problem. For example, he does not provide any information on the social stratification of early Muslim settlers in Gujarat and the kind of influences which made an impact upon their social structure. Even while dealing with Khojah and Bohra missionaries he does not tell us to what extent these is
Historical Material Available

The analysis of these problems calls for painstaking effort not only but material for their study is not entirely lacking. Persian chronicles, inscriptions, coins, foreign travellers' accounts, Persian, Arabic and Indian literatures and local traditions provide information which can be used for the analysis of these problems. In a study of Muslims in Bengal, for instance, Abdul Karim has used these sources to analyse Muslim society in Bengal. He examines the socio-political background of Bengal on the eve of Islamic impact, the contribution made by various elements such as the Sultans, Muslim scholars and Sufi saints to the consolidation of Islam and discusses the composition of Muslim society and the local aspects of religious and daily life of Bengali Muslims. He shows how Islam came into Bengal as a foreign religion but was slowly integrated into the socio-religious system of the people. Although Karim's treatment of Muslims in Bengal is historical and no attempt is made to deal with sociological problems, his study provides a very satisfactory analysis of the forces acting and interacting in the formation of Muslim society in Bengal. It is from studies of this kind that the social aspects of Indo-Muslim contact can be adequately understood. Students of Muslim social history are likely to be disappointed by Mira's treatment of the rise and development of Muslim society in Gujarat.

The second part of the book attempts to analyse the culture and social organisation of Muslims in Gujarat. In this part, the author gives ethnographic accounts of the Muslim communities in Gujarat. The accounts are concerned primarily with the manners and customs, social vellutions, dress and social organization of the different communities. The data on which these accounts are based were partly derived from documentary sources such as the National Register of Citizens and District Reports etc., and were partly collected through hold work among the communities. Some accounts are more detailed than others for two reasons: in the first place, some communities are larger and more widely distributed so that they show greater regional variation; secondly, held work could not be done intensively among some communities.

In the nineteenth century ethnographic glossaries and compendium were compiled in different parts of India. These glossaries and compendiums provided valuable information on the origin, religious beliefs and usages, customs and manners and kinship and caste organization of all important castes and tribes in different regions. In latter years the reports of the decennial censuses provided detailed accounts of castes and tribes and the changes taking place among them in the different provinces. In many ways the second part of Mira's book resembles the ethnographic glossaries and list of castes contained in the census reports. Although it provides valuable information on customs, manners and social organization of Muslim communities in Gujarat, it does not provide information on the nature of interrelations between these communities so that a sociologist interested in an analysis of the inter-relations between the different castes and communities will find them extremely inadequate.

Total Social Structure Ignored

The author treats each community as separate and independent. He discusses the occupation, customs and manners and social organization of each caste as if it exists in isolation from the rest of society. Even while discussing recent changes in occupations, dress customs and styles of life of members of the different communities he does not attempt to relate those changes to the total social structure and makes no effort to see how far these changes are local reflections of wider social changes.

Sometimes sociologists and social anthropologists isolate a particular community from its total social network and study its form and structure in detail. Such an isolation is, however, an analytical device used to facilitate a systematic understanding of the internal structure of the community. In actual situations every caste or community is embedded into a wider social system and it derives its existence by the fact that it is a unit in a system of similar units. In studies of 'social structure it is necessary to place each community in relation to groups of like order.

The importance of studying a caste or community in its social context has been stressed by many sociologists and social anthropologists. Marriott has shown that the apparent uniqueness and seemingly fortuitous variety within caste in India and Pakistan become capable of regular analyses and understanding when a caste is examined, not historically in isolation, but locally and regionally with systematic regard for its contexts. Ansari has also said that the examination of inter-caste relations is necessary for a fuller understanding of the way in which the caste system operates among Muslims. Mira's treatment of each community as an isolate unit leads to many drawbacks in the analysis of Muslim social stratification.

Relations with Hindus Ignored

In the first place, we are unable to study the nature of social stratification in the Muslim society of Gujarat from the ethnographic accounts given in the second part of the book. For a proper analysis of the system of social stratification it is necessary that we should have information on the patterns of status groups, economic classes and power groups in any society. Such information can be obtained only through the analysis of interrelations between the various communities in social, economic, political and juridical spheres. Since each community is treated here in isolation this information is not available.

Secondly, since only the Muslim communities are the focus of attention, the relationships between these communities and Hindus with whom they may be living in close proximity are omitted from analysis. It is up to the author of a book to limit the scope of his study and he can easily choose to leave out any set of relationships from analysis. Nevertheless, the nature of interaction between Hindus and Muslims constitutes an important area for study of Muslim social stratification for without an understanding of this interaction it would be difficult to appreciate the influences wrought by Hindu social structure on the social structure of Islam in India.

Broadly, the relationships involved in the study of Muslim social structure can be reduced to three main catego-
ries, First, there are relationships which exist among the different Muslim communities or castes residing in a local area or region. Each relationship in this category form part of sub-systems of ritual economic and political relations by reference to which groups are defined and consequently the status of members of each group as well as their behaviour and mode of conduct when acting as such towards members of similar groups is differentiated. Second, there are relations between persons either as individuals or as members of kinship groups of different kinds such as household, family and lineage etc. Most of these relations exist between members of the same caste and community and the behaviour of members in respect of each other is undifferentiated. Finally, there are relations of Muslims both as an undifferentiated unit and as individual members of specific caste groups with Hindus as a single social entity and as individual members of caste groups. In dealing with problems of social structure it is necessary that these different categories of social relationships should be separately investigated.

It is difficult to deal with the three categories of social relationships mentioned above at the provincial level. It would, therefore, have been useful if the author had narrowed the area of his held study. He should have organized field work in a few peasant and urban communities in different parts of Gujarat and tried to examine the kinship, inter-caste and inter-community relations at local levels. Such a study would have provided more sociologically useful data.

Elements of Caste System

The third part of the book is a general discussion of Muslim social organization. In this part the author discusses the elements of a caste system in the system of social stratification among Muslims, the self-governing institutions and marriage and family customs, especially the hypergamous and endogamous marriage patterns and some of the restrictions which family obligations put upon its members. He also tries to locate the trends and processes of social change among the Muslim communities in Gujarat. Although the discussion is largely based upon data provided in the book, the author has also drawn upon material from other areas for comparative purposes.

The author argues that social stratification among Muslim communities in Gujarat is patterned on the Hindu caste system. In his opinion there are two bases from which this similar pattern might have originated. In the first place, it might have originated from the recognition of consideration of propinquity and status among Muslims elsewhere. The spread of Islam led to the proliferation of power groups and racial considerations became important determinants or status. In Islam, thus arose a highly fluid communal system which, though flexible and highly responsive to subtle nuances, was still affiliated to birth as a status symbol. This system provided a basis for the development of a caste-like system among Indian Muslims.

Different from Hindu Caste

The other basis of a caste-like system among the Muslims in India lies in the social stratification system in the indigenous population which became incorporated into Muslim society through conversion. Originally, the local population belonged to a caste society in which status was rigidly defined by birth and maintained by strong social sanctions. When these groups became incorporated into Islam through conversion either by peaceful persuasion, threat of force, offer of material or political advantages or aspirations of upward mobility they imported their social system with them. Since much of early conversion was group conversion this was relatively easy.

The author, however, points out that the system of social stratification among Indian Muslims also shows some significant differences when compared with the Hindu caste system. For one thing, the acceptance of the principle of caste in Muslim society is different from the Hindu caste system. While both the systems resemble each other in the endogamous pattern of marriages and keen sense of birth and lineage among the Muslims the system has not been elaborated to any great extent. The degree of hierarchical gradation is looser and mobility is relatively easy within the scale of Muslim castes. Further, status which is a subtle blend of so many definable and indefinable elements plays an important role in determining social distance so that it is difficult to arrange the castes into any definite hierarchy. Secondly, since the Muslim social system admits wealth and status as determinants of status honour, comparatively less emphasis is placed in it upon pollution. Thirdly, within the Muslim social stratification there is no ritually pure caste like Brahmans with dispensations and obligations which may be peculiar to them alone. Sayyads who are given a prominent place among the Muslim castes lack the charisma which has given the Brannins their peculiar “place in the Hindu society. Fourthly, while endogamy is accepted as a general social restriction among most caste groups some of the intermediate castes intermarry freely. Finally, the Muslim system of social stratification has no independent existence. It has developed symbolic relationship with the Hindu caste system so that it has become, in a wider sense, a part of a larger whole.

Several scholars have mentioned that there is no elaboration of hierarchical ranking of castes in the Muslim society by Marriitty, it has, however, shown that this relative simplicity of ranking in Muslim society is not associated with the predominance of Islam in any region. The elaborateness of the hierarchical ranking of castes is determined, among other factors, by the number of local caste groups in the society. To favor an elaborate caste banking it is necessary that the concrete structural units of the society must be numerous. He suspects that the simple development of hierarchical ranking of castes among Muslims may be connected with the simple structure of local communities.

In Eastern U P

There seem many good reasons for correlating the elaborateness of hierarchical ranking of castes among Muslims with the size of community structure and number of caste groups. My own data show that the predominantly Muslim villages of eastern U P consisting of a number of Muslim caste groups have elaborately developed hierarchical rankings and the different caste groups in these villages can be arranged into fairly definite positions of status honour. In the middle Indus and Bengal Delta, however, where the local communities are small and the number of castes in them is limited the hierarchical ranking is very simple. Although Misra has made no attempt to correlate ranking to the number of caste groups in this book, this is a problem which should be investigated before the simplicity of hierarchical ranking among Indian Muslims can be accepted finally.

The author identifies a process of mobility among the Muslim communities to which he gives the name Isla mization. It implies patterning of the way of life of a particular caste on the more respectable pattern in Islam, changes in occupation and dress and the weakening of the traditional self-
governing, *jamat-bundi*, organization. This process always takes place within the caste system because it is intended to bring about upward mobility and it affects the total structural arrangement of the society. The author does not provide any discussion of how this process is actually brought about within a group of communities. Further, he considers the existence of local reference groups irrelevant to the process of Islamization. My own data, however, suggest that along with the process of Islamization of the style of life of a caste, the Islamizing group also begins to lay claim to a superior status. Also, since the process always takes place in a local setting the existence of local reference groups determines the extent and direction of this process.

It is obvious that the usefulness of this book is very limited for sociologists and historians interested in the study of Indo-Muslim contact. It is, however, likely to be very useful for the students of Islamic studies. In the past they have generally based their studies of Muslim social structure on the study of religious literature and textual sources, and side-stepped the peculiarities of Indian Islam. They have also hesitated to survey the communities whose faith and history have been their chosen theme, this book, as Professor Grunenaum remarks in his Preface "opens the door to one of the least investigated sectors of the Islamic world and it provides a rich introduction to the composition and sratification of Gujarati Islam and unsocial realities within which the Muslim faith is lived in the complexities of an area where traditions are mingled rather than blended".

Notes
1 For a number of years Ghaus Ausari's study, "Muslim Cast; in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact" (Lucknow 1960), has remained the only standard sociological work on social stratification among Indian Muslims.
2 See, for instance, Dube, S C "Indian Village", London, 1957 and Srinivas, M N 'Social System of a Mysore Village'. In *Village India* (ed) Mukim Marriott, Chicago, 1957. Although Muslims respectively constitute 16.6 and 11.8 per cent of the villages studied by Dube and Srinivas and there are suggestions in their works that they consist of several district sub-divisions both authors treat the entire Muslim population as an undifferentiated unit.
4 For Gujarat see Desai, G H "A Glossary of Castes, Tribes and Races in the Baroda States, Bombay, 1912.
5 Marriott, "Caste ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan" Poona 1960, p 1
6 *op cit p 58.*
7 See, for instance, Ansari, G *op cit* p 66, Marriott, M *op cit* p 43 and Ahmad, Z 'Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh', *The Economic Weekly*, February 17, 1962. p 389.
8 *op cit p 49.*
9 Fieldwork was carried out in a predominantly Muslim multi-caste village in Barabanki District in eastern Uttar Pradesh between March 1961 and May 1962.