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CASTE SYSTEM AND ISLAM: THEORETIC AND PRAGMATIC REFLECTIONS AMONG MUSLIMS OF INDIA

Altaf Hussain*

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a historical understanding on the caste based social stratification among Muslims of India. This paper will also examine the contrast between egalitarian theoretical vision of Islam and social reality of Indian Muslims. This paper will also study the existence of caste like features among various Muslim communities of India. The paper is largely based on secondary sources of information like books, journals, research reports, census data and newspapers.

Keywords: Caste, Indian Muslims, Analogous, Islam, social stratification, theoretical, empirical.

CASTE SYSTEM AND HINDU SOCIETY

Every society in this world is stratified one-way or the other on the lines of race, language, gender, tribe, religion, class, culture, and many other ways. India and the sub-continent people are also stratified on similar lines, but in the Indian context caste has been a key feature of social stratification, which is based on the birth of the individual in a particular caste or jati.

Caste system is the basic structure of Hindu society and the essential part of it. J.H. Hutton rightly observed that there are some 3,000 castes in India and it would need an encyclopedia to deal with them all. Therefore, there is a great deal of literature that exists on Hindu caste system and its various parameters. The scholars have studied caste in its various parameters in a variety of ways at a national, regional and village level. Ghaus Ansari rightly observed, "There already exists a great mass of literature on the Indian caste system and there is hardly any aspect of this phenomenon which remains untouched." So it is not essential to discuss in this paper about caste system and its various aspects.

Firstly, the existence of caste based discrimination among non-Hindu communities, produce the question of whether the term 'caste' can be applied as a system of

social stratification, other than Hindu society. On the one hand, there are scholars who are following Max Weber and take the position that caste is a fundamental institution of Hinduism and its use should be restricted to Hindus or at best, to social groups which, though professing others faiths, live with or near Hindu communities, which Dumont calls the 'Pan Indian civilization'.

On the other hand, another group of sociologists and social anthropologists like F.G. Baily, Fredrik Barth, Andre Beteille, Gerald Berreman, Passion, De Vos and Wagatsuma have stressed that the caste system is to be defined in terms of structural features that are found not only in the Hindu community of India but in a number of other societies as well.

Imtiaz Ahmad holds that while analyzing the system of social stratification in other religions and societies, they tend to quite unconsciously follow a cultural specific definition of the institution of caste and base their discussion on Hindu phenomenon. Obviously, then a consideration of caste among Muslims would require to be based not on purely structural criteria, but rather on the degree to which their social stratification displays principles and features characteristically

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