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Does caste play a political role among Muslims in India?

Julien Levesque

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figure 1: Muslim pilgrims pray facing the tomb of the Sufi saint Muinuddin Chishti, in the city of Ajmer in Rajasthan. Sufi saints and their descendant claim to descend from Prophet Muhammad, and are thus designated as “sayyid”, the name of group that generally tops the symbolic social hierarchy.

Photo credit: Julien Levesque

South Asian Muslims represent more than 500 million people, which is more than a quarter of the world’s Muslim population, mainly located in Pakistan (220 million), India (200 million), and Bangladesh (150 million). South Asian Muslims are different in terms of the states in which they live, their cultures and languages, as well as their sectarian orientations, schools of jurisprudence, or social classes. They are also divided into numerous castes—a form of social organization which paradoxically unites South Asian Muslim societies beyond their differences. Caste is designated by different terms, such as *biradari*, *qaum*, *samaj*, or the English word *community*. Whereas a significant body of scholarship has highlighted the way caste becomes a political issue and the source of collective mobilization, the same question has barely been touched upon when it comes to Muslims. Indeed, the scholarly treatment that

the latter generally receive adopts a religious lens, seeing them as a undifferentiated minority group in the Indian context, and as subject to radicalization and sectarian conflicts in the majority contexts of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Therefore, this paper hopes to throw some light on whether caste plays a political role among Muslims in India.

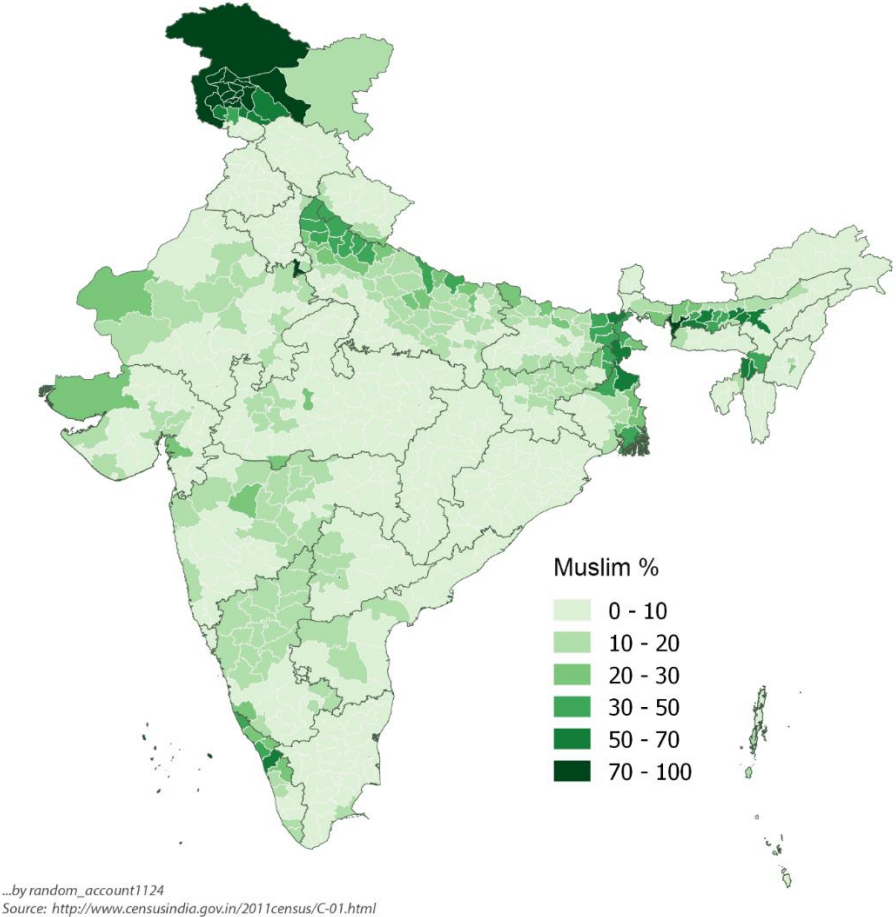


figure 2: map of the distribution of Muslims in India, by district, based on the 2011 census data (link: <https://i.imgur.com/NU8uZfA.png>).

Castes among Muslims?

Let us start by re-examining an apparent contradiction: the existence of castes among Muslims. Caste can be defined as a form of social organization that implies unequal relationships of interdependence among social groups, regulated by a set of behavioural rules that limits interaction between these groups (endogamy, commensality, occupational specialization). The notion of caste has no textual basis in the Islamic tradition, which enjoins believers to treat each other as equals. Consequently, many South Asian Muslims, when asked about caste, respond that no such thing exists in Islam.

Yet observers had noted since the 19th century that Muslims in the sub-continent do possess social structures similar or quasi-identical to Hindu castes. This observation has since then sparked significant debate (Levesque, 2020). Indeed, scholars—from colonial ethnography to socio-anthropological studies—tend to differ on whether caste should be seen as a social institution culturally rooted in Hinduism (in line with the structuralist anthropology of Louis Dumont) or as a social structure not limited to a particular religion or culture (as argued by sociologist Imtiaz Ahmad and anthropologist Marc Gaborieau). According to the latter

conception, Hindus and Muslims are part of the same society and therefore share the same social structures. Moreover, Gaborieau (2007) highlights the existence of untouchability among Muslims, which according to him justifies the use of the term “caste”, at least for the most dominated social groups.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, South Asian Muslims have sought to give a formal existence to their caste communities, by creating associations. Community organizations founded on caste belonging, or “caste associations”, were born of political issues related to identity and collective representation. Often called *anjuman* (association) or *sabha* (assembly), such organizations engage in community work and collective welfare, by running neighbourhood cooperatives, hospitals, student hostels, or managing religious festivals. But the inclusion of caste in the decennial census between 1881 and 1931 turned caste identity into a political issue, by revealing the proportional weight of each community. Associations then petitioned authorities about their position in the hierarchy and sought to control the way their members registered themselves.

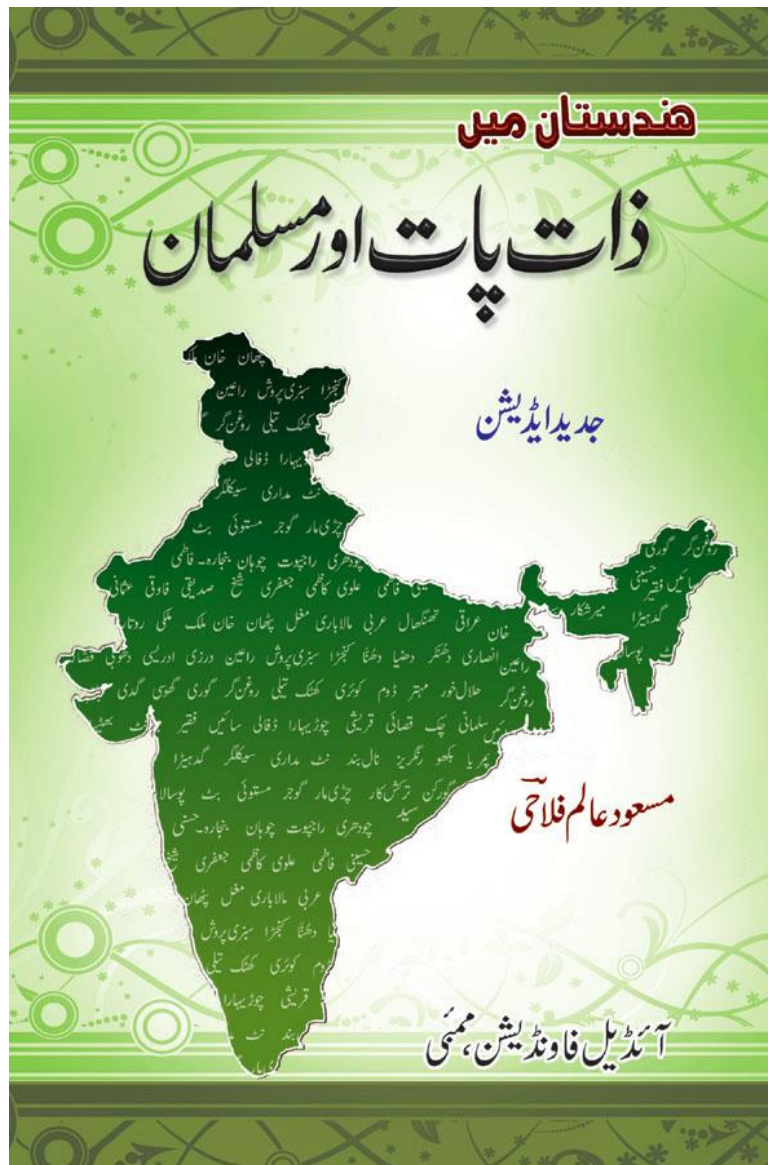


figure 3: cover of the book *Hindustan mein zat-pat aur musalman* (Caste and Muslims in India), by Masud Alam Ansari. Relying on religious texts written in South Asia, the author condemns the justification of caste inequality by religious scholars hailing from dominant groups.

Caste politics and the representation of the Muslim minority in India

If Muslims have caste associations and that these play a political role, why does this question remains largely absent from scholarship on Muslim minority politics as well as on caste politics? To understand why, we need to be aware of the meta-narrative of Muslim representation in independent India. This narrative tells of Indian Muslims' massive support to the Congress party after the country's independence in 1947, up until the 1980s. Muslims then turned towards regional political parties based on caste identity, such as the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. In these two states, Muslim support to such political parties gave birth to what became known as the "M-Y equation", an alliance between Muslim voters and the Yadav Hindu caste. The M-Y equation brought castes that had so far been politically marginalized to political power, [a phenomenon that political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot described as a "silent revolution"](#). Moreover, Muslims largely support the Indian conception of secularism, which guarantees specific rights to religious minorities. [As shown by Irfan Ahmad](#), even organizations like the Jamaat-i Islami ended up adhering to the secular principle although it runs counter to its foundational doctrine. This adherence to the principle of secularism was also visible in the recurring invocations of the Constitution during the winter 2019-20 protests against a reform of the citizenship law. Finally, the narrative of Muslim representation in independent India could not be complete without one final observation: the constant under-representation of Muslims in elected offices as well as state institutions (administration, justice, police), which the majoritarian politics led by Prime minister Narendra Modi has only exacerbated.

This meta-narrative suffers from several shortcomings. First, it mainly describes the experience of North Indian Muslims, especially those of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but leaves out other regions with an important Muslim population, such as Kerala, West Bengal, Assam, or Kashmir. Interestingly, these are the regions where Muslim political parties could remain after independence as they were less affected by the bloody events of Partition. Thus, while any sort of political mobilisation on the basis of Muslimness was ruled out in North India, the Indian Union Muslim League in Kerala and the All India Majlis Ittehad ul-Muslimeen in Hyderabad were able to play an active political role, and still exist today. Finally, this narrative assumes that Muslims all vote in a similar way, *en bloc*, and thus does not help us understand how internal differences within Muslims—of sect, caste, region, or culture—affect political choices.

Minority politics or identity politics?

Criticizing the meta-narrative of Muslim representation points to the tension between, on the one hand, "minority politics" and, on the other, "identity politics".

By minority politics, I mean the issue of representing Muslims as a single community in India's minority environment. Since 1947, minority politics has mainly been the prerogative of a set of organizations controlled by a political and religious elite hailing from North India's dominant Muslim caste groups (designated by the term *ashraf*, or noble). Among those, the religious scholars (ulama) have consistently maintained a conservative stance preventing change in the norms that guide the community. Organizations like the All India Muslim Personal Law Board or the Muslim Majlis-i Mushawarat essentially deal with relatively symbolic matters—such as the place of Urdu, the minority status of educational institutions, or the preservation of a separate personal law for Muslims—without paying much heed to socio-economic problems. My research confirms, on the basis of a biographical database constituted with historian Laurence Gautier, the fact that the leaders of such organizations have since 1947 been almost entirely from dominant, *ashraf* caste groups.

This form of minority politics has increasingly attracted criticising in the past few decades, from groups whose actions could be qualified, by contrast, as “identity politics”. Identity politics here designate the representation of sectional interests (of caste or sect) within Muslims, and the denunciation of internal discrepancies. Several organizations—such as the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz—challenge the political and religious leadership of Muslim elites by accusing them of using the need for the Muslim minority to stay united as a way of maintaining their dominant position. These organizations claim to represent marginalized caste groups among Muslims—or *pasmanda*—and mobilize on the basis of caste to demand greater equality. Organizations like the PMM are in fact only the tip of the iceberg: they aggregate or federate a myriad of local and regional caste-based organizations. Their community work, apart from practical matters like religious events or marriages, also involves identity construction and the production of a new collective narrative. This narrative generally rests on a myth of origins that ties the community to the origins of Islam in the Arabic peninsula. In that sense, these communities seek to appropriate for themselves a characteristic of *ashraf* groups, their supposed foreign origin.

However, this form of “identity politics” has so far failed to make a dent as an electoral force. The recent legislative assembly elections in the Indian state of Bihar are a case in point. Although this state has historically been at the forefront of *pasmanda* mobilizations and in spite of the recent creation of a new organization ahead of the elections, very few candidates from *pasmanda* groups fielded by political parties and only three were actually elected. In many ways, the voting pattern of Indian Muslims thus remains largely determined by the wish to oppose the party currently in power.



figure 4: The Ansari Mahapanchayat was founded in 2019, ahead of the elections in the Indian state of Bihar, and seeks to represent Muslims of the weaver caste group (Momin Ansari).

Conclusion

Caste among Indian Muslims is not a fading but an evolving phenomenon. The contemporary relevance of caste-based mobilization among Muslims shows in the fact that numerous associations keep being created to voice social and political demands. If these groups find it

hard to get their representatives elected, their political role works at a local level through processes of identity construction, and could eventually contribute to a broader representativeness of organizations that speak in the name of Indian Muslims.

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