

Caste should be seen as the overarching category in Indian society

Khalid Anis Ansari

Khalid Anis Ansari

Caste should be seen as the overarching category in Indian society
March 29th, 2017

Retrieved on 16th December 2025 from roundtableindia.co
*The interview focuses on the Pasmanda movement, on the issues of secularism/communalism and on the upper caste hegemony in all political, cultural and social fields in India. The interview was conducted by **Kuffir**, Contributing Editor, Round Table India, and produced by **Gurinder Azad**.*

You can watch the full video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWeeaXADPBw> *Transcribed by Myneni Deepu.*

sa.theanarchistlibrary.org

March 29th, 2017

Kuffir: So, what does Pasmanda mean?

Khalid Anis Ansari: Pasmanda is a Persian term, which means 'those who have been left behind'. So if you look at the term, it has parallels to the term 'Dalit', which is used for the ex-untouchables. Dalit means broken down, someone who has been stepped upon. So it's a similar term. Pasmanda actually encapsulates the Bahujan Muslims. Just like in the so-called Hindu community, there are OBCs, Dalits, STs, and the Bahujan term is the broad signifier which captures these experiences – similarly, Pasmanda captures the experiences of the OBC Muslims, the Shudra Muslims, the Ati-shudra Muslims, and also the Adivasi Muslims. So it's a broad signifier; it's an umbrella term which captures all these groups.

Kuffir: There is some confusion which is sought to be created. Some would like to say this is a new terminology or a new movement which is being invented by certain sections. But there is a history of the Pasmanda Muslim right from the time of conversion. They have not been fully embraced or taken into the Muslim fold – or the upper caste Muslim fold. So, could you trace the history, going back, let's say, was it there from the beginning from the time Islam entered India?

Khalid: No, what I would say is, one, the entire understanding of history in terms of religion, while it may highlight a few things, it also excludes a lot of experiences. For example, if we see India, or even south Asia, caste should be seen as a social system; as an access of social stratification which cuts across identities. In that sense, all religions, or all the interpretative systems of religions have legitimized caste in one way or another. Whether it be the Hindu religious systems, whether it be the Islamic system, later even Sikhism, even Christianity – they have legitimized caste hierarchies. And on an empirical level, almost every faith group is differentiated into a number of castes. So every faith group has these caste cleavages. So in my opinion, these caste groups must not be located within the broad overarching 'faith' category. Rather, caste should be seen as the overarching category. And there are internal divisions on the basis of faith, on the basis of sexuality, on the basis of gender and so on. Because caste is the master signifier which actually allocates work, it allocates sexuality, allocates distribution of labour, who gets what, who marries whom. So the broader Indian society cannot be understood unless we enter through the caste category.

Kuffir: Caste is a social system and faith may decrease the rigidity of it but can't stop it totally. That is the understanding?

Khalid: I would still object to that – this entire understanding that Hindu society is very rigid and Muslim caste is less rigid. I would ask for more ethnographic work, more empirical data, before that is established. It is slightly dangerous to have a certain notion of classical or textual Islam and impose that on the empirical reality. There is very less ethnographic work done on the lower caste Muslims. So, unless we have more substantive narratives coming from there, we won't be in a position to make a very generalized statement that Hindu society is more rigid and Muslim caste society is less rigid. Because we have to speak to the victims first. How do the victims perceive? Because there are as many regional differences within the so-called Hindu society as there are within the Muslim society. When we are talking about Hindu community or Muslim community – for example, if we talk about the Muslim community, the anthropological *The People of India* project says that there are 705 occupational endogamous groups within Muslims. Now if you are talking about 705 occupational groups, one needs to ask further – which are the groups facing most discrimination in terms of caste? What are their experiences? How do they articulate that? Whether there is even a sense. For example there is the question of Muslim *Mehtars*, the *halakhors*, right? Would one say that their discrimination is less, when compared to the Hindu *Mehtar*?

Kuffir: But Muslim lower caste doesn't face discrimination only from the Muslim upper castes. It also faces it from the other sections.

Khalid: Absolutely.

Kuffir: So this intersectionality doesn't really work because everyone does look down upon the lower castes. In this connection, we could say that caste actually came in with the converts, or that the religion didn't/doesn't really matter.

So there is this very important work of Masood Alam Falahi, which traces in a way the history of caste practices among the Muslims in the last few centuries at least, could you talk about the book?

Khalid: Before going to the book, there are a few things that I would like to flag. One, whether you take Arabian society or any other society 1500 years back; all of these societies had hierarchies. There was some primitive accumulation...all of these societies were internally stratified societies. How that hierarchy was arranged might

be different. For example, in the case of Arabia, the hierarchy may be arranged in terms of tribe, in terms of the tribal identity. In India it could be arranged in terms of caste. If you look at the early Islamic literature, there is too much discussion on hierarchies – especially in the sense of genealogy. Even in India, during the so-called Muslim rule, there was an office established by the court which was called the *Niqabat* – the office of the *Niqabat*. The task of this office was to monitor the genealogy of Syeds. And once that genealogy was passed; that ‘these are authentic Syeds’, then they could apply for government positions. So there were major positions that were actually reserved for Syeds, and the Niqabat was the office which was used to monitor authentic caste claims. And if you look at the entire Islamic history, there is too much fixation in genealogies. Which race you come from, which tribe you come from...so my intuitive speculation would be that when the early Muslims who arrived here – whether they were Arabs, Turks, Abyssinians, Mughals, whatever – they were not very surprised with what was here, because they were already introduced to hierarchies there. So it was a kind of eclecticism, where when they arrived in India, they found there is an already well-functioning system. Then they required a legitimating vocabulary, and I think they drew this legitimating vocabulary from the coffers of Islam itself. So this entire understanding that caste came from Hinduism; it is only a small part of the truth. There is much that has happened within the Islamic frame which is probably occluded and invisibilised, and that is what Masood Alam Falahi has laid a finger on. There is much that requires to be done on that count, but it’s a very good beginning. He has compiled a number of *fatwas*, opinions of legal juris, and he has shown how they were *Manuvadi* – that is the term he used – *Manuvadi Ulema*. How the Ulemas are practicing Manuvaad within a faith tradition which is supposed to be egalitarian.

Kuffir: If you say Manuvadi Ulema, there is also this term *Manu Mullah* which I found in a Telugu poem – we had shared that. Masood Falahi’s work is also important because he traced almost from the very beginning. Especially from the days of the Delhi Sultanate in north India. So there is this history already and there are these recognized groups that – you might call it *biradari*, or you might call it *zaat*; there were certain terms like *badzaat* which exclusively came over from Urdu in a way...

these brands, all these have failed miserably, in addressing the concerns of the most excluded. And now it’s the time to re-think on all these political spectrums.

landless labourers and so on and so forth; those who are the victims of riots and all kinds of islamophobic violence – most of them are Pasmanda Muslims. So the victims are actually Pasmanda Muslims, and the beneficiaries of the victimhood discourse, are the Ashrafia Muslims. So most of the institutions, and the NGOs that work for the so-called victims – they are all dominated by those classes. So what I feel is, that this notion of Muslim victimhood....because of the persistence of episodes of communal riots, and this entire notion of Muslim victimhood, it has created a kind of a siege mentality. It has fixated the entire so-called Muslim discourse, on a few key issues. And most of these issues are very emotional issues and are very instrumental in occluding; in invisibilising the bread-and-butter concerns of the majority of the Muslims who happen to be Pasmanda. So what is the state of artisans? – There is hardly any discussion. Are the artisans committing suicide because of what is happening due to globalization? – There is no discussion on that. What is the state of landless labourers?

For example, I would say, lets us look at the main political trends in India. Whether it is the left discourse, whether it is the majoritarian discourse, whether it is the minority discourse, my test would be: how do you engage with the most excluded? For example, the university where I work, there is a *Van Gurjar* community. So we visited this *Van Gurjar* community some time back. There are rows and rows – hamlets of *van gurjars*, and the highest education that anyone has received there was class 5. The *van gurjars* are included in the ST list in Kashmir, but they are not recognized in the ST list of UP. Who will fight these battles? How is the minority politics benefitting these *van gurjars*? How is the OBC-Dalit politics benefitting these *van gurjars*? How is the left politics benefitting these *van gurjars*? If in the last 60-70 years, the highest education that a *Van Gurjar* child has got is class 5, what kind of progressive politics is happening in this country? So I think we need to really critically evaluate all the major political trajectories – the First Past the Post System – and how to make our democracy more robust and more sensitive to those who are demographically very weak, who are economically most marginalised...whether the so-called progressive – whether it is Dalit politics, whether it is Bahujan politics, whether it is minority politics – whether these politics actually mean anything to these communities. That is the test. And my own intuitive hunch is that all

Khalid: Sir Syed used the term *badzaat julaha* for those artisans, who rebelled against the company; against the *Raj*. So he used the term *badzaat julaha*, when he was referring to the rebellion in Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind, where he wrote about the causes for the revolt of 1857. That was exactly the term he that he used, *badzaat julaha*.

Kuffir: So this is important. When we come back to the 19th century and the so-called freedom struggle or the nationalist movement, we come upon Sir Syed and we come upon all these Brahmin nationalists. And what we note is that there was Phule and there was Ambedkar later, and in the interim period there were lots of others across the country; there were also the Adi-Dharam movement in Punjab and also the Adi-Hindu movement, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra – all these were lower caste movements and self-respect movements. Similarly, there has also been a movement among the lower caste Muslims. Whether it was the Dalit or the OBC (what are now known as OBC and Dalit), could you talk about that recent history also? Probably with Abdul Qaiyum Ansari..

Khalid: I'll start backwards. I'll start with whatever was happening in Hindu society – similar movements and trajectories were evident within the Muslim society as well. So, within 1880s, 1870s onwards, after the first Census – I think it was in 1871 when the first census started – most of the lower caste Muslims, at least those Muslims who were slightly numerically strong and had a certain emerging section of an educated class; they started inventing various mythologies of origin, from 1880 onwards. They started using and appropriating upper caste surnames in order to gain some self-respect, because most of their caste titles were used as derogatory terms and objects of abuse. And the moment they had some social mobility, they wanted to first '*Ashrafise*' themselves or '*Islamise*' themselves, so that they could at least have some modicum of self-respect within the Muslim body politic. The *Mansuris* – the cotton carders – they traced their genealogy to Mansur-al-Halaj, the Sufi who said *Ana 'l-haqq* (I am the truth). They started using the title *Mansuri*. The *Julahas* – the weavers – created another story, of how they were related to Ayyub Ansari from Medina, and started using the term *Ansari*. Similarly, the butchers – the *Kasais* – they started using '*Qureshi*'. Now most of these were upper caste titles. *Ansari* was an upper caste title at that point of time, *Qureshi* was an upper caste title; and when the lower castes started inventing their own mythologies of origin in order to

gain self-respect they started using their new surnames, appropriating the upper caste surnames.

There was a meeting in Deoband – Mufti Mohammed Shafi...

Kuffir: Was this in the 1870s?

Khalid: No this was later, in the early 1900s. So, a meeting was called by Mufti Mohammed Shafi and other Deoband upper caste Ashraf stalwarts. And the meeting was called to ban, to pass a law, to say that this appropriation of upper caste surnames should be made illegal. This was at that point of time. So, these lower caste Muslims, *they are now trying to islamize themselves*. This Islamisation attempt or Ashrafisation attempt was not being taken kindly at all by the Ashrafia class. Then let us take the term *Qaum*, for instance, which now stands for ‘the community’. Till 1870-1880s, if you read the Urdu literature, even if you read the speeches of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and other stalwarts, this term ‘*Qaum*’ actually denotes the higher elite *shareef* classes. It is later on, when democracy becomes inevitable, and numbers become crucial in the political game; when just belonging to the propertied class and being educated didn’t matter anymore, and there was now some understanding that democracy is now inevitable and there would be universal adult franchise and every vote would matter – then suddenly the definition of *Qaum* is expanded to include the other lower castes. Otherwise in the previous literature, *Qaum* means Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan, Rajputs and so on and so forth.

Kuffir: Just as with the Brahmins.

Khalid: Yes, and others were *julahas*, they are *Mansuris*, *Dunias*, *Kasais* – but not ‘proper’ Muslims.

They are neo-converts, or....there is always a sense of lack. That the ‘Muslim’ would be defined by the Ashrafia class. Their culture, their language – that would be the norm. The rest...everything else is...there is a sense of lack. So everyone has to compete; they have to keep on becoming like the Ashrafia Muslims. So they have to wear a *Sherwani*, they have to speak chaste Urdu, they have to use a particular kind of poetry..in order to become a respectable Muslim – those trends were going on.

Around the 1920s or so, Abdul Qaiyum Ansari – which I actually call the First Wave of Pasmanda Politics – he was instrumental in consolidating the Momin conference. I think it was formed around 1925 or something. There were caste associations that started forming

4 percent. So, 3-4 percent bagging almost 50-55 percent government jobs – and they are whipping this discourse of Muslim backwardness. Even in the 1920s-30s, this ‘slip’ from 60 percent to 30 percent....Now I see this as a great problem. Because they are not approaching these numbers – the question of representation – through a democratic mindset. They are approaching it from the mindset of a ruling-class. That Hindus and Muslims are two communities, and ‘we are partners’, and so our share should be 50-50 in all. So the democratic sensibility is not there, that ‘if our population is 5 percent, our representation should be 5 percent’. Dr. Ambedkar also, in his book *Pakistan (or, the Partition of India)*, he has references...

Kuffir: You talk of the north...the state was similar in Hyderabad. In fact, much more, on the higher side. Maybe you will study Hyderabad also; it needs to be studied – their history, a ‘sudden backwardness’ creeping in....There were lots of backward Muslims; as you said the Pasmanda were uncovered, they had no access to these positions anyway. So also, in Hyderabad, Telangana, Marathwada, Karnataka – all these places. So how would you say the Pasmanda has, until now, not gained much by way of getting the same assurances as the others? Most of the Hindu OBCs; at least 80 percent are covered right now. They are not properly enumerated in the censuses, but at least the *jatis* are covered right now. And (the remaining) 20 percent of much more smaller *jatis* have to be spotted again and discovered. Now Muslims’ *jatis*, I suspect only 40 or 50 percent have been uncovered until now. So this process also has not been completed and actually aggravates the situation of the artisanal Muslims especially...They are moved away from agriculture, many of them, except UP-Bihar possibly. So their situation, as Sachar too honestly points out – that *Ajlaf* and *Arzal* as the most deprived among all Indian sections. So why has there not been any political eruption, let’s say, when every other class does demand? What has been the history of the Pasmanda since 1947?

Khalid: I’ll add on to what we were discussing about this entire trajectory of this argument of Muslim backwardness. So, this is working even when the Muslims are over-represented. I think that trajectory continues even 50s onwards. One, Ashraf Muslims are over-represented in power structures, and they rake in this Muslim victimhood card to their own advantage. Most of the excluded Muslims; whether they are the artisans or the other occupational castes, or the

use your caste titles', or 'inform the census person that we belong to this caste'.

Kuffir: Gurinder also talks of a contemporarily similar movement started by the Arya Samaj or the Hindu Maha Sabha in Lahore and other places, where they went on to so-called Hindu households and Dalit households especially, telling them to register themselves as Hindu and not as Untouchables or Dalits. So it was a similar kind of movement.

So, how did the independence of India affect the Pasmanda?

Khalid: If you look at the pre-1947 stage, the Muslim politics, especially the ML (Muslim League) politics... it was dominated by the Muslim landlords; by the aristocratic classes. And most of the lower Muslim castes, they were the *rayyats* (ryots) – they were almost like serfs, with great restrictions on commensality, on mobility... From the narratives that I have recorded in my research work, in many Bihar and UP villages, when I meet these old people who have some memories, there is almost a uniform pattern – everyone said 'we were not allowed to wear clothes of our choice'. When the *Zamindar* or the people belonging to 'those' families were sitting somewhere, 'we had to bow as we passed'. In some cases, they had to take their slippers in their hands and then move...so all kinds of discrimination were there.

Kuffir: Similar to...

Khalid: Almost almost similar!

Now this entire narrative of Muslim backwardness; this is very interesting and I want to say something about it. Right from Hunter Commission onwards in 1870s, to Rajinder Sachar and Ranganath Mishra, there is this discourse of Muslim backwardness. So the 'entire Muslims are the subaltern community', 'they are a marginalized community', and so on and so forth. If you look at the data in the 1880's in the united provinces, then in terms of government services, the Muslims – if I'm not wrong, their population in the United Provinces was around 22-23 percent at that point of time, pre-independence – and their representation in the government services in the 1870s-80s was around 60 percent. So 22 percent in the population, and their representation in government services is around 55-60 percent. Now out of this 22 percent, if we stick to the thesis, that class and caste were almost coeval at that point of time – because capitalism had not entered and modernity had not entered in a big way – then out of this 22 percent, the *Shurfa* (ashraf) elite class would be around 3 or

from 1900 onwards – there was Jamiat-ul-Ansar, Jamiat-ul-Quresh, Jamiat-ul-Mansoor. And it is very interesting that most of the caste organisations were formed in Calcutta, (where Faqir works these days) – because most of these lower castes went to Calcutta to make it big in life; they wanted to move out of villages in Bihar and UP and migrated to Calcutta, and that is where they got some politicisation and they formed these caste associations. These caste associations consolidated and joined ranks and formed the Momin conference. So the Momin conference – which is the first wave of Pasmanda politics – it challenged the Ashrafi hegemony over Muslim politics. And something which is never really discussed, is that on the lines of Dr. Ambedkar, that he asked for a separate electorate for the Dalits. The Momin conference raised the demand for a separate electorate in around 1938-39.

Kuffir: Almost around the same time.

Khalid: Right, in the 1930s. So that is the first wave, and it was a *razeel* collective. It was seen as a *razeel* collective. The Momin conference brought together the butchers, the *saifis*, the Mansuris...

Kuffir: Razeel means low born?

Khalid: Yes, low born. It was kind of a *razeel* collective and again, the term 'Momin' is important. Because if you look at history, then the claim to be religious was always monopolised by the Ashrafia class. 'We have a certain genealogy, so we are the *pucca* Muslims.' And the rest are the 'other' Muslims, lesser Muslims, who are lacking. And that is why the term 'Momin' is important. Momin means someone who is pious, someone who is very close to god. They used the term Momin to stress that 'we are equally good Muslims'. They were still working within the Muslim body politic. So in the first wave, there is no strong criticism of Islam or there is no historical excavation as such. But in terms of politics, there is the question or representation which was raised, the question of separate electorate which was raised. Abdul Qaiyum Ansari was instrumental in forming 'Momin Hostels' when he became a minister from the 1950s onwards.

Kuffir: Can I stop you for a second here. All this – let's look at the geography as well – all this was happening in Bihar and UP.

Khalid: And Bengal.

Kuffir: And Bengal. Please continue.

Khalid: So, that was the first wave. The Momin conference contested the Two-Nation theory, it critiqued the Muslim league every-

where...but unfortunately, because there was a restricted franchise; a restricted electorate – not everyone was allowed to vote – in the 1946 elections which is also dubbed as the ‘consensus on Pakistan’, only 12 percent of Muslims were allowed to vote. At that point of time, only the propertied classes or those who had a certain amount of educational attainments; only they could vote. So the majority of the Muslim vote was not even put to test. In that sense, if there is a ‘consensus on Pakistan’ it was these 12 percent who actually supported (the formation of) Pakistan. The Pasmanda vote – because there is a caste and class correlation; it is so stark even now..in the 1940s it must have been absolutely coeval...upper caste would mean upper class, as simple as that – 85-87 percent of the lower caste vote, was not even put to test.

Kuffir: And there was no significant migration as such of the lower castes?

Khalid: At least from the caste group which I come from, there were active campaigns all across UP-Bihar that ‘we should not migrate, this is the land of our birth, this is where our ancestors are buried, and so we shall not move’. So the Momin conference again had the greatest influence on the *julahas*; on the weavers – we can speak on that even later. But eventually that was again a problem. The Momin conference became, slowly but steadily a *julaha* conference – an organization dominated by the north Indian weavers. And that is why the other Muslim groups which joined the Momin conference in the 1920-30s, they slowly got distanced from this organization because they started feeling that it had become a pressure group for the *julaha*, Ansari Muslims.

So the first wave protested, raised, flagged certain critiques about the Ashrafiya politics. There was no great excavation on Islamic history and so on, but at least it was an interesting interruption to the elite Ashraf politics in India.

Kuffir: Lets look at the colonial state at that point. They did give some space to the Scheduled Castes, they did give some space to the Scheduled Tribes, they were called to the Round Table conferences, they were also called to the various committees. How did the Indians or the British Indians treat or respond to this aspiration?

Khalid: I think it went largely unacknowledged by the colonial authorities. Even in Dr. Ambedkar’s writings, the first mention of Momin, I find in the 1946 text, *What Gandhi and Congress had done*

to the Untouchables. There is the first mention of the word Momin, but Momin is treated there as a caste group, without its political ramifications. But at least there is some acknowledgement of that. I don’t know, maybe at that point of time, he...

Kuffir: But he did point out caste among Muslims..

Khalid: Yes yes, absolutely.

Kuffir: So as a political movement it largely remained within the northern belt, because the nationalist movement was also stronger there.

Khalid: Absolutely.

Kuffir: So it spread over the years to the rest of the country. The largest number of Muslims were, at a certain point of time in Indian history, in the south and the west. Now the west has emptied itself in many ways...

Khalid: In terms of symbolisms, there is just one thing..I think there was a huge protest organized by the Momin conference in the 1930s in Delhi. And if I’m not wrong, I’ve read that there’s a mention that around one lakh people had gathered in that protest. So there was some mobilization on that count.

Kuffir: So we could also see this as a certain kind of lack of resources, affecting them more. Because this is a large section of population almost as much as the Dalit population is right now. 14 percent or 13 percent could be lower caste Muslims...what do you think would be their percentage?

Khalid: Of Pasmanda Muslims? Pasmanda Muslims would be around 85 percent of the Muslim population.

Kuffir: The Muslim population in India is now 14 percent, then it must have been higher I think?

Khalid: It must have been around 22 percent.

Kuffir: So (even) 18% (of that) could have been larger than the Dalit population in some parts. And this movement was ignored by mainstream political parties...anyway the Muslim league ignored it? What was the response?

Khalid: No, Muslim League actively campaigned against the Momin conference! In the 1931 census, I think they went from villages to villages saying that you should only use the term Muslim; ‘don’t mention your caste when the census person comes to you’. So there was an active campaign against the Momin conference. And Momin conference went from house to house, mentioning ‘please do