

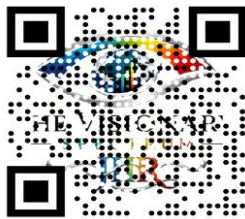
The Fracture of Masawat: Colonial Classification, Internal Stratification, and the Political Economy of Contemporary Muslim Castes in Bihar

Premandu Raj Jain¹, Dr.Birendra Kr.Singh²

¹Research scholar, Department of history, Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar Bihar University

²Supervisor, Department of history, Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar Bihar University

¹Email: premandujain@yahoo.com



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Corresponding Author:

Premandu Raj Jain

Email: premandujain@yahoo.com

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Abstract:

This article examines the historical construction, sociological evolution, and contemporary material realities of Islamic identity and internal social stratification in South Asia, with a specific focus on the post-partition administrative geography of Bihar. Moving beyond reified, theology-centric definitions of religion, we utilize the framework of "lived religion" to analyse how intra-Muslim contestations act as the primary engine for identity formation. By tracing the historical trajectories of conversion, the systemic emergence of the Biradri system, and the tripartite stratification of Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal classes, this paper deconstructs the persistent tension between scriptural egalitarianism (Masawat) and lived hierarchical realities. Finally, utilizing empirical survey data, twentieth-century commission reports, and recent census figures, we demonstrate how this social hierarchy is actively weaponized by severe socio-economic marginalization, educational deficits, and structural displacements within Bihar's contemporary political economy.

Keywords: sociological evolution, Islamic identity, internal social stratification, South Asia, educational deficits.

I. Introduction: Colonial Categorization and the Paradigms of Lived Religion

The construction of modern Islamic identity in South Asia was forged through competing responses to British colonial classification. While British administrative efforts sought to fragment the Muslim population through rigid census categories, some Muslims actively worked to build a unified

community under the overarching concept of *Qaum*. Concurrently, another group contested colonial categories by shifting focus away from collective unity, choosing instead to engage with an internal, highly localized terminology of *muqallid* (blind followers of jurisprudence) and *ghair muqallid* (non-conformists). Although scholar Zaidi tends to define religion strictly in terms of the "solely theological," he acknowledges that for most Muslims, the most impactful issues were deeply focused on the nuances of everyday ritual rather than grand theological narratives. This focus aligns with Sher Ali Tareen's *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*, which demonstrates how dense doctrinal debates were made visceral through their entanglement with social relationships and shifting political realities. By recognizing that religion extends beyond abstract doctrines, Zaidi's framework illuminates how internal, intra-Muslim debates acted as a powerful engine for identity formation.

Despite these insights, the theoretical execution of such historical analyses remain limited by a frequent disengagement from contemporary critical theory. Over the past few decades, the discipline of religious studies has increasingly cantered on "lived religion," deliberately challenging historical attempts to define religion as a solely theological construct—a framework that is itself a deeply rooted colonial inheritance. Pathbreaking work by scholars like David Hall, Robert Orsi, and Catherine Bell has developed a robust methodological approach emphasizing that lived ritual and inherent contradiction sit at the very heart of religious categories, rather than suggesting that these contradictions deny the validity or presence of a religious tradition. However, much of the conventional historiography does not acknowledge this extensive body of work within religious studies. Maintaining a sharp, reified division between "theology" and "politics"—a dichotomy that contemporary scholarship has long debunked—ultimately serves as a significant theoretical shortcoming. It fails to account for how theological mandates are continuously renegotiated on the ground.

II. Conversion Dynamics and the Genesis of Subcontinental Stratification

To fully appreciate these localized dynamics, one must examine the conversion processes that shaped Indian Islam.

Islam constitutes a formidable religious institution in India, representing the nation's largest minority and a major demographic component. While historical shifts—from the ancient migration of Indo-Aryans to the settlements of indigenous Dravidians—gradually transformed early Hinduism into an elitist religious manifestation, the subsequent advent of Islam offered an alternative societal framework. Drawn to Islam's ideal of social equality and its egalitarian worldview, massive waves of voluntary conversions occurred across the subcontinent. Muslim preachers specifically engaged the lower rungs of society, attracting individuals heavily disenchanted by the rigorous Hindu caste system. As political theorist M.N. Roy noted, low-caste populations embraced Islam to secure equal social treatment, yet they frequently maintained their traditional spatial and cultural practices.

Consequently, contemporary Indian Islam exhibits a distinct South Asian geographic trait, assimilating regional accretions that diverge from linear Islamic theology and challenge the notion of a homogenous religious entity. Geographical variances heavily influence how the religion is practiced, creating a sharp dichotomy between egalitarian religious commandments and the lived

realities of its followers. Despite Islam's vehement theological denial of hierarchy, Indian Muslims practice social discrimination based on caste and lineage. This structural fragmentation is clearly traced through stratified social classes, most notably the *Ashraf* (noble lineages such as the Syeds and Sheikhs) and the *Ajlaf* or *Arzal* (indigenous converted groups, including the Ansaris).

Historical and anthropological assessments position these early Islamic preachers in India as vital social reformers who actively disowned caste discrimination and challenged monopolistic, exclusionary religious practices. As prominent historian Romila Thapar observes, the advent of medieval Islam significantly fostered a sense of community identity and "ethnicity feeling" among historically oppressed low-caste populations. While heterodox traditions like Buddhism initially resisted Brahminical hegemony, scholars argue that the institutional framework of Islam provided a more enduring and structurally formidable alternative to this social stratification. Driven by the systematic neglect of their welfare by high-caste elites, Dalit and working-class populations voluntarily embraced Islam to escape deep-seated caste vices.

While historical data verified by researchers like R.C. Majumdar confirms that the volume of Dalit conversions was significantly higher, the faith remained fully accessible to upper-class individuals, drawing adherents from across the socioeconomic spectrum. However, this mass demographic transition created a profound cultural synthesis and subsequent social dilemma. As K.N. Panikkar notes, these native converts frequently functioned as "quasi-Muslims," adopting a new, egalitarian belief system while simultaneously carrying forward the traditional, pre-conversion practices of their erstwhile Hindu communities. Sociologists and historians, including Imtiaz Ahmad and Irfan Habib, have documented this ongoing contradiction, noting how South Asia's deeply entrenched caste system survived among converted Muslims despite flatly violating Islamic precepts of absolute social equality. This persistence was further compounded by the aggressive, exclusionary attitudes of upper-tier Muslim elites—including descendants of foreign migrants and high-caste Hindu converts—who actively resisted internal egalitarian reform to preserve their socio-economic dominance, thereby absorbing the structural ills of the broader community into the Islamic framework.

III. The Anatomy of Biradri: Tribal and Regional Kinship Networks

Anthropologists investigating this complex composition classify Indian Muslims into three overarching analytical categories: racial divisions, tribal divisions, and social stratification, with each field further segmented into distinct subsections. Within the broader racial and ancestral taxonomy, scholars identify five primary lineages: the Mughals (descendants of Babur from the Turan region), the Iranians/Persians (originating south of the Oxus River), the Pathans/Afghans (descendants of non-Mughal Afghan migrants), the Arabs (early pre-Islamic maritime traders who settled and intermarried locally), and the Native Indian Muslims (indigenous converts who constitute the overwhelming majority of the contemporary demographic). Ultimately, while these ancestral and occupational divisions persist, empirical research indicates that this mind-boggling stratification remains fundamentally distinct and less rigidly rooted among Indian Muslims than the ritual purity and pollution frameworks found within the traditional Hindu community.

Anthropological and sociological investigations into South Asian Islam further reveal a complex network of tribal divisions and regional kinship structures that run parallel to scriptural mandates. While primary sacred texts such as the Quran and Hadith contain no theological validation for social stratification—instead advocating for *Masawat* (absolute equality of status)—historical Islamic societies early on accommodated socio-economic inequalities through the principle of *Kifa'* (marital compatibility) and the historic socio-political pre-eminence granted to the Quraish tribe. Over time, race and origin of birth crystallized into powerful social forces, manifesting in the subcontinent as a deeply entrenched system of localized stratification known as "*Biradri*".

Anthropologists classify these internal divisions across distinct tribal and regional axes, including the Pathans (Afghan migrants split into the traditionally superior Sarabin lineage and the Kalani division), the Saiyids of Bohra (an influential eighteenth-century clan claiming direct prophetic genealogy), the Balochis (a Sunni military clan under the Mughals that absorbed sub-Saharan migrant elements), the Shaikhzanas (indigenous native Muslims recognized as descendants of saints), the Mewatis (neo-Muslims of Haryana who maintain Rajput military lineages and syncretic Hindu customs), the Gakkars (a military community situated along the Chenab River), and the Bohras (a close-knit Shiite mercantile community).

In regions like Bihar, this stratification operates through a distinct tripartite hierarchical model determined by ethnic origin and traditional occupation:

1. **The Ashraf:** The noble elite of foreign or high-caste Hindu origin, including landowners, religious figures, and political leaders like the Saiyads, Shaikhs, Mullicks, Mughals, and Pathans.
2. **The Ajlaf:** The working or artisan class comprising native occupational groups such as the Ansari weavers, Mansoori cotton-carders, Saifi blacksmiths, Idrisis tailors, Qureshi butchers, and the insular Kulhaiyas of the Kosi River basin.
3. **The Arzal:** The severely excluded underclass directly comparable to Hindu Dalits. This Arzal tier is relegated to marginal or menial trades, encompassing groups like the Mehtars, Lalbegis, and Halalkhors (sweepers/scavengers), Dhobis (washermen), Bhatiaras (innkeepers), Naalband (horse-shoe makers), Rangrezs (dyers), Churihars (bangle-makers), and non-sedentary nomadic street performers like the Nats and Bakhos.

Ultimately, while this multi-tiered *Biradri* structure presents a mind-boggling array of internal segmentations, empirical research notes it remains fundamentally distinct from the Hindu caste system, as it operates as a socioeconomic adaptation lacking the explicit, immutable metaphysical sanctions of ritual purity and pollution.

IV. Material Realities and Structural Marginalization in Bihar and Jharkhand

Empirical data from the late twentieth century illuminates the profound socio-economic marginalisation, extreme educational deficits, and structural exclusion characterizing the most vulnerable *Arzal* sub-castes within the Muslim community of Bihar and Jharkhand. This acute deprivation is starkly exemplified by communities such as the Kanhaiya's, whose population in the early 1990s was estimated at 12 million yet suffered from a dismal 3 per cent literacy rate—dropping to a mere 1 per cent among females. Reliant on traditional and agrarian livelihoods like cattle grazing,

bullock cart or boat navigation, and seasonal unskilled labour migration to Punjab and metropolitan hubs, 99 per cent of this demographic remained rural, with 50 per cent trapped in perennial debt to private village moneylenders. This systemic vulnerability resulted in zero representation within the Bihar Police Service and a near-total absence of professional capital, counting only seven doctors, seven college teachers, and 25 high school teachers across the entire community.

A parallel trajectory of marginalisation is visible in the Shershahabadi community—historically classified under pejorative labels like Mal Dahiya, Bhatiya, Budhiya, and Bediya across the Kosi belt—who were entering colonial records as criminal tribes. Comprising 75 per cent landless labourers residing in bamboo and grass dwellings, their sub-3 per cent literacy prompted the District Magistrate of Katihar (1976–77) and the Tribal Research Institute, Ranchi, to recommend their inclusion as Most Backward Castes (MBCs); however, their lack of electoral numerical strength stalled their transition into Annexure I categories.

Amidst this structural stagnation, specific groups have pursued upward mobility through 'Ashrafisation'—a sociological phenomenon heavily akin to M.N. Srinivas's concept of 'Sanskritization' among Hindus—as seen by the Sheeshagar (glass and bangle workers) adopting the elite title of Siddiqain. Despite an estimated population of 5.5 lakhs in the Bihar-Jharkhand plateau, the Mungeri Lal Commission Report (1971–1976) details how modern economic shifts rendering traditional glass bangles obsolete severely worsened their financial position, leaving 90 per cent landless. The Sheeshagars showcase a severely restricted pool of success stories, with only 300 individuals passing Intermediate examinations and a near-total absence of female representation in higher education. Ultimately, these extreme disparities demonstrate that while Muslim social stratification in other states may rely strictly on localized group membership, the internal hierarchy in Bihar is uniquely weaponized by deep socio-economic and occupational displacement.

This systemic exclusion is further reinforced by urban sociological analyses. Empirical sociological surveys conducted among a hundred randomly selected families (with a population under 600) spanning localized *Ajlaf* and *Arzal* sub-castes in Patna—including the Dhobi (Hawaris), Halalkhor, Bakho, Pamaria (Abbasi), Machhuara, Nalband, Nat, Gadheri (Ibrahimi), Bhatiyara (Faruqi), Gorkan (Sain/Faqir), and Pasi—expose severe levels of structural deprivation that outstrip the socio-economic vulnerabilities of Hindu Dalits. Educational capital within this cohort is virtually non-existent, counting a mere three Intermediate certificate holders, one graduate, and one matriculate, which translates directly into extreme institutional underrepresentation restricted to five low-tier public sector roles (two peons, two sweepers, and one constable).

The material reality of these households is defined by absolute landlessness, chronic housing and sanitation deficits (72–80 per cent lack private dwellings or toilets), and severe food insecurity, with 25 per cent of families limited to a single daily meal, 95 per cent unable to regularly afford pulses, and 78 per cent living barefoot due to a failure to meet a baseline subsistence income of 75 rupees per day. Despite this acute marginalisation, constitutional provisions restricting Scheduled Caste (SC) status on religious grounds bar these underclasses from accessing defensive affirmative action benefits, provoking deep academic and legal critiques regarding the secular integrity of state policy.

In response to this stagnation, subaltern segments have historically weaponized social mobility strategies. Contemporary demands to include certain agricultural Sheikhs within Backward Caste lists draw directly upon nineteenth-century colonial ethnography by Francis Buchanan and Henry Miers Elliot, who documented that

local, non-Aryan peasantry frequently adopted the prestigious Sheikh title to construct a noble past—a socio-religious process William R. Pinch equates with the Sanskritized identity shifts of the Kurmi, Yadav, and Kushvaha Hindu peasants. Demographically, this stratified population has grown steadily; the Muslim population of Bihar expanded from 75 lakh (13.48 per cent) in 1961 at a growth rate of 31.26 per cent, eventually reaching 16.5 per cent (13.7 million) in the 2001 Census, representing 10 per cent of the total national Muslim demographic. Following the bifurcation of Jharkhand in September 2000, this population remains highly concentrated within the post-partition administrative geography of Bihar's 37 districts, clustering heavily within the eastern Purnea division (encompassing Kishanganj, Araria, and Purnea districts) and the northern Tirhut division.

V. Modern Macroeconomics, Census Metrics, and Stratified Geographies

Demographic data from the 2011 Census of India indicates that the national Muslim population stands at 172.2 million, constituting 14.2 per cent of the country's total 1,210.9 million citizens, while their demographic share within the state of Bihar rises to 16.9 per cent. Despite the state's geographic position along the Gangetic plains, analysing the structural position of Bihar's Muslims necessitates a disaggregated approach due to profound regional and economic imbalances. Foremost, Bihar remains the most economically disadvantaged major state in India; its 2015–16 per capita income of Rs. 26.8 thousand (at 2011–12 prices) was barely one-third of the national average of Rs. 71.4 thousand. Consequently, fostering a robust growth process in Bihar is impossible without ensuring that its sizeable Muslim minority acts as an equal participant and beneficiary.

Intra-state demographic analysis reveals that Bihar's Muslim population is heavily polarized across its 38 districts: concentration remains low (under 10 per cent) across 12 districts primarily in South Bihar (excluding Vaishali), shifts to medium (10–20 per cent) across 19 districts (13 in North Bihar and 6 in South Bihar), and peaks at high levels (above 20 per cent) in 7 North Bihar districts. Crucially, the north-eastern sub-region exhibits an exceptionally high concentration exceeding 35 per cent across Purnea, Araria, Katihar, and Kishanganj—the latter forming a distinct Muslim-majority district at 68.0 per cent.

Sociologically, recent surveys identify 43 distinct castes among Bihar's Muslims. While the Hindu caste framework is explicitly ordained by religious texts, the foundational text of Islam mandates a strictly egalitarian social ethos devoid of birth-based hierarchies. However, centuries of close inter-religious interaction have resulted in a parallel division along caste lines among Indian Muslims, though notably without the practice of ritual untouchability. Historically arising out of hereditary occupational structures rather than scriptural mandates, these caste divisions are experiencing steady structural fragmentation. Driven by the spread of modern education and macroeconomic changes, the traditional alignment between caste and occupational background is weakening as

many Muslims transition into new professions. Crucially, this stratification model diverges sharply from the Hindu system because the Muslim upper-caste elite accounts for a much larger proportion of the community's overall population.

Empirical data regarding the internal demography of Muslims in Bihar reveals a unique structural composition and pervasive economic vulnerability that diverges significantly from the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. Unlike the Hindu community, where upper castes constitute a relatively small fraction of the total population, the Muslim upper castes (*Ashraf*) account for a remarkably high and consistent proportion of the community, representing 40.4 per cent of the population in rural areas and 41.1 per cent in urban centres (averaging roughly 40.9 per cent across both sectors). In contrast, the middle or backward castes (*Ajlaf*) form the smallest segment at 25.0 per cent in rural areas and 25.2 per cent in urban zones, while the lower or most backward castes (*Arzal*) comprise a substantial 34.6 per cent of rural and 33.7 per cent of urban populations. This distribution underscores a striking structural symmetry between the rural and urban demographic landscapes.

Financially, this population faces acute deprivation; according to benchmarks established by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) and the Planning Commission of India, 49.5 per cent of rural Muslim households and 44.8 per cent of urban Muslim households live below the poverty line. Even though 87 per cent of Bihar's Muslim population resides in rural areas—with approximately one-third of these households holding some land—barely 9.3 per cent of total rural income is generated through active cultivation, signalling a profound crisis in agrarian productivity and asset viability. Instead, the rural Muslim population derives its livelihood primarily from low-wage agricultural labour (39.6 per cent), followed closely by remittances sent from out-migrant household members (24.5 per cent) and localized self-employment (19.1 per cent). This survival strategy contrasts sharply with the urban Muslim economy, where nearly half of all household income (48 per cent) is derived from regular wages or salaries, 33 per cent from self-employment ventures, and a significantly lower 9.3 per cent from external sources.

VI. Conclusion

The construction of modern Islamic identity in South Asia cannot be decoupled from the lived socio-economic structures that define its internal reality. While theological scripts present an unyielding vision of *Masawat*, the historical synthesis of local occupational realities, colonial classification systems, and enduring *Biradri* dynamics have produced a highly stratified community. In regions like Bihar, these internal fractures are not merely symbolic or theological; they are deeply material. The stark data regarding the *Arzal* and *Ajlaf* sub-castes—marked by immense educational poverty, systemic underrepresentation, landlessness, and exclusion from state affirmative action programs—highlights a profound human development crisis. Ultimately, any meaningful project of social justice or macroeconomic growth within South Asia must move past the myth of a homogenous religious identity, confronting instead the stark internal hierarchies that dictate the lived experiences of marginalized Muslim populations.

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