

Imtiaz Ahmad

IS THERE CASTE AMONG MUSLIMS IN INDIA?

Professor D. N. Majumdar was my teacher. I deem it an honour to have been invited to deliver this lecture in his memory.

I have chosen caste among Muslims in India as the theme for this lecture. Some forty-three years ago I had published an anthology entitled *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*. In the Introduction to that work I wrote: 'There is a rich and voluminous sociological literature on caste in India. But a great bulk of this literature is confined to the study and analysis of caste as it functions among the Hindus. Caste as it exists and functions among the Muslims and other non-Hindu groups of Indian society has not been studied in equal detail by sociologists and social anthropologists although it has often been recognized that their social structures were also organized according to caste principles' (Ahmad, 1973: 1).

The idea that caste existed among Muslims was not new or novel. Empirical studies which initially took the form of decennial census adduced considerable evidence that castes (or caste-like groupings, which is a much later categorization) existed among Muslims and could be identified through a hierarchy of status orders that had several significant attributes: source of descent so that those claiming to be the descendants of the Prophet or one of his Companions enjoyed precedence over local converts, and association with an occupation leading to each caste confining marriages to its members. Using evidence from decennial censuses, Ghaus Ansari (1959) argued that Muslims in India were divided into three broad categories whom he called the *ashraf* (noble born), *ajlaf* (mean and lowly) and *arzal* (excluded). Each of these categories was further divided into a number of groups for which, following the practice of the decennial censuses, he chose to designate as castes. Even then our book came in for widespread criticism from Muslims and scholars of South Asian Muslim societies.¹

Muslims are as a rule, while they admit that caste or caste-like groupings exist among them, display a high degree of ambivalence on the subject of caste among Muslims. This ambivalence has many expressions and has resulted in two distinct tendencies among Muslims. Many Muslims, who admit that caste differences obtain among them, often come up with the plea

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that rather than caste some other term should be used to designate Muslim castes. Ethnic groups, *biradaris* or caste-like groupings have been considered and used as substitutes. Others deny the existence of caste among Muslims altogether, arguing that Islam is an egalitarian religion and does not recognize distinctions of caste and status honour. These Muslims refuse to recognize that Islam and Muslims are not necessarily one and the same and that there might be a gap between Islamic beliefs and ideology and actual social behaviour.

Both tendencies arise from Muslim anxieties about their position in India. Those Muslims who argue that rather than caste some other word should be used to designate social divisions among them are guided by the anxiety that if caste was used it would betray affinity with the Hindus. The Muslim community was very substantially formed through conversion from the indigenous groups and the fear that it might relapse back into Hinduism has prompted it all through history to clearly distinguish itself from Hindus through evolving diacritical distinctions that they feel are more Islamic and set Muslims apart from Hindus. Accordingly, while they are willing to admit that caste-like formations exist among Muslims, they would much rather like some other word to be used to designate Muslim castes.

On the other hand, those Muslims who are prone to denying the existence of caste among Muslims altogether do so out of an anxiety for projecting the community as a monolith in the context of its standing as a minority in India. Benur (2004) traced this dimension in the context of the rise of the nationalist movement in India. He writes: 'The Hindu nationalists, using religion and culture as the bases of nationalism, tried to push only the Hindus as the "national" community, and the Muslims as the "illegitimate" residents of India. The Muslim elites also tried to project the Muslims as religious monolith and advanced the theory of distinct "Islamic" identity of the Muslims. But because the Muslims were divided by the caste hierarchy, it was inconvenient for them to project the Hindus as monolith. Hence, they put forward the theory of "unity in diversity" and argued that the Hindu culture was the "unifying force" behind the so-called diversity of the Hindus. The Hindu elites, i.e. the Brahmanical upper classes pushed the Brahmanical value system and philosophy as the "essence" of so-called Indian culture. The Muslim elite adopted a similar view about the Muslims, reducing everything to Islam So, it was contended that the Indian Muslims are without any caste system and they are one homogeneous community.'

This tendency has percolated down to sociologists who display a remarkably uncanny ambivalence towards caste among Muslims. At the behavioural level, they are willing to concede that there are elements of caste in Indo-Muslim society. However, as soon as the discussion shifts from behaviour to ideology they recoil from their position, seeking to add caveats or hedge around the issue by admitting unabashedly that when they apply the term in the context of a Muslim group they are using it in a loose sense.

Two recent writings by Hasnain (2005) and Nazir (1993) exemplify this tendency. Hasnain locates his discussion in the context of the question whether the concept of caste can be applied to the system of social stratification of a community professing a faith other than Hinduism. His conclusion is bald and simple: 'It is true that the egalitarian social order of Islam stands in sharp contrast with the ideology of caste yet the 'Indian Islam' and 'Hindu Caste System' have been able to achieve a substantial compatibility' (2005:2). He then goes on to offer a host of explanations for why this should be the case. He writes: 'Hutton sounds convincing when he says that when Muslims and Christians came to India, the caste was in the air and the followers of even these egalitarian ideologies could not escape the infection of caste. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of Indian Muslim population comes from the lower Hindu castes who have been coming into the fold of Islam to escape from social persecution and the oppressive socio-economic disabilities. They were also attracted and lured by the social egalitarianism of Islam but the search for equality proved a mirage. In many cases there were improvements in their socio-economic condition yet the goal of social equality remained illusive. Moreover, in most of the cases the people embracing Islam gave up their religious faith but not the caste that was brought forward even to a new socio-religious milieu. Thus, it would be apt to say that while Islam may not be having castes or caste-like groupings, the Indian Muslims do have' (Hasnain, 2005: 207-08).

No sooner that he has made this sociological formulation, Hasnain becomes uncomfortable. As if fearing that he might have committed an almost sacrilegious act by declaring that there is caste among Indian Muslims, he wishes to recoil from it. Cryptically, he adds: 'But in the present paper an attempt is being made to stay clear of the issue whether the model of social stratification among the Indian Muslims is the replica of the Hindu caste system or not. The author, in this paper, shall be using the term caste and caste system among the Indian Muslims in a conveniently loose manner. It is undisputed that there are groups of people among the Muslims who are organised more or less like the Hindu castes but this is also true that many of them are less rigid because Islam, theoretically at least, permits marriage between different classes of believers' (2005:207). Not only that. He looks for crutches that would enable him to perform this summersault. He finds one in the following statement of Nazir, which he quotes approvingly: '. . . It is necessary to make a distinction between a caste system and caste labels: the former refers to a local system of hierarchically ordered corporate groupings involving division of labour, occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only; the latter refers to a set of non-local, non-corporate named groups which provide a ranking hierarchy, and which do not involve occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only' (Nazir, 1993:2898). 'Perhaps,' concludes Hasnain, 'the "caste system" and "caste like groupings" among the Indian Muslims with all its fluidity may be better analysed and better understood through this observation' (2005:208).

This assumes that Hindus live under 'the caste system'. Muslims only use castes labels. Several theoretical and empirical questions are raised by this assumption. First, how is this assumption made? Is it made on the basis of a piece of empirical research? Or, is it made on entirely *a priori* grounds. As far as I am aware, there has to date been no empirical research which can be said to have established beyond the shadow of a doubt that Muslims do not live under a caste system and only use caste labels. Indeed, if such empirical research existed, the dilemma these authors (and others) face over how to characterise Muslim social stratification in India would not exist. It exists because available empirical research has demonstrated that Muslim social stratification in India and beyond is marked by features of the caste system. It is, therefore, clear that the assumption is made on *a priori* grounds. As believing Muslims committed to upholding the widely proclaimed Islamic egalitarianism as axiomatic, they cannot face up to the behavioural reality that Muslims live under a caste system. They not only assume the distinction between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels' but go on to suggest that it constitutes a viable framework for analysing and understanding Muslim social stratification in India. It is used as a smokescreen to avoid facing the harsh behavioural reality of caste among Muslims in India.

Second, is there an empirical basis to the assertion that Muslim social organisation in India is 'a set of non-local, non-corporate named groups which provide a ranking hierarchy, and which do not involve occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only'? (Nazir: 1993: 2898). Nazir does not make explicit the level at which he is talking. Is he talking about the categorisation of Muslims into the broad categories of *ashraf*, *ajlaf* and *arzal*. If that is his point of reference, then his characterisation of Muslim social organisation as a set of non-local, non-corporate groups can be said to have some validity. However, it would invalidate the distinction between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels' since similar broad division exists in the form of *varna* categories in 'the caste system'. Ansari used the three broad categories of *ashraf*, *ajlaf* and *arzal* in the collective sense but clearly recognised that they were divided into smaller named groups that were distinguished from one another by occupation, endogamy and sociability. Thus, if Nazir's reference is to the groups at this level, then his description of Muslim groups is wholly erroneous. Let us look closely at the empirical evidence in order to determine whether the distinction he posits between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels', and by implication between Hindu and Muslim modes of social organisation, is confirmed by available studies.

Sociological research on Muslims in India as opposed to lay and impressionistic writings continues to be thin. Evidence brought together by Ahmad (1973) and subsequent research demonstrates that Muslim groups which are the point of reference here, for which words *biradari* and *zat* are commonly used, are local and corporate entities. Even *biradaris* or *zats* such

as Saiyyid, Sheikh and Ansaris, which are dispersed widely and found in different parts of a district, state or the county, are identified by their affiliation to a particular territory and restrict their marriages to members within that territory. Of course, how that territory is distinguished varies widely. For Saiyads, Shiekh and Pathans, which resent being characterised as *biradaris* and prefer to be described as *zats*, the association to territory is expressed through appending the name of the territory to its name. Thus, one hears of Saiyads of Satrikh, Sheikhs of Allahabad, Kidwais of Baragaon or Kasauli and Pathans of Malihabad. In the case of *biradaris* that have an internal organisation of government and social control (called *biradari* or *zat panchayat*) this territorial association is defined by the jurisdiction of the *biradari panchayat*. The Ansaris in Rasulpur, where I carried out fieldwork, were divided into concentric circles of three and thirteen villages. They confined their marriages to thirteen villages though Ansaris existed in neighbouring areas as well.

This is not all. Considerable evidence exists to show that the *biradaris* or *zats* are associated with particular occupations, are inter-dependent (tied into patron-client relationships of the *jajmani* type), and are endogamous. This does not mean that all members of a *biradari* or *zat* necessarily practice the occupation with which their group is traditionally associated. There has been much variation throughout history among *biradaris* and *zats*, as indeed there has been within castes, in the extent to which their members remain tied to the practice of their traditional occupation. *Biradaris* and *zats* higher up in the social hierarchy did not usually have a traditional occupation and there was no close association between *biradari* or *zat* and traditional occupation. On the other hand, *biradaris* and *zats* further down the social ladder had traditional occupations and their association with occupation was strong. This was not significantly different from the picture of groups in what Nazir would characterise as ‘the caste system’. Risley’s following observation makes this explicit: ‘In theory each caste has a distinctive occupation, but it does not follow that this traditional occupation is practised by its members’.

The argument that Muslim groups, *biradaris* and *zats*, are not based on recruitment by birth only is equally fallacious. Like the groups in what Nazir would call ‘the caste system’, Muslim *biradaris* and *zats* are based on recruitment by birth only. There is no process by which one can become a Saiyyid, Shiekh or Julaha except that of birth. It is for this reason that when someone marries into another *biradari* or *zat*, he is not integrated into another *biradari* or *zat* but retains his or her original *biradari* or *zat* association. There exists a possibility in the case of *biradaris* and *zats* to attempt social mobility and end up becoming a Sayid, Shiekh or Pathan in course of time through inventing a rationale and a genealogy. Where such social mobility occurs, the basis of recruitment to the *biradari* or *zat* does not change. The *biradari* or *zat* just ends up becoming another *biradari* or *zat*, and comes to be known by

another name, to which recruitment continues to be based on the principle of birth. This is again not significantly different from the situation in 'the caste system' where castes have the possibility of changing their antecedents and name through the process of social mobility. Thus, the point that *biradaris* and *zats* are 'less rigid because Islam, theoretically at least, permits marriage between different classes of believers' (Hasnain: 2005:208) is not empirically established. It is asserted without a substantial basis in any empirical research.

This raises fundamental questions. Why Hasnain and Nazir as well as a host of other researchers who have worked on the sensitive question of the existence of caste among Muslims are so strongly persuaded to posit that there are significant differences between 'the caste system' and the system of *biradaris* and *zats*? Is it that these differences actually exist but empirical research has so far failed to unearth them? Or, is it that they are persuaded into asserting these differences contrary to empirical evidence out of extraneous considerations? Is it that they are prone to emphasising these differences because as believing Muslims they are familiar with the Islamic discourse that asserts that Islam preaches social equality and are afraid to take a contrary position? Or, is it that asserting these differences is a defence mechanism whereby they can simultaneously adhere to their disciplinary obligation as social scientists as well as their religious obligation to uphold what is commonly considered the Islamic view on social stratification? My own view has been that the tendency to emphasise differences between 'the caste system' and the system of *biradaris* and *zats* arises from some such considerations, but I would refrain from making any such point here. I would like, instead to explore whether their starting point that Islam is an egalitarian religion and preaches social equality theologically and sociologically valid. This is central to understanding their standpoint.

There is need to ask three different questions of the Islamic text if we are to understand Islam's position with respect to social stratification and social equality. First, whether Islam is opposed to social stratification as such or is merely opposed to social inequality. Second, what is truly the Islamic attitude towards social inequality that existed in the society in which Islam evolved and took roots? Finally, whether the social equality that it proclaims, and to which reference is always made when it is suggested that Islam is an egalitarian religion, is a description of an existing state of affairs in society or is merely an ideal that is given to mankind as a direction in which it should strive. It is necessary to ask these questions in order to understand the nature of the emphasis on egalitarianism and social equality in Islam. Basic to these questions is the sociological dictum that no society beyond the most primitive can be truly egalitarian. This was the point at the heart of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1999) wherein he argued that as societies generated economic surplus there almost always developed some form of social stratification. Pitirim A. Sorokin articulated this point as a general statement: 'Any organised

social group is always a stratified social body. There has not been and does not exist any permanent social group which is “flat”, and in which all members are equal. An un-stratified society, with a real equality of its members, is a myth which has never been realised in the history of mankind. This statement may sound paradoxical and yet it is accurate. The forms and proportions of stratification vary, but its essence is permanent, as far as any permanent and organised social group is concerned’ (Sorokin:1959:13-14).

On even the most casual reading of the Islamic scriptural text one is struck that quite irrespective of the emphasis it places on equality of human beings Islam’s orientation is remarkably hierarchical. Its hierarchical orientation comes in a wide variety of fields. First, the relationship of the believers with non-believers is conceived in hierarchical terms with the believer the *dhimmi* and the *kafir* constituting a clear hierarchy. Second, the relationship of Allah to the believer is conceived in hierarchical terms. It is a relationship of subordination and subservience so much so that the individual believer must prostrate before Allah in daily prayers and must at the same time see himself as utterly powerless in relation to Him. Any number of passages exist in the Islamic scriptural text endorsing the relatively lowly standing of the believers, whether as individuals or as a collective entity, in relation to Allah. Third, the relationship of the wife to her husband is clearly conceived in hierarchical terms even if the text does not distinguish between them in terms of the religious duties enjoined upon them. This is sometimes cited by Muslim feminists and Muslim modernists to argue that Islam guarantees equality of gender and does not place a Muslim woman in any inferior position to a man. However, in reality a woman is subordinate to a man and the relationship between them is seen as constituting a hierarchy wherein the woman stands in relation to a man in the same position as the individual stands in relation to the community and the community stands in relation to Allah. Finally, the relationship between the master and slave is conceived in clearly hierarchical terms even if the master is called upon to deal with the slave with kindness and merit is assigned to those who would free their slaves. Thus, it is clear that the framework of Islamic thinking is deeply imbued with the notion of hierarchy and social stratification.

It is true that the Arab society in which Islam evolved did not possess great differences of wealth, but economic differentiation between ordinary Bedouins and the trading classes did exist. One can easily imagine that they would have differed with respect to their wealth, material possessions and lifestyles and Islam could not have brushed them under the carpet. It would have been required to deal with them, as they would have been reflected in their behaviour and mutual attitudes. As far as the Islamic scriptural text is concerned, it clearly recognises such distinctions in society and prescribes appropriate forms of behaviour for each. It asks those deprived in social and economic terms to be content and to live according to their means. It is

repeatedly said in the text that Allah is All-seeing and would reward the poor for their poverty on the day of judgement. At the same time, the wealthy and rich, while they are allowed to live in their riches and to spend according to their economic standing, are warned not to be too proud of their material possessions. Moreover, they are asked to show kindness to those who are deprived and poor and to part with a portion of their wealth and income for the poor. Even the poor are conceived in hierarchical terms: first come the near ones followed by orphans and then the destitute and the deprived. If some kind of social stratification had not existed in society, Islamic scriptural text would neither have referred to those differences, nor indicated appropriate forms of behaviour for them. It would also not have sought to devise an economic framework for the redistribution of wealth in a manner that the poor are able to meet both ends meet. It is, thus, clear that the emphasis that Islamic scriptural text places on social equality does not describe an existing state of affairs.

If the worldview of the Islamic scriptural text is hierarchical and it admits social and economic differences in society, then how should we interpret its emphasis upon social equality? One way to interpret this can be to ignore that Islamic orientation is hierarchical and that it recognises social and economic differences in the society in which it originated and to argue that it stands for egalitarianism as an absolute value. I would argue that those who maintain that Islam contemplates no social stratification are interpreting Islam in precisely this way. Even when they encounter social differentiation and stratification, they glibly ignore it and flag the proclaimed egalitarianism of Islam as a social reality. The other way of interpretation can be to recognise a fundamental difference. This is the difference between society as it exists and as it ought to exist and to maintain that the Islamic proclamation in favour of social equality is more in the nature of an ideal for the future than a description of an existing state of affairs.

Gaborieau (1978) called for frankness in studying the phenomenon of caste among Muslims in India. The Muslims who entered India did not seem to be shocked by the institution of caste, and if they were not shocked it must be that they were not unfamiliar with such arrangements. Ghaus Ansari has also noted that Islam was not egalitarian when it entered India. 'The ideal of equality among Muslim', he states, 'was practicable only in the then prevailing conditions of Arabia. In the course of the expansion of Islam and its contact with other complex cultures the democratic forms of political organization and social equality within the community gradually disappeared (Ansari: 1959:30).

Early Muslim rulers as well as intellectuals, including the ulema, did not see anything wrong with the persistence of caste among Muslims in India. Actually, they rationalized and legitimated it as the natural order of things. Zia Barni² elaborated a theory that the 'merits' and 'demerits' of all people

have been 'apportioned at the beginning of time and allotted to their souls'. People's actions are not of their volition, but rather an expression and result of 'Divine Commandments'. Muhammad Habib and Afsar Umar Salim Khan, translators of Barni's work, painfully admit, 'Barni's God, as is clear from his work, has two aspects—first, he is the tribal deity of the Musalmans; secondly, as between the Musalmans themselves, he is the tribal deity of well-born Muslims' (quoted in Sikand:2005). Subsequently, the ulema employed the Islamic juridical concept of *kafao'a* to provide legitimacy to the existing social divisions in society.

There are two diametrically opposed views on the presence of caste among India. One view is that caste among Muslims can be traced to Hindu influence though one comes across two variations of this view. Some scholars suggest that the existence of caste in Indo-Muslim society is accounted for by the simple fact that the large majority of the Muslims are converts from Hindu castes. Upon their conversion they brought their pre-conversion orientations with them. Others explain the presence of caste among Muslims in terms of the interface between Islam and the Indian civilization. Islam came to India over an already established and developed civilization. It could hope to override the indigenous civilization only at the cost of its own rejection. This set in motion a process of compromise and adaptation whereby both traditions borrowed from one another. So far as Islam was concerned, it took over elements of culture and social organization from the indigenous civilization and made them its own.

This was not unique to India. Islam, as is the case with all great world traditions, had always been very flexible in integrating local traditions and customs. We only need to look as far as the great rituals of Hajj to find a Pre-Islamic tradition that was claimed (or rather, reclaimed) by the nascent Muslim community. Another example is the Prophet's reported commemoration of Passover (or more likely Yom Kippur) by instituting a fast on that day (actually predating the Ramadan fast). As Islam spread throughout much of the world, many local traditions and celebrations were tolerated, if not wholeheartedly embraced by the local polity. Of course, this is part of the normal fusion that exists in most cultures, not least of which Islamic ones (witness the modern day Egyptian celebrations of Shamm an-Nasim, Iranian celebrations of Noruz, the continuation of Ismaili traditions in contemporary popular celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in Egypt, etc.).

A second view is that in the course of its journey through Persia, Islam had already imbibed the notion of social hierarchy. As such, by the time Islam entered India the notion of gradation of social groups into a hierarchy had already become a part of its cultural inheritance. It had no difficulty in incorporating the caste system in India. From this perspective, it would seem that caste among Muslims in India was not only a result of local Hindu influence, but a form of social organization that had already become accepted

as a result of its cultural contact with other Muslim cultures which had evolved hierarchical structures. It did not have any difficulty in adjusting to the Hindu caste system. My personal view is that in dealing with .a complex institution like caste among Muslims it would be futile to argue that caste among Muslims in India can be explained in terms of Hindu influence or Islam's contact with other cultures in the course of its journey into India. It would seem appropriate that the caste phenomenon among Muslims must be explained in terms of both external as well as indigenous influences.

Orthodox Muslims and champions of religious reform argue that caste among Muslims in India is a temporary anomaly susceptible to eventual elimination through reformist efforts. They insist that the process of Islamization,³ understood as a tendency involving a conscious rejection of syncretic elements that persist as remnants of pre-conversion orientations and ethos, would result in a gradual elimination of caste among Muslims in India. Islamization has not always been found to result in the spread of orthodox Islamic beliefs and practices at the cost of what is called the heterodox or syncretic complex. Satish C. Misra suggested some years ago that it was wrong to conceptualize the process of religious change in Indian Muslim society simply in terms of Islamization. He distinguished two processes that had been, according to him, operating throughout the Medieval period, and he called them indigenization and Islamization. This enabled the elements of the heterodox religious complex to persist side by side with the orthodox one without any apparent indications of conflict or contradiction. This is as true of caste as of other folk elements among Muslims in India.

Let me conclude by making two points. One, any consideration of caste among the Muslims at once raises the question whether the term caste can be applied to the system of social stratification of a community which professes a faith other than Hinduism. Leach (1960) has raised this question as to whether caste is best considered as a cultural or as a structural phenomenon. There are two broad points of view on this question. On the one hand, there are some who, following Weber (1947: 396), 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 other faiths, live with or near Hindu communities, within what Dumont (1957) calls the 'pan Indian civilization' (see, for this point of view, Leach, 1960, Srinivas *et.al.*, 1959, and Dumont, 1970). On the other hand, a second group of sociologists and social anthropologists defines caste in structural terms so as to be applicable to the relationship between two or more groups in other religions and societies as well (see Bailey 1963, Berreman 1960, Harper 1968).

Caste first came to be identified as a principle of social stratification among the Hindus and this fact has had a determining influence on the sociologists' orientation to the question of the application of the term caste to groups outside Hinduism. Even those who take a purely structural view of

the institution recognize that there are limits beyond which a social system cannot differ and yet still deserve the label 'caste.' Moreover, while analyzing systems of social stratification in other religions and societies, they tend quite unconsciously to follow a culture-specific definition of the institution and base their discussion on the Hindu phenomenon. Obviously, then, a consideration of caste among the 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 associated with caste among the Hindus.

There has been much fresh thinking on this subject in recent years. According to this new thinking caste systems are defined as moral systems that differentiate and rank the whole population of a society in corporate units generally defined by descent, marriage and occupation (see Marriott and Inden, 1974). It is contended that caste systems need not be thought of as unique to South Asia or to its emigrants. They may be found more widely. From this perspective caste among Muslims in India can be seen as an independent system and not merely as an extension of the Hindu caste system.

The study of Muslims and Islam has traditionally been a province of the Islamicists and Muslim theologians. Sociologists and social anthropologists have paid comparatively little attention to its study. The reason for this academic division of labour is easily understandable. The fundamental theological and philosophical principles that can be said to constitute the core of the Islamic faith are enshrined in a single scriptural source and are supposed to be universally adhered to by all those who call themselves Muslims. This reinforced the belief among the sociologists and social anthropologists that the Islamicists' understanding of the religious faith of the Muslims could be taken as wholly accurate and valid, especially as the sociologist or social anthropologist could not, in any case, match the Islamicists' expertise in handling textual materials.

No doubt the Islamicist's contribution to the study of Islam has been considerable. Through painstaking study of the textual sources and scriptural literature they have been successful in identifying and elucidating for us the fundamental Islamic precepts and rules which every Muslim is universally expected to adhere to. Unfortunately, however, the rigidly normative thrust of this approach has also prevented the appreciation of the bewildering diversity of beliefs, rituals and religious practices that underlies the faith in different parts of the world. It has also inhibited a satisfactory analysis of the response of the Islamic religious tradition³ to different cultural situations and contexts and the adaptations and adjustments that it had to make in the course of its journey from its West Asian heartland to distant parts of the world.

Sociology and social anthropology are committed as academic disciplines to the empirical investigation of the social phenomenon. Where

religion in concerned, they are concerned not so much with the theological and philosophical tenets of a particular religion but rather with the concrete form that those tenets take in the actual life of the people. Sociological or social anthropological analysis of religion thus covers the whole of a people's beliefs and practices towards the supernatural as well as the purpose to which they may put their faith in dealing with their daily worries and hopes. Thus, the sociological or social anthropological understanding of religion is at once more comprehensive and more concrete. We need more studies on Muslims in India by sociologists and social anthropologists.

NOTES

1. There is an interesting debate on caste among Muslims according to which Muslim system of social stratification is claimed to have evolved independently and is seen as having no relationship with the Hindi caste system. Charles Lindholm (1965) has argued that many of the features found in Muslim society are similar to those found among Muslims in other parts of South Asia and on that basis has argued that the Muslim social stratification found in India is an extension of the system found elsewhere. Many Muslims are themselves inclined to take a similar line of argument. This argument would have been tenable if Islamic scriptural sources had provided a blueprint of an Islamic social stratification system. This not being the case, the argument fails to sustain itself. It is plausible that Islam did modify certain social practices including that of caste. Whatever practices were not sanctified by Islam but existed in India were attenuated. Whatever practices existing in India were in conformity with the Islamic ethos became more rigid. Thus, purdah practices, which already existed even in India, were rendered more rigid and strict and caste principles were relaxed or made less restrictive.
2. For a more detailed treatment of Barni's as well as other contemporary scholars' views on social divisions in medieval Muslim society, see Sikand (2005).
3. There are two processes at work in Muslim society in India: Ashrafization and Islamization. Ashrafization denotes emulation by the lower castes of the lifestyle and manners of the upper castes in a bid to achieve social mobility. Islamization denotes shedding of heterodox beliefs and practices in favour of those prescribed in scriptural sources. 'The typical mode of Islamiation', as Clifford Geertz had noted in the Indonesian context, was visualized as: painfully gradual. First comes the Confession of faith, then the other pillars, then a certain degree of observance of the law, and finally, perhaps, especially as a scholarly tradition develops and takes hold, a certain amount of learning in the law and the Quran and Hadith upon which it rests. The intricate norms, or at least Sunni Islam, can be apprehended only step by step, as one comes to control, to a greater or lesser degree, the scriptural sources upon which it rests. For most people, such control never goes beyond accepting, at second hand, the interpretations of those who control those sources directly. But that learning, however, crude, and access to scholarship, however shabby, are central to becoming a Muslim in anything more than a formal sense, is apparent everywhere in the Islamic world.... Islamic conversion is not, as a rule, sudden, total overwhelming illumination but a slow turning toward a new light (1965: 96-7).

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