

Towards a Theory of Muslim Social Stratification

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Bangladesh is predominantly a rural society where an overwhelming majority of its habitants are Muslim by religion. In order to understand the rural society of Bangladesh, one therefore, needs to analyze the Muslim social stratification both theoretically and empirically. Taking into account the empirical evidences, in this paper, an attempt has been made to develop a theory of Muslim social stratification with particular reference to Bangladesh¹.

Introduction

Bangladesh is predominantly a rural society in the sense that an overwhelming majority (about 78 per cent) of the people is living in the rural areas. Therefore, the growing interest in understanding such a society has naturally led to interest in conducting research on rural social structure. Since people living in rural areas are predominantly Muslim, it therefore, requires an analysis of Muslim social stratification with particular reference to Bangladesh.

Different social scientists have already studied various aspects of social structure and life in rural Bangladesh where some of them even discussed the issues of Muslim social stratification. Among the social scientists who have substantially contributed to the issue of Muslim social stratification are Khan (1960); Karim (1962, 1976, 1980); Bhattacharya (1978); Aziz (1979); Arefeen (1982, 1986); Ahmed (1988) and Mannan (2002). In this paper, therefore, an attempt has been made to critically analyze their positions to make a comprehensive understanding of Muslim social stratification in Bangladesh with particular reference to their theoretical positions and empirical data.

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¹ This theory was originally developed in my Ph. D. Thesis submitted to University of Poona, India, 1985. This is slightly a revised version of that framed theory.

Caste among the Muslims of Bangladesh

Under the broad rubric of social anthropology and rural sociology many Indian as well as foreign scholars have used the familiar 'caste' model for understanding and analyzing Indian society because of its relatively more rigid system of hierarchical ranking among the members of the caste Hindu society. To them caste is the most fundamental reality in case of Indian society. Being influenced by the then dominant theoretical orientation of structural functionalism most of these sociologists found it difficult to perceive and explain social reality in India in any way different from the caste frame. But in Bangladesh most of the rural inhabitants are Muslims and this raises a series of questions of which the more relevant in the present context are:

- i. Does the Muslim community in rural Bangladesh follow Hindu caste model or at least use it as a reference group for determination of status ranking?
- ii. Is the Muslim community a caste-like or non-caste and casteless society?

Before going for a detailed examination of the Bangladesh situation it is necessary to clarify few points developed regarding the pattern of Muslim stratification in India. Several Indian scholars have also tried to understand Muslim stratification pattern in India. An outcome of this effort is a volume edited by Imtiaz Ahmad (1978) with the purpose of understanding the extent to which caste-like system of hierarchical ranking existed among Muslims and 'to explore the degree of the similarity of their social stratification to caste among the Hindus'. Ahmad also clarified that 'caste is viewed by most contributors to that volume as a form of social stratification' (1978: 15). The main problem of contributors to that volume was whether or not the notion of hierarchy among the Muslims could be considered as isomorphic to the hierarchy implicit in the model of caste Hindu society. All of them have tried to understand caste or caste-like formations among the Muslims from different regions and states of India. Ahmad's conclusion suggests that 'caste exists as a basis of social relations amongst the Muslims too, but its form has been greatly weakened and modified as it differs from Hindu caste model in certain details' (1978:12). In general the opinion of the contributors is that 'the types of hierarchies found among the Muslim communities studied by them are certainly comparable to the Hindu caste system though an exact parallel between them cannot be said to exist.

This is evident both from the manner in which the contributors have titled their papers, in their explicit statements as well as in the logic of their arguments' (1978:4).

However, a major problem with that volume is that its contributors did not approach hierarchy among the Muslims with a probing mind. Rather they confined their discussion to the nature and extent of caste system among the Muslims. On the contrary, they should have raised this question of caste like hierarchy with a searching attitude and should have probed more thoroughly as to the fundamental basis of hierarchy among the Muslims in India. However, here we are not primarily concerned about Muslim stratification in India.

Whether or not the Muslim society in Bangladesh follows any caste or caste-like system is a basic question that needs to be pursued here. As pointed out by Arefeen (1982), some authors notably Wise, Mukherjee, Karim and others² wanted to term the social stratification among Muslims as a variant of Hindu caste system. To them some features are identical with the Hindu caste. e. g. Muslims are hierarchically organized – they too practice certain forms of endogamy and they tend to have hereditary occupation particularly in rural setting. But these scholars have also mentioned some distinctive features of social stratification and hierarchy among Muslims e.g. the total absence of the concept of purity and pollution. These features led the above authors to the conclusion that although strictly speaking Muslim stratification does not follow the Hindu caste model, it is still possible to trace a variant of caste system among the Muslims of Bangladesh.

There are many other scholarly works produced by a good number of social scientists,³ who mainly dealt with problems of land distribution,

² See James Wise, 1903. 'The Muham-Madans of Eastern Bengal' *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. LXIII, Part-III; Ramkrishna Mukherjee, 1949. "The Economic Structure and Social Life in Six Villages of Bengal." *American Sociological Review* Vol.14 No.3; A. K. Nazmul Karim, 1962. *Social Stratification Among the Muslims of Certain Districts of East Pakistan*; in John Owens (ed.), 1962. *Sociology in East Pakistan*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan; F.R. Khan, 1968. "Caste System of the Village Community of Dulandi in the District of Dhaka." in John Owens (ed.), 1968. *Sociology in East Pakistan*; Zillur Khan, 1968. "Caste in Muslim Peasantry in India and Pakistan", *Man in India*, Vol. 28.

³ See Peter J. Bertocci, 1970. *Elusive Villages: Social Structure and Community Organization in Rural East Pakistan*, Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University; Hafez S.M. Zaidi, 1970. *The Village*

social arrangements on land, differential land control and power structure and with the differential impact of rural development measures on social composition of agrarian classes in rural Bangladesh. These authors, excepting Chowdhury, have dealt with the pattern of social stratification in Bangladesh villages, including the question of applicability of the caste model to Muslim society. However, the caste question is discussed somewhat casually because apparently they are convinced that caste is far from being a noteworthy phenomenon among Muslims in rural Bangladesh. On the basis of ethnographic data Arefeen (1982) has rightly observed that Hindu caste model is not applicable to the Muslims of rural Bangladesh.

Even if any similarities, structural as well as underlying ideological, between Muslim stratification and Hindu caste system are ruled out summarily, the other question still remains as to whether the Muslims constitute a genuinely non-caste or casteless society both in theory and in practice. As mentioned above, some authors like Wise, Karim and others have also used the caste model for understanding social stratification among the Muslims but in general their position too is greatly ambivalent. In their opinion the Muslim stratification is a form or variant of Hindu caste system and at the same time they refuse to term Muslim society as a caste system. Perhaps their ambivalence is due to the fact that these authors viewed the problem of analyzing social hierarchy among the Muslims within the Hindu caste framework (Arefeen, 1982: 57).

It, therefore, may be mentioned here that the caste framework is neither appropriate nor applicable to the Muslim society in general and to the understanding of Muslim villages in Bangladesh in particular, because the Muslims do not follow any rigid rules of ritual hierarchy or ritual

Culture in Transaction-A Study of East Pakistan Rural Society, Honolulu: East-West Centre Press; A.K.M. Aminul Islam, 1974. *A Bangladesh Village: Conflict and Cohesion-Anthropological Study of Politics*, Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company; Jenneke Arens and Joss Van Beurden, 1977. *Jhagrapur: Poor Peasants and Women in a Village in Bangladesh*, Amsterdam; Anwarullah Chowdhury, 1979. *A Bangladesh Village: A study of Social Stratification*, Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies; Willem van Schendel 1982. *Peasant Mobility: The Odds of Life in Rural Bangladesh*, Delhi: Manohar; Betsy Hartmann and James K. Boyce, 1984. *A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladesh Village*, Delhi: Oxford University Press. H. K. Arefeen, 1986. *Changing Agrarian Structure in Bangladesh: Shimulia – a Study of a Peri-urban Village*, Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies.

practices, habits, restrictions on food and water and notion of purity and pollution that are most commonly associated with caste Hindu hierarchies as mentioned by Dumont, Ghurye and others,⁴ which are not prevalent among the Muslims in Bangladesh villages. Moreover, the recent studies on rural Bangladesh have also further confirmed that caste-like practices are absent among the Muslims of Bangladesh.

'Class' as a Framework

In the above discussion it has been made clear that the 'Caste' framework for understanding hierarchy among the Muslims in rural Bangladesh is not applicable. Alternatively, the 'Class' framework is both an adequate and appropriate framework for analyzing social structure in rural Bangladesh. In a theoretical contribution made by Arefeen (1982) the use of 'Class' framework has been rendered more problematical. However, before entering into a critical review of Arefeen's respective positions I would like to mention here the reasons which are generally advanced against the use of class framework in the neighbouring Indian situation.

Those who disapprove of the use of class framework in the rural Indian context often argue that the concept of 'Class' has a definite historicity and social context in an alien setting; it was developed in, and applied to the analysis of western industrial societies only. Since India is predominantly an agrarian society, class concept may be misleading in understanding Indian society in general and rural society in particular. Secondly, it is further argued that the lack of class awareness or consciousness on the part of those belonging to objectively different social strata also militates against the use of class framework. Since the 'Class' concept has been developed for understanding the problems of class conflict and class struggle, by definition it is inapplicable to rural India where there is no class-consciousness. Use of 'Class' framework would be no more than a conceptual construction, they assert. Hence, there is an extensive use of native "community-based" categories such as caste in the study of rural India particularly⁵.

⁴ See Louis Dumont, 1972. *Homo Hierarchies - The Caste System and its Implications*, Paladin; G.S. Ghurye, 1961. *Caste, Class and Occupation*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot; J.H. Hutton, 1968. *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins*, Bombay: Oxford University Press; M. N. Srinivas, 1962. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House; etc.

⁵ See Beteille's - *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* particularly chapter II for a fascinating discussion on the use of caste-class framework in the Indian context.

In the context of Bangladesh, however, the arguments advanced against the use of class framework are somewhat different from those voiced in the Indian context. In the Bangladesh context Arefeen has addressed the whole question of using 'Class' analytical framework in an essay published in 1982.

Briefly put, Arefeen's argument is that the fictive ascriptive descent is the fundamental basis of Muslim hierarchy in Bangladesh (Arefeen, 1982: 57). He has developed a theory that 'Muslim stratification is based on nobility of descent or *Saraphati*' (1982:66). Though the 'fictive ascriptive descent' is the fundamental basis of Muslim hierarchy in Bangladesh, the 'Class' framework is differently used for analyzing rural Bangladesh in a broad Marxian sense because fictive ascriptive descent or *Saraphati* is basically a non-economic category whereas 'Class' analysis revolves mainly around economic criteria. If the Muslim hierarchy is perceived fundamentally as based on a non-economic principle such as *Saraphati* then the pertinent question is whether at all the 'Class' model is applicable. If so, whether it is complementary to such non-economic categories as *Saraphati* or independent of them. Arefeen's *Saraphati* theory for understanding Muslim stratification or hierarchy is not beyond criticism. The critical question is the importance of wealth in understanding Muslim stratification.

Then the question is as follows: What is the more fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh? Is it the extent of wealth or ascriptive descent? Or is it *Saraphati* or *Tawanggari* or to put it in technical parlance, is it 'nobility of descent' or 'nobility of opulence' that decides social ranking in rural Muslim society in Bangladesh? Indeed, a more fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh is not *Saraphati* but *Tawanggari*⁶. The word *Tawanggari* means the extent of 'richness and wealthiness' which is not only a social category that is measurable by objective indices but is also experienced and felt subjectively. It is not the nobility of descent but rather the nobility of opulence, which is a more fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in

⁶ *Tawanggari* is a Persian word that means 'richness' or wealthiness. In Noakhali district of Bangladesh rural people use this word such as *Tawanggar* (rich) and *Goriv* (poor). Indeed, Muslims of Bangladesh are using many Arabic, Persian and Urdu words in their daily life that have mixed up with their mother tongue Bengali.

Bangladesh. It may be argued here that nobility follows from opulence and hence I would like to call it the nobility of opulence. On that account *Tawanggari* is the fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh. In the following pages some more evidences in favour of this theoretical position have been presented.

Chowdhury (1979:10) following Louis Dumont (1972) has said that the Hindu caste hierarchy is mainly based on consideration of ritual pollution and purity, while the Muslim status groups are based on the traditional ownership and control of land, education and on differences in styles of life. He further says that the well-to-do landowning class mostly corresponds with high status Muslims and these roughly correspond to the upper caste Hindus because power is more or less concentrated in the hands of a few *Khandani* (aristocratic, men of noble origin) Muslims (1979: 10). Chowdhury (1979: 83) has also mentioned that the *Khandans* are large or big landowners and the *Girhastas* are either subsistence-oriented landowning cultivators or sharecroppers.

Karim (1976) has conducted a study in another Bangladesh Village called Nayanpur. Inhabited mostly by Muslims, the village has only 5 per cent of its population as Hindus. According to Karim the Muslim population of village Nayanpur is stratified into the following hierarchically superimposed classes or groups as he has put these:

- i. Chowdhuries- they claim to have once been the feudal chiefs of the village;
- ii. Khandakers- they claim to have once belonged to the priestly class;
- iii. Muhuris- they claim to have once belonged to the writer class (writer of deeds, scribes, chroniclers, etc.);
- iv. Bhuians- 'wealthy' peasant proprietors;
- v. Agriculturists- having their own cultivable lands;
- vi. Landless agricultural labourers;
- vii. Wage-earners of other sorts;
- viii. Woodcutters working in the neighbouring forests.
- ix. 'Slaves' as *Ghulams* - once they were slaves.

Bertocci has given a fascinating account of the status differences of lineages and homesteads that can be used for understanding the pattern of social stratification among the Muslims of Bangladesh. It is widely known that throughout rural Bangladesh each and every lineage or homestead (with a few exceptions) has a name or title of its own. The origins of these names and titles vary from region to region and sometimes even from village to village. On the basis of his fieldwork conducted in two Comilla villages - Hajipur and Tinpara (Pseudonyms), Bertocci observes that there are at least four kinds of names and titles commonly associated with lineages and homesteads in those villages. Among these two are 'traditionally status' titles or names associated with (a) landed aristocracy, (positions in the revenue collection system of the pre-independence times or in the government administration) and (b) religion. The remaining two kinds of titles are usually associated with (c) occupation, in a service or artisan capacity, and (d) characteristics given to a member or member of the family, remembered by the village community for some reason. The latter are not patronymics but merely localism by which neighbouring families in the villages have come to call a given homestead (Bertocci, 1972: 38). Bertocci was also interested in examining the relationship of status distinction and pattern of marriage alliance, in his villages both on the class and caste lines. The villagers often told him with varying tones of insistence that economic considerations were of the greatest import in the selection of spouses. As one of his informants had put it (1972: 44-45), nowadays, if one's economic position is good, one's lineage status is also good.

But in any lineage, the economic condition of all the households is not the same. Some households are high and these include mostly surplus farmers. Then there are others who are comparatively less affluent while some are outrightly poor, hence, the maintenance of the status honour of the whole extended kin-group or lineage falls largely on the shoulders of the wealthiest members of that respective lineage. Bertocci has also given an interesting set of data. **Table 2** later indicates that 9 out of 10 (i.e. 90 per cent) surplus farmers in Hajipur and Tinpara are members of the titled lineages or homesteads.

However, poor peasant households in the patrilineal kin group of the homestead or lineage enjoy high status as their low economic status is counterbalanced by their affiliation with a relatively wealthy lineage.

One might say the poor are 'paid-for' (or compensated) in the long run by the wealthy households of the lineage either in the past or at the present point in time. It is only in this sense that the statements of the villagers have to be understood and interpreted because villagers perceive the economic condition of the household as the major consideration in their matrimonial choices. Thus, only indirectly can it be maintained that those whose economic situation is good also have (or come to acquire) high lineage status (1972: 47). Perhaps, this explains why the members of poor peasants/families also sometimes claim that earlier they were also enjoying high status along the secular dimension, but now they express their woes that they could no longer claim similar high status. Hence, one is reminded of the proverb common to Muslims everywhere in the sub-continent, which states: "Last year I was a *Jolaha* (weaver), this year I have become a sheikh, and if next year's crops are good, I shall be *Syed*." Of course, it should also be mentioned that all households of traditionally high status titles, whether secular or religious, were not truly wealthy in both the villages that Bertocci has studied.

In **Table 1** a comparative picture of land ownership and their respective status as presented by Bertocci is given. **Table 1** gives the social status of different peasant families along with their economic status in terms of the extent of land holding. In that table it is also shown that 39 Muslim households of Hajipur and Tinpara belonged to homesteads, which enjoyed traditional high status title. On the other hand, 56 farm households belonged to low status Muslims where majority of these i.e. (77 per cent) were categories of marginal and poor landowners. **Table 2** also shows that 90 per cent of all the surplus farm families belonged to high status category while Table-1 shows that 98 per cent of farm families of low status belonging to landless/landpoor and marginal/subsistence peasant categories and only about 2 per cent belonged to surplus category. Hence, Bertocci has drawn an important generalization from those data, which confirm an overall association of land ownership with relative social rank. Thus it has to bear out Weber's dictum to the effect that while property and status do not always coincide in the long run they tend to do so with extraordinary regularity (1972: 41).

Table 1. Land ownership and status Muslim only

Land ownership category	Low status		High status	
	No.	%	No.	%
Landless	6	11	3	8
Land poor	27	48	11	28
Marginal	16	29	10	26
Subsistence	6	11	6	15
Surplus	1	1	3	23
Total	56	100	39	100

Source: Peter J. Bertocci "Community Structure and Social Rank in two Villages in Bangladesh" *Contributions to Indian Sociology* NS NO.VI 1972 P. 42

Table 2. Comparison between per centages of per class high status and low status households

Peasant type	High status % per class	Low status % per class
Surplus farmers	90	48
Marginal/subsistence	41	59
Landless/Land poor	31	69
Total	100	100

Source: Computed from Bertocci's data. *Ibid.* Pp. 42-43.

Another recent study by Mannan (2002: 253) shows similar evidence of Muslim social stratification where one changed the *Bangsha*⁷ status through gaining economic prosperity. His informant said:

"These people traditionally are pan-bepari (betel-nut hawkers). By dint of their effort and business transactions, these people over the years became the richest people in the neighborhood. Now they influence politics and donate money to village welfare and sports activities. Around 1970 some members began to claim that they were the descendents of *Sayeed Bangsha*. I knew they were lying. Indeed they are from low-*Bangsha*. After 17 years later, now, many original and younger *Sayeed* know that these people are from *Sayeed Bangsha*. After the next 20 years,

⁷ Bangsha means lineage

this pseudo-Sayeed will be able to establish themselves as true Sayeed and no one will question their integrity”.

However, to recapitulate the issue of stratifying rural Muslim society, *Tawangari* is considered as a more fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh. As stated earlier, it is not the nobility of descent but the nobility of opulence, which is the essential basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh in the sense that in the long run nobility comes with opulence. So, it is logically and empirically (in view of Bertocci's data) proved that *Tawanagari* can be considered as the fundamental basis of Muslim stratification in Bangladesh.

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