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CASTE POLITICS, MINORITY REPRESENTATION, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY:
THE ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE OF MUSLIM CASTE IN INDIA
GUEST EDITED BY JULIEN LEVESQUE & SOHEB NIAZI



INTRODUCTION

Caste politics, minority representation, and social mobility: the associational life of Muslim caste in India

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ABSTRACT

Social stratification among Muslims in South Asia, specifically the phenomenon of Muslim caste, has recently gained scholarly and media attention, particularly in India. However, the public discussion – often empirically shallow and politically polarized – fails to adequately explain the mechanisms through which Muslims perpetuate social inequality while invoking egalitarian principles. This special section, based on a panel held at the 2022 BASAS annual conference, aims to contribute to the scholarly and public discourse by advocating for the study of Muslim caste associations. Taking the associational life of caste into account provides a tangible object of study. Moreover, it shifts the focus away from macro-level discussions towards an empirically grounded analysis at the meso- and micro-levels. This introduction explores two central aspects. First, we suggest that caste associations offer a fresh perspective on the study of Muslim social mobility, beyond the oft-assumed imitation of dominant caste groups or Ashrafization. Second, documenting caste associations helps us understand the diversity of Muslim representation, specifically, the tension between Muslim minority politics and Muslim caste politics. Overall, this special section provides multiple examples of Muslims' associational engagements with caste, which encompass endeavours as diverse as political assertion, declassing, social exclusion, or universal charitable aspirations.

KEYWORDS

Caste; associations; minority representation; social mobility; Indian Muslims

Introduction

In recent years, scholars of South Asian Islam and Muslims themselves have paid renewed attention to caste. In India, this renewed attention can be attributed to two primary factors. First, the emergence of a critique internal to Muslim politics, carried by activists from marginalized caste groups calling themselves Pasmanda and challenging the leadership of the dominant groups, collectively designated by the term Ashraf (A. Alam 2009; I. Ahmad 2007; Sikand 2001).¹ The Pasmanda critique came about in part due to the mobilization for caste-based quotas that occurred among Muslims following the release of the 1980 Mandal Commission report. This mobilization led to the creation of numerous new caste associations that not only lobbied for quotas but also engaged in intra-community affairs, from the management of marriages and religious festivals to discursive strategies of collective self-identification. However, while the Pasmanda banner allowed different Muslim

marginalized castes to come together under a common umbrella, the discourse failed to gain significant traction. On the whole, it could neither translate into a large political movement (S. Alam 2022), nor pressurize mainstream political parties or Muslim organizations to ensure the presence of diverse caste groups in their fold (Levesque, Gautier, and Belorgey 2022).

The second reason that rekindled attention to the matter of caste among Muslims is the assertion and rise to power of the Hindutva groups in India. Since the 1980s, the campaigns of the BJP, RSS, and other affiliate organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Bajrang Dal, have placed India's religious minorities in a vulnerable position. The coming to power of the BJP in 2014 has only exacerbated the situation. While vigilantes directly target Muslims in the name of cow protection (Ferry 2018), the government adopts measures that contribute to religious polarization and increases its control over state institutions – leading several scholars to talk of India as a 'majoritarian democracy' (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019). This context affects intra-Muslim debates on caste and leadership. On the one hand, religious polarization and the vulnerability of minorities reinforces the claims of those who seek to consolidate Muslim political unity – such as Asaduddin Owaisi, who projected himself as a pan-Indian Muslim leader in the 2010s (Bajpai and Farooqui 2018). In other words, the pressure for strategic unity discredits discussions on intra-Muslim inequalities as potentially divisive and therefore threatening for 'the community'. On the other hand, the rise to power of the BJP has also opened new opportunities for some, as the BJP seeks to exploit intra-Muslim divisions as part of its political strategy, notably by forging ties with Shia and Barelvi or Sufi personalities (Laliwala 2020). During the campaign for the 2022 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP sought to patronize some Pasmanda Muslim groups and then appointed Danish Ansari, a Pasmanda Muslim, to the government. A few weeks later, the Prime Minister himself, Narendra Modi, encouraged his party to open towards the Pasmanda Muslims, sparking multiple commentaries on the BJP's new strategy (K. A. Ansari 2022). Thus, if the Pasmanda discourse has so far failed to profoundly transform caste inequities among Muslims, it nonetheless succeeded in sparking an intense debate on caste and minority representation in the context of growing Hindutva ascendancy.

This collection of essays, based on a panel held in 2022 at the annual conference of the British Association of South Asian Studies, aims to intervene in these debates as well as in the scholarly discussion on Muslim caste² – a discussion notably sparked by sociologist Imtiaz Ahmad (I. Ahmad 1973, 1966). Several scholars have emphasized the need for more extensive research on Muslim social stratification in South Asia, with the repeated suggestion to focus on the way Muslims reproduce social hierarchies while paradoxically invoking Islamic notions of piety (*taqwā*), ethics (*akhlāq*), or equality (*masāwāt*) (Bellamy 2021; Gautier and Levesque 2020; Niazi 2020b; Quaiser 2021; Saidalavi 2017). Our contribution to this literature consists in throwing fresh light onto one particular manifestation of caste in the form of organizations, or caste associations. These may be defined simply as associations or organizations – which may be formally registered as societies or trusts – whose membership depends on a common caste belonging. This introduction advocates for the study of caste associations as a particularly productive vantage point for understanding the contemporary social and political transformations taking place among Muslims in India, particularly the dynamics of social mobility and minority representation. Concentrating on Muslim caste associations provides a tangible object of study to investigate Muslim caste. While caste associations should not be confused with caste itself, they hold direct implications for other aspects of caste and thus offer a specific window into caste practices – such as marriage choices, occupational strategies, and dynamics of group solidarity or exclusion. Thus, the focus on Muslim caste associations allows us to move beyond the debate over whether caste exists among Muslims (Ali 2002). Moreover, it shifts the focus away from macro-level discussions towards a localized and empirically grounded analysis at the meso- and micro-levels.

To highlight how taking caste associations into account may usefully contribute to scholarly and public debates on Muslims in India, this introduction first summarizes the key historical moments in the development of scholarship on Muslim caste. We then suggest that focusing on Muslim caste association offers a fresh perspective on the study of Muslim social mobility, beyond the oft-assumed imitation of dominant caste groups or Ashrafization. Finally, we argue that documenting

caste associations helps us understand the complexity of Muslim representation, specifically, the key tension between Muslim minority politics and Muslim caste politics.

Bringing associations into the study of Muslim caste

The scholarly study of caste among Muslims can be delineated through three historical moments. In the nineteenth century, colonial scholars saw Muslim caste as the result of a civilizational encounter – Islam meets India, India meets Islam – through which Muslims adapted to the forms of social stratification that existed in India (Levesque 2020). This vision essentialized both Islam and Hinduism as two distinct entities, the first inherently egalitarian and the second inherently hierarchical. The adoption of caste practices by Indian Muslims was thus understood as a form of acculturation resulting from genetic intermixing, while converts to Islam were gauged by their level of rejection or maintenance of Hindu customs. After India's Independence, and particularly from the 1960s onwards, sociologists and anthropologists brought a new empirical endeavour to the study of Muslim caste. They broke with the static and descriptive approach of colonial surveys to focus on observable transformations – social mobility, collective mobilization, or new marriage practices. Imtiaz Ahmad (1973) defended the appropriateness of the term caste to describe Muslim social stratification in South Asia. Others, notably Louis Dumont (1980) and T. N. Madan (1972), differed. They did not observe any 'caste system' among Muslims due to the perceived absence of an over-arching ideological principle guiding the structure. Consequently, some scholars have suggested that Muslims use 'caste labels' but do not fully practice caste (Nazir 1993), a view refuted by Imtiaz Ahmad (I. Ahmad 2007, 97) as a 'smokescreen to avoid facing the harsh behavioural reality of caste among Muslims in India'. The dispute over whether intra-Muslim inequalities could be described as caste fizzled out as structuralist approaches lost sway. However, in the 1990s, the emergence of the Pasmanda critique revived the study of Muslim caste. The Pasmanda movement challenged the leadership representing Muslims under India's secular framework, blaming its members for consolidating their own position as Ashraf instead of advancing the collective interests of Muslims (K. A. Ansari 2009). The Pasmanda discourse resulted in part from the creation of associations by various Muslim *birādarīs* or occupational caste groups – almost none of which used the term Pasmanda – to demand reservations in the wake of the Mandal Commission report. As the contributions to this special section highlight, the emergence of Pasmanda demands and the subsequent political developments they triggered continue to draw the attention of scholars.

To ground this revived interest in Muslim caste empirically, associations constitute a fruitful object of study. They help us move beyond some of the conceptual and methodological limitations that earlier hindered the study of caste among Muslims. Most of the conceptual obstacles had to do with the dominant presence of the 'Hindu caste system' as the reference point to gauge caste among non-Hindus. With the Hindu *varna* system as the standard, Muslim *birādarīs* could only be classified according to their degree of proximity to Hindu caste groups.³ According to this logic, understanding Muslim caste implied appraising the extent to which Muslims had acculturated or not (G. Ansari 1960). This approach reduced caste to a set of supposedly objective, observable criteria, and lost sight of emic perspectives – what caste may mean to Muslims (Vatuk 1996). Associations thus offer a way of examining Muslim caste *in practice* and in Muslims' own terms.

Moreover, caste associations provide a tangible object for empirical study that allows scholars to circumvent the objection made by many Muslims themselves and by some scholars to argue against the existence of caste among Muslims, namely, that there is no justification for caste in the foundational texts of Islam – the Quran and Hadith. This argument is problematic on at least two accounts. First, not only is there now ample evidence to suggest that social stratification among Muslims in South Asia does correspond to the key characteristics of caste (graded hierarchy, endogamy, occupational specialization), but recent work (Falahi 2009) has shown that textual justification could be found for caste practices in the discursive production of South Asian Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*) and historians like the thirteenth century thinker Ziauddin Barani.⁴ The Ashraf or Sayyid

Muslims have historically deployed these textual justifications to perpetuate inequalities based on lineage or birth, which in turn, solidify endogamous marriage practices or reinforce hereditary occupational distinctions (Niazi 2020b). Second, this argument reduces Islam to its foundational texts, thus reproducing the normative distinction between Islam's 'Great Tradition' of the 'original' Arab and Persian regions and the 'acculturated' Islam, or 'Little Tradition' found beyond the Arabo-Persian world. Caste associations constitute a *locus* where Muslims engage with caste as they seek to 'achieve coherence' with Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986, 17).

While the existence of Muslim caste may be debated on matters of definition, the existence of organizations established on the basis of a common ascriptive identity that forms a group generally designated as *birādārī* can hardly be challenged. Associations claiming to represent a particular *birādārī* are active in public space under an official name, are often registered with the state as trusts or societies, hold official meetings and publish official statements. These caste associations engage in a range of activities. They may strive to consolidate the collective *birādārī* identity, enforce social boundaries and rules for excommunication, restrict the marriage circles within the *birādārī*, advocate for the reform of social customs, participate in local political institutions or serve as a network for occupational groups to participate in market dynamics relevant to their trade. They may also construct and promote narratives that justify claims to respectability and initiate mechanisms for internal solidarity, such as scholarships or collective weddings. Examining the formation, objectives, and activities of these organizations illustrates the crucial role of ascriptive status identities – such as belonging to a *birādārī* – in shaping the collective life of Muslims.

Finally, taking caste associations into account is essential to understand the state's relation to Muslim caste groups. Scholars examining the relation of caste and politics in India have long noted the role of associations in weakening the vertical interdependence between caste groups (in the form, for instance, of the *jajmānī* system) and reinforcing the 'horizontal consolidation of caste' (Jodhka 2010, 2017; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Srinivas 1962). Relying on pre-existing *panchāyats*, voluntary caste associations were first established in the late nineteenth century as a result of changes introduced by the colonial state, such as legal representation, the decennial census, or new educational opportunities in line with a Western model of education (Carroll 1977, 1978). Acquiring political salience with the introduction of the colonial census, caste associations engendered new forms of collective solidarity – Ghurye (1932) spoke of 'caste patriotism' – and began to act as pressure groups after the introduction of local municipal boards and representative politics in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modernist scholarship regarded caste associations as an Indian form of civil society, a view that overlooked the fundamentally unequal character of caste (Kothari 1970; Rudolph and Rudolph 1960). From the 1970s, caste associations became a catalyst for the emergence of OBCs as a significant political force (Jaffrelot 2003). They took on a new form – large federations – and used a language of assertion to argue for greater inclusion in institutions of power. This narrative of the development of caste associations, however, entirely overlooks the 'politicization' of caste among Muslims – assuming either that their experience is homogenous, or that identity consolidation as a Muslim political community overdetermines all aspects of Muslim collective life.

However, caste associations based on a collective *birādārī* identity have been crucial voices in shaping political demands among Muslims at least since the 1920s (Sajjad 2014, 274–317). One key specificity of the politicization of Muslim caste in independent India is certainly the gradual change of the state's stance on the matter, with the progressive inclusion of Muslims in preferential quotas for marginalized caste groups. After Independence, the Constituent Assembly chose to include Muslims and other religious minorities neither in the Scheduled Caste category that provided compensatory quotas (or 'reservations') for Dalit castes, nor in the Backward Classes category (Bajpai 2000).⁵ The assumption, then, was that caste was not a key social characteristic of Muslim societies, which were rather considered rooted in Islam's egalitarian principle. At the central level, the two Backward Classes Commissions (the 1955 Kaka Kalelkar Commission and the 1977 B.P. Mandal Commission) nonetheless acknowledged the existence of caste discrimination among Muslims and thus included some Muslim caste groups in their recommended Backward Classes

lists. However, because the government rejected the Kaka Kalelkar Commission report in 1961, the responsibility of providing quotas for Backward Classes was delegated to the states. As a result, in the 1970s, some states introduced quotas for Muslim caste groups, either by including Muslims as a whole in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category (Karnataka and Kerala), or by listing specific Muslim groups as eligible for caste-based reservations, as in Bihar (Fazal 2007). Importantly, the empirical scholarly study of Muslim caste that developed from the 1960s has informed the changes in state policies that provide or withdraw recognition to different caste groups.

Studying Muslim caste associations brings two questions together, which are generally treated separately – caste politics on the one hand, and Muslim politics on the other. Exploring the associational life of caste among Muslims thus fills two gaps in the literature. First, it addresses the minority experience of the development of caste associations. This special section asks whether the gradual ‘politicization’ of caste from the late nineteenth century onwards affected Muslims in a way similar to the Hindu majority. Second, studying Muslim caste associations throws light on the multiple, caste-located experiences of minority politics among Indian Muslims – an aspect we further develop in a subsequent section of this introduction. Overall, taking caste into account forces us to shed the common assumption of homogeneity – all Muslims share a similar minority experience under India’s secular regime – in favour of a more nuanced reading – the Muslim minority experience is variegated, and caste, like class, gender, or culture, is one of the key factors that affect it. This special section is thus a programmatic call for researchers to explore the associational life of caste among Muslims, as a way not only to revive and expand the study of social stratification in Islam, but also to highlight the diversity of what it means to be Muslim in India’s post-independence secular regime.

Muslim caste and social mobility beyond Ashrafization

Studying caste dynamics among Muslims requires us to apprehend how Muslims develop strategies for social mobility, particularly through claims of higher status. Caste associations emerged as important platforms for individuals or groups seeking to improve their social position in this manner. Scholars widely acknowledge that assertions of higher status play a crucial role in the Hindu *varna* system. Such claims transform distinctive characteristics between different caste groups into tools employed by lower castes to elevate their social standing (Silverberg 1968). Famously termed as ‘sanskritization’ by M.N. Srinivas (Srinivas 1962, 16–41), this process entailed not only the adoption of upper caste surnames but also a shift in occupational specialization, customs and traditions, including dietary and food habits (Charsley 1998).

Scholars have observed a similar process among Muslims in India, with claims to socially valorized lineages playing a central role. Cora Vreede-de Stuers (1968, 6) coined the term Ashrafization to describe the ‘attempts at social climbing by groups or individuals through hypergamy and adopting the way of life of higher classes’. Ashrafization among Muslims relied on genealogical claims fuelled by the discipline of *ilm-al nasab* (study of genealogy). Descent from the Prophet’s family or the *ahl-al bayt* was necessary to claim Sayyid status across the Islamicate world. As claims to Sayyid status were not easy to substantiate, the Shaikh status – that in the Indian context primarily indicated a lineage descending from the Prophet’s Arab tribe, the Quraish – became the social category that Muslim groups aspiring to social mobility embraced (Niazi 2020b). This was particularly true of those known as the *peshewar aqwām* or occupational castes. The Shaikh status offered sufficient fluidity for various Muslim occupational castes, or *birādarīs*, to adopt Arab surnames such as Ansari (companions of the Prophet) or Quraishi (Arab tribe of the Prophet) to indicate an association with – though not descent from – the Prophet of Islam.

Ashrafization entailed other aspects. Marriage regulations served as mechanisms not only for the maintenance of caste boundaries but also as a tool for social mobility. Imtiaz Ahmad (2018b) thus showed that a caste group, in this case the Shaikh Siddiquis of Allahabad district, could maintain a distinctive identity while raising its social standing in the Muslim social hierarchy. Moreover, the process of social mobility could also mean a change in occupational specialization. The framework

of Ashrafization suggested that socially mobile groups would give up ‘traditional’ occupations and subsequently take up novel professions associated with a higher status. However, probably more congruent with reality is the understanding that lower caste groups in general, or socially mobile castes in particular, practice multiple occupations over a period of time and that changes in occupational specialization result from other factors, such as industrialization or the patterns of rural-urban migrations. Finally, as Stuers pointed out, social mobility also involved what she called Islamization, that is, the conscious discarding of rites and customs associated with the Hindu past of a Muslim caste group. This process, however, also resulted from the Ashraf-led Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Metcalf 1982; Pearson 2008; Sanyal 1996). In her study of Muslim marriage customs in northern India, Stuers showed that women from upwardly mobile families in an urban milieu adopted veiling (*pardā*) as a sign of Islamic morality.

However, several scholars, including some of the contributors to this special section, emphasize that social mobility among Muslims cannot be easily categorized as a simple, linear Ashrafization process. Rather, this collection of essays suggests that Ashrafization involves more than the simple adoption of higher caste surnames or the imitation of the cultural values of the Ashraf. This becomes obvious when historicizing and tracing the evolution of Ashrafization among South Asian Muslims. An overly simplistic view of Ashrafization assumes that claims to higher social status have constantly unfolded in a uniform manner. However, because South Asian Muslim cultures involve a tension between the identification with a non-Indian genealogy and Indian Ashraf values (Buehler 2012, 232), Ashrafization must be understood as a dynamic process that assumes diverse forms and meanings across historical periods. This aligns with the observation by historians concerning the shifting status of the Ashraf and the exclusivity of Ashrafi culture across historical epochs (Paiker 2022; Pernau 2013).

In the Mughal period, belonging to the Ashraf entailed specific privileges, including governmental benefits in the form of stipends and revenue free land grants (M. Alam 1986, 112; I. Habib 1963, 353). As the Muslim elites of North India assimilated into a shared culture, previous ethnic differences of region and descent translated into social categories – namely, the four main groups among the Ashraf, the Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals, and Pathans. The Mughal period witnessed a drive to safeguard these privileges through the preservation of an Ashrafi culture, forming a subculture that aimed to uphold non-Indian traditions and promote education in Persian, Arabic and subsequently Urdu (Buehler 2012, 235). Because ancestry held such significance, the state was directly involved in regulating genealogical claims. Thus, in the late sixteenth century, the specialized institution of the *niqābat* (an office that verified genealogies) emerged to scrutinize the validity of Sayyid claims and issue genealogical certificates to those deemed legitimate. However, despite the existence of the *niqābat*, evidence from this era suggests that non-Ashraf Muslims and Hindu converts were able to not only assimilate into Ashrafi culture but also get genealogical recognition despite their origins – thus defying social and governmental measures aimed at impeding social mobility. Moreover, if social mobility during the medieval and Mughal periods was significantly influenced by the Ashrafi culture perceived as foreign, the Ashraf also appropriated much of the local culture, even as they sought to maintain a certain distinction. Richard Eaton thus notes that many Bengali Ashraf Muslims had by the early seventeenth century essentially ‘become virtual Rajputs’ (Eaton 2001, 27). Yet Buehler (2012) highlights that the widespread adoption of Indian social customs by Ashraf Muslims, a process he terms *Ajlafization*, did not happen on a wide scale.

During the colonial era, competing claims to social status formed one of the main drivers behind the establishment of caste associations in the late nineteenth century (Carroll 1977, 1978). Among Muslim occupational castes, this often involved claiming a Shaikh status. The most significant endeavour to form a caste association occurred among the weavers. Previously derogatorily referred to as *Julahas*, they adopted the title of *Ansari*, signifying the companions of the Prophet (Pandey 1983), and established the *Momin Conference* in 1924 in Calcutta, an organization also known as the *All India Jamiat-ul Ansar* in certain regions of the subcontinent (Ghosh 2020; Rai 2012, 2013, 2018). The *Momin Conference* was one of the earliest pan-Indian associations formed around a shared

birādārī identity, that of Muslim weavers. In the decades leading to India's independence, the Momin Conference developed a close association with the Indian National Congress (Askari 1971). In 1927, another important organization emerged in Delhi to represent butchers, meat, hide and leather traders under the banner of the All India Jamiat-ul Quraish (Z. Ahmad 2018a; Niazi 2020a). Similarly, several smaller associations were formed to mobilize other *peshewar birādārīs*, including the Mirasis (musicians and genealogists) and the Arains (vegetable sellers and gardeners [Koul 2017]). All these associations linked their respective *birādārīs* to the Shaikh status. For this reason, Tausif Ahmad (2023) suggests the term 'Shaikhization' instead of Ashrafization.

Focusing on the social and political activities of the *peshewar* Muslims adds nuance to the conventional understanding of Ashrafization. Their organizations employed strategies to claim higher social status, enabling them to overcome the stigmatization associated with their occupational identities. This was notably accomplished through the symbolic adoption of Ashraf practices. These strategies encompassed assuming Arab surnames based on Quraish lineage to seek Shaikh status, ensuring endogamy within the *birādārī* to restrict marriage circles, embracing ethical and moral norms and values around notions of piety, and encouraging the reform (*islāh*) of marriage customs deemed un-Islamic, such as dowry.

However, the aspiration to upward social mobility involved other strategies among *peshewar birādārīs*. For instance, many efforts of the *peshewar* Muslims centred around promoting alternative visions of the Islamic normative principles by interpreting the egalitarian principle of *masāwāt* (equality). Perhaps more importantly, besides imitating the Ashraf, the *peshewar* Muslims also developed strategies that aimed to distance themselves from Ashraf practices. In the contemporary context, the *peshewar* Muslims' distancing from the Ashraf serves their demands for preferential policies – a form of 'declassing' or 'de-casting' that Gayatri Rathore (2023, in this volume) names 'de-Ashrafization'. More broadly, these strategies involved contesting, critiquing, and resisting the stereotypical narratives that stigmatized their occupational identities based on the labour and services performed by them. This set of strategies emphasized the distinct aspects of the specific occupation or *peshā* practiced by various *birādārīs*, forming *jami'ats* or associations to consolidate *birādārī* identity, documenting community histories (*qaumī tārikh*) in the vernacular mediums of Urdu or Hindi, and highlighting the principle of *masāwāt* as the normative foundation of an egalitarian interpretation of Islam. One of the primary approaches employed by these associations to promote the interests of their respective *birādārīs* was through active engagement in local politics, particularly in municipal boards, which served as arenas for political contests among different intra-Muslim communities. Arguably, these strategies – which sought to set the Muslim *peshewar birādārīs* apart from the Ashraf – found resonance with the vast population of lower caste groups, including those stereotypically associated with occupations considered 'ritually impure' occupations, such as leatherwork for Chamars (Rawat 2011) or sanitation work for the Halalkhors (Lee 2018, 2021).

Caste associations and Muslim minority politics

Focusing on caste associations thus helps understand how social stratification among Indian Muslims is contested or reproduced. It also brings new empirical material and theoretical insights to our understanding of the political representation of minority groups. Scholars have long emphasized that caste politics among religious minorities in India conflicts with the politics of community representation (K. A. Ansari 2023; Fazal 2007; Sikand 2001). In other words, asserting caste differences within religious minorities has a divisive effect that weakens their political capacity to represent community interests. In the case of Muslims, this highlights a tension between those claiming to speak on behalf of all Muslims, who are predominantly of Ashraf origins, and those advocating for the interests of marginalized caste groups among Muslims, specifically the Pasmānda. However, two recent developments suggest that this tension does not unfold in a straightforward, mechanical manner, but rather in an intricate way.

The first development is the endorsement of the demand for a 'caste census' by a major political party that seeks to bring all Muslims on a single political platform, the Hyderabad-based All India Majlis-i Ittehad-ul Muslimeen (AIMIM), led by Asaduddin Owaisi (Bajpai and Farooqui 2018). A long-lasting demand by lower- and anti-caste activists, the caste census aims to update the figures based on which quotas in education, public employment, and in the electoral process are allocated. New numbers may be expected to favour marginalized caste groups: a documented increase in their population share would bolster the demand for a revision of the 50% quota cap put in place by the Supreme Court in the 1992 Indra Sawhney case (Bhat 2019).⁶ Interestingly, the AIMIM supported the demand: in August 2021, when a ten-party delegation from Bihar met the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi to request a caste census, the delegates included members of the AIMIM, which had recently won five assembly seats in the Seemanchal region. On the eve of the meeting with the Prime Minister, the head of the AIMIM in Bihar and Member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly, Akhtarul Iman, held a meeting in New Delhi in the Muslim-majority area of Abul Fazal Enclave, where members of the party insisted on the importance of addressing the issue of caste-based inequality among Muslims. Notwithstanding the reasons that led the AIMIM to support this demand (from its political strategy in Bihar to its position on the adoption of quotas for Muslims in its home state of Telangana), this stance indicates that the issue of caste-based quotas can be appropriated in and combined with a unitary rhetoric of minority representation.

A second example illustrates how the tension between caste politics and Muslims politics calls India's secular framework into question. In July 2022, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested his party and government should reach out to Pasmanda Muslims. This came as a surprise to most observers for two main reasons. First, doubt remained over the sincerity of a statement by a party whose track record stands out for majoritarian politics rather than overtures towards religious minorities. Second, the term Pasmanda was new to many, since it had been rather absent from mainstream public debates in India until then. News outlets sought to explain that, contrary to common knowledge, Muslims in India organize socially along caste distinctions. Further highlighting that the mobilization of lower caste groups has challenged the traditional Muslim leadership, the media showed that caste was politically relevant among Muslims. Commentators agree that the BJP's strategy to woo the Pasmanda extends much beyond Narendra Modi's statement and has encouraged multiple political appropriations of the label (see Azam 2023a, in this volume and Ansari 2022). Yet this statement sparked contrasted public interventions that indicate diverging visions of secularism among Pasmanda activists. On the one hand, a veteran leader of the Pasmanda movement, Ali Anwar, reaffirmed in a public letter the need for Muslim unity against Hindutva groups and insisted that Indian secularism guaranteed Muslims' equal access to citizenship.⁷ For Anwar, whose political engagement has been anchored to the Left, protecting Muslims against violence and marginalization was the need of the hour. On the other hand, a young Pasmanda public figure, Faiyaz Ahmad Fyzie, stressed the importance of caste politics by arguing in favour of the BJP's project of instituting a Uniform Civil Code (UCC).⁸ In his view, the implementation of the UCC would contribute towards freeing Pasmanda Muslims from the political tutelage of the Ashraf who have traditionally defended community-specific family laws. Thus, we may note that the emergence of widespread caste-based demands since the 1990s has called into question not only Muslim elites' claims to community representation, but more broadly India's model of secularism as the guarantor of Muslim interests, even as the rise of Hindutva groups would in principle call for greater Muslim political unity.

As these developments suggest, apprehending the intricate ways in which the tension between caste politics and Muslim politics plays out requires moving beyond a macro-analysis towards the meso- and micro-levels. By focusing on caste associations, the contributions to this special section bring in the local and regional scales into analysis. Caste associations do indeed exist in multiple forms and actively engage at various levels of political and community organizing. Shireen Azam (2023a, in this volume) examines the way single-caste associations come together under the

Pasmanda label to form what Rajni Kothari and Rushikesh Maru (1965) called a 'caste federation'. In the case of the Pasmanda Adhikar Manch examined by Azam, the Halalkhor, Shah, and Nanpuz in Varanasi formed a new organization ahead of the 2022 Uttar Pradesh elections, with clear political ambitions in mind. Uniting under the Pasmanda umbrella allows Muslim caste groups to voice political demands at a larger scale. However, Azam shows that internal divisions hinder the process of political unification. These divisions pertain to the strategic approach to adopt towards Muslim privileged caste groups and the issue of internal power imbalance between the numerous and well-established Muslim Pasmanda castes (such as the Ansaris) and more marginalized caste groups among the Pasmanda, some of whom, like the Halalkhor, experience untouchability.

While Azam highlights the dynamics of complementarity and competition between several single-caste organizations in forming a broader Pasmanda caste federation, Azeem Ahmed and Gayatri Rathore explore similar processes between organizations claiming to represent the same Muslim caste group. Focusing on the caste of vegetable sellers, or Rayeen, in the town of Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh, Ahmed (2023, in this volume) emphasizes the complementarity between multiple organizations within a single Muslim caste group. Ahmed shows that as the traditional form of caste organization – the *panchayat* and its head, the *chaudhuri* – loses the authority to enforce community regulations (such as caste endogamy), two new forms of organizations emerge. These include the caste association (the Jamiat-ur Rayeen) that seeks to bring the Rayeen on a single platform to weigh in on the political process at the local, state, and national levels. The second form is the foundation, whose charity activities aim not simply at the welfare of caste members but aspire to 'universal' welfare.

Caste associations may also take another form, including among Muslims: that of a labour union. Because caste associations cater to groups that are often specialized occupationally, part of their activities may rely on a particular profession, as in the case of the Rayeens' link to the wholesale market (*mandi*). For the same reason, they may also seek to defend the professional interests of their group. Conversely, organizations that present themselves as labour unions may effectively function as caste associations, when the majority, if not all, of their members belong to same caste group. This is the case for the Sheikh sanitation workers in Srinagar that Hafsa Shah (2023, in this volume) focuses on. In a different context, Gayatri Rathore (2023, in this volume) shows that the Muslim Bhishtis of Jaipur felt the need to establish a separate labour union to represent Muslim sanitation workers, distinct from the union representing the Hindu Balmiki. Here, caste associations, while conflicting over the interests of two Dalit groups for similar employment positions, become the indirect instruments of religious distinction.

Finally, Julien Levesque (2023, in this volume) proposes to distinguish between three types of Muslim caste-based organizations according to the social role they play: the non-confrontational and reform-oriented *anjuman*, the politically assertive *jami'at*, and the gatekeeping, network-oriented association. Comparing three Sayyid organizations in India and Pakistan, Levesque suggests that the Ashraf preference for the *anjuman* form indicates that it is well-suited to the reproduction of social norms. Conversely, lower ranking Muslim caste groups find the *jami'at* a more conducive associational form to demand equal respect and rights in the public sphere, and ultimately to work for social change. Taken together, the contributions to the special section offer an overview of the range of Muslim caste-based organizations, which include single-caste associations, traditional panchayats, caste federations, *anjumans* for community welfare and religious festivals, labour unions, foundations with universal ambitions, and *jami'at* for political assertion. In variegated ways, these organizations voice the interests of different Muslim *biradaris* as caste groups, as Muslims, and for some as Pasmanda. While much of the scholarship on Muslim caste now focuses on the transformative potential of the Pasmanda discourse, this special section seeks to shift the focus to how Muslims organize in the name of their *biradari*.

The contributions in this special section document a variety of Muslim *biradaris* and their organizations, some of which have received limited scholarly attention thus far. These include the Nanpuz bakers, the Fakir (Shah) gravediggers, the Bhishti and Sheikh sanitation workers, the Rayeen

vegetable sellers, and the dominant Sayyids. The case studies presented here focus mainly, though not exclusively, on North India. The regions covered range from a Muslim-majority region like Jammu and Kashmir, to the urban contexts of Jaipur and Srinagar, and to smaller towns such as Pratapgarh and Amroha in Uttar Pradesh or Kozhikode in Kerala. We hope future scholarship on Muslim caste follows this line of inquiry to further make sense of the caste-located character of the Muslim social and political experience in India. This will require adequately incorporating still marginalized and excluded *birādarīs*, as well as considering other regions of South Asia.

In his afterword, Joel Lee (2023, in this volume) suggests numerous avenues for new research – such as the religious bifurcation of occupational castes, the adoption of ‘universal’ charity, or the forms and implications of caste concealment. Reminding us of the importance of Islamic ethics, Lee also invites us to think about the new ‘varieties of social imagination’ caste associations may open. Developing the study of Muslim caste would certainly enrich and strengthen India’s public debate on social equality. Indeed, as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2023) recently remarked, addressing caste inequalities among Muslims is likely not to divide and weaken them politically but to work against their collective disenfranchisement.

Notes

1. The most compelling argument was penned in 2001 by Ali Anwar, the founder of the Pasmānda Muslim Mahaz, in a book recently translated in English (Anwar 2001, 2023).
2. We use the expression ‘Muslim caste’ for euphonic rather than heuristic reasons, as a shorter form of ‘caste among Muslims’. Hence, we do not propose ‘Muslim caste’ as a concept, but rather understand caste as an organizing principle that involves hierarchical groups, occupational specialization, and rules of interactions between groups (endogamy, commensality). Its practice may be shaped by various social, religious, and cultural contexts. We believe, however, that caste among Muslims in India is shaped by factors specific to their religious tradition – for instance, the egalitarian principle in Islam – and to their socio-political location – such as their minority status or the rise of Hindutva groups.
3. *Birādarī* is a term of Persian origin that literally means brotherhood or fraternity, and that is most often used by North Indian Muslims to designate caste groups.
4. Barani is said to be one of the first to use the Ashraf-Ajlaf distinction in his work, *Fatāwā-i jahāndārī* (M. Habib and Khān 2020, 97–99).
5. The potential inclusion of Muslims and Christians in the SC category is the object of intense debate and important legal change may be expected in the coming years. The Supreme Court of India is examining a petition filed in 2004 – *Ghazi Saaduddin v State of Maharashtra Thr Secretary* – with which several subsequent petitions have been clubbed. In 2022 the government appointed an inquiry commission headed by the former Chief Justice of India K.G. Balakrishnan to make recommendations on this issue. Whether the SC category should be extended to Muslims and Christians is a political and politicized question. Opponents to the extension argue that Muslims already benefit from special rights as a minority. A recent article (Kumar 2023) analyses the Constituent Assembly debates to suggest that the SC list was never envisioned as religion neutral. However, Imtiaz Ahmad (2007) had earlier argued that Dalit converts to Islam should benefit from the preferential policies granted by the SC status because the exclusion they experienced did not stop with conversion. Very recently, Shireen Azam (2023b) has built on Ahmad’s arguments to submit an intervention report to the Supreme Court in support of granting the SC status to Dalit Muslims. The rulings of the courts and the positions of Muslim caste associations and political parties on this question are likely to be pivotal in shaping the politics of Muslim caste in the near future.
6. The caste-census demand has also undone the BJP-led NPA government in Bihar in August 2022, where the new coalition has vowed to conduct such a survey (see for instance: Sharan 2023).
7. For a news report on this public letter, see Santosh (2022).
8. In his numerous media and online interventions, Fyzie repeatedly stresses that the Ashraf, not the Pasmānda, oppose the UCC (see for instance Fyzie 2022).

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