



### Printer Friendly Version

#### Caste And Caste-Based Discrimination

#### Among Indian Muslims - Part 1

*[Translator's Note: Very little has been written on the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination among the Indian Muslims. 'Upper' caste Muslims, who, although a very small minority among the Indian Muslims, generally deny the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination in the larger Muslim community by arguing that these have no sanction in Islam. However, although these do not have legitimacy in the Quran, their reality cannot be denied. Nor too can the legitimacy that these have sought to be given by numerous supposedly leading Indian Islamic scholars be ignored.]*

In 2007, Masood Alam Falahi, a graduate of a madrasa and then a 27 year-old M.Phil. student at Delhi University, wrote a voluminous, almost 600-page, Urdu book titled Hindustan Mai Zat-Pat Aur Musalman ('Casteism Among Muslims in India'). Weaving together insights from fieldwork and key writings by influential Indian Muslim scholars, including Muslim clerics on the subject of caste, the book is a pioneering study of caste-based discrimination among the Indian Muslims and of the continued domination of 'high' caste Muslims that parallels, in remarkable ways, the Hindu case.

Realising the importance of this pioneering book, I have begun translating key portions of it, which I plan to send out as articles once every few days. Once the translation is complete I hope to publish it as a book.

This instalment is a translation of the first thirty pages of the book titled 'Why I Have Written This Book'. -- Yoginder Sikand for NewAgeIslam.com]

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Why I Have Written This Book

**By Masood Alam Falahi**

02 November, 2010

[NewAgeIslam.com](http://NewAgeIslam.com)

[Translated from Urdu by Yoginder Sikand for NewAgeIslam.com]

O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted (Quran 49: 13)

There are two things that, if they are found among people, take them to the level of infidelity: one is to consider others to be low-born [...] (Saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad contained in the Sahih Muslim)

In 1994, I was a student at a well-known madrasa, the Jamiat ul-Falah, in Bilariyaganj, in Azamgarh district in eastern Uttar Pradesh. I was then in the final year of the alimiyat course. It so happened that the Uttar Pradesh wing of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind had organised a week-long 'Introducing the Quran' programme across the state. Through various activities that formed part of this programme, activists of the Jamaat sought to reach out with Islam's message of brotherhood and equality to Hindus, especially Dalits, trying to invite them to Islam. Accordingly, a Jamaat activist named Hakim Abdur Rauf visited a Dalit locality in Bilariyaganj and delivered a speech to the inhabitants declaring Islam to be the perfect antidote to untouchability, caste-based discrimination and social hierarchy. He told his Dalit listeners that if they became Muslims and entered the fold of Islam, they would be liberated from the terrible degradation that they had been subjected to for centuries, and that all the other Muslims would embrace them as brothers.

After he had finished speaking, a Dalit youth stood out from among the crowd and said, 'Sir, it is true that there is no casteism in Islam. But is your Muslim society free from casteism? The Muslims of the town where you are presently in refuse to marry outside their own respective castes, and in this they are no less strict and particular than the Hindus. They refuse to give their daughters to prospective grooms from other Muslim castes, no matter how well-educated and decent such men may be. Instead, they insist that their daughters marry men from their own caste even if the latter are illiterate.' 'If we accept Islam', the Dalit youth went on, 'which Muslims will agree to inter-marry and inter-dine with us? Who will marry our daughters or give us their daughters to marry?'

It is instructive to note how this Dalit youth's reaction was interpreted by Jamaat activists who heard about this incident. One of these, a member of the Jamaat, is considered to be an 'alim, a learned scholar of Islam, and never tires of talking about promoting 'Islamic revolution' and establishing 'Islamic government' in India through missionary work among non-Muslim Indians. His response to the Dalit youth's reaction was not to acknowledge the need to launch a movement to end the curse of casteism among the Muslims of the country. Instead, he cynically remarked, 'Some people concoct lame excuses so as not to accept Islam because they know that if they embrace Islam they are bound to be confronted with problems.'

I am grateful to God that my own family is free from the cancer of casteism. Once, two 'ulema friends of my brother came to meet him. One of these had married outside his caste, and the other maulvi teased him for this. My brother was very upset with the latter's behaviour and told him, 'You claim to be the leaders of the

Muslims, but, despite knowing that caste prejudice and ethnic pride is sheer ignorance and un-Islamic, you are fanning it!’

My late mother was also very against caste and caste-based prejudice, knowing full well that these have no place in Islam. She received numerous proposals for my marriage but always insisted that all she wanted was a pious and well-educated daughter-in-law, whose caste did not matter. My late father was like my mother in this respect.

From a young age itself I lived in a city, along with my brother. The environment in cities is quite different from that in the countryside. In cities people are caught up with their own work and do not bother about other people’s affairs. That is why as a child I knew nothing about the horrors of casteism and the great damage that it has done to Indian Muslim society.

The Muslims of my ancestral village and the region surrounding it are followers of the rival Deobandi and the Barelvi schools of thought. When they need guidance in religious matters they consult texts written by Deobandi and Barelvi writers, such as the *Bahishti Zevar*, by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (a Faruqi Shaikh), the *Fatawa-e Rizviya* by Maulana Ahmad Riza Khan Barelvi (a Pathan), and the *Bahar-e Shariat* by Maulana Muhammad Amjad Ali (an Ansari), deeming these to be adequate even if the fatwas contained in these books are wholly wrong in the light of the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

Shortly after the incident that I described above, in which the Dalit youth confronted the activist of the *Jamaat-e Islami* with bitter truths about our caste-ridden Muslim society, I thought of consulting the *Bahishti Zevar* in the belief that Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi must certainly have bitterly condemned casteism, caste-based social hierarchy and conventional fiqh-based rules of kufu’ or social parity that must guide selection of marital partners in his magnum opus. However, I was completely aghast when I opened the book, to the fourth chapter that discusses in detail the rules of social parity that Maulana Thanvi insisted needed to be strictly followed in contracting marriages. It went completely against what I had expected. I am not exaggerating when I say that what I read sent shivers down my spine and tremors that rent my heart. Till then I had thought that caste, caste-based discrimination and conventional fiqh-derived notions of kufu’ or social parity that governed the choice of marital partners were all a social construct, a product of the influence of Hinduism and Hindu society on the Indian Muslims. However, what I discovered, to my utter horror, was that Maulana Thanvi had declared all of this to be an integral part of the Islamic shariah simply because these are legitimised in the traditional books of fiqh. To make matters worse, he did so without providing any legitimacy or proof from the Quran and the Sunnah. In this way, he legitimised the division of Muslims into what he considered ‘high’ (unch) and ‘low’ (neech), ‘noble’ (sharif) and ‘despicable’ (razil) groups on the basis of individuals’ birth in particular social or caste-like groups.

How, I asked myself in shock, could Muslims be at all branded in this fashion as ‘despicable’? God forbid! Is

it not ridiculous? Maulvi Thanvi went further and even declared that newly-converted Muslims (nau musalman) were not the social equals of other Muslims, and that inter-marriage between the two was not advisable. And so we can very well say, 'He whom we thought was a Messiah turned out to be a Hulagu Khan'.

Reading what Maulvi Thanvi had to say on the subject, my distress knew no bounds. I was appalled at how all this was being associated with Islam and being wrongly sought to be legitimised in its name. Did the ulema have no idea that this was giving Islam such a bad name? Did they not realise how it was posing an immense hurdle in the spread of Islam? Did they not feel the need to struggle against caste, a system and ideology that has no sanction whatsoever in Islam? I must here mention that I spoke to a number of ulema from various Muslim groups or jamaats about this. With the exception of a very few who admitted that the ulema of their respective schools of thought who had defended caste and caste-based hierarchies had made a grave blunder, they simply refused to acknowledge that these scholars had grievously erred. Instead of critiquing them, they tried to defend their views by resorting to all sorts of casuistry.

In the final year of the fazilat course at the Jamiat ul-Falah we had to do a course on Comparative Religions., which was taught by Maulana Anis Ahmad Falahi Madani, who belonged to the Shaikh caste. In his lectures the Maulana explained to us the theory and history of the varna system of the Hindus and their practice of untouchability. He told us that caste-discrimination, caste-based social hierarchy and the conventional fiqh rules of kufu' were a product of the Hindu influence on the Indian Muslims. He also clearly indicated that all this was further supported and legitimised by the ulema and the fuqaha, scholars of fiqh, themselves, and by numerous influential fiqh texts. At the same time, he insisted that all this was diametrically opposed to the very spirit of Islam. The Maulana elaborated, in great detail, on the terrible damage that this had caused to Muslims and to the cause of Islam over the centuries. He also told us how political parties routinely used the existence of caste-based hierarchies among Muslims and Hindus for promoting their own interests. He insisted that we must struggle against all casteism for it had no sanction in Islam at all.

By this time I had numerous unanswered questions in my mind about caste-discrimination and social hierarchy among Muslims and the conventional fiqh rules about kufu'. I am indebted to Maulana Madani for convincingly answering many of them. I was greatly inspired by what he taught us. He convinced me that we needed to put an end to caste-based practices in Muslim society, and for this purpose I began reading all that I could on the subject.

I was curious to learn to what extent caste-based discrimination was actually practised among the Muslims. The best way to do so was, of course, to travel around and see things for myself. Once, during our vacations, I went to my grandmother's village, Dardi, which is in Sitamarhi district in Bihar. There I met with Muhammad Abbas, a man from the Shaikh caste, who was known for his stern opposition to caste. He had arranged for his sons to marry a girl from the Ansari caste. In the course of our conversation, he related the following incident.

Once, two Muslim men from a certain village in Sitamarhi district travelled to another village in the district for some work. There, they met a man from the Shaikh caste, who asked them their names and that of their village. When he learned where they were from he asked them, 'Are there really any Muslims in that village at all? I have heard that only Julahas, Kabadis (Rain, Kunjeras) and Dhuniyas and so on live there.'

During that visit to my grandmother's village I met another man who told me of a settlement near his village where three families belonging to a marginalised Muslim caste live under the constant and relentless oppression of Muslims of the Shaikh caste. The former sought to resist this oppression by migrating to a nearby town. Some members of their family even secured government jobs. This escalated their conflict with the Shaikhs, and one day the two groups came to blows. The 'low' caste Muslims, although less in number, managed to badly beat up a number of Shaikhs. The incensed Shaikhs then lodged a complaint at the police station claiming that, as they put it, 'Low caste people had rioted against Muslims.' They did not mention that these 'low' castes were also Muslims—Julahas, Dhuniyas, Kabadis and Qasais.

One day, while in the village, I saw a Muslim man of the Hajjam or barber caste, whom I knew rather well, hurling abuses at the men of the Shaikh community. When I asked him why he was so angry, he told me that a Shaikh man had mocked him by contemptuously referring to him as 'Hajjma', making fun of his caste. He said that his grandfather was a saint or buzurg and that his tomb is a mazar or Sufi shrine, but, yet, he complained, the Shaikhs refuse to recognise that he was a buzurg because they claimed that it was simply inconceivable for a Hajjam to become a buzurg, as if the two were mutually contradictory.

Incidents like these began to bring before me a true picture of the reality of caste and caste-based discrimination in Muslim society. Shortly after I returned to my madrasa from my vacation in my grandmother's village, I learned of a man who is considered to be a leading Islamic scholar, and who presents himself as passionately committed to spreading Islam and to 'establishing the faith' (iqamat-e din). He is a member of the council of representatives of the Jamaat-e Islami. From very reliable sources I learned that this man insists that 'low' caste Muslims cannot, and should not, inter-marry with 'high' caste Muslims. Nor, he believes, can they be made the head of an army. Nor, too, he insists, can they be prayer-leaders or imams. On hearing about this, another Islamic scholar, who, unlike this other man, is genuinely committed to Islamic missionary work and to 'establishing the faith', bitterly critiqued him and condemned his views as un-Islamic.

Somewhat at the same time another incident took place. It so happened that the granddaughter of a member of the Jamaat-e Islami, a man of the Shaikh caste, who occupies an important post in the organisation, wanted to marry a man of the Ansari caste. Her family did not agree, and so she escaped from her house. In order to find her, the family even consulted astrologers and magicians. Finally, they located her and brought her back home. Her father and brother then relented somewhat and agreed to her marrying the Ansari boy, but her grandfather, who was wedded to caste prejudice, simply refused, saying, 'If she marries a Julaha my nose will be cut off.' Finally, that hapless girl was forcibly married off to a man from her own Shaikh caste.

It was not that the girl's father and brother did not believe in caste. If they did not, things obviously would not have come to such a pass. I had a long and detailed conversation with her father, and it was apparent that he had strong biases against 'low' caste Muslims. When I told him that I had written against casteism, his reply was that this meant that I was under Satanic influence! His son, the girl's brother, was even more caste conscious than him. Once, when I had to go somewhere on work, he said to me, 'Brother Masood, why do you want to go there? Only low caste people live there.' The people he was referring to were all Muslims—Julahas, Dhuniyas, Kabadis and Qasais.

From these and such like incidents and experiences I developed a new understanding of the extent of the problem of caste in Muslim society. I also realised that many Muslims who never tire of preaching the virtues of Islam and keep talking about the need to 'establish the faith' and even dream of establishing a Caliphate or 'Islamic' rule in India are so fanatically wedded to caste prejudice and to conventional fiqh rules about kufu' that in this they are no different at all from caste conscious Hindus. If, suppose for a moment for argument's sake, a Caliphate indeed comes to be established in India at the hands of such people, I realised that it would not be one structured on the model provided by the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, it would be a carbon copy of the model suggested by Manu, the putative author of the Manusmriti, that Bible of Brahminism.

As I began reading up on various aspects of caste and as the immensity of the caste problem among Muslims became clearer to me, I decided to write a full-length book on the subject, which is now in your hands. Some aspects of this book may be considered by some readers to be harsh and embarrassing, but, undeterred by this, I feel it my duty to abide by the commandments of God and His Prophet to stand by the truth. As the Holy Quran tells us:

No believing man or believing woman, if God and His messenger issue any command, has any choice regarding that command. Anyone who disobeys God and His messenger has gone far astray (33: 36).

In this book I have, among other issues, discussed the historical background, origins, and development of the institution and ideology of caste in India, and have tried to show how, in all periods of India's history, forces of truth have valiantly struggled against caste and its upholders, the forces of falsehood. I have tried to relate caste with the historical process of the expansion of Islam in India and have also raised serious questions about the hurdles faced in this path, some of which relate to widespread caste prejudices among a sizeable section of the Indian Muslims. Readers of this book will, God willing, be convinced that the widespread caste-based discrimination and fiqh-based rules of kufu' prevalent among the Indian Muslims resemble very closely the Hindu case and, in fact, correspond to the teachings of the Manusmriti. The book highlights the alarming fact that in certain respects, such as with regard to rules governing marriage and caste-based discrimination, there is absolutely no difference between the commandments of the Manusmriti and the rules laid down in the books of Muslim fiqh in the sections that discuss conventional rules and notions of kufu'.

I am grateful to Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi (a Faruqi Shaikh) who very kindly arranged for this book to be

serialised in the monthly Urdu journal Zindagi-e Nau, published from New Delhi, spanning a long period, from August 2000 to May 2002 under the title Hindustan Mai Chhoot Chhat Aur Musalman ('Untouchability and Muslims in India') before it was published as a volume. These instalments of my book invoked considerable interest from readers, who sent in letters, both appreciative as well as critical. Of these letters 34 were published in Zindagi-e Nau between October 2000 and September 2002. These letters brought to the fore many new aspects about caste and caste-based discrimination among Muslims that I was not aware of.

In this book I have used terms such as 'Brahminical' and 'Manuvadi'. These terms are not to be taken to refer to any particular caste, but, rather, to a particular mentality that underlies and sustains caste, caste-discrimination, caste-based hierarchies and untouchability. These terms also indicate that supporters of casteism are not restricted to any particular caste, but, rather, can belong to any caste, for that matter. In places where I have talked about certain individuals from particular castes who support casteism, my intention is to indicate only such individuals, and certainly not to make any generalisations about the caste they belong to. This is because, as I just mentioned, supporters of caste prejudice can be found in every case. It is wholly erroneous to make generalisations about all the members of a particular caste. It is not true to say, as some so-called 'low' caste people allege, that all so-called 'upper' people are prejudiced and casteist. Likewise, it is not true that, as some so-called 'upper' caste people claim, that all those who write or work against casteism are from the 'low' castes. That is why I have indicated, where possible, the caste of the individuals whom I have mentioned in this book, although whether their caste origins are really what they claim is another matter.

In my view, the criterion for superiority and status is definitely not caste, but, rather, what the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad lays down in this regard, which is taqwa, that is to say piety or God consciousness. I do not regard any caste as being 'noble' or 'despicable'. I have tried not to hurt the sentiments of any caste with my words. Despite this, if any reader does feel slighted by my writing I would request her or him to contact me at once and point out where she or he feels I have not lived up to the demands of the truth and justice. If she or he has a genuine point, God willing I will rectify what I have written in the next edition of this book.

Numerous people have helped me in the preparation of this book and I heartily thank them all. The list of names is so long that to catalogue them all would require several pages. Among them are the numerous readers of my articles that were published in the columns of Zindagi-e Nau who sent me their comments or wrote letters to the editor of the journal expressing their views about what I had written. Some of them even took the trouble of coming to meet me.

It would be unjust of me not to mention specifically the names of some people who played a very important role in this book. Maulana Abdur Rahman Khalid Falahi provided me with considerable valuable material from the library of the Jamiat ul-Falah in Bilariyaganj. Maulana Muhammad Jasimuddin Qasmi, then a student at the Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and Abdul Hafiz Khan Salafi Balrampur, then studying at the Aligarh

Muslim University, proofread the entire manuscript. Maulana Abdul Hamid Numani, senior office-bearer of the Jamiat ul-Ulema-e Hind, Maulana Muhammad Tahir Madni (Shaikh), rector of the Jamiat ul-Falah, Maulana Abul Baqa Nadvi (Shaikh), former rector of the Jamiat ul-Falah, Professor Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui Nadvi, former Professor in the Department of Islamic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University, Dr. Maulana Obaidullah Fahad Falahi (Pathan) of the Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Maulana Khalid Saifullah Rahmani Qasmi (Syed), General-Secretary of the Islamic Fiqh Academy(India), Maulana Abdul Bar Asri Falahi (Shaikh), former lecturer in Arabic literature and Hadith at the Jamiat ul-Falah, and Dr. Maulana Muhammad Razi ul-Islam Nadvi (Pathan), Assistant Editor of Tahqiqat-e Islami, Aligarh and of the monthly Zindagi-e Nau, Delhi, were great sources of help and encouragement. In the preparation of the second edition of this book, the assistance of my very dear friends Shamshad Alam, Niyaz Ahmad Falahi, Maulana Fayyaz Ahmad Falahi, and Abdullah Mansur was indispensable.

It would be nothing short of tragic if I forgot to mention the debt of gratitude that I owe to Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi, editor of the monthly Zindagi-e Nau, member of the Advisory Council of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind, and founding-member of the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. It was he who very kindly arranged for the book to be first serialised in Zindagi-e Nau. Many readers of the journal praised these articles. However, others vehemently opposed their publication. Yet, Dr. Faridi did not cave in to their pressure. Many publishers approached me and offered to publish this book. Dr. Faridi was the first to do so, and he also informed me that some people wanted to translate the text into various other languages. It is, in large measure, because of the efforts and help of Dr. Faridi that this book has finally been published. I am grateful to him for writing a foreword to the book.

I must also profusely thank Dr. Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, former amir of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind, who also took an interest in this book, and who, on the suggestion of Dr. Faridi, gave his consent, verbally as well as in writing, to the publishing of this book by the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, the official publishing wing of the Jamaat-e Islami. Accordingly, as per his orders, this book had reached the final stages before printing when a section of members of the Jamaat-e Islami who support casteism and want caste discrimination, which has no sanction whatsoever in Islam, to survive in order to further their own interests, placed immense pressure on Dr. Ansari and Dr. Faridi to stop the publication of the book. The manuscript had already been carefully examined by Dr. Faridi, and I had removed the sections that he had suggested be excised. However, when the supporters of caste in the Jamaat-e Islami succeeded in preventing the publication of my book from the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, I included back in the text all this excised material and added some additional material.

After the manuscript was returned to me by the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, I showed it to Dr. Syed Anwar Alam Pasha, who teaches Urdu at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and asked him to critically examine it and point out what he felt were its faults and limitations since my intention was to promote honest discussion on the subject of caste among Muslims and not to fan strife and dissension. I am grateful to him for acceding to my request. He read the manuscript carefully and, in a note to me, said he found nothing wrong or

unacceptable in it and advised me to get it published as soon as possible. ‘The Jamaat-e Islami’, he wrote, ‘must seek forgiveness for halting the publication of such a good book.’

I am thankful to Mr. Inayatullah, senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India, who looked through the text from the legal perspective and made some important and necessary corrections. Many thanks, too, to Mr. Syed Qazi Shamsuddin of Al-Qazi Publications, New Delhi, for publishing the first Urdu edition of this book, and to the Ideal Foundation, Mumbai, for its second Urdu edition.

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