

Does Untouchability Exist among Muslims?

Evidence from Uttar Pradesh

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Untouchability forms a crucial criterion for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Castes. It is rarely discussed with reference to Muslims. A household survey was conducted in 14 districts of Uttar Pradesh to examine contradictory claims about the practice of untouchability by non-Dalit Muslims and Hindus towards Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. A section of Dalit Muslim respondents report existence of untouchability in dining relations, habitation, social interaction and access to religious places. Surprisingly, a higher proportion of non-Dalit Muslims corroborate these claims.

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One issue has cropped up time and again in social science literature and political discourse: is there a group of people among Muslims comparable to those included in the list of Scheduled Castes (scs) in terms of their socio-economic conditions, social status, and experience of untouchability? In the absence of any reliable data and studies, this issue is rather difficult to explore. It is especially so because no castes, other than those that follow Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, are included in the schedule, and government agencies follow official classification while collecting data.

While the practice of untouchability among Hindus is a widely documented phenomenon, its existence amongst Muslims and Christians in India is rarely discussed. One of the most extensive and systematic documentation of the incidence and sites of practice of untouchability in contemporary India, by Ghanshyam Shah et al (2006), focused only on castes included in the schedule, thereby ignoring Muslim and Christian communities. One of the reasons that researchers on such important subjects do not go beyond the official sc list is the unavailability of data. As official agencies, including the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner and the National Sample Survey Office, collect data only according to official categorisation, researchers find it convenient to toe the line of prescribed norms.

A study of the practice of untouchability is not just important because it is the worst form of oppression and the state has vowed to eradicate it through legal and penal measures, but also because it forms crucial criteria for inclusion in the schedule. The

Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, popularly known as the Presidential Order (1950), lists the castes eligible for affirmative action. Its previous incarnation prepared in 1936 had identified castes that face ritual untouchability in terms of the binary of pure/impure. The Presidential Order, 1950 initially included only Hindus; later, Buddhists and Sikhs were also included in it. Among the major religious communities in India, Muslims and Christians remain excluded from the schedule.

The Practice of Untouchability

In a comprehensive study of untouchability, Shah et al (2006: 19) define untouchability as a “distinct Indian social institution that legitimises and enforces practices of discrimination against people born into particular castes and legitimises practices that are humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative.” It covers all spheres of life, including social, cultural and economic, and derives its strength from the concept of purity, one of the important aspects of the caste system. In its classical form, the caste system considers “untouchables” impure enough to keep them outside the four-tier system. The practice takes such a vicious form that mere touch or a shadow of an “untouchable” falling on someone else pollutes them. Shah et al (2006: 21) further elaborate that the term “untouchability” refers not just to the avoidance or prohibition of physical contact but to a much broader set of social sanctions.”

After a long period of blackout, in the last decade social science has taken a welcome turn and these taboo themes have also started figuring in research, though at a much slower pace. These studies have revealed concrete forms of the practice of untouchability among Muslims; they have pushed the matter into social science debates. It has also posed a challenge for the “communal analysis of caste,” which conceives the practice as a matter for the Hindu religion only. The communal view of caste believes that the caste system, being legitimised by the Hindu religion only, cannot exist outside its periphery (Webster 1999).

The same view is shared by those who claim that caste does not exist among Muslims. Surprisingly, this view has persisted for long, despite evidence to the contrary presented by Ghaus Ansari (1960) and Imtiaz Ahmad (1973), among others.

The emergence of this new stream has pushed the discourse beyond the absence of religious sanctions for caste practices in Islamic texts. Scholars working on issues relating to Dalit Muslims differentiate between “textual Islam” and “lived Islam.” They underline persisting socio-economic inequalities between Dalit Muslims and other social groups, and document sites and instances of untouchability being practised (Alam 2014). They argue that the “false pride about there being no discrimination in the Muslim society on the grounds of caste and there being no untouchability, prevented efforts at the community or the non-governmental level to improve the conditions of Dalit Muslims” (Anwar 2005: 1).

These studies claim that the “concepts of purity and impurity; clean and unclean castes do exist among these Muslim groups. Dalit Muslims are seen as unclean and impure by Ashraf Muslims” (Alam 2014: 9). In a study of Dalit Muslims, Aftab Alam (2014) finds varied forms of untouchability among Muslims, including the refusal by Ashrafs to drink water from the same glass/vessel as a Dalit Muslim, not allowing Dalit Muslims to touch the water source and giving them leftovers to eat, and living segregated in separate hamlets. Dalit Muslims were discriminated against in the mosque as well, and, in some cases, they were asked to sit in the last row. To avoid such discrimination, in some places Dalit Muslims have built their own mosques (Alam 2014).

In another major work, Ali Anwar in his book *Masawat ki Jung* shows how Dalit Muslims

are discriminated against and frowned upon in everyday life by the Ashraf. Such discrimination persists in mosques and even after one’s death. The detailed description of the plight of pamarias in a pathan-dominated village of Bhojpur District is heart-rending. Islam’s slogan for equality notwithstanding, pamarias are not allowed

to bury their dead in the pathans graveyard” (Ahmad 2003: 4887).

Comparing the socio-economic and “ritual” status of Dalit Muslims with that of communities included in the schedule, Ali Anwar (2005: 2) argues that

our journey started more or less with the same social, educational and economic status. We washed clothes like them. We too were called *dhobi* (washerman) like them. The only difference was that they had a Hindu name while we had a Muslim name. They too cleaned dirt like us. Again the only difference was, they were called *dom* and *bhangi* and we were addressed as *maistar* and *khakrob* or, *halalkhor*. Likewise *lalbegi*, *halalkhor*, *nachi*, *pasi*, *bhant*, *bhatiyara*, *pamaria*, *nat*, *bakkho*, *dafali*, *nalband*, *dhobi*, *saiin*, etc and other numerous castes, who follow different religions (Hindu/ Muslim) but their professions, social, economic and educational status are similar are termed as *asprishya* (untouchable) in Hindu society, while in Muslim society they are called *arzal* (inferior).

These studies, no doubt, underline crucial issues and bring new insights, but they are based either on experiences or on small-scale surveys. This may be one reason that governments have not considered these issues seriously. The present study intends to fill this space by empirically testing claims regarding the practice of untouchability among Muslims.

The Study: Data and Method

The Mandal Commission report (1980) and the Sachar Committee report (2006) have used existing secondary information to assess the social and educational status of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Muslims in India, respectively. The assessment under the Post Sachar Evaluation Committee report (2014) also used secondary information to evaluate implementation of decisions taken by the Government of India on the recommendations of the Sachar Committee. However, the lack of unit-level information of individual castes included among the OBCs in the census and large-scale sample surveys such as the National Sample Survey (NSS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS), and India Human Development Surveys (IHDS) prevent social scientists from identifying “Dalit Muslims” and analysing the practice of

untouchability towards them. This data is critical because, officially, the OBC is a recognised category, which also includes castes that have been grouped together as “Dalit Muslim” for this study.

These castes were identified using a two-pronged approach. First, it identified occupational groups whose corresponding Hindu castes are already included in the scs. Additionally, castes identified by previous studies have also been included for empirical verification. This way “Dalit Muslims” includes castes such as Bhatiyara, Faquir, Shah, Dafali, Nat, Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Banjara, Dhobi, Ranki, Rangrez, Jogi, Mochi, Mukeri, Bakho and Bhishti. This list may not be exhaustive.

Accordingly, this study uses primary data collected by the Giri Institute of Development Studies (GIDS) under the project “Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh” to assess the practice of untouchability by non-Dalit Muslims and Hindus towards Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. The survey was conducted from October 2014 to April 2015. It was administered to a state representative sample of 7,195 households located across 14 districts in four regions of Uttar Pradesh.¹

A survey that attempts the identification of Dalit Muslims in a state with numerous castes and sub-castes faces serious practical challenges compared to other surveys. After careful consideration of these issues, it was decided to adopt a multistage stratified systematic random sampling design for the selection of households. Considering the focus of this study, wherever required, an over-sampling of households belonging to three Muslim groups was done to be able to analyse internal differentiation in the community.

cspro software for data entry and cleaning and spss Statistics v22 for data analyses were used. Bivariate estimates are used as statistical analyses. Further, the distribution of the sample (Appendix 1, p 36) in each category is enough to carry out any robust statistical estimates, which are also an indicator of validity of the data. The sample was classified into six socio-religious groups (SRGs), namely, Hindu General, Muslim General, Hindu

OBC, Muslim OBC, Hindu Dalit and Muslim Dalit. Data on caste, religion and social groups was collected from three different sets of questions and matched with each other while classifying the SRGs.

Everyday Forms and Sites

The practice of untouchability encompasses each and every sphere of life, but rules related to food, habitation, social interaction and access to religious places are most explicitly followed. These crude forms can be easily documented in social science research. The present study does not claim to be a comprehensive investigation of these practices among Muslims. It only strives to capture a glimpse of hitherto blacked-out caste equations in the community. It must also be borne in mind that Muslims, unlike Hindus, do not openly admit to such practices. Arguably, the absence of religious legitimacy for such practices and an egalitarian Islamic ethos leads Muslims to push such ostracisation behind a thin veil, thereby making documentation difficult.

In order to confirm the existence of such caste equations, Dalit and non-Dalit Muslims were posed a set of questions. There is a possibility that Dalit Muslims may be facing similar treatment from non-Muslims also. But, because several Hindus do not prefer dining relations with Muslims as a whole, queries about such practices in Muslim and Hindu households were posed separately.

According to data collected by this household survey, a substantial proportion of the Dalit Muslims report that they do not receive an invitation from non-Dalits for wedding feasts, etc (Table 1). While it is rather difficult to ascertain the specific reasons for the absence of such a relationship between the two groups, this may also be reflective of historically constructed social segregation. When we try to corroborate this data with statistics given in Table 4 (p 35), where almost one-fourth of non-Dalit Muslim households report having no Dalit Muslim household in their village, we encounter a possible settlement pattern segregated along caste lines. This may not be the dominant feature of this community, as around three-fourths of

Dalit households do get invitations, but the presence of this phenomenon invites further investigation for which one proceeds to another set of questions.

In response to a question about seating arrangements, a section of Dalit Muslims testify that they are seated separately in non-Dalit Muslim feasts. Almost a similar proportion of respondents confirm that they eat after the upper-caste people have finished. And yet another section says that they are served food in different plates. Numbers here are relatively smaller, generally in the range of 5%–10% at the state level, but they indicate the existence of untouchability among Muslims. As we ascend from the bottom to the top on the educational or wealth quintile ladder,

Table 2: Untouchability Practices at Different Sites, n=630

Background of Respondents		Whether Dalit Muslim Children Are Asked to Sit in A Separate Row in School? (Yes)	Whether Dalit Muslim Children Are Asked to Sit Separately for Mid-day Meals? (Yes)	Whether Dalit Muslims Are Allowed to Bury Their Dead in the Same Graveyard? (No)	Whether Dalit Muslims Offer Prayers in the Same Mosque? (No)	Whether Dalit Muslims Are Seen as Associated with Menial Jobs? (Yes)
Educational level	Below primary	8.60	8.20	32.60	3.30	8.20
	Madrasa schooling	8.30	25.00	37.50	29.20	7.60
	Primary to intermediate	6.60	6.80	31.80	2.70	8.40
	Graduation, diploma and above	6.70	7.10	50.00	0.00	4.50
Wealth quintiles	Poorest	6.20	7.10	31.40	3.80	5.30
	Second	9.80	6.90	37.60	4.60	2.40
	Middle	7.90	10.80	27.50	4.90	8.40
	Fourth	9.50	10.10	29.00	4.30	8.50
	Richest	7.90	11.70	38.30	1.70	19.80
Place of residence	Rural	8.60	9.90	31.00	4.80	15.90
	Urban	6.50	5.50	37.20	2.50	6.10
State average		7.55	7.70	34.10	3.65	11.00

Source: GIDS survey on "Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh."

Table 1: Nature of Untouchability Practices at Feasts of Non-Dalit Muslims in the Opinion of Dalit Muslims, n=630

Background of Respondents		Whether Received Invitation from Upper-Caste Muslim HH (No)	Seated Along with Upper-Caste People	Seated Separately	None/Any Other/Do Not Want to Respond	Eat Along with Others	Eat after Upper-caste People Have Finished	None/Any Other/Do Not Want to Respond	Served Food and Water in Similar Plate and Glass	Served Food and Water in Different Plate and Glass	None/Do Not Want to Respond
Educational level	Below primary	26.80	90.40	8.30	1.30	92.00	5.80	2.20	94.95	3.47	1.58
	Madrasa schooling	13.20	93.30	6.70	0.00	93.30	6.70	0.00	93.33	6.67	0.00
	Primary to intermediate	28.70	91.40	6.00	2.60	94.00	3.40	2.60	93.39	1.65	4.96
	Graduation, diploma and above	2.80	88.90	11.10	0.00	88.90	11.10	0.00	91.67	8.33	0.00
Wealth quintiles	Poorest	26.90	90.90	7.80	1.30	93.50	5.80	0.60	96.13	1.29	2.58
	Second	19.50	91.10	8.10	0.70	92.60	5.90	1.50	94.33	3.55	2.12
	Middle	17.40	94.90	3.80	1.30	96.20	2.50	1.30	96.30	3.70	0.00
	Fourth	47.60	87.00	8.70	4.30	97.80	0.00	2.20	97.96	0.00	2.04
Place of residence	Rural	21.50	93.70	4.40	2.00	94.30	3.80	1.90	93.81	3.41	2.78
	Urban	26.90	84.10	15.20	0.70	88.40	8.70	2.90	97.18	2.82	0.00
State average		26.20	89.20	9.55	1.25	91.55	6.10	2.30	95.50	3.10	1.40

HH stands for households.

Source: GIDS survey on "Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh."

reporting of untouchability increases. It is also higher in urban areas than in rural areas on most of the indicators.

Around 8% of Dalit Muslim respondents report that their children are seated in separate rows in classes and also during mid-day meals in their schools (Table 2, p 34). To elicit a response of Dalit Muslims on discrimination in religious spaces, a query on burial grounds was posed to them. At least one-third of them state that they are not allowed to bury their dead in an upper-caste burial ground. They do so in either some other place or in one corner of the main ground. Most of the Muslims offer prayers in the same mosque, but in some places Dalit Muslims felt discriminated against in the main mosque. A significant section of Dalit Muslims also feel that their community is seen as being associated with menial jobs. Respondents who studied at the madrasas were found to be more vocal about the untouchability they have experienced.

Upper-caste homes, whether Muslim or Hindu, are considered crucial sites for any exploration on untouchability. Dalit Muslim respondents were requested to share their experiences inside homes of upper-caste Hindus and Muslims. A list of some possible situations was prepared and respondents were asked whether they faced any such situation while visiting upper-caste homes. Their responses, presented in Table 3, assume

significance because this data also gives an idea of the relative severity of these practices in homes of upper-caste Muslims vis-à-vis upper-caste Hindus. For instance, around 13% Dalit Muslims report having received food/water in different utensils in upper-caste Muslim houses. This proportion is close to 46% in the case of upper-caste Hindu homes. Similarly, around one-fifth of the respondents felt that upper-caste Muslims maintained a distance from them, and one-fourth Dalit Muslims went through similar experiences with upper-caste Hindus.

Lastly, an attempt was made to cross-check experiences shared by Dalit

Muslims with responses from all non-Dalit Muslim respondents regarding the treatment given to Dalit Muslims in their houses. Of the total surveyed non-Dalit Muslims, around 27% did not have any Dalit Muslim households in their locality. Others were queried about their visiting and food relations with Dalit Muslims. More than 20% denied having visiting social relations with Dalit Muslims. And among those who visit their places, another 20% do not sit inside their houses and over 27% do not eat food items offered by Dalit Muslims (Table 4). They were also queried about what happens when Dalit Muslims visit their houses. Around 20% respondents do not get

Table 4: Untouchability from the Perspective of Non-Dalit Muslims, n=1977

Background of Respondents		Whether Families of Dalit Muslims Reside in Your Locality? (No)	Do You Ever Visit Places of Dalit Muslims? (No)	Whether You Sit Inside Their House With Them? (No)	Whether You Eat Food Items Offered by Them? (No)	Whether People Belonging to Dalit Muslim Communities Visit Your Place? (No)	Whether They Are Offered Food In Same Utensils In Which You Eat? (No)
Educational level	Below primary	26.60	21.70	16.70	24.70	20.70	25.10
	Madrassa schooling	15.90	31.70	11.40	13.40	12.50	29.50
	Primary to intermediate	16.50	28.80	31.80	40.10	12.90	30.90
	Graduation, diploma and above	32.80	8.50	6.90	23.20	29.30	35.90
Wealth quintiles	Poorest	25.80	24.90	17.90	24.10	15.90	25.50
	Second	28.80	24.10	31.60	36.50	18.60	25.90
	Middle	29.30	17.30	25.20	37.60	24.00	26.30
	Fourth	20.20	25.00	28.00	31.50	17.70	21.30
	Richest	11.00	28.80	10.90	26.40	13.60	41.40
Place of residence	Rural	35.20	16.20	13.30	22.20	24.90	23.60
	Urban	19.40	26.10	25.00	33.40	16.00	35.30
State average		27.30	21.15	19.15	27.80	20.45	29.45

Source: GIDS survey on "Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh."

Table 3: Practice of Untouchability by Upper-caste Muslims and Hindus with Dalit Muslims, n=600

Background of respondents	Situation Faced in Upper-caste Muslim Houses as Reported by Dalit Muslims							Situation Faced in Upper-caste Hindu Houses as Reported by Dalit Muslims							
	Kept at a Distance	Asked to Sit at a Particular Place	Given Food/Water in Utensils Not Used by the Upper-caste People	Derogatory Terms Used	Particular Term Used Rather Than Their Name	None	Do Not Go to Their Homes	Kept at a Distance	Asked to Sit at a Particular Place	Given Food/Water in Utensils Not Used by the Upper-caste People	Derogatory Terms Used	A Particular Term Used Rather Than Their Name	None	Do Not Go to Their Homes	
Educational level	Below primary	16.70	7.30	17.30	6.20	4.40	66.10	10.10	19.60	11.20	52.50	3.10	6.00	31.20	10.40
	Madrassa schooling	52.20	22.70	40.90	14.30	4.80	57.10	4.80	39.10	23.80	63.60	14.30	9.50	19.00	9.50
	Primary to intermediate	20.30	8.60	12.20	4.30	4.30	68.10	6.50	25.20	17.10	57.60	1.40	4.30	30.40	5.80
	Graduation, diploma and above	18.20	0.00	27.30	0.00	0.00	54.50	18.20	36.40	27.30	90.90	0.00	0.00	9.10	0.00
Wealth quintiles	Poorest	20.60	11.90	20.70	5.80	3.20	63.50	9.00	26.30	15.50	56.50	2.70	5.90	29.30	8.00
	Second	15.20	5.10	12.90	3.20	4.50	70.10	9.10	17.80	9.00	58.10	3.20	7.10	26.00	9.10
	Middle	13.40	5.20	12.40	3.10	5.20	72.90	10.40	17.50	18.80	52.60	5.20	3.10	37.50	5.20
	Fourth	11.90	6.00	10.40	1.50	0.00	76.10	10.40	10.40	7.50	52.20		4.50	38.80	6.00
	Richest	42.90	11.10	32.10	24.00	12.20	36.70	6.10	41.80	15.10	47.20	2.00	6.10	20.40	24.50
Place of residence	Rural	15.30	9.30	15.20	4.30	3.50	70.20	8.80	18.80	15.80	59.40	3.60	6.60	28.20	4.70
	Urban	26.60	5.70	20.80	8.90	5.80	57.90	10.00	28.60	8.90	46.40	2.10	3.70	33.70	17.40
State average		20.55	4.85	12.98	3.08	4.10	70.25	7.38	24.93	8.23	46.38	2.58	4.43	38.38	10.00

Multiple response query.

Source: GIDS survey on "Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh."

Dalit Muslim visitors. And others whose houses are visited by Dalit Muslims admit that at least in one-third of the cases Dalit Muslims are not offered food in the same utensils as they use. This data clearly reveals that non-Dalits are more direct in admitting to the practice of untouchability.

Concluding Remarks

Data presented in this paper could be just the tip of the iceberg, as relatively well-off sections among Dalit Muslims report higher incidences of untouchability, and perpetrators admit to it even more so. It leaves no room for any confusion that the practice of untouchability is not confined to Hindus alone. It spreads far and wide and perhaps no Indian religious community can escape it, including the Muslims. However, one has to admit that when it comes to enforcing these social sanctions with zeal, upper-caste Muslims are no match to their Hindu counterparts.

If issues of Dalit Muslims are never addressed, either by the state or by the community, it is largely because this discourse is plagued by hypocrisy at multiple levels. The Indian state, which is mandated by the Constitution of India not to discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, etc, openly indulges in it by confining the schedule of castes only to followers of three religions, consequently barring entry for others.

The precarious condition of Dalit Muslims due to the actions of the state is further complicated by the position taken by the conservative elite of their own community. Every attempt of this marginalised group for recognition is countered by conservative Muslims citing certain Quranic verses. It is vehemently argued that since Islam does not lend support to vertical segregations, there is no possibility of caste practices among Muslims. The underlying assumption here is that all Muslims strictly adhere to Islamic texts in their everyday lives, a claim that would be first refuted by the same conservatives. Otherwise also, methodologically, it is yet to be established that social relations of a religious community can be understood by only looking at its

sacred texts. These issues are also bypassed by social science research, which should now take the lead to correct its own errors.

NOTE

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Appendix 1: Sample Distribution of Study Variables

		Percentage Distribution	Sample Size (N)
Gender	Male	94.98	6,833
	Female	5.00	360
Educational level	Below primary	50.83	3,672
	Madrasa schooling	1.40	101
	Primary to intermediate	38.55	2,785
	Graduation, diploma and above	9.22	666
Wealth quintiles	Poorest	20.06	1,439
	Second	19.94	1,431
	Middle	20.00	1,435
	Fourth	20.00	1,435
Socio-religious groups	Richest	20.00	1,435
	Hindu General	15.19	1,093
	Muslim General	8.64	622
	Hindu OBC	30.83	2,218
	Muslim OBC	18.83	1,355
	Hindu SC/ST	17.53	1,261
Socio-religious groups	Muslim Dalit	8.98	646
	Muslim OBC and Dalit	27.81	2,001

Source: GIDS survey on “Social and Educational Status of OBC/Dalit Muslims in Uttar Pradesh.”

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