

Original article

SOCIAL RESEARCH AMONG THE MUSLIMS IN INDIA: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Social studies on Muslim societies in India are rather very scanty and inadequate. And due to lack of research studies our knowledge on them is very limited. It is a common perception that Anthropologists are interested only on studying tribe and ethnic groups. However, it was the British who first realized the need of study the “other culture” to understand the native people for handling the local administration without disturbing their social or cultural life and the East India Company for the first time took an initiative to study the rituals, customs, beliefs and festivals of Indian Muslims as majority of their regular army were occupied by the native Indian Muslims. The study concluded with the facts that Islam and Muslims have produced a significant effect upon the indigenous characteristics of believes and practices of the Indian people. In postcolonial period various Social Anthropologists and Sociologists have studied the Indian Muslim communities for the sake of academic necessities as well as for policy making and planning. All their studies shows how the Muslims in India have adopted certain religious and social practices not found in other Muslim countries and which has no sanction in Quran.

However, the present paper is an attempt to capsule the evolution of the research studies of the Muslims in India. The paper is based on secondary sources as well empirical observations.

Keywords : Muslim, Islam, Society, India

INTRODUCTION

Religion has always fascinated sociologists and anthropologists since the beginning of these disciplines. It was a common perception that Anthropologists were interested only on studying tribe and ethnic groups. But it is not true in contemporary times although they initially focused mainly on the so-called ‘primitive cultures’.

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In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor adopted a unilinear evolutionary theory of societies where he suggested that societies, through the evolutionary process, pass through three progressive stages, animism, polytheism and monotheism. Radcliffe-Brown also dedicated a large part of his research to religion. However, Durkheim (1915) argued that the study of the primitive society could shed light on the origin and formation of the idea of the religion among more complex societies.

India is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. The rich geographical, cultural and economic wealth has attracted various ethnic and religious groups to come and form the composite Indian society, culture and civilization. Though there are so many social and cultural dissimilarities, but it is true that there are interrelations and interactions among these various communities since time immemorial. Muslims are considered as the principal minority and are visible in the entire length and breadth of this country. Research studies on Indian Muslim society in India are very scanty and inadequate. And due to lack of research studies our knowledge on them is also very limited. However, there are some instances of sociological or anthropological studies on Indian Muslims during the colonial times but the serious efforts of studies were initiated after the independence as after the independence of India the social scientists have started to studying the complex societies of both rural and urban areas and identifying the problems faced by the people including the social and cultural change and identity issues. But unfortunately the studies on social dynamics of the religious minorities' especially the Muslim communities are very limited. Islam as a monotheistic belief was entered in India through the Northern part by Muhammad bin Quasim in the later part of 7th century A.D. But most of the contemporary social scientists believed that Islam entered in India by the Arab traders through the Malabar Coast almost in the lifetime of *Hazarat* Muhammad and then the multitude of the lower sections of the Hindu castes and indigenous ethnic groups welcomed the new religion due to the ethos of equality and simplicity and as a result many people attracted and accepted the new faith gradually (Wherry, 1976; Miller, 1976 & Engineer, 2000). However, it was the British who first realized the need of study the "other culture" to understand the native people for handling the local administration without disturbing their social or cultural life and the East India Company for the first time took an initiative to study the rituals, customs, beliefs and festivals of Indian Muslims as majority of their regular army were occupied by the native

Indian Muslims (Sarif, 1832). Their studies concluded with the facts that Islam and Muslims have produced a significant effect upon the indigenous characteristics of beliefs and practices of the Indian people. In postcolonial period various Social Anthropologists and Sociologists have studied the Indian Muslim communities for the sake of academic necessities as well as for policy making and planning. All their studies show how the Muslims in India have adopted certain religious and social practices not found in other Muslim countries and which has no sanction in Quran.

From Studying Islam to Studying Muslims:

The Muslims constituted 14.23% (2011 census) of the total population in India and became the largest minority community of the country. They are considered a minority community in terms of their numerical strength and political status. They are a backward community in terms of their education and participation in political and public affairs. Muslims occupy one of the most important positions in the society of West Bengal and considered the largest religious minority group. West Bengal has 27.01% Muslim population which is comparable only to Assam (34.22%) and Kerala (26.56%). Islam as a monotheistic belief was first attracted by the historians and they wrote a series of books on the history and development of the faith. Those days, anthropologists considered studying Islam less attractive than studying 'primitive' religions since many of them perceived Islam as lacking interesting cultural and symbolic features, such as complex symbolic rituals or ceremonies. In other words, Islam appeared too plain or simple to them to conduct study. But in India anthropologists met Muslims mainly in urban centers with complex kinships, lineages, and compound hereditary economics and social status which was totally deviated from their popular belief on Islam and Muslims. Thus for the first time they have needed a comparative approach for Muslim societies.

It may be broadly stated that it was the British who first realized the need of study the "other culture" to understand the native people for handling the local administration without disturbing their social and cultural life. They were interested mainly in mapping the phenomenon of distribution in space and social-cultural diversity. These accounts were always in the form of general ethnography. However, from the middle of the 19th century some gazetteers prepared by the British administrators have given some idea of the Muslim

groups and their backgrounds in varying details. Most of the compilers of these glossaries such as Crooke (1896) and Risley (1891) deliberately referred to the Muslim groups as caste while Ibbetson (1883) have referred them as classes. Max Weber (1958) observed extreme assimilation of caste order in Indian Islam. Subsequently Hutton (1946), Smith (1947), Bose (1951) and Srinivas (1968) also notice caste or some of its elements in Indian Muslim society. All of them mainly viewed the Indian Muslim society from the perspective of caste which is the larger system embracing different religious communities in India. However, within the dawn of the independence considerable interest in the advancement of research studies among the Muslims has been gradually increased for the academic as well as developmental necessities. Hence, the observations on the Muslim communities in India reveal the fact that the uniqueness of the Indian Muslim society lies both in its structure as well as in its activities. It is noticed that empirically the Muslim society is deeply segmented in various orders and there are tremendous social divergences among them (Ahmed, 1973; Ansari, 1960; Bhattachariya, 1973; Marriott, 1960; Siddiqui, 1974, Mondal, 1994).

Trends in Pre-Independence India:

The Muslims occupied a most important position in India. They were the largest minority community as well ruling community or class of the nation during the colonial annexation. It may be broadly stated that it was the British who first realized the need of study of the Muslims and expressed a deep interest to prepare a concise book where a full account of all necessary rites, customs and usages observed by the *Musalman*s would be written in a familiar style for the Europeans who would not only read it but would derive much useful knowledge from its perusal to understand thoroughly a people with whom they had constant transitions and daily intercourse in the relations of public officers, soldiers and subjects in administering the government of the country (Sharif: 1832). Hence, on personal request from Dr. H. A. Herklots, a surgeon on the Madras establishment of the East India Company, Jafar Sharif wrote the book *Qanun-I-Islam* or the Customs of the Muslims in India in the year 1832 where he traces the customs, traditions, ceremonies, religious practices and superstitions imposed on Indian Muslims. The account begins with the ceremonies of the mother's pregnancy, rites performed by the parents during the maturity of the children and the ceremonies of matrimony followed by the fests and festivals which occurred in the

different months of the year. The French and Portuguese administrators also studied the social and cultural life of the Indian Muslims in their respective areas. One of the famous works was “*Memoires Sur Dons L’Inde*”. It was written by profound orientalist *Monsieur Garcin de Tassy* in 1832. The memoir was an attempt to show how Muslims in India have adopted certain religious practices which are in contravention of the Muslim scriptures. Ali (1832) on her “*Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*” described the social and cultural life of the Muslims who occupies the higher socio-economic position particularly the *Shi’ah* sect of Muslim community residing in India. It was like the description of the practices and events, which she saw as a wife of a *Shi’ah* Muslim family in Lucknow city.

Hunter (1871) observed the economic, social, educational life of the Muslims and also noted political issues of the Wahabi activists in India. Hunter expressly states that it is only the Bengal Mohammedans to whom he applies the subject-matter of the book, and that it is only them whom he knows intimately. The book, however, abounds in passages which lead the reader to believe that it is not merely the Bengal Mohammedans that the author treats but the Mohammedans throughout India.

From the middle of the 19th century some gazetteers prepared by the British administrators like Ibbetson (1883), Risley (1891), Crooke (1896) etc., have given some idea of the Muslim groups and their backgrounds in varying details. Their observations reveal that the system of caste of the dominant Hindu society has a great impact on social and cultural life of the Muslims of this sub-continent. On the basis of these observations, the census of India in 1901 listed 133 Muslim groups who had some features of Hindu caste system like hierarchy of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupational activity.

Trends in Post-Independence India:

In postcolonial period various Social Anthropologists and Sociologists have studied the Indian Muslim communities for the sake of academic necessities as well as for policy making and planning. However, their studies are categorized into three broad interrelated areas viz., Muslim social structure, sociological study of Islam in India, and the interaction of Muslims with non Muslims. Ghaus Ansari (1960) who in his book entitled “*Muslim caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of culture contact*” shows the origin, growth and development of

caste system among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh. Although his monograph was based on published census reports where he carefully identified the existing castes among the Muslims and analyzed the structure of Muslim society. He had also discussed the inter-caste relationship within the community. Gupta (1956) and Ahmad (1962) also observed the system of caste and their hierarchical order among the Muslim of Northern India.

Since the late sixties of the last century scholars have devoted their attention to develop a theoretical framework as well as methodological conceptions for proper understanding the problem of their studies on Muslim society and also to go on the more contemporary situation. Ahmad's (1973, 1976 & 1984) work on Muslim social structure, family, marriage, kinship, rituals etc., are the best examples of that category which lead to the conclusion that social scientists are somehow interested in working on the Muslim social life and organization though a vast area of their identity issues are remained unexplored. Miller's (1976) monograph of the *Mopilla* Muslim community of Malabar Coast with glimpses of their history and culture is another important document to the development of anthropological research among the Indian Muslim where he observed that the *Mopillas* with their ethnic individuality have left a rich legacy in the socio-historical sphere of Kerala which is significant.

Basu (1985), a trained anthropologist from the Anthropological Survey of India, has conducted an anthropological research on the slum dwelling Muslims of Calcutta during 1972-73 and enlisted the findings in the book entitled "*Anthropological profile of the Muslims of Calcutta*". On the basis of some somatometric and somatoscopic observations he mainly examined the question of affinity within the Muslim groups as well as ethnicity and morphological variations. Siddique (1974) in his pioneer research work entitled "*Muslims of Calcutta: A Study in Aspects of their Social Organization*" identified nearly 60 caste like ethnic groups among the Muslims of Calcutta city. He stated that most of the segmentations of the Muslims of Calcutta are on the basis of nationality, regionality and ethnicity. He critically examined the hierarchy or social stratification among the Muslims. He also critically described the spiritual believes system and sacred places of the Calcutta Muslims. His later works are an approach to the study of Hindu-Muslim relationship and the implication of majority minority relationship. Bhattacharaya (1991) in his book "*Moslems of*

Rural Bengal: A study in social stratification and socio-cultural boundary maintenance” has discussed the social stratification of the Bengali Muslim society particularly the Muslims of rural Birbhum. He noted that though theoretically Muslims form an egalitarian society, there is caste like stratification in practical life which is the result of the direct influence of dominant Hindu community living with them.

Mondal (1994) in his empirical study on “*Dynamics of Muslim Society*” presented an analysis of social organization, social structure, social stratifications and social segmentation of the Muslims of West Bengal in particular and India in general. According to him the social and cultural life Muslims displays a distinctive character as it is influenced by both the Islamic great tradition as well as the Indian local traditions. He also critically analyzed the interaction of Islamic great tradition with the little traditions with in the Islamic framework of Bengali Muslim society. The study also displayed the demographic, socio-economic and educational conditions of the Muslims. Afterwards he (1997 & 2005) in various ways wrote the educational, socioeconomic and gender issues of the Indian Muslims or more particularly the Muslims of rural Bengal.

Trends in Contemporary Indian Scenario:

Since the last decade of the 20th century the interest of scholars are shifted around the areas of communalism along with community identity, ethnicity and the gender issues or the status of women. These studies have opened the door of understanding the Muslim society in two ways. One way of understanding it is by interpreting it theologically or what do the rules say. This is ‘Textual Islam’ based on ‘Book View’. The other way is to interpret it historically to know what the Muslims have done in history and by looking at Muslim Societies at a given point of time to see how the Muslims ‘live’ Islam in their everyday life. It is only in those times that sociologists/social anthropologists have turned their attention to the empirical/field view of Islam and Muslim communities. Hasnain (2006 & 2008) writes about the ways of understanding the perception of Islam from a global view point. He observed that the Muslims are not only following the religious scriptures for their very survival but there is some thing beyond it. He also discussed issues from Jihad, Rise and Fall of Muslim Empires, Islamic Democratic Theory, Ethnic Identity and Exogamy to Popular Islam and Misogyny, Modernization of *Madrasa* Education and aspects of livelihood of Indian Muslims. Richard

Eton's *Islamisation and Bengal Frontier* (1993) shows the cultural accommodation involved in the process of Islamization where inclusion, identification and displacement of Islamic and Hindu concepts of divinity took place over time, leaving eventually to the adoption of Islam within an indigenous framework.

The subject of women's social position and their problems and struggles for empowerment are major issues in academic and development programming of recent times. There is an intimate relation between society, culture, and religion with the status and role of women. As a matter of fact women's studies receiving much importance today. Considering the problems and issues of emancipation of the Muslim women in globalized era, Mondal (2005) argued that women's perspectives are not much reflected in the discourses and agenda of development planning and interventions. He later in his various studies and writings showed the difference between text and contact on gender position which has motivated a large section of enlightened Muslim women to raise their voice for gender justice and to organize movement for social reform. In recent times the concept of 'Islamic human rights' has firmly established in association with the secular concept of 'human rights' in the complex globalized world. As a matter of fact the concept of 'Islamic Feminism' has been emerging as a perspective to deal with the Muslim women's issues from the point of view of their religion. It is a brand of feminism but has a specificity and peculiarity of its own. The feminist theory urges women to start for setting the agenda of their own the Islamic feminism has certainly oriented towards this direction. If the voice of protest is considered as root of the feminist movement, the Islamic feminism is also an ideology that helps in protest movement of the Muslim women to protect their rights and privileges as laid down by their religious text (Engineer, 1987, 2005 & 2006).

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Islam and Muslims today, than at any other time, are a matter of great attention throughout the world especially in the west. Under such a context if the duty of the researchers to address some contemporary questions like: why Muslims have been reduced to the level of backward and marginalized community? How can their economic, educational and social conditions be ameliorated? Hence, there is a need to do more researches for assessing the nature, extent and causes of Muslim backwardness for strategies and policies to ameliorate their condition.

However, all the above reviews indicate that there is paucity of works on Indian Muslims in some various contemporary emerging issues and in concluding comments there are two main points for the researches. The first one is the researchers should select the emerging trends or concurrent issues of their identity and emphasis more in their selective areas. And the last one is they should more enthusiastic for intensive studies on the mutual interaction of the two major religious communities of India, namely Islam and Hinduism.

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