

Impact of Education Led Economic Mobility on Caste Behaviour among Muslims

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ABSTRACT

It has been established that Sunni Muslims in India are divided into three major social groups – *Ashraf (noble)*, *Ajlaf (uncivil)*, and *Arzal (impure)*. This paper has explored the dynamic social relationship between these caste groups in Ambedkar Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. It has been identified that education acts as a means/tool for this dynamism. The paper has explored the empowering role of education in mitigating caste prejudice. Education has pushed members of marginalized *Arzal* castes, such as Halalkhor, toward economic upward mobility and increased their social acceptance among the community. The family of the Halalkhor caste recalls the behavioural change among castes belonging to the upper and backward categories, especially Ansaris. It also deals with the question of the ‘degree of untouchability’ among Muslims, the most intriguing question persistently lingers in the mind of a scholar. At last, paper concludes that although education has a positive role in the social acceptability of Halalkhor, it does not omit caste practices.

Keywords: *Dalit Muslim, Halalkhor, Marginalisation, Education, Economic and Social Mobility.*

INTRODUCTION

Scholars continue to deliberate over the foundation of the caste system among Muslims. Few researchers trace its origin to the Arab world and culture. They denied the egalitarian impact of Islam on the Arab peninsula. On the other hand, few argue that caste practices among Muslims are due to Hindus’ cultural influence. Whatever the reason, the existence of caste practice is now theoretically proven beyond doubt among Indian Muslims. It is well-known that the community is divided into *Ashraf*, *Ajalf*, and *Arzal*.

Many scholars have claimed that three categories are arranged similar to the Hindu social structure. Sheikh, Saiyad, Pathan, Mallick, Turk, and other foreign-origin castes belonged to *Ashraf*. They are equivalent to Brahmin, Rajput, and Vaishya of the Hindu caste order. However, scholars are so engaged in proving the existence of caste because of non-recognition by the government that they have forgotten to deal with the ever-changing form of caste practices in the community. Due to this reason, in the literature of study on Muslims,

the caste system appears to be a static phenomenon. However, this is not true. This paper has dealt with the ever-changing form of caste and the impact of educational and economic mobility on behavioural change within the social relationship among Muslims vis-à-vis the Halalkhor caste.

Muslim Manual Scavenger (*Halalkhor*): Who are they?

Throughout history, scholars have noted the existence of Muslim scavengers who were known by various

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names. In W. Crooke's book "The Tribes and Castes of North-Western India" (1896), he listed forty-seven Muslim scavenging castes. The Chuhras, predominantly Muslims, were commonly referred to as Musalli or Kutana, with the terms being almost synonymous but varying in usage depending on the region. The caste was further break-down into sub-castes such as Bansphor, Shaikh, Lalbegi, Hariri or Hah, Ghazipuri Rawat, Dhanuk, Hela, and Dhe. The Halalkhor caste, a prominent Muslim scavenger caste, has had its name and origin discussed by colonial travelers and anthropologists.

Fryer referred the Halalkhor as "base people" who defiled themselves by consuming anything and performing servile tasks. Ovington described the Halalkhor as "eat-all" or individuals who drank anything potable and ate anything that came their way, including carrion. They were responsible for sanitary services in households and were considered untouchable due to the perceived pollution and disdain associated with their contact. However, these caricatures of the Halalkhor as "eaters of anything" or "eat-all" are incorrect. The Halalkhor community adheres to the Muslim religion and is bound by specific dietary laws outlined in the Quran. Lang's definition seems more appropriate, as he describes the Halalkhor as the lowest-ranking servants who worked hard to earn their pay. Akbar even renamed them halal-Khor, meaning people who worked diligently for legitimate earnings. Despite this improved nomenclature, their remuneration remained at the lowest rate.

In addition to their caste-based profession, the Halalkhor castewere utilized by Mughal rulers for spying on their neighborhoods and reporting to local authorities. Gokhale pointed out that these individuals were obligated to clean out every house twice a day and inform the kotwal (police officer) about all activities. Crooke mentioned that the term "Mehtar" was commonly applied to the servants of Emperor Humayun. Another title for them is "Halalkhor," meaning one who consumes what is lawful and earns legitimate earnings. They are also known as "Khakrob," or "sweeper of dust," and "Baharwala," meaning someone who is not admitted into the house. In Punjab, they are euphemistically referred to as "Musalli," meaning "one who prays." Collectively, they are sometimes known as Lalbegi, the name of one of their sub-castes derived from their religion and patron saint.

Right-wing political parties have campaigned that scavenging resulted from the Mughal rule in India.

However, this is far from the truth. Gita Ramaswamy explained that this argument aligns with the Hindutva theory that all social evils originated from Muslim rule and seeks to reconstruct a glorious Rajput heritage for communities like Bhangis. The practice of scavenging existed even before the Mughal period, and many of these scavenger castes continued their practices even after converting to Islam. There was no change in their occupation during British rule either. The Census of India (1901) mentioned that a third class called "Arzal" or "lowest of all" consisted of the lowest castes, including Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal, and Bediya. They were forbidden from entering mosques or using public burial grounds; no other Muslims would associate with them. This degrading occupation and the involvement of Muslim scavengers in scavenging continued in post-colonial India.

Currently, there is no precise estimate of the population of the Halalkhor community as the government does not conduct a caste census among Muslims and Christians. Bindeshwar Pathak argued that complete information about all scavenging communities, including social customs, status, economic position, and culture, is not available nationwide, even for those included in the list of Scheduled Castes. Therefore, conducting a caste census among minorities is crucial for well-designed policy interventions to improve their welfare. Opposing the caste census from various quarters would hinder this process.

According to the 1961 Census, out of the total workforce engaged in scavenging, Scheduled Castes accounted for 48.2%, while the remaining 51.8% comprised non-Scheduled Castes, including Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians. The Task Force constituted by the Planning Commission 1989 estimated the number of scavengers from groups such as Muslims, Christians, and Tribals to be around three lakhs. The Sachar Committee Report also provides some insights into the number of this community. It states that 0.2% of Muslim urban workers are engaged in building caretaking, sweeping, cleaning, and related occupations, while the proportion is 0.1% in rural areas. Among Muslim manual workers, women constitute a more significant proportion at 0.2%, while male workers account for 0.1%.

HALALKHOR OF AMBEDKARNAGAR

The confusion over the total strength of Dalit Muslims has also persisted in the state. According to the data provided in the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011 (SECC-2011), Uttar Pradesh had a total of 17,388

manual scavengers. Another data made public by the Minister of Social Justice revealed 10,016 manual scavengers, i.e., 82 percent of India’s manual scavengers. An Inter-Ministerial Taskforce constituted after the meeting convened by NITI Ayog in November 2017 to compute the strength of manual scavengers in mission mode revealed another set of numbers. According to the Task Force, there are 28,796 manual scavengers in Uttar Pradesh. Though, it has not included a septic tank or sewer cleaners.¹ However, there is no certainty about the Muslim manual scavengers in the state. Joel Lee (2015) exposed the politics of the Census concerning Muslim manual scavengers in Uttar Pradesh.

Nevertheless, as per the field report, there is approximately 22,000 Halalkhor in Ambedkar Nagar. They are united by caste and religion but divided by sects and class. They are Muslim by religion but practice different versions of Islam. The main sect divisions in Ambedkar Nagar are Barelwi and Deobandi. The majority of them follow the Barelwi sect. It could be well understood due to the influential presence of *Kichhochha Sharif Mazar* (Shrine), which belongs to Makhdum Ashraf Jahangir Semnani. Deoband and other sects have little but growing influence in the areas. The sect has been the most significant divide within Halalkhor. Barelwi Halalkhor refrains from marrying or having social interaction with Deoband Halalkhor.

The class-based division is also very strong in the Halalkhor community. Many respondents have claimed that most economically upward caste members do not care about the community. Their behaviour toward their caste members has changed. Hakeem told us, “Those who have done better in life care more about Ansari and Khan. They behave like upper caste with us.” Kaleem, too vents his anger against economically better-off Halalkhor. His relative, whom we met later on, taking advantage of education, has placed themselves in the middle class. Kaleem argued that they have the most negligible interaction with them. “Middle-class Halalkhor want to marry Ansari and other upper castes. Why can’t they marry a poor but educated Halalkhor girl?” retort Saleem?

Nevertheless, most Halalkhor male members, including the head of the family, work as a sweeper in Tanda Nagar Palika Parishad (NPP). Furthermore, women indulged in manual scavenging in the countryside and municipal

areas. To understand the functioning of caste and change, if any, in its structure among Muslims, the author has conducted a qualitative interview in the district of Ambedkar Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. The interview was mainly conducted in the Tanda block of the district. The place was selected because of the substantial presence of the Halalkhor caste in one place. The presence is huge as Dalit Muslims (*Arzal*) are generally scantily spread in the state. Also, Tanda is a very old NPP that has employed the Halalkhor community since its existence. Most of the sweepers engaged in NPP are Halalkhor.

NPP is one of the oldest Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). In 2016, Tanda celebrated 100 years of its urban administration. 11.3 percent of district Households are in the Tanda block. It has a total 2.72 lakh population with 41,596 Households. Block has 80,550 Scheduled Castes population. Tanda NPP has 95,516 populations in 14,597 households.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Ambedkar Nagar and Tanda (Block), Census 2011

District/Block		No. of HHs	Total Person	SC population
Ambedkar Nagar	Total	368728	2397888	591125
	Rural	325035	2117158	562930
	Urban	43693	280730	28195
Tanda	Total	41596	272551	80550
	Rural	41596	272551	80550
	Urban	-	-	-
Tanda (NPP)	Total	14597	95516	7094

Source: District Census Handbook, Ambedkar Nagar, pp. 43-44.

Most of the population defecates in the open, regarding sanitation and hygiene issues. According to the 2011 Census (table 2), 81.3 % of the rural population defecated in the open, whereas 30.23 % were in urban areas. Open defecation (OD) is a challenge for which the government has set its priority. Nevertheless, the human serving latrine is a significant concern for our purpose. Table 2 also shows that, according to the Census 2011, 0.54 percent of latrine in Tanda was serviced by a human. It means the job of labor-intensive scavenging was there in 2011. In an urban area, it was higher.

¹ Counting manual scavengers has been a challenging task for the state agency. It is more difficult to count Muslim manual scavengers. Joel Lee (2015) wrote about how the Lal Begis, who categorized themselves as having a different religion other than Hindus, became Hindus. How Lal Begis of Lucknow, with traditional Muslim culture, became Hindu Balmiki?

Table 2: Number and percentage of HHs by type of Latrine Facility in Tanda, 2011

		Total	Rural	Urban
Flush/Pour Latrine	Piped Sewer Sys	3596 (3.97)	1877(2.65)	1719 (8.71)
	Septic Tank	14658 (16.2)	5704 (8.06)	8954 (45.4)
	Other Sys	1851 (2.04)	1467 (2.07)	384 (1.95)
Pit Latrine				
	With Slab/Ventilated Improved Pit	3620 (4)	2554 (3.61)	1066 (5.4)
	Without Slab	735 (0.81)	582 (0.82)	153 (0.78)
Night Soil disposed into Open Drain		274 (0.3)	117 (0.17)	157 (0.8)
Service Latrine				
	Night Soil removed by Human	486 (0.54)	11 (0.02)	475 (2.41)
	Night Soil serviced by Animals	142 (0.16)	105 (0.15)	37 (0.19)
No Latrine				
Within Premises				
	Public Latrine	1679 (1.85)	852 (1.2)	827 (4.19)
	Open	63487 (70.13)	57519 (81.26)	5968 (30.23)

Source: District Census Handbook, Ambedkar Nagar, pp. 321-322.

However, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBM Gramin) data revealed that 97.19 percent of households are covered under IHHL (table 3). Only 1140 households are left without a toilet in Tanda Block. In Tanda (NPP), MIS revealed that the administration had rejected 1310 applications for IHHL as compared to 2706 approval.

Table 3: Status of IHHL Coverage in Rural Areas of Ambedkar Nagar and Tanda

	Ambedkar Nagar	Tanda (Block)
Total Identified HHs not Having Toilet	149370	17508
Balance Uncovered HHs	34141	1140
IHHL Coverage (%)	88.38	97.19

Source: SBM (Gramin, MIS) access on 14 August 2018.

It is necessary to mention the status of hygiene, sanitation, and solid-liquid waste management in the block, as it is directly related to the labour force's (here, Halalkhor) socio-economic and educational situation.

Past and Present

The data above show that there is no dry latrine in Ambedkar Nagar. Hence, there is no more manual scavenging or scavengers. During our field survey, we did not find a single case of manual scavenging in Tanda. It is the cumulative result of being banned from dry latrines under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) and its predecessor schemes. This has detached Halalkhor women from their traditional occupation of cleaning dry latrines and carrying night soil on their heads. It also detached them from the notion of '*ganda kaam*' (dirty job) and opened a window of more social interaction with the Ansari (julaha) caste. *Julahas* are in the majority in NPP. Ansaris, an OBCs caste, play a hegemonic social role in Ambedkar Nagar. They did not allow Halalkhor caste members to sit, eat and pray with them. Kaleem argued

“Ansari log bahut neech samjhte they hum longon ko” (Ansaris had treated us as lowly people). Tanda is a major powerloom hub in eastern UP, producing tericot fabric. The Ansari caste mainly controls it. They used to call us Bhangi. Earlier, we did not sit, eat, or pray with them (Ansari). Earlier, we were not invited by Ansaris to any function.

Mohammad Faizan argued in a similar vein.

Earlier, our caste was treated very badly. We were not allowed to enter their house. This was happening primarily at the time when our women were collecting and cleaning the dry latrine.

Intezar Ahmad faced discrimination during his school days around 1968. “We were asked to sit separately in school. People from our caste took food to eat separately in any function.” Mohammad Ahmad, a moazin (*Azan* giver) in a mosque and former sweeper, argues that “Those days, 25 years back, we used to sit and eat separately during *Dawat* (community dinner). In a mosque 30-35 years back, we offered namaz separately. We did talk to Akhtarun, a former woman manual scavenger. She is not literate. She was cleaning night soil with her bare hands in her parent's home and after marriage in her in-laws' place. She was treated as untouchable. She shared her experience as:

Sab Saale Bhangi pikar mast rahte hai, aur tokri se maila dhote ho. Jao apna glass leke aao, chai pini hai to (all these Bhangi drink carelessly and clean toilet in their basket. If you want to drink tea, go and bring your glass)”, a tea stall owner told Akhtar. My grandchildren had to carry their plates to school for mid-day meals.

Jaleel, Waheed, a former sweeper in Nagar Palika, and Mohammad Mustafa, a sweeper in Nagar Palika, concur with Akhtarun. They shared that

Earlier, we were treated as untouchable. We were not allowed inside the house. Even tea was not given. We used to carry our glasses to have a cup of tea. That was the level of untouchability. When we went to buy cloth from the market, the shopkeeper did not allow us to enter the shop. He asked us to do whatever we have to take, please let me know, and I will give it. In the mosque, we were not allowed to do *waju* (ablution) from the same utensil.

It is to be noted that a *Pasmanda* (backward) caste who is subjected to caste-based humiliation by the Ashraf itself carried the same against Halalkhor. Here, the Ansari caste behaved like Hindu OBCs. However, our respondents informed us that in two-three decades the behaviour of Ansaris toward them has changed. It is no more in practice. There are more social access and interaction between the hegemonic Ansaris and Halalkhor. How all of a sudden does such behaviour, depart social life? It is not happening in a day.

Halalkhor caste, through their everyday experience, got to know that their profession is one of the worst. The degrading social position was located in their occupation, scavenging. Slowly and gradually Halalkhor caste shifted from their traditional job. They started focusing on cleanliness – both at the personal and neighbourhood level. Mohammad Mustafa argued that “My wife was a manual scavenger. Now she has left that job. After leaving that job, social interaction and acceptability have increased.” Jaleel, a sweeper by profession, explains that after our attention toward cleanliness, I am experiencing more acceptability. “Now, I offer namaz in the same queue. I did my *Iftari* (breaking of fast in the evening during the month of Ramzan) along with them in the same mosque. So, there is change. Ansari and Halalkhor visit each other’s home and eat without any hesitation”, said Jaleel. Kannada, a sweeper by profession, said that “Hindus still treat us in the old way. However, in Muslims like the Ansari family, now we go there and eat.” Others offer the same narrative about cleanliness and their access to social space.

They also started focusing on their children’s education to remove them from such a degrading position. Akhtarun told us, “It was her conscious decision to impart education to my grandchildren, which would help them to be away from this job.” “Education plays a significant role in my career. It is not like earlier days.

It is because of education. I have gained respect. Though we are not equal, we have filled the gap. I sit on a chair along with them. I eat with them. They do not object. This is because of my hard work. I cannot change my caste. He strongly believed that one can change their situation through education. *Agar Uncha banana hai to Imdaar bano* (If you want to go higher, gain education)”, said Faizan, a wealth manager in a private bank.

Abdul Hakeem said, “During school days, when my friends learned about my caste, they started acting consciously. However, my child and younger brother are doing B. Pharma is not facing such a situation. Today, nobody speaks in front of you.” Zainab, a B.Sc. student, and private school teacher, said, “I have faced no discrimination. I have friends from Sayyid, Pathan, and Rangrez. We are friends and behave normally with each other.” Mohammad Ahmad said, “My grandchildren go to school, but there is no complaint about discrimination.”

Scholars like P. Bourdieu saw little change through education regarding power equations within the class. According to him, education reinforces class position. Upper-class children loaded with cultural capital remain advantageous in school structure, which in return has been designed to favour these children. Despite his notion toward such a system of education, Bourdieu argued that disadvantaged children try to gain cultural capital, which helps them mitigate the difference in society. Making a study on the relationship between education and socially deprived caste, Jeffrey et al. (2005) argued that “...youth continue to assess schooling as a basis of ‘cultural distinction’, a symbol of their ‘modern’ eminence, and source of breaking-down caste-based notions of differentiation... In reply to their marginalization from administrative employment, marginalized community emphasis on knowledge as an arrangement to gain a social identity that has substituted recognized caste-based ideas of social worth. This establishes a restricted criticism of the caste. Jatav youth did not seek to eliminate types of disgrace and subservience but contended that these tags should not be devoted to them as ‘learned’ people.”²²

This study also found that education, although unable to do away with the caste system, helped the Halalkhor community negotiate their space with caste members who were above them in the hierarchy. In this study, it is found that along with cultural capital, education has helped Halalkhor

caste members in their economic mobility as well. A smaller section of middle-class formation has taken place among Halalkhor of Ambedkar Nagar. They have breached at least two principles of the caste system – leaving traditional jobs associated with their caste and inter-caste marriage. The researcher in the field has noted down many instances of inter-caste marriage. The marriage between Ansari boys and Halalkhor girls and vice-versa has been recorded in the Tanda block. Here, the intersectionality of caste and class is at play. The educated and economically Halalkhor caste members marry girls from the caste above them.

The consciousness about education and cleanliness also came through the activism of the learned community people. Abdul Hakeem leads Prantiya Dalit Muslim Halalkhor Association (PDMHA) in Ambedkar Nagar. The association was founded by Hakeem's father two and a half decades back. Since then, Hakeem and his father have led rights-based awareness campaigns and promoted education. Hakeem exclaimed that "Education has changed the outlook of the community. Now, you can get many intermediate and graduate students from the Halalkhor caste. They wish to do engineering, medical, and other technical education. Nevertheless, their financial situation stopped them from achieving their goals."

People like Mohammad Ilyas, whose father was a fourth-grade employee at Tanda Thermal Power Plant, got an education and became a clerk at UPCL. He started articulating the situation of the Halalkhor community in the 1990s with the government but failed to achieve much success. Nevertheless, that always motivated him to lead the awareness campaign in the community. Mohammad Ilyas argued that due to the Ashraf leadership, who never bothered to raise their demands and non-articulation of an issue due to educational backwardness within Halalkhor, their concerns were never seen in the light of the day.

He further exclaimed that.

What if Ashraf and Halalkhor have failed to raise the issue? Government should have taken up as it had stood for Sikhs and Buddhist Dalits. Many government commissions and committees have reported on the practice of caste within the Muslim community. Nevertheless, the government needs to pay attention to it. Why does it always look for political mobilisation to fulfill the demand?

The government has taken policy initiatives to eradicate manual scavenging. Putting into deliberation the solemnity of the challenge and the demands of the provincial authority, Parliament legislated the "Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993". The Act, among other things, offers that no human shall:-

- (i) Participate in or hire for or allow to be involved in or employed for any other human for manually carrying human excreta; or
- (ii) Build or sustain a dry latrine.

In 2013, the authority introduced the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Bill. This Bill will supersede the preceding one as it needed to show more adequacy in removing the ills of unhygienic latrines and manual scavenging from the nation.³This Act aims to, among other things, attain its purposes to -

- i) Eradicate the unhygienic latrines.
- ii) Forbid
 - a) Service as Manual Scavengers
 - b) Dangerous manual cleaning of drain and septic chambers.
- iii) Counting of Manual Scavengers and their reintegration within a given period.

However, the demand that Hakeem and Mohammad Ilyas talked about was political. It was not just about eradicating or dismantling dry latrines. It was also about the inclusion of Halalkhor in the list of Scheduled Castes. Rehabilitation after leaving their job was another issue. Although humiliation is associated with the job, it has provided the family with additional income. In the absence of a rehabilitation package, a family lost their income. Kaleem's wife is a former manual scavenger. She complained about the decline in family income. She

²Jeffrey, Jeffrey & Jeffrey, "When Schooling Fails: Young Men, Education, and Low-caste Politics in Rural North India," *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2005, pp. 1-38.

³Op. Cit. Thirty-Second Report, Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment.

stated, “Family was looking for money to start a small business. However, we have not got any. Also, we are not beneficiaries of any housing scheme. My family lives in an 8x14 flat. We cannot afford private school fees. Out of Pocket Expenditure (OoPE) on well-being is also an issue. There is a lack of information on various schemes they can benefit from.”

Ali Hussain (56) pointed out that “things are better off from the past, but caste still exists. There is no rehabilitation of Muslim manual scavengers. Government *ko kuchh vyavstha karni chahiye*. (Government must do something)”. Only some people have got a mandatory one-time stipend of Rs. 40,000. Children of manual scavengers are not receiving scholarships, and after 5th grade, they have to pay fees for books even in government schools. The post-matric scholarship among the Halalkhor student is negligible. Maulana Azad Scholarship for minority students has been non-existence for them.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, government policies, despite their shortcomings, community awareness about the occupation, and rising education have a positive cumulative effect on caste behaviour and social relationship. This paper argues that education is the base of societal progress. It has helped a downtrodden community to carve out social and economic space for themselves. Halalkhor has used that space to contest the social hierarchy. Social justice is the teleological end of education for the philosophers like Plato. Since then, philosophers like I. Kant, Jean J. Rousseau, Karl Marx, John Dewey, Gandhi, Phule, and Ambedkar have projected education as a liberator. Jyoti Rao Phule argued that the advancement of persons was thinkable only with knowledge. He stated,

Vidya bina mat gayi

Mat bina gati gayi

Gati bina niti gayi

Niti bina sampati gayi

Sampati bina shudra dbast huye

Itna sara anarth ek avidya se huya

He gave fresh connotations to education. Phule said, “The learning which does not assistance the commoner to prepare themselves for the challenge of life, which does not fetch out the power of personality, an essence of compassion and the daring of a lion...true education is that which empowers individuals’ self-confidence.”⁴

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