

Dimensions and Dynamics of Social Structure of the Pangals

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This article seeks to foreground the general parameter of the challenges facing the Muslim women in Manipur. Even in the democratic space enjoyed supposedly by individuals (and groups constituted on varied grounds), weak and disadvantaged individuals/sections continue to face extreme hardships, which are inimical to their full development as respectful citizens. In highlighting the parameter, the paper touches on the struggle Muslim women face in their effort to eke out a living. The complication of their problem is further compounded by the general attitude of the community toward their genuine economic and social issues. This article also looks at the theoretical premise or discourse being employed in the demand for affirmative policies for Muslim backward groups in the country. In looking broadly at these narratives, the paper seeks to highlight the need to reinvent the practice of identifying backwardness in the country which would help empower backward groups.

Keywords: Caste, Pangal, Social Structure, Democracy, Census

The Pangal women

Women across the globe are generally in a more disadvantageous footing vis-à-vis their men counterparts. Even in the democratic countries of the West the right to vote was given very late to the womenfolk. Their weak position, which has had complicated and far reaching dimensions, may be attributed to a combination of numerous factors. Of these factors, educational and economic backwardness may be cited as key features in their existential map which has much to say in analysing a better part of their struggle (Ahmed, 2011).

Manipur is one of the poorest states in the country. The percentage of population under Below Poverty Line (BPL) in the State is 47.1 as against 29.8 of the National Average in 2009-10. Muslim women in Manipur are, if we go by the human development indices, one of the weaker and disadvantaged sections in the country. Without even analysing the available data, any perceptible observer cannot help but see their plight in their struggle to eking out a living out of things they try selling at various corners of Imphal. Muslim women in this condition may be better appreciated if we go by the reality that Muslims generally do not encourage their women folk to go out and earn a

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livelihood. Muslim tradition discourages women in public, much less on the streets. Some amongst the 'religious' Muslims frown them for supposedly compromising their understanding of Islam. So does a section from the educated and supposedly 'cultured' Muslims for compromising the image of their community. Their situation is indeed precarious.

Whatever may be reason, it is a reality that the women selling vegetables as street vendors are one of the distinctive features of the Manipuri Muslim women. Economic reality, manifested in social and educational spheres, have pushed them hard. It, in fact, has pushed them on the streets. We cannot however reduce the backwardness of Muslim women to discussing only the situation we see on streets or street corners. This, nonetheless, appears to be a manifestation, and a stark one at that, of the overall malaise facing the womenfolk of the Muslim community in the state.

The complementarity between the economic condition and educational status cannot be overstated. Low economic condition leads not only to illiteracy but also drop out cases in schools and this, in turn, contributes to low participation in various activities in the society. On the other hand, low educational attainment leads one to all sorts of difficulties such as lack of awareness the system has put in place designed to address some of the problems faced by them. It is indeed a vicious cycle.

Vegetable selling category

Because girl child lacks economic well-being/support, we see these children take up the daily routine of taking (usually early in the morning) their vegetable produces to nearby markets, and to Khwairamband market in Imphal. The girl children who should be going to schools go to markets to sell things. It may be worthwhile to note here that girl child/adult women form the majority of the persons going to nearby markets and to the markets in the Capital, though boys/men also do these activities. This example is cited here to underline the problem that low economic position (and related manifestations) forces the Muslim women away from more constructive activities as productive citizens of the country. Inequality based on gender is a pernicious one.

Caste Census and the Pangals

A move was afoot to include caste in the 2000 census enumeration in India, but it had not materialised. Then the Government decided that caste would be enumerated as a separate exercise, outside the 2011 census. Afterwards caste census conducted in Indian states, including Manipur, of the country. The *Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011* (enumerated in 2012) in Manipur along with persons below poverty line was the first time in India since 1931 census (when caste-wise data was collected and published) that caste-wise data of the people was being sought to be detailed. The constitution-driven worldview of egalitarianism and social reality, and politics based on affirmative action formulated to redress the caste-related injustices and inequalities provide two paradigms for social justice in India. The stark reality of caste-related inequalities and accompanied disadvantages for the 'low' caste groups necessitates a systematic documentation of people belonging to various caste groups in the country so that a reliable data pool may be assembled to facilitate policy formulation for their protection and, by extension, their

betterment vis-à-vis other better-placed 'high' caste groups.

However, caste-based breakup of the people has, at the same time, proved to be helping the tendency/process of making the people acutely conscious of their caste distinctions, caste identity and accompanied caste position. In fact, the colonial census enumerations were among the earliest attempts to present a structured social inequality on the basis of caste division dictated by a scale of social precedence (Cohn, 2008) where the concept of 'race' was notoriously used and, in fact, abused. Out of design or curiosity, the issues raised by M.N. Srinivas and G.S. Ghurye (Ibid.), the colonial state through their works including census enumeration had sought to standardise the identity of caste groups from the jumble of caste groups arranged in a complex hierarchical manner by seeking to place them at 'proper' strata (Ahmed, 2011). Various caste groups were almost scrambling to register their groups in the positions they thought respectable in the enumeration process, thus helping a process of caste identity consolidation, formation and reformulation. The census classification of castes gave a glow of official approval of the caste-based hierarchy. This practice was discontinued when the country became independent.

The practice of ranking of groups in India in terms of marked inequalities is antithesis to the notion of an ideal of egalitarian society. Despite this, however, caste-based distinctions and inequalities being reflected in the basic indicators of human development has been a distinct feature of the *dominant societies* and have constituted a prominent feature of the *dominant histories* in India. Therefore, not taking these inequalities and resultant implications on the life chances of the groups into consideration would be a tragedy. Caste-based inequalities are not confined to groups among the Hindus alone. Muslims in India are also found to be stratified on the basis of caste.

The narratives

That class, caste, gender and religion are important underpinning components which play themselves out in any effort for political space for empowerment. In the context of the demand for reservation of Muslims there are two approaches employed by Muslims in their argument for addressing the acute condition of their being in the least privileged, even below Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribe (STs) and non-Muslim Other backward Class (OBCs), state of affairs. Both approaches affirm reservation in jobs and education as important ingredients in trying to ameliorate themselves from the disturbing condition of backwardness of Muslims in India. Backwardness of Muslims puts a hindrance to the path of national development and progress.

Their backwardness in India was amply established by Prime Minister's High Level Committee under Justice Rajindar Sachar which was appointed in 2005 to compile and analyse all available data on educational, economic and social status of the community. In fact, National Commission on Backward Religious and Linguistic Minorities was appointed in 2004 under the Chairmanship of Justice Ranganath Mishra, former Chief Justice of India. The Commission submitted its report in May 2007, making a recommendation, among others, for 15% reservation for the religious minorities, of which 10% exclusively for the Muslims.

One approach seeks to identify Muslim community as a whole as a backward com-

munity – economically and therefore socially and educationally. This approach implies that ‘Muslim community’ – obviously defined by religion – is also a ‘class’ – an economic classification/category – of people sharing the same relations to the forces of production. In other words, in the whole system of organisation of production or the economic structure in India, Muslims (or groups belonging to the ‘Muslim’ category) share more or less a class position because of their ‘common’ economic position in that structure. This approach, it is clear, sees the convergence between the religious category – the ‘Muslim community’ – and the economic category – the ‘Muslim class’ (Ahmed, 2009). This approach/position, however, begs a question: Is the Muslim community a monolithic community in the country? The answer to this question depends upon the yardstick/factor by which one chooses to judge them, for identity is derived from several contexts and emphasising the primacy of one particular identity from the identity-set is defined, in large part, by the context. This leads to the necessity of seeing the second approach of argument in demanding affirmative policies for Muslims.

The second approach is derived from the heterogeneous, divided as they are into many caste-like and *biradari* groups, identity of the groups under the Muslim category. Though the *Qur’an* clearly stresses on the equality between human groups (The *Qur’an*, 49: 13), Muslim society in India is divided on segmental caste-like groups. Caste exists among them ‘as a basis of social relations’ (Imtiaz Ahmad, 1973: xxviii), though its form, ‘weakened and modified,’ differs in certain details from the Hindu caste model. The level of development and the degree of backwardness of these groups, who are spread across the country with differing degree of rigidity, is varied. Given this reality, many Muslim organisations, representing groups mostly from so-called ‘Ajlaf’ category, argue the demand for reservation of their respective Muslim caste-like group(s), expressing the fear that in the event of giving reservation to the Muslim community as a whole, the better off groups under the category of so-called ‘Ashraf’ might appropriate better part of the benefits, thus undermining the very purpose of empowering the ‘weak’ and the underprivileged. Thus this approach expresses the desire, and succeeds in it, for inclusion of backward Muslim caste-like groups in the OBC category. Many were included. However, they find themselves again at a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis non-Muslim OBCs (Ahmed, 2012).

Determining OBCs: Need to interrogate caste-centric approaches

The nature of social stratification and its consequent manifestation in group relationships with all its political and economic dimensions is one of the prime concerns in post-colonial India. Muslim societies in India have manifested varied forms of social arrangement and their stratification patterns have come to increasing level of attention in a polity marked by a process of trying to instill, because of its historically entrenched (and sometimes tragic) hierarchical equations, affirmative policies for (again) historically ‘low’ groups/communities. Muslims in India have been a part of this process, though their courses are not similar to or identical with the cases among the Hindus. The emergence of categories such as SC, OBC etc. is, at the same time, reflection and manifestation of an attempt of a state trying to give their ‘due’ share to various ‘low’, ‘weak’ and marginalised communities. However, there are differences of the historicity of the emer-

gence of these categories. Sachar Committee report observes thus: 'Studies on backward class movements, analysis of Constituent Assembly Debates and the various landmark judgments of the Supreme Court and the High Courts have been of great help in understanding the historicity of the emergence of the category 'Other Backward Classes' (Sachar Committee report, 2006: 189). India is a land of various histories and societies. It is unfortunate that narratives developed from the histories of the 'heartland' of the country have become the dominant focal point for discussion and policy formulation. Groups exist beyond the more apparent and readily accessible group images constructed in the dominant societies and dominant histories in India. Amid the caste-infested societies in the country, there is caste-less community but which at the same time is backward because of a different historical trajectory accompanied by its own reasons in the country. The groups in the OBC category again have different historicities which interrogates the tendency to restrict the criterion to determine OBCs to caste-specific considerations.

Democracy and Empowerment

In the kind of governance where various sections of societies have been subjected to policies to redressing the backwardness, weaker sections especially women need to be given extra sensitivity for a better leap of development. Ideally, democracy and empowerment go hand in hand. It is this ideal that need to be realised.

While Muslim women have the advantage (or opportunity) of electing their representatives like others, their choice is deeply shaped by the lack of informed considerations. The result is the total failure to meet their development considerations. Without education, therefore, democracy is meaningless. And without education empowerment remains a mirage. The process of democratisation connotes, apart from having political democracy, a need and process of percolating power downwards. As a matter of fact, 'inclusive growth' may only possible in an 'inclusive democracy.'

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