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Stratified Across Faiths: A Sociological Analysis of Caste Persistence in Religions Outside Hinduism: With Special Reference to Christianity and Islam

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ABSTRACT
Caste continues to influence social relations in India beyond its traditional association with Hinduism, extending into Islam and Christianity despite their egalitarian doctrines. This study examines the forms and persistence of caste stratification among Indian Muslims and Christians. Using a qualitative and exploratory research design, the study is based on secondary sources such as sociological literature, government reports, and academic studies, analysed through thematic and content analysis. The findings reveal the presence of hierarchical structures like the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal divisions among Muslims and Upper-caste–Dalit distinctions among Christians, sustained through endogamy, occupational inheritance, and institutional practices. These caste-based hierarchies shape access to education, economic opportunities, religious authority, and social mobility, resulting in the continued marginalisation of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians. The study highlights that religious conversion has not eliminated caste but has enabled its reconfiguration within new religious contexts, underscoring caste as a persistent structural reality within India's socio-religious landscape.

Keywords: Caste, Endogamy, Social Mobility, Occupational Inheritance

INTRODUCTION

The concept of caste has long occupied a central position in the sociological analysis of Indian society. Traditionally associated with Hinduism, caste (derived from the Portuguese casta, meaning "breed" or "race") refers to a system of social stratification characterized by hereditary transmission of status, occupation, and social relations (Srinivas, 1962). In its classical form, it is organized around the four-fold varna hierarchy, namely - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. It also has thousands of sub-castes or jatis functioning as localized, endogamous units (Dumont, 1970). The caste system institutionalizes inequality through notions of purity and pollution, occupational specialization, and endogamy, thereby governing social mobility and intergroup relations.

Historically, caste as an institution evolved from early Vedic distinctions of ritual status to a rigidly hierarchical system under Brahmanical ideology, codified through texts such as the Manusmriti (Sharma, 1999). With time, caste became not only a religious category but also an economic and political one, shaping access to resources, land, and power. Colonial ethnographers, such as H.H. Risley and J.H. Hutton,

reinforced these divisions through enumerations and classifications, which institutionalized caste as an administrative and social category (Dirks, 2001).

However, the persistence of caste is not limited to Hinduism. Empirical research across India has consistently shown that the principles of caste endogamy, occupational hierarchy, and notions of social distance have percolated into other religious communities, notably Islam and Christianity (Ahmad, 1973; Béteille, 1965; Fuller, 2003). While both Islam and Christianity doctrinally emphasize equality and the brotherhood of believers, the lived realities of Indian adherents reveal deep continuities with the Hindu social order. This phenomenon, often termed "caste conversion continuity," underscores how pre-conversion identities and social structures survive religious change (Mosse, 2012; Tharamangalam, 1996). From a sociological perspective, caste persistence among non-Hindu religions can be understood through the concept of social reproduction wherein historical structures and hierarchies perpetuate themselves through institutions of family, education, and religion (Bourdieu, 1977). Conversion, instead of dissolving caste identity, often results in its rearticulation under new religious idioms. The resulting forms of stratification produce complex intersections of class, religion, and ethnicity, thereby shaping both social identity and political mobilization in contemporary India (Pasricha, 2019; Alam, 2020).

Understanding the endurance of caste beyond Hinduism is crucial for broader sociological inquiry. It raises fundamental questions about the relationship between religion and social structure, about the limits of ideological egalitarianism in transforming material and symbolic hierarchies, and about the ways in which marginalized groups negotiate dignity and inclusion within faith-based institutions. Thus, this study seeks to analyse the persistence, manifestations, and multifaceted impacts of caste among Muslims and Christians in India, situating the inquiry within the broader framework of social stratification, inequality, and cultural continuity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Caste

Caste is a system of social stratification based on birth, involving hierarchical status groups, endogamy, and hereditary occupational specialization.

Pasmanda Muslims

Pasmanda Muslims are the socially and economically marginalized Muslim communities of India belonging to the Ajlaf and Arzal groups, historically regarded as "lower" or backward castes within the Muslim social hierarchy.

Caste-Based Discrimination

Caste-based discrimination refers to practices of exclusion, restriction, and unequal treatment arising from caste status, affecting individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and dignity.

Varna

Varna is the classical Hindu four-fold division of society- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, w hich is based on hereditary status and occupational roles.

Dalit Christians:

Dalit Christians are members of formerly "untouchable" Scheduled Castes who converted to Christianity but continue to face caste-based discrimination within both church structures and broader Indian society.

Theoretical Framework

1. Structural Functionalism

According to functionalist thinkers like Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, caste functions as a stabilizing institution that maintains social cohesion and order (Durkheim, 1933; Parsons, 1951). In the context of Islam and Christianity, caste operates as a mechanism of continuity: the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal hierarchy among Muslims or the "upper" and "Dalit" Christians among converts maintain structure and predictability (Ahmad, 1973; Mosse, 2012).

Even though these religions preach spiritual equality, caste persists because it fulfills crucial social roles like regulating marriage, defining identity, and preserving inherited community norms.

2. Conflict Theory

From a conflict perspective (Marx & Engels, 1970; Weber, 1978), caste is an instrument of domination and control. Elite groups such as the Ashraf Muslims and upper-caste Christians maintain power and privilege through control of education, leadership, and religious institutions (Alam, 2020; International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2016). Marginalized groups like Pasmanda Muslims or Dalit Christians face systemic exclusion and limited mobility.

Hence, caste operates as a tool of both social and symbolic capital that benefits dominant groups and perpetuates inequalities.

3. Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) concept of habitus and social reproduction explains how caste survives through everyday practices. Endogamy, ritual exclusion, and occupational continuity become embedded forms of cultural capital transmitted across generations. Mosques and churches serve as institutional "fields" where caste-based practices are legitimized and normalized (Pasricha, 2019). Thus, even without formal recognition, caste endures through socialization, habitus, and institutional reproduction.

4. M. N. Srinivas's Concept of Sanskritization

M. N. Srinivas (1952) introduced Sanskritization to describe how lower-status groups seek upward mobility by emulating the customs and practices of higher castes. This framework helps explain caste persistence in post-conversion contexts. Among Indian Muslims and Christians, many marginalized groups adopt the practices, symbols, and even titles of higher-status communities (e.g., "Sheikh," "Syed," or "Brahmin Christians") to claim respectability (Srinivas, 1952; Ahmad, 1973). However, such symbolic mobility rarely translates into real social equality. Instead, it reinforces caste hierarchies by revalidating the values of the dominant groups. Hence, Sanskritization within Islam and Christianity become a mechanism of adaptation rather than transformation.

5. B. R. Ambedkar's Theory of Caste and Religious Conversion

B. R. Ambedkar's interpretation of caste provides a critical framework for understanding its endurance across religions. Ambedkar (1936, 1948) argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers—a system rooted in graded inequality. He maintained that conversion alone cannot dismantle caste unless the new religion structurally rejects hierarchy (Ambedkar, 1948). In the case of Indian Islam and Christianity, conversion often altered religious identity without transforming social relations. As Ambedkar noted, caste "travels with the convert," because social recognition remains embedded in the Hindu-origin order of purity and pollution (Ambedkar, 1936). His framework thus explains why Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians continue to face exclusion even within religions that profess equality.

Statement of Problem

Caste, as an enduring system of social hierarchy, continues to shape Indian society far beyond its Hindu origins, extending deeply into Islam and Christianity—religions that profess equality and reject social stratification. Despite their egalitarian teachings, both faiths display internal hierarchies, such as the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal divisions among Muslims and the Syrian–Dalit or Upper–Lower distinctions among Christians. The historical assimilation of Hindu social patterns, reinforced by endogamous marriage practices, occupational segregation, and unequal access to social and economic resources, has sustained caste identities even after conversion. The continued exclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians from Scheduled Caste recognition has further entrenched their marginalization, denying them equal opportunities and institutional representation. This study therefore aims to analyze the persistence and transformation of caste within Indian Islam and Christianity, investigating how social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms reproduce hierarchy within faiths that ideologically uphold equality, viewing caste as a continuing structural reality in modern religious life.

Significance of the Study

The present study holds significant sociological relevance as it explores the enduring presence of caste within Islam and Christianity—two religions that ideologically advocate equality and universal brotherhood. By analysing how historical, social, and institutional factors sustain caste hierarchies among Indian Muslims and Christians, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between religion and social stratification. It provides valuable insights into how caste operates as a structural and cultural phenomenon that transcends religious boundaries, shaping access to education, occupation, and political representation. The study also carries policy relevance, as it highlights the continued exclusion of Dalit converts from constitutional recognition and welfare schemes, emphasizing the need for inclusive social justice frameworks. Ultimately, this research aims to broaden the discourse on caste beyond Hinduism, challenging the conventional perception of caste as a purely religious construct and situating it instead as a pervasive system embedded in India's broader socio-religious fabric.

Literature Review

1. Ahmad, Imtiaz (1973), Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India, was among the first sociological explorations of caste within Indian Islam. Through ethnographic studies in North India, he demonstrated that the Muslim social structure closely parallels the Hindu caste system, divided into Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal categories. Ahmad showed how descent, endogamy, and occupation collectively shape Muslim social hierarchy despite Islamic teachings of equality. His work challenged the prevailing notion of Islam's casteless character, highlighting the coexistence of religious ideology and local social practices. Although written in the early postcolonial context, Ahmad's study laid the theoretical groundwork for later research by conceptualizing caste in Islam as a form of "status hierarchy" rather than a theological principle.

2. Robinson, Rowena (2003), Conversion, Continuity and Change: Social Structure and Caste Among Indian Christians, examined the persistence of caste structures among Indian Christians, focusing on both historical processes of conversion and contemporary social relations. She argued that conversion did not erase caste identity but rather reconstituted it within new religious frameworks. Her ethnographic research in Tamil Nadu and Kerala revealed that upper-caste converts retained their dominance in church hierarchies and educational institutions, while Dalit Christians faced exclusion in

worship and leadership. The study's critical contribution lies in demonstrating how Christian institutions inadvertently reproduce caste distinctions through marriage practices, parish organization, and denominational segregation. Robinson thus extended the discussion of caste persistence into the Christian context, framing it as a social rather than purely religious phenomenon.

3. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2004), Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India, Though centred on gender, Hasan and Menon's study offers valuable insights into caste-based inequalities among Indian Muslims. The authors observed that caste and class intersections deeply influence the socio-economic status of Muslim women, especially those from the Ajlaf and Arzal groups. Their findings indicated that the structural marginalization of lower-caste Muslims parallels the discrimination experienced by Dalits in Hindu society. The study argued that despite Islamic egalitarianism, entrenched hierarchies rooted in lineage and occupation continue to limit mobility. By integrating feminist and intersectional perspectives, Hasan and Menon expanded the analytical lens of caste in Islam, linking it with patriarchy and economic deprivation.

4. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur (2010), Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India, examined how Dalit and Adivasi converts navigate religious identity and social exclusion within church and community. The volume emphasized the dual marginalization faced by Dalit Christians—discriminated against by upper-caste Christians within the church and excluded from Scheduled Caste benefits by the state. Through case studies from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Chhattisgarh, it revealed that caste operates not merely as a social relic but as an active force shaping access to education, land, and religious authority. The work's strength lies in its comparative approach, situating Dalit Christianity within broader debates on conversion, identity, and social justice.

5. Ali Anwar (2020). Masawat ki Jung: Pasmanda Muslim Samaj aur Rajniti, this sociopolitical analysis provides an insider's perspective on caste inequality among Indian Muslims, focusing on the Pasmanda movement (literally "those left behind"). Drawing from personal experience and field observations, Anwar argued that social mobility and representation among lower-caste Muslims remain limited due to the dominance of Ashraf elites in religious, political, and educational spaces. He also highlighted the structural invisibility of Dalit Muslims in state policy and affirmative action. The book positioned caste among Muslims as both a social and political issue, advocating for recognition and empowerment of Pasmanda communities. Anwar's work is particularly relevant for understanding the modern reassertion of caste identity and activism within Indian Islam.

Objectives

1. To study the forms of caste stratifications existing in Islam and Christianity.
2. To analyse the reasons behind the penetration and persistence of caste in Islam and Christianity.
3. To analyse the multi-faceted impacts of caste system in Islam and Christianity.

Research Questions

1. What are the forms of caste stratifications that exist in Islam and Christianity?
2. What are the reasons behind penetration and persistence of caste in Islam and Christianity?
3. What are the multi-faceted impacts of caste system in Islam and Christianity?

Research Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary research approach, relying on existing government reports, sur-

veys, journals, articles, newspapers, academic studies etc. The research design is exploratory and descriptive. The study employs thematic and content analysis to identify recurring patterns and trends concerning caste and its presence in Islam and Christianity.

Analysis of the Objectives

1) To study the forms of caste stratifications existing in Islam and Christianity.

Islam

Three-fold Division

A foundational typology of caste hierarchy among Indian Muslims divides society into the Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal categories. This classification, first noted in colonial ethnographies and later analyzed in detail by sociologists such as Imtiaz Ahmad (1973, 1978), remains central to understanding social stratification within South Asian Islam. Though Islam preaches the equality of believers before God, empirical studies reveal that notions of descent, lineage, and occupation have historically shaped Muslim social order in India (Ahmad, 1973; Ahmad, 2019).

The Ashraf, literally meaning "noble" or "honourable," comprise groups claiming foreign or high-born ancestry, such as Sayyeds (descendants of the Prophet), Pathans (of Afghan descent), Mughals (of Central Asian lineage), and Sheikhs (often claiming Arab or Persian roots). These groups are typically considered social elites within Muslim society, occupying higher positions in religious leadership, education, and administration (Ansari, 2004; Ali, 2016). The Ashraf's elevated status is historically reinforced by their association with Islamic scholarship, religious purity, and cultural refinement, all of which mark them as "status-bearing" communities in contrast to indigenous converts (Engineer, 1991).

The Ajlaf, a term often translated as "commoners" or "low-born," include the indigenous converts to Islam from artisanal and peasant backgrounds. They typically engage in manual, craft-based, or trading occupations such as weaving (Julaha or Ansari), carpentry (Saifi), barbering (Nai), or butchery (Qassab). Scholars have described the Ajlaf as the intermediate strata—socially inferior to the Ashraf but above the Arzal in hierarchy (Ahmad, 1973; Sikand, 2004). While they have embraced Islamic rituals and identities, their social position continues to be shaped by occupational and kin-based identities that mirror the Hindu jati structure (Osella & Osella, 2000).

The Arzal constitute the lowest stratum, often referred to as "degraded" or "untouchable" Muslims (Brandeis Journal of South Asian Studies, 2020). They are historically linked with stigmatized and "polluting" occupations such as scavenging, sweeping, tanning, and bone-picking (Kurdish Studies, 2022). These groups, including communities like Halalkhor, Lalbegi, and Bhangi Muslims, experience intense social exclusion and discrimination from both upper Muslim groups and Hindu Dalits. Research by Sikand (2004) and Alam (2020) suggests that the Arzal face restricted social mobility, exclusion from mosque leadership, and limited access to educational and political representation.

As one study notes, "The present study finds that Muslim society of India is divided into three major social groups—Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal" (Brandeis Journal of South Asian Studies, 2020). This tripartite structure mirrors the Hindu varna–jati system, where descent and occupation mutually reinforce social distance and hierarchy. The persistence of these divisions demonstrates that lineage and occupational heritage continue to determine Muslim social order despite the theological ideal of equality within Islam (The Indian Express, 2021). In practice, this structure produces a graded social inequality, making caste-like divisions among Muslims a durable and pervasive form of stratification in South Asia.

Occupational Biradaris and Jatis within Islam

Within the Ajlaf and Arzal categories of Indian Muslim society, there exist numerous biradaris or occupational subcastes that closely resemble the jati structure of Hindu society. These endogamous occupational communities perform specific trades or services, often inherited across generations. Among the most prominent are the Qassab (butchers), Ansari or Julaha (weavers), Dhobi (washermen), Nai (barbers), Lohar (blacksmiths), Mirasi (traditional musicians), Faqir (religious mendicants), and Halalkhor or Lalbegi (scavengers) (Ahmad, 1978; Engineer, 1991).

These biradaris exhibit distinct social boundaries and marital endogamy, with members typically marrying within their own occupational group. Sociological studies show that occupational status, not religious piety, often determines the social hierarchy within Muslim communities (Ahmad, 1973; Sikand, 2004). Even though Islam, in principle, rejects the concept of hereditary status, in practice these biradaris function as closed status groups, maintaining occupational continuity and limiting social mobility. The persistence of these caste-like formations highlights how local cultural and economic structures have been incorporated into the lived practice of Islam in South Asia (Osella & Osella, 2000).

Regional Variations

The caste structure among Muslims is far from uniform across India. It reflects deep regional, linguistic, and historical variations. In North India, the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal hierarchy remains the dominant framework of stratification, reflecting centuries of interaction between Indo-Islamic and Hindu social systems (Ahmad, 1973).

In contrast, South India presents a more complex mosaic. Among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, researchers have found sharp distinctions between landowning "upper" Muslims and agricultural labourers, with patterns of segregation and avoidance similar to those among Hindus (Osella & Osella, 2000). The Labbais of Tamil Nadu also show status differentiation based on trade and lineage. Meanwhile, among Konkani Muslims in western India and Bohras in Gujarat and Maharashtra, sect, trade, and ethnicity often overlap to produce distinct social hierarchies (Sikand, 2004; Ali, 2016).

These variations suggest that Muslim caste formations are not monolithic, but adaptive to local socio-economic conditions. The interaction between Islam and local culture has led to a situation where the ideals of Islamic egalitarianism coexist with entrenched forms of regional and occupational hierarchy.

Sectarian and Ethnic Stratification

In addition to occupational and regional differentiation, sectarian and ethnic identities serve as significant markers of stratification within Indian Islam. The Sunni–Shia divide, for example, often extends beyond theology into status and community identity. Within Sunni Islam itself, the Barelvi–Deobandi distinction has historically shaped access to religious authority, education, and leadership (Ahmad, 2019; Ali, 2016). Ethnic categories such as Pathan, Syed, Mughal, and Sheikh are often valorised as "high" identities, associated with nobility or foreign ancestry. In contrast, occupational groups such as Ansari or Julaha—though large in number—occupy lower rungs in the social hierarchy (Engineer, 1991). These sectarian and ethnic distinctions frequently intersect with caste and class, producing what Ahmad (2019) describes as a "multi-layered social stratification system" within South Asian Islam.

Such divisions illustrate how status and purity—concepts antithetical to Islamic theology—have become socially operative in Indian Muslim life. The result is a deeply intersecting structure of caste, sect, and ethnicity, all reinforcing inequality in subtle but persistent ways.

Contemporary Reproduction of Caste Through Education and Politics

Despite significant social change, caste-like hierarchies continue to be reproduced in modern Muslim

society through educational access, occupational patterns, and political representation. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) identified that 40.7 percent of Indian Muslims fall under the "Other Backward Classes" (OBC) category, reflecting deep structural inequality and the persistence of caste-linked disadvantage. Many of these Muslim OBCs correspond directly to traditional Ajlaf and Arzal occupational groups, such as weavers (Ansaris) and butchers (Qassabs).

Contemporary Muslim politics has also seen the rise of the Pasmanda movement, representing the "backward" or "marginalised" Muslims. Derived from the Persian word pasmanda—meaning "those left behind"—this movement seeks to highlight internal inequalities within the Muslim community and demands recognition, reservation, and redistribution for lower-caste Muslims (Ansari, 2004; Alam, 2020). However, studies show that educational advancement and class mobility have not fully eroded caste identity. Even among educated Muslims, endogamy, symbolic status boundaries, and occupational segregation remain deeply rooted (Ahmad, 2019). This continuity underscores how social reproduction occurs through both traditional kinship structures and modern institutional mechanisms. In short, the persistence of caste consciousness within education and politics suggests that caste among Muslims is not a relic of the past but an evolving feature of their contemporary identity.

Christianity

Converted-Caste Continuity: Endogamous Subgroups and "Dalit Christians"

Despite the egalitarian ethos of Christianity, numerous sociological and anthropological studies indicate that caste identity persists strongly among Indian Christians. The phenomenon of "converted-caste continuity" refers to the retention of pre-conversion caste identities, producing distinct social blocs such as Dalit Christians, intermediate-caste Christians, and upper-caste or "forward" Christians. These divisions mirror the Hindu varna-jati hierarchy, wherein former "untouchable" converts continue to face discrimination within the church and community life (Bauman, 2008; Mosse, 2012).

Empirical evidence shows that endogamy remains deeply entrenched. Many Dalit Christian groups maintain exclusive marriage networks, social spaces, and even worship practices, thereby sustaining caste endogamy within a Christian framework (Robinson, 2003). According to a report by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (2016), "social segregation extends to the sphere of worship, with separate churches and priests being almost the norm among Dalit Christians." This demonstrates how caste functions as an organizing principle even within a supposedly casteless religion.

Denominational and Congregational Segregation

Caste boundaries are often reproduced through denominational or congregational divisions. While Christian denominations (such as Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox) ostensibly differ on theological grounds, in India these lines frequently correspond to caste cleavages (Mosse, 2012; Viswanath, 2021). For instance, upper-caste converts historically aligned with dominant Catholic or Syrian Christian traditions in Kerala, while Dalit converts were relegated to separate Protestant or Latin Catholic congregations. In some regions, such as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, separate parishes and cemeteries exist for Dalit and non-Dalit Christians (John, 2019).

A recent study observes that "the caste-based segregation runs so deep within the churches in India that there are congregations who do not share the same building" (ResearchGate, 2020). Such practices perpetuate the exclusion of Dalit Christians from positions of ecclesiastical authority and reinforce caste as a spatial and ritual boundary.

Occupational and Status Hierarchies within Christian Communities

Caste-linked occupational stratification has also persisted within Christian society. Historical records from

colonial censuses and missionary archives demonstrate that converted communities carried their traditional occupations—such as agricultural labour, sanitation work, and weaving—into their Christian identities (Webster, 1992). For example, in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, agricultural labourers from Paraiyar or Pulaya backgrounds formed the majority of Dalit Christian populations, while land-owning and trading castes dominated the Syrian and Latin Catholic groups (Mosse, 2012).

These occupational differences translated into differential access to education, resources, and church leadership. The Wikipedia entry on "Caste in Christianity in India" (2023), drawing from multiple ethnographic sources, notes that informal hierarchies still exist within dioceses, influencing clerical appointments and parish resource allocation.

Religious Ritual Exclusion and Access to Authority

Another axis of Christian caste stratification is the limitation of ritual participation and leadership roles for lower-caste converts. In several dioceses, Dalit Christians have historically been denied roles such as altar servers, catechists, or parish council members. Elite converts, often from the Syrian Christian or upper-caste Hindu backgrounds, dominate seminaries, church administration, and theological institutions (Bauman, 2008; IDSN, 2016).

As the International Dalit Solidarity Network (2016) documents, "modes of subordination in churches persist through unequal ritual participation and the insistence on endogamy." This religious marginalization mirrors broader socio-economic exclusion, linking caste, class, and power within Christian institutions.

Regional Variations and Emerging Identity Politics

Caste dynamics among Christians vary regionally. In Kerala, Syrian Christians maintain high ritual purity claims and social distance from Dalit Latin Catholics and Scheduled Caste converts (Kurien, 2002). In Tamil Nadu, distinct caste identities such as Paraiyar Christians, Nadar Christians, and Vellalar Christians coexist, with clear hierarchies of marriage, ritual, and leadership (Robinson & Kujur, 2010). In North India and Punjab, Mazhabi Christians and Chuhra Christians—descendants of Dalit converts—continue to be stigmatized and economically marginalized.

In recent decades, "Dalit Christian" movements have emerged, demanding state recognition and inclusion in Scheduled Caste reservations. Scholars like John C.B. Webster (1992) and Rowena Robinson (2003) argue that this reflects a new phase of caste consciousness within Christianity, where religious equality is contested through the idiom of caste-based social justice.

Hierarchies among Indian Christians: From Bammons to Dalit Converts

In Goa and coastal western India, Christian caste stratification is sharply defined.

- The Bammons (Christian Brahmins) occupy the top position, historically monopolising priesthood, education, and administrative authority (Pinto, 1992).
- The Chardos (Christian Kshatriyas) form the intermediate elite—often landowners and professionals—but remain socially distinct from Bammons (Gomes, 2004).
- The Sudirs represent middle artisanal groups, while the Mahars and Mangs—Dalit converts—occupy the lowest social rank, continuing to face exclusion and segregation (Naik, 2013).

Even within the Church, caste lines are rigidly maintained: separate seating in churches, exclusive cemeteries, and endogamy persist (Fernandes, 2011). Robinson (2003) observed that "Christian Mahars continued to be treated as untouchables, excluded from social and religious functions by upper-caste Christians.

2) To analyse the reasons behind the penetration and persistence of caste in Islam and Christianity

Historical Embeddedness of Caste in South Asian Social Order

Caste as a system predates organized religions like Islam and Christianity in the Indian subcontinent and is deeply embedded in the region's social fabric (Bayly, 1999). Its endurance across religions stems from its civilizational rather than purely theological nature. When Islam and Christianity spread in India, they encountered this pre-existing social hierarchy based on purity, occupation, and descent (Ahmad, 1978). Conversions therefore occurred within the caste society, not outside it. As Mosse (2012) explains, caste in South Asia functions as a "structural grammar of social relations," and converts, though adopting new faiths, continued to inhabit the same local social spaces, occupations, and kinship systems. Hence, caste became "translated" into Islamic biradaris and Christian sub-castes.

Continuity of Pre-Conversion Identities and Endogamous Closure

Conversion did not erase pre-existing social distinctions; rather, it often reinscribed them within new religious identities. Sociological evidence shows that converts carried their ancestral caste identity, continuing the same marriage patterns, kinship ties, and social distance (Ahmad, 1973; Robinson, 2003). Among Muslims, the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal structure reproduced the logic of descent-based hierarchy similar to Hindu varnas. Among Christians, former Dalit converts formed separate congregations and maintained endogamy, resulting in "Dalit Christians" and "upper-caste Christians" (Bauman, 2008). According to the International Dalit Solidarity Network (2016), "social segregation extends to the sphere of worship, with separate churches and priests being almost the norm among Dalit Christians." This pattern reflects Max Weber's (1968) notion of social closure, wherein privileged groups maintain boundaries to protect social honour and resources.

Occupational Inheritance and Economic Stratification

Caste and occupation have historically been interlinked; consequently, occupational roles survived religious conversion. Many converts from lower castes retained their traditional occupations—such as sanitation work, weaving, or agricultural labour—due to economic dependency and lack of alternative livelihoods (Webster, 1992). Among Muslims, the Arzal groups continued to engage in "polluting" occupations like scavenging or leatherwork, while upper Ashraf Muslims occupied religious, mercantile, or administrative roles (Ahmad, 1978). Similarly, in Christian communities of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, Dalit converts (e.g., Paraiyar Christians, Pulaya Christians) often remained agricultural labourers, while higher castes dominated education and church hierarchies (Mosse, 2012; Robinson & Kujur, 2010). This occupational continuity entrenched economic inequality within religious communities, limiting the social mobility of lower castes. The Sachar Committee Report (Government of India, 2006) highlighted that nearly 40.7% of Indian Muslims belong to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), reflecting caste-linked occupational backwardness that persists despite religious conversion.

Institutional Accommodation by Religious and Colonial Authorities

Religious institutions and colonial governance played a key role in accommodating caste-based distinctions rather than dismantling them. Missionaries, in particular, sought to attract high-caste converts first, believing they would bring legitimacy to the faith (Robinson, 2003). As a result, churches were often organised along caste lines, with separate parishes, schools, and cemeteries for Dalit and upper-caste Christians (Webster, 1992).

Similarly, Islamic institutions in India, including madrasas and mosques, frequently reflected local social hierarchies; leadership positions like imam or muezzin were often monopolised by Ashraf groups (Ali, 2016). Colonial census classifications further legitimised these divisions by enumerating social groups as

discrete "communities," freezing caste distinctions across religions (Dirks, 2001). Thus, institutional inertia and colonial bureaucratic codification transformed fluid social hierarchies into rigid categories that persisted into the postcolonial period.

Cultural Logics of Purity and Pollution

Even though Islamic and Christian theologies reject notions of ritual purity and pollution, cultural beliefs from the Hindu milieu penetrated practice. Concepts of "clean" and "unclean" labour shaped perceptions of dignity and status among converts. For example, Dalit Christians engaged in sanitation or manual labour were treated as "less pure" and excluded from clerical roles (Mosse, 2012). Likewise, Muslim Arzal groups performing menial labour were stigmatized as "najis" (impure), despite Islamic injunctions against such discrimination (Engineer, 1991). This persistence of purity ideology reflects what Srinivas (1966) termed Sanskritisation in reverse, where non-Hindu communities unconsciously internalise the Hindu ritual hierarchy.

Political Economy and Resource Competition

In modern India, affirmative action policies and electoral politics have paradoxically reinforced caste identities among religious minorities. Movements such as the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz and Dalit Christian Federation mobilize lower-caste Muslims and Christians for political and economic recognition (Ansari, 2004; Alam, 2020). While these movements seek justice, they also solidify caste-based identity as a resource for state benefits. Alam (2020) argues that "Pasmanda identity politics has transformed caste from a social stigma into a political category," revealing how caste evolves through state–society interactions rather than purely cultural reproduction.

Colonial Classification and Codification of Caste

The colonial state's obsession with classification intensified caste boundaries across religions. Census officers such as Herbert Risley and colonial ethnographers insisted on categorising Indian populations by caste, profession, and religion (Dirks, 2001). This "ethnographic state" institutionalised caste in law and administration, ensuring that Muslim biradaris and Christian sub-castes were recognized as formal social units. As a result, conversion did not erase caste; it bureaucratically entrenched it. Contemporary sociologists like Fuller (2011) and Gupta (2000) note that colonial legacies continue to shape the politics of recognition and identity among religious minorities.

Intersectionality: Caste, Gender, Region, and Education

Caste interacts with other axes of inequality—gender, class, and region—reinforcing its persistence. Studies from Kashmir (Wani, 2021) and Kerala (Kurien, 2002) reveal that lower-caste Muslim and Christian women face "double discrimination" in education, marriage, and employment. In regions like Kerala, the dominance of Syrian Christians marginalizes Latin and Dalit Christians socially and economically (Mosse, 2012). The intersectional nature of discrimination ensures that caste inequality is layered and multidimensional, complicating the task of social reform.

Everyday Social Practices and Micro-Exclusions

The persistence of caste is most visible in everyday practices—interdining, marriage, worship, and leadership roles. Ethnographic accounts reveal that Dalit Christians and Muslim OBCs are often denied burial in common cemeteries, made to sit separately in churches or mosques, or excluded from local committees (IDSN, 2016; Robinson, 2003). These micro-practices reinforce macro-structures of inequality, demonstrating what Goffman (1963) termed the "stigma of discredited identity." Social distance, rather than overt exclusion, perpetuates caste in subtle, normalized ways.

Reform Movements and Partial Transformations

Despite persistence, resistance movements have emerged within both religions. The rise of Dalit theology in Christianity (Webster, 1992) and Pasmanda discourse in Islam (Ansari, 2004) has challenged theological silence on caste. These movements reinterpret religious texts through a social justice lens, emphasizing equality and human dignity. However, structural change remains limited because caste is not only cultural but also economic and political. As Mosse (2012) observes, "religious conversion did not break caste; it reconstituted it within new institutional forms."

3) To analyse the multi-faceted impacts of caste system in Islam and Christianity

Socio-Cultural Impacts: Reproduction of Social Distance and Segregation

One of the most visible outcomes of caste persistence is the reproduction of social distance and ritual segregation within religious communities. Among Muslims, social hierarchies manifest through the Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal division, where the Ashraf claim noble or foreign ancestry (Sayyeds, Pathans, Mughals), while Ajlaf and Arzal groups comprise occupationally defined local converts, including artisans and manual labourers (Ahmad, 1978; Alam, 2020). Despite Islam's universalist doctrine of ummah (community of believers), endogamy, limited social mobility, and ritual avoidance continue to structure social relations (Sikand, 2004).

Similarly, among Christians, caste segregation has produced distinct categories such as "Dalit Christians" and "forward-caste Christians." Churches in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh have been documented maintaining separate seating, separate cemeteries, and even different Eucharistic vessels for upper- and lower-caste members (Mosse, 2012; IDSN, 2016). The International Dalit Solidarity Network (2016) reports that "social segregation extends to the sphere of worship, with separate churches and priests being almost the norm among Dalit Christians." This shows that the notion of spiritual equality coexists with everyday practices of ritual exclusion.

Economic Impacts: Occupational Fixity, Poverty, and Unequal Access

Caste also produces enduring economic inequality. Lower-caste Muslims and Christians tend to remain concentrated in hereditary or low-status occupations such as weaving, sanitation work, agricultural labour, or domestic service (Ahmad, 1978; Robinson, 2003). Studies show that Muslim OBCs and Dalit Christians experience lower levels of land ownership, access to capital, and stable wage employment than both their upper-caste co-religionists and Hindu counterparts (Government of India, 2006; IDSN, 2016).

For instance, the Sachar Committee Report (2006) revealed that nearly 40.7% of Muslims belonged to OBC categories, while Dalit Muslims (Arzals) were among the poorest segments, with occupational immobility over generations. Similarly, the National Commission for Minorities (2007) found that Dalit Christians are disproportionately represented in sanitation and informal labour, earning substantially less than upper-caste converts (Webster, 1992).

This economic marginalisation is further compounded by exclusion from affirmative action benefits — Dalit Christians and Muslims are not recognized under the Scheduled Caste category due to constitutional limitations, effectively barring them from state-based redistributive policies (Chinnaiah, 2016). Consequently, caste acts as both a structural and institutional mechanism of economic reproduction.

Educational Impacts: Uneven Access and Limited Social Mobility

Historically, Christian missionary schools provided early educational opportunities for lower-caste converts, yet these institutions often reproduced class and caste hierarchies through streaming and exclusionary practices (Mosse, 2012). Educational attainment among Dalit Christians remains lower than

among forward-caste Christians, and among Muslims, caste correlates strongly with literacy and school completion (Fernandes, 2011; Robinson & Kujur, 2010).

While access to schooling has improved since the 1980s, the returns to education for lower-caste Muslims and Christians are often limited due to discrimination in hiring and exclusion from elite occupational networks (Pew Research Center, 2021). In some regions, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, lower-caste Muslims report continued preference for intra-community schools to avoid stigma (Alam, 2020). This creates a vicious cycle of limited mobility and persistent occupational inheritance.

Political Impacts: Identity, Mobilisation, and Representation

Caste divisions have reshaped political identity among Muslims and Christians. The rise of Pasmanda movements — representing "backward" Muslims — reflects an assertion of caste identity within a religious minority that has historically claimed homogeneity (Ansari, 2004; Alam, 2020). Similarly, Dalit Christian organisations such as the National Council of Dalit Christians advocate for recognition under Scheduled Caste status and equitable representation within church hierarchies (Webster, 1992).

However, the political outcomes of these mobilisations are mixed. While they have amplified marginalised voices, upper-caste or Ashraf elites often dominate leadership positions in both community and political organisations (Ali, 2016). The denial of SC status to Dalit Christians and Muslims creates a dual marginalisation: exclusion from both Hindu privilege and minority rights frameworks. Thus, caste continues to shape the political opportunity structure, mediating who speaks for the community and who benefits from state recognition.

Institutional Impacts: Caste and Religious Hierarchies

Religious institutions mirror social stratification. Among Muslims, the management of mosques and madrassas is frequently controlled by Ashraf groups, while Ajlaf and Arzal members occupy peripheral roles (Ahmad, 1978). Among Christians, the Catholic and Protestant church hierarchies remain dominated by upper-caste clergy, particularly in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa (Robinson, 2003; Mosse, 2012). Research documents instances where Dalit clergy are denied promotion, excluded from administrative authority, or confined to Dalit-majority parishes (IDSN, 2016).

This institutional stratification contradicts the doctrinal principles of egalitarianism but persists due to control over resources, patronage, and education within religious bodies (Fernandes, 2011). It produces what sociologists call "bounded inclusion" — formal equality with informal exclusion (Srinivas, 1966).

Psychological and Cultural Impacts: Stigma and Identity Negotiation

At the individual level, caste manifests as stigma, shaping one's self-concept and social interactions (Goffman, 1963). For Dalit Christians and lower-caste Muslims, conversion offered spiritual dignity but not complete social liberation. Persistent discrimination, even within co-religious spaces, leads to identity dissonance being religiously equal but socially inferior (Bauman, 2008).

Scholars describe this as a form of "double consciousness", wherein converts internalise both religious and caste identities, negotiating belonging within a hierarchy that their faith rejects (Mosse, 2012). Stigma also affects mental health, aspiration levels, and inter-community trust (Kurien, 2002).

Gendered Dimensions: Intersection of Caste and Patriarchy

Caste and gender intersect to produce compounded marginality. Among lower-caste Muslim and Christian women, patriarchal control is intensified by caste norms that restrict mobility and education (Wani, 2021). Female domestic workers and manual labourers from Dalit Christian or Arzal Muslim backgrounds face wage discrimination and sexual exploitation, with limited institutional recourse (Kurien, 2002).

These women remain doubly invisible as members of marginalised castes and as women within patriarchal religious structures. Hence, gendered caste disadvantage functions as a critical axis of structural inequality (Alam, 2020).

Legal and Policy Impacts: Recognition and Exclusion

The Indian legal framework, which restricts Scheduled Caste status to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, institutionalises exclusion for Dalit Muslims and Christians (Chinnaiah, 2016). Consequently, caste inequality in these communities persists without constitutional remedy. Despite repeated recommendations from the Ranganath Misra Commission (2007) and the National Commission for Minorities, political resistance has stalled reform. This legal invisibility deepens marginalisation, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disempowerment. Caste thus operates simultaneously as a social reality and a policy omission, showing how religion and state frameworks interact to reproduce inequality (IDSN, 2016).

Transformative Responses: Theological and Political Reinterpretations

Recent decades have witnessed counter-movements seeking to reinterpret religious doctrines against caste hierarchy. Dalit theology in Christianity (Nirmal, 1983; Webster, 1992) re-centres the narrative of Jesus as a liberator of the oppressed, positioning Dalits as theological subjects rather than passive victims. Similarly, Pasmanda discourse in Islam challenges the Ashraf-centric narrative of Muslim identity, demanding equality in religious representation and state policy (Ansari, 2004; Alam, 2020). These movements signal that caste is not a static inheritance but a contested terrain, where religion becomes both the site and instrument of reform.

Conclusion

The persistence of caste stratification within Islam and Christianity in India reveals a deep-rooted intersection between religion and social hierarchy. Despite the egalitarian doctrines that both faiths profess, emphasizing equality, fraternity, and the rejection of inherited status ; social realities continue to mirror the broader structure of the Hindu caste order. The Ashraf–Ajlaf–Arzal divisions among Muslims and the Syrian–Dalit distinctions among Christians demonstrate how caste has transcended religious boundaries to become a cultural and social institution. This paradox underscores that conversion alone does not guarantee liberation from caste-based marginalization; rather, structural transformation and societal awareness are essential.

Looking ahead, the path toward equality within these religious communities lies in acknowledging and addressing internal hierarchies rather than denying their existence. Religious institutions must take proactive roles in promoting inclusivity through reinterpretation of scriptures, community-based reforms, and social integration programs. Educational and economic empowerment initiatives targeting marginalized groups within these faiths are crucial for dismantling entrenched hierarchies. Inter-caste and inter-community dialogues, along with affirmative representation in church and mosque leadership structures, can foster a more egalitarian environment.

In the long run, a sociological shift is needed, one that redefines identity beyond caste affiliations and nurtures a collective consciousness rooted in shared faith and humanity. If such reforms are institutionalized and supported by both civil society and religious authorities, the future could witness a gradual erosion of caste divisions, allowing Islam and Christianity in India to embody the true egalitarian spirit they have long preached.

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