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## Casteist demons and working-class prophets: subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872–1928

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### Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between caste and Islam in Bengal at a time when they acquired heightened significance as markers of identity for the colonial state and between communities. Scholarship, mainly drawing on North India, has emphasised the contrast between the existence in practice of a hierarchical system of social stratification among Muslims and the ideals and traditions of Islamic egalitarianism. This article, however, shows that caste-based struggles and tensions produced a revolutionary Islam. I suggest that the subversive potential of Islamic egalitarianism, described in early Islam by Louise Marlow, was kept alive by low-caste Bengali Muslims. The social reality of caste enabled multiple understandings of what it meant to be a Muslim, and the more radical among them were subaltern ontologies—different meanings of what it was to be a Muslim in the world. Here, I analyse writings on caste by four unreliable narrators around the turn of the twentieth century—a British colonial ethnographer, an *ashrāfi* Muslim anthropologist, and two Muslim reformers—to describe the politics and lifeworlds of low-caste Muslim groups in Bengal. The article argues for a more nuanced understanding of this period of Islamic reform and development, one that is conscious of the subaltern currents shaping its course. I show how a reformist politics of ‘rejection’ of elite Islam emerged as a response to the problem of caste inequality. These discourses and practices repudiating elite Muslim titles, centring histories of labour, and emphasising equality as an embodied experience reveal the revolutionary potentialities of a subaltern Islam.

**Keywords:** Caste; Islam; subaltern politics; colonial Bengal; egalitarianism

In 1926, Muhammad Yaqub Ali, secretary of the Ahl-i Hadith *anjuman* (association) in Kakran, Dhaka district, wrote ‘*Deojāter Porinām*’ (‘End of Demonkind’), a rib-tickling comic poem about a demon feast that ends in tragedy. The poem appeared in the final pages of *Jāter Barā’i* (Caste Pride), a small pamphlet condemning the material and affective practices of caste among Muslims. In the poem, the demons fight an epic battle. They leap into the air, each one higher than the other, ascend to the skies, let out roars that darken clouds and cause fierce thunderstorms, gnash their 20-metre long teeth to create lightning, and lock each other into bone-crushing hugs. The demons war day and night until they are all destroyed. Their tragic end is caused by their refusal to accept each other as equals.<sup>1</sup>

This demon fable is a cautionary tale about the destructive powers of caste and distinction. The story starts happily enough with the demons inviting all the inhabitants of a

<sup>1</sup> M. Y. Ali, *Jāter Barā’i* (Dacca, 1926), pp. 19–25.

village to a feast. They go to the market to buy food and other items, clear the ground (*maidan*) and make seating arrangements. Since the demons possess no sense of caste, they pay no heed to social ranks or rules on inter-dining in their preparations. However, some of the villagers, disgusted by the caste-less and polluting ways of the demons and the other undesirables invited to the event, turn to the *buzurg* (elder) in the village to help them get out of the invitation. The elder, wise to the ways of the world, knows just the trick to destroy the possibility of this radically egalitarian feast taking place—an appeal to the seductive, irrepressible, and destructive power of pride. Adopting his advice, on the day of the feast, the villagers request to be served by whoever is the most important among the demons. This provokes emotions and actions with devastating consequences. Competition for status—analogous, as the title of the pamphlet indicates, to caste—awakens the destructive powers of the demons. In the poem, caste is portrayed as a false mischief-making problem that cannot be resolved; an arbitrary value that sows discord and disharmony. But why was a Muslim reformist writing on caste and demons? What was the relationship between caste and Islam in the colonial period? Why was humour felt to be an appropriate medium for anti-caste discourse?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, caste emerged as a significant yet contested idea and reality in the lives of Bengali Muslims. The 1872 Census carried the surprising revelation that 48 per cent of Bengal's population were Muslim. Subsequent official narratives attributing the preponderance to low-caste and tribal conversion prompted an array of responses from the Muslim community, ranging from denial to anxiety and reform. In the 1891 trial of Raja Surya Kant Acharya, the chief landowner in the Mymensingh district, fleeting references to the raja sharing the dock with a Kheru Sheikh, a 'low class Mohammedan prisoner', in the court proceedings, engendered outcry and protest among certain sections of Bengali Muslims, offended by the suggestion that they too practised caste. They wrote in impassioned tones in English and Indian journals about the impossibility of caste given the egalitarian virtues of Islam, thus erasing the troubling presence of Kheru Sheikh.<sup>2</sup> Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee, the diwan of the Nawab of Murshidabad, also proffered a denial of caste in his 1895 book *The Origins of Muslims in Bengal*, originally written in Persian two years earlier. Rubbee, employing an admixture of speculation and racism, countered the claim that the mass of Bengali Muslims were low-caste Hindu or tribal converts to the religion. He argued that a number of factors, such as 500 years of Muslim rule, reluctance among different communities to abandon their faith, and physiognomic differences between Hindus and Muslims meant that the great majority of Muslims could only be of foreign and, mainly, noble descent. Although Rubbee acknowledged social stratification among Muslims, he argued that it could not be equated with the degradations of the Hindu caste system. He wrote: 'But among the Muslims, there are not men of those very mean and dirty occupations as there are among the Hindus. For in no part of Bengal is there a single Muslim sweeper, scavenger or nightman or the like.'<sup>3</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, the discourse transitions from denial to confession. Maulvi Abdul Wali, a sub-registrar at Ranchi, outlined the existence of a caste order among Muslims structured by descent, marriage, and occupation in a paper read out at the Anthropological Society of Bombay.<sup>4</sup> Wali's social background and political

<sup>2</sup> 'Social divisions in the Mohammadan community', *The Calcutta Monthly* 1 (July 1896), pp. 2–4. See also *Case of Raja Surya Kant Acharya, Bahadoor* (India, 1893).

<sup>3</sup> K. F. Rubbee, *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal: Being a Translation of 'Haqiqate Musalman-i-Bengalah'* (Calcutta, 1895), p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> In the footnotes of the paper, we learn that it was written at the special request of the deputy commissioner of Ranchi, in reply to the enquiries made by Edward Gait, Herbert Risley, and Colonel Dalton, officials involved in

concerns, not so different from Rubbee's, meant that his admission was driven by a desire to maintain class and caste privilege, evident in his warnings about the breakdown of a 'moral' order, his policing of caste boundaries, and fear of subaltern Islam. Wali wrote of the rising number of 'ignorants and upstarts' who hid their caste origins using the names 'Shaikh or Mir', but were actually 'weavers, wine-makers etc., with all their pretensions'.<sup>5</sup> He despaired at the suffering and decline of the 'genuine Ashraf' due to their unfair treatment at the hands of the colonial rulers.<sup>6</sup> By the 1920s, rapid urbanisation, changes in political representation, and rising communalism led reformist groups, driven by a combination of fear and hope, to adopt a different approach to caste. These Muslim reformers, showing little sympathy for the plight of the *ashrāf*, called for a more subversive form of Islamic egalitarianism.

In this article, I explore changes in Islam in the late nineteenth and twentieth century from a bottom-up perspective. Colonial rule and attendant developments such as a flourishing print culture, religious and caste-based associations, and the increasing centrality of theology and law in everyday life heightened the importance of communal identities over this period. Yet, at the same time, this was a creative, dynamic, and contingent process that produced multiple understandings and practices of Islam, some more radical than others. Pradip Kumar Dutta has argued that the possibilities (and vulnerabilities) of communal identities of this period can only be understood through their interplay with other collective identities such as caste, gender, and class.<sup>7</sup> Here, I build on this to argue that caste produced revolutionary egalitarian interpretations of Islam in colonial Bengal. Louise Marlow, a scholar of classical Islam, notes the ongoing struggles between different social groups in the early period, with the *ulamā* and elite actively undermining Islamic egalitarianism through law, literature, and social practice, while peasants and poorer classes resisted and tried to make it a reality.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, I argue that the ideas of Islamic egalitarianism that emerged in colonial Bengal were not simply insincere or superficial utterances, subordinate to the force of hierarchical ideas and political realities, as the text by Rubbee might cause us to believe. Instead, they were brought to life and given true form and power by marginalised groups.

The article shows how low-caste Muslims, while not writing texts themselves, shaped the discourse of religious and social equality during this period of Islamic reform. The radical promise of a subaltern Islam was revealed through these discourses, which centred equality as their fundamental tenet, offered sacred genealogies of work, and emphasised intimacy and touch as integral parts of Islamic pedagogy. Most of the writing on Muslim occupational caste groups has been about their search for self-respect through 'Ashrafisation'—the process by which low-caste groups attempted to improve their social standing through adopting the behaviours, lifestyles, and practices associated with different *ashrāf* groups. Here, however, I show how some texts offered a counter-tactic by rejecting narratives of respectability for their genealogy, and more importantly, for Islam as a whole. Islamic reform dominates scholarly narratives about Muslims in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Asia, but its relationship to caste is reduced to simplified narratives of reformist orthodoxy against heterodox local traditions. Scholars argue that the reformist campaign led by the *ulamā* and the *ashrāf* (upper-caste

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the compilation of the Census. See M. A. Wali, 'Ethnographical notes on the Muhammadan castes of Bengal', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* 2.2 (1904), pp. 98–113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Wali, 'The cause of backwardness of the Muhammadans of Bengal in education', *Journal of the Moslem Institute* 2.4 (1907), pp. 288–300.

<sup>7</sup> P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> L. Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, 1997).

Muslims), to purge the perceived heretical behaviour and practices among primarily low-caste Muslims, produced a more distinctive and cohesive Islamic identity.<sup>9</sup> The article departs from this flattened unidirectional perspective to suggest instead that low-caste contributions to reformist movements changed the means, content, and outcomes of reform, producing a more capaciously imagined Islam.

The article examines four authors who specifically address caste among Bengali Muslims in their writings: James Wise, a colonial ethnographer; Maulvi Abdul Wali, a native ethnographer; and Muhammad Yaqub Ali and Muhammad Enayetullah, Ahl-i Hadith reformers. I begin with a discussion on the relationship between caste and Islam at a global and local level. Thereafter, I focus on the work and frustrations of the colonial and native ethnographers as they tried to delineate the caste order and describe the religious beliefs and lifeworlds of low-caste Muslims. Despite the attempt to clarify, classify, and regulate, their work demonstrates both a sense of confusion and suspicion of being fooled by the subjects of their enquiries. The second section of the article examines in detail two Ahl-i Hadith texts which outline the problems of caste, and in doing so, speak to the possibilities of a subaltern Islam. Some of the limitations of these texts are self-evident; their writers are unreliable narrators, whose understandings and presentations reflect diverse agendas, and whose access to low-caste Muslim lifeworlds was mediated and distorted by race, class, and power, particularly in the case of Wise and Wali. Yet, these texts reflect more than simply elite articulations and understandings of the world. As critics of Subaltern studies have rightfully argued, subaltern and elite domains are not discrete, hermetically sealed worlds, but co-produced through dialogue and interaction with each other.<sup>10</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon argues that subaltern and elite identities are formed from many different 'fragments', that do not, in essence, belong to any specific group, but are shaped and moulded in ways that serve distinctive purposes.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the focus of much scholarship continues to be on subaltern borrowing of ideas and an unassailable faith in elite autonomy. A more interactive reading reveals tensions between elite authors and subaltern influence on the socially constructed nature of these texts.<sup>12</sup>

## Castes of Islam

The breadth and richness of scholarship on caste in South Asia reveal the significance of the topic beyond academic circuits and in the actual everyday lives of groups and communities. Recent histories continue to offer new insights on caste, contributing to long-standing debates about its relationship to Hindu cultures, the colonial state, the political

<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest that our understanding of the reformist period has not been enriched through the scholarship of this period; however, the binary is too easily assumed and needs to be problematised. The author agrees with Sherali Tareen's remarks that these binary constructions are conceptually limiting. For more on the reformist movement in Bengal, see R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity*, 2nd edn (Delhi, 1996); A. Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ, 1983); T. I. Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (New York, 2019); T. M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871–1977* (Calcutta, 1995); Ananya Dasgupta, 'Labors of Representation: Cultivating Land, Self, and Community Among Muslims in Late Colonial Bengal' (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2013), <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/849> (accessed 10 July 2023).

<sup>10</sup> D. Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London, 2002); R. O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the subject Subaltern studies and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies* 22.1 (1988), pp. 189–224; D. Gupta, 'On altering the ego in peasant history: paradoxes of the ethnic option', *Peasant Studies* 13.1 (1985), pp. 5–24.

<sup>11</sup> O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the subject Subaltern studies', p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Sumit Sarkar suggests this technique is useful for thinking about 'silences and disjunctures': see S. Sarkar, 'Identities and histories: some lower-caste narratives from early twentieth century Bengal', in *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (Delhi, 2002), pp. 38–80.

economy and Indian nationalism, which sharpen as well as complicate our knowledge of the phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Despite the dynamism of caste, Susan Bayly notes that it possesses specific features and characteristics; caste is a hierarchical ordering of social groups structured according to notions of common descent, occupational ideal, and innate moral qualities.<sup>14</sup> The caste order systemises inequalities and upholds the privilege of those at the top, through endogamy, unequal access to resources and opportunities, and purity and pollution rituals. But what is the relationship between caste and Islam? One of the most revolutionary and fundamental principles of Islam is the assurance of unity and egalitarianism among its followers. Marlow writes: 'Islam is probably the most uncompromising of the world's religions in its insistence on the equality of all believers before God. In God's eyes, differences of rank and affluence are irrelevant, and all Muslims, regardless of their positions in this world, are equally capable of salvation in the next.'<sup>15</sup> There are innumerable Quranic verses, prophetic Hadiths, proverbs and other Islamic knowledge traditions that confirm the universal brotherhood of believers, with piety as the distinguishing principle. One of the oft-quoted verses is from Surah al-Hujurat: 'O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this belief in religious egalitarianism has often conflicted with actual social practice among Muslim communities.

The existence of hierarchical forms of social stratification among Muslims in India is one of the key paradoxes for scholars of Islam in South Asia. As Joel Lee notes, while caste has been a 'defining' feature in the historical and lived experience of Muslims in India, Pakistan, and Nepal, it remains 'obscured' in popular and academic representations, primarily because of the strong and obvious connection between itself and Hinduism.<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding this, there has been a rich and sustained debate on the origins and effects of Muslim social stratification among scholars trying to explain the apparent divergence between scripture and practice. Some scholars have denied the existence of caste altogether among Muslims, basing this mostly on theological and political grounds. Others have used analogous concepts such as *birādarī*, *zāt*, or *qaum* and, despite structural similarities, have elided references to caste. Ghaus Ansari in 1959, and Imtiaz Ahmed in 1973, were among the first scholars to argue that the Muslim social order was organised

<sup>13</sup> The scholarship is incredibly rich; for some classical and recent historical studies on caste, see L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago, 1981), B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, NJ, 1996); S. Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950* (Albany, NY, 1998); S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, vol. IV.3. The New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge, 1999); N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ; Chichester, 2001); S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi; London, 2004); A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, CA; London, 2009); R. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*. Contemporary Indian Studies (Bloomington, IN, 2011); S. Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*, vol. 44. Brill's Indological Library (Leiden, 2013); C. Jangam, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India*, 1st edn (New Delhi, 2017); D. Cherian, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Berkeley, CA, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, pp. 1-24.

<sup>15</sup> Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> Verse 49:13. A. Y. Ali, *The Holy Qurān: An Interpretation in English, with the Original Arabic Text in Parallel Columns, a Running Rhythmic Commentary in English, and Full Explanatory Notes*. By 'Allāma 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī (Lahore, 1934).

<sup>17</sup> J. Lee, 'Caste', in *Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism*, (eds) Z. R. Kassam, Y. K. Greenberg and J. Bagli. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions (Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2018), pp. 167-176.

according to similar ‘principles’ and ‘features’ to the Hindu caste system. Muslim caste groups were hierarchically ranked according to descent, geographical and ethnic origins, and occupation, with restrictions placed on connubial relations, commensality, and other forms of everyday sociality.<sup>18</sup> The *ashrāf* at the apex of this system were social groups, who could notionally trace their genealogies to foreign nobility, sometimes even to the Prophet’s family, and engaged in non-manual and intellectual occupations. The *ajlāf* and *arzāl* were at the lower end of this order. Maulvi Abdul Wali, writing on the etymology of these terms, observed: ‘Ajlaf and Arzal are respectively plural of Jala and Razil, and are both Arabic. They are contemptuous terms similar to nigger.’<sup>19</sup> The *ajlāf*, known as *atrāf* in Bengal, were descendants of converts, whose former low-caste status persisted in their new faith. These groups were ranked according to their occupational specialisations, from clean to degrading ones, with *arzāl* reserved for sweepers, scavengers, and grave diggers. However, Muslim social stratification patterns have varied across time and region, with loosely defined and enforced rules on caste status and mobility.

Caste-like stratification among Muslims has been attributed by colonial ethnographers and scholars to the proximity and influence of Hindu beliefs and cultural traditions. In this view, the long-standing and intimate contact between Hinduism and Islam in India meant the translation, absorption, and accretion of alien elements in Muslim beliefs and practices. In contrast, other scholars have argued that the Muslim social order was not entirely derived from the Hindu varna system, but also drew on notions of hierarchy and forms of social stratification found in Islamic societies and knowledge traditions, legitimated by the Islamic law and the *‘ulamā*. Marlow points out how Islamic egalitarianism ideals were ‘tamed’ as Islam spread across diverse societies and encountered hierarchical social relations and cultures that needed to be accommodated. Between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries, Muslim societies developed complex forms of social stratification. Genealogy, endogamy, and occupational status distinguished the *‘khāssa*’ (high) from the *‘amma*’ (low) in these pre-modern Islamic societies.<sup>20</sup>

Lineage was an ‘essential organising principle’ in pre-Islamic tribal Arab societies, and inflected the interpretation of hadiths and court literature in the early period of Islam, moderating the egalitarian principle in Islamic traditions.<sup>21</sup> Ideas of piety came to be related to *nasab* (genealogy) and *hasab* (inherited merit), with social precedence and other privileges accrued by those who either claimed Sayyid status, tracing their descent to the Prophet, or who belonged to the nobility.<sup>22</sup> The principle of *kafā’a* (marriage equality) which emerged in early Islamic legal traditions further legitimated social differences and hierarchy; in particular, the Hanafi *fiqh*, the dominant legal tradition among South Asian *maslaks* (religious orientations), developed strict conditions for equality on the grounds of race and genealogy, unlike the other schools of thought. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani, quoting his teacher Imam Abu Hanifa on *kafā’a*, stated: ‘the Qurayshites are equal to another; (other) Arabs are equal standing with each other; and of the Mawali this is true: those whose grandfather and father were Muslim are equal (to the Arabs) but if they have no bride-price (mahr) to offer they are not equal’.<sup>23</sup>

Occupation also emerged in Muslim societies as a way of assigning social status and moral dispositions and qualities to individuals. The work that one did acquired

<sup>18</sup> G. Ansari, ‘Muslim caste in India’, *The Eastern Anthropologist* 9.2 (June 1955), pp. 104–111; I. Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Wali, ‘Ethnographical notes’, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Kazuo Morimoto (ed.), *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, 1st edn (London; New York, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, (ed.) S. M. Stern, (trans S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber) (Chicago, 1973) p. 124.



importance because occupations were often hereditary and perceived as divinely ordained. The ‘literature of occupations’ in early Islam, often written by men not actually involved in the crafts described, expressed a general disdain towards those engaged in manual labour. Certain occupations such as sweepers, tanners, weavers, and cuppers were more stigmatised than others. Men performing these roles were described as the *siflat al-nas* (men of mean status) and seen as intellectually and morally deficient. They were accorded a lower status for *kafā’a*, unable to contract marriages outside their own group, and their legal testimony was of little value or inadmissible.<sup>24</sup> The worst prejudice was reserved for cuppers and weavers; the latter, in particular, was a reviled figure in many cultures and religions.<sup>25</sup> This hostility can be identified in the reported prophetic hadith ‘men are equal, except for the weaver and cupper’, in the sayings of Ali who purportedly condemned weavers as the offspring of Satan, and in the work of Arab intellectuals such as Al-Jahiz who wrote that ‘the weavers in every age and in every country possess in equal measure foibles such as short temper, stupidity, ignorance and iniquity’.<sup>26</sup>

These notions of hierarchy and social stratification travelled widely across the South Asian subcontinent in multiple ways, for example, in the thirteenth-century writings of Nasir al-Din Tusi, whose envisioning of an ethic-political model of society in *Akhlāq-i Nāsiri* became a fundamental part of the Mughal canon.<sup>27</sup> Tusi’s ethic of rule argued for heredity of occupation and ranking of society from noble to base, as part of divine wisdom. These *akhlāqī* treatises and normative ideals continued to be integral components of Muslim education into the late colonial period, appearing in the Deobandi curriculum, Muslim elite households, and popular children’s magazines.<sup>28</sup> This possibly explains the fatwa issued by Deobandi scholar Mufti Muhammad Shafi, condemning the occupations of the barbers, weavers, and dyers as impediments to moral development, which led to protests by weavers in Deoband in 1933.<sup>29</sup> Soheb Niazi also shows the influence of ‘*ilm al-nasab* (the science of genealogy) practised in pre-Islamic Arab societies on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *tarikh* (history) texts authored by Sayyid inhabitants of Amroha narrating the Qasbah’s past through their genealogies.’<sup>30</sup> While ideas of hierarchy travelled widely across Muslim societies, it is important to acknowledge the role of cultural exchange. Louise Marlow cautions against claims of caste as necessary to Islam, which she suggests are incorrectly based on ideas of Islam as a culturally bounded entity, and ignore external influences and borrowing. Her work shows that Islamic conceptions of hierarchy by birth and occupation were less pronounced in the western Islamic world in the pre-modern era. Tusi’s social models were most likely drawn from

<sup>24</sup> C. E. Bosworth et al. (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. Supplement*, vol. 12, new edn (Leiden, 2004), p. 172. See entries for *dabbāgh* (tanner), *djazzār* (slaughterer), *ghassāl* (washerwoman), *hadjdjām* (cupper), *ha’ik* (weaver), *hallāk* (barber), and *kannas* (sweeper).

<sup>25</sup> For a sample of literature on weavers across cultures and religions, see D. L. Burley, ‘The Despised Weavers of Ethiopia’, (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 1976); M. Aberbach, *Labor, Crafts, and Commerce in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem, 1994); A. W. Hughes, *Defining Judaism: A Reader. Critical Categories in the Study of Religion* (London; Oakville, CT, 2010); R. M. Dille, *Islamic and Caste Knowledge Practices among Haalpulaar’en in Senegal: Between Mosque and Termite Mound*. International African Library 30 (London, 2019); Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism*; Bosworth et al. (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. Supplement*.

<sup>26</sup> Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, pp. 162–166.

<sup>27</sup> M. Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200–1800* (London, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> E. Tignol, ‘The language of shame: a study of emotion in an early-twentieth century Urdu children’s periodical (Phūl)’, *South Asian History and Culture* 12.2–3 (3 July 2021), pp. 222–243.

<sup>29</sup> Marc Gaborieau, ‘India (Hind)’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* (Brill, 1 June 2007), [https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/\\*-COM\\_0035](https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/*-COM_0035) (accessed 10 July 2023).

<sup>30</sup> S. Niazi, ‘Sayyids and social stratification of Muslims in colonial India: genealogy and narration of the past in Amroha’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30.3 (July 2020), pp. 467–487.

Sasanian ideals in Iran and Iraq, which bore similarities to the Indian caste order. These ideals were then transmitted and expressed as Islamic thought through the translations and adaptations of texts by Muslim authors.<sup>31</sup> Ideas of hierarchy have always been in vigorous contention with Islamic egalitarian ideals and the historical realities of Muslim societies.

The majority of the scholarship on caste among Muslims in India has been conducted by social scientists. In an important critique of Imtiaz Ahmed's edited volumes on caste and other social realities of Indian Muslims, Francis Robinson proposed a *longue durée* perspective to better understand the contingent and unstable nature of caste categories among Muslims and the changing relationship between scripture and practice.<sup>32</sup> Recent scholarship demonstrates a move towards historical investigations of the relationship between caste and Islam, especially in the contested political landscape of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial South Asia, a period marked by competition, reform, and the mobilisation of communities along the lines of identity. Moving away from official colonial sources, the focus of new work has been on how Muslim groups themselves have experienced and engaged with caste, including resistance to it, in the local vernacular.<sup>33</sup> Joel Lee's work on Lal Begis marks a significant intervention in this area; moving beyond dominant narratives of 'Ashrafisation' or elite understandings of community, he presents alternative histories of caste and religion in South Asia. Lee shows how contestations over caste practices enabled the production of new and creative socio-religious ontologies, subjectivities, and ethics among low-caste communities. In doing so he asks:

How many Dalit prophets, gurus, and anti-gods remain concealed in archives and oral traditions—or perhaps even in the contemporary cover of plain sight? What manner of subaltern religious formations might reveal themselves—illuminating, in the process, a new cartography of South Asia's socioreligious landscape—once we desist in the projection of the categories of a recently manufactured, state-supported, majoritarian common sense on to earlier periods, and onto people in the present whose apparent acquiescence to the *pahchān* (recognition) urged by the dominant may be not the end, but the beginning of the story?<sup>34</sup>

This article builds on this idea of the subversive potentialities revealed by caste, expressed by Lee (as well as others), by turning not to North India, but to Bengal. North India has been the dominant focus of major scholarly works on Islam for a number of reasons. There is a persistent belief that North India is the vantage point from which general and totalising claims about Islam can be made, as the heartland of serious political and social debates on the Muslim position in India, and with Urdu as the main vehicle

<sup>31</sup> Louise Marlow, 'Some classical Muslim views of the Indian caste system', *The Muslim World* 85.1–2 (1995), pp. 1–22; Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism*.

<sup>32</sup> F. Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim society in South Asia', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 17.2 (1 July 1983), pp. 185–203. See also Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim society in South Asia: a reply to Das and Minault', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 20.1 (1 January 1986), pp. 97–104.

<sup>33</sup> A. Lanzillo, 'Butchers between archives: community history in early twentieth-century Delhi', *South Asian History and Culture* 12.4 (2 October 2021), pp. 357–370; J. Lee, *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion* (Cambridge, 2021); Niazi, 'Sayyids and social stratification of Muslims'; J. Levesque, 'Debates on Muslim caste in North India and Pakistan', *CSH-IFP Working Papers* 15 (2020), pp. 1–24; L. Gautier and J. Levesque, 'Introduction: historicizing Sayyid-Ness: social status and Muslim identity in South Asia', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30.3 (July 2020), pp. 383–393; S. K. Rai, *Weaving Hierarchies: Handloom Weavers in Early Twentieth Century United Provinces* (Delhi, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Lee, *Deceptive Majority*, p. 305.



of Islamic intellectual history. Scholarly perceptions of Islam in Bengal seem to correspond with Ware's description of the academic discourse on West African Islam as 'marginal', 'exotic', and 'second-rate'.<sup>35</sup> This is despite the fact that Bengal was the most populous Muslim province in colonial India, site of important messianic and reformist movements and a flourishing Islamic print culture that circulated within and outside the region, and across oceans.<sup>36</sup> Bengal, I argue, is an important regional space from which to explore the dynamics and contestation between caste and egalitarianism among Muslims, as it offers a critical alternative perspective to North Indian Islam.

### Caste and Islam in colonial Bengal

Once upon a time, a maulvi arrived in a village somewhere in Bengal to visit his disciple after an absence of some years. However, he noticed that the *bodhna* (washing pot), a symbol of the faith that traditionally hung from the roof in Muslim households, was missing. Informed that his discipline had renounced the faith and joined an 'outcast tribe', the maulvi returned to the city and reported the apostasy to the nawab, who promptly dispatched his troops and forced the entire village to convert. This was just one of the many conversion tales narrated to James Wise by Bengali Muslims 'without any feelings of shame or astonishment', and which he used to explain Muslim origins in Bengal.<sup>37</sup>

The 'conversion by sword' theory continues to be popular among Hindu nationalists and others sharing similar beliefs, even if unsupported by evidence. The pioneering studies of Asim Roy and Richard Eaton show how Islam rooted itself in Bengal between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of the changing eastward direction of the Ganges which linked Eastern Bengal to upper India, and Mughal consolidation over the flourishing rice and textile economy. In particular, the role of Sufi pioneers in clearing forests and jungli lands and settling agrarian populations expanded the number of Muslims and produced strikingly new and creative understandings of the faith. Islam embedded itself in a vibrant subaltern space that was both non-Brahminical and non-Aryan. The majority of converts were drawn from low-caste Hindu or indigenous groups such as Chandals, Mahisyas, or Namasudras.<sup>38</sup> But forms of hierarchy and distinction among Bengali Muslims were already apparent in the late sixteenth century. The medieval poet Mukunda Ram Chakrabarti, in *Chandimangal*, described low-caste endogamous Muslim communities engaged in hereditary occupations, such as *goālās* (milkmen) who did not perform their fast or prayers, *kābāris* (fish sellers) who constantly lied and did not keep beards, *hajjāms* (barbers) who moved from place to place, and *qasā'is* (butchers) doomed to perdition.<sup>39</sup> The fundamental feature of these low-caste Muslim groups appeared to be their alienation from the land and the itinerant nature of their professional activity as opposed to urban *ashrāf*, whose distinction was tied to their 'income from fiefs, villages, lands, wages and stipends'.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, scholarship points to a religious identity that was imaginatively expressed in the Musalmāni literature of this period,

<sup>35</sup> R. T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*. Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> S. Khatun, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (London, 2018); T. K. Stewart, *Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination* (Oakland, CA, 2019); T. K. Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London, 1883), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Delhi, 1997); Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from A. Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal, down to A.D. 1538. (A Thesis)*. Asiatic Society of Pakistan Publications, No. 2 (Dacca, 1959), pp. 155–157.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148–149.

which went beyond prescriptions and law, and introduced new geographies, meanings, and possibilities for Islam. Narratives on the life of the Prophet situated him in physical and cultural landscapes outside Arabia, and tales of male and female Sufi saints taming animals and land flourished.<sup>41</sup>

There is a broad consensus among scholars that the Muslim reformist movements and the rise of the ethnographic state in the late nineteenth and twentieth century stripped Islam of its varied form and content, hardened boundaries between its different communities, and enabled more puritanical versions of the faith. The writings of James Wise and Maulvi Abdul Wali on caste and reform, as well as reformist writings, however, suggest otherwise. The next section is a detailed discussion of James Wise's 1883 text *Notes on the Races, Caste, and Tribes of Eastern Bengal*, the preliminary findings of his long-term research, of which only 12 copies were printed by Harrison and Sons.<sup>42</sup> The rest of Wise's materials were passed on to inform the work of his contemporary, Herbert Hope Risley, commissioner of the 1901 Census and director of ethnography, who, as Nicolas Dirks pointed out, 'became the dominant ethnological voice in India of the early twentieth century'.<sup>43</sup>

### *James Wise: frustrations of the colonial ethnographer*

Despite humble descriptions of James Wise 'as an indefatigable solitary worker, of whom there have been many in India, who devoted their lives to laborious local investigation, and died with the results still unpublished', his interest in an ethnographic study of Bengal had deeper roots than most others.<sup>44</sup> Wise's family was deeply steeped in the social, economic, and religious landscape of Bengal. His uncle, Josiah Patrick Wise, was a missionary, the 'projector' of the Dacca Bank, and owned indigo plantations across vast swathes of East Bengal.<sup>45</sup> His father, Thomas Alexander Wise, in addition to being a civil surgeon in Hooghly, collected Tibetan artefacts and translated Sanskrit medical texts which appeared in British journals.<sup>46</sup> Wise himself, civil surgeon-turned-ethnographer, was thus continuing the family's preoccupation with the region, as well as their interest in strengthening colonial rule. Wise found himself especially troubled by the ways in which the 1872 Census had exposed gaps in colonial knowledge of the region. Over 17.5 million Bengali Muslims resided in Lower Bengal, making up more than 70 per cent of the population there, and a greater proportion in Chittagong, Noakhali, Pabna, Rajshahi, and Bogra.<sup>47</sup> Contrary to colonial expectations, Bengal emerged as the most populous Muslim province and not North India, the former heartland of Mughal power and concentrated location of Muslim qasbahs, as previously assumed. Wise noted that earlier surveys and estimates, 'often wonderfully correct', turned out

<sup>41</sup> A. A. Irani, *The Muhammad Avatara: Salvation History, Translation, and the Making of Bengali Islam* (New York, 2021); Stewart, *Witness to Marvels*.

<sup>42</sup> James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Caste, and Tribes of Eastern Bengal* (London, 1883).

<sup>43</sup> N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> 'The tribes and castes of Bengal', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 21 (1892), p. 338.

<sup>45</sup> Josiah Patrick Wise called for increasing European settlement and extensive appointment of Christians as officials, court officers, and police in his statement to the House of Commons on colonisation in India, shortly after the Mutiny. See Parliament and House of Commons, *Second Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India); with the Minutes of Evidence Taken before Them* (London, 1858), pp. 35–64.

<sup>46</sup> D. Lange, *An Atlas of the Himalayas by a 19th Century Tibetan Lama: A Journey of Discovery* (Leiden, 2020), pp. 21–26.

<sup>47</sup> H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta, 1872); Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, pp. 119–120.

to be 'obviously defective' in predicting a Muslim Bengal. The question of who the Muslims were, knowledge that had clearly eluded officials, acquired heightened significance in the wake of the 1857 Rebellion and the Wahhabi trials of the 1860s. Wise felt the need for a 'careful and minute examination' using more rigorous techniques.<sup>48</sup> His notes on caste reflected the broader turn of the colonial state to anthropology, for knowledge and discipline. Caste formed the basis of knowing, organising, and controlling the Indian social order through the reification of social differences between groups, fixing ideas of material and cultural difference in the bodies and genealogies of the colonial subject.<sup>49</sup>

Wise's survey was a sprawling, meticulous, and innovative enterprise. By the time of his abrupt death in 1886, it included copious written materials about castes and their practices, as well as over 200 images 'of representative types and groups of all classes of people' captured by a professional photographer who had accompanied him during his survey.<sup>50</sup> This text, unfinished at his death, ultimately found public articulation through Risley's multi-volume work on caste in Bengal, and through his ideas on anthropometry as science and the racialisation of caste.<sup>51</sup>

The uncertainty that permeated colonial knowledge of caste reveals itself in Wise's frustrated attempts to capture the difference between the caste practices and religious life-worlds of low-caste Muslim and Hindu groups. Wise's lack of conviction in his data was also noticeable in his reluctance to publish all of his materials, until a full enquiry was possible.<sup>52</sup> His apprehensions about the reliability of colonial methods, and interpretations of caste, were shared by other British writers. Wise collected information from his visits to caste settlements, and interviews with village headmen and *purohīts* (priests) in Dhaka. H. M. Weathrall, the superintendent of police in Dhaka, described by his colleagues as inclined to 'wild talk', acted as Wise's interpreter.<sup>53</sup> The results from Dhaka were treated as representative of caste in the entire region of Eastern Bengal. Wise's text was organised on ideas of fixity: first, that Hindus and Muslims were separate communities, and, second, that caste operated in clearly defined and knowable ways. His notes approximate the lower-rungs of the Muslim social order to the Hindu caste system, fixed by occupation and endogamy. For Wise, at the very bottom of the social order were those engaged in the most 'dishonouring' professions like the *bājaniya* (musician), *beldār* (scavenger and remover of carcasses), *chāmārāfarosh* (hide merchant), *dhobi* (washerwoman), *dhuniyā* (cotton carder), *julāhā* (weaver), *kalwār* (liquor and spirits dealer), *kalu* (oilman), *kuti* (person who

<sup>48</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, pp. 1–5.

<sup>49</sup> R. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*. Contemporary Indian Studies (Bloomington, IN, 2011); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>50</sup> Sir H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. *Ethnographic Glossary (Official Edition, Circulated for Criticism.)*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1892), pp. xiii–xv. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, anthropometric photography emerged as a scientific prop to ideas of racial and caste differences, legitimating colonial rule. Photographs were an attempt to stabilise knowledge that was in actuality rather slippery. A. Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography: Racial Photography as Scientific Evidence, 1876–19* (Chicago, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Risley dedicated his 1891 multi-volume *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* to the memory of James Wise, whose material had formed an integral part of Risley's own findings. Wise, who had been in conversation with Risley about collaborating on a book on 'ethnography of the territories under the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal', died abruptly in 1886. His wife handed over Wise's unpublished works for Risley's use on the condition that the data was verified in the way that her husband had intended. Clare Anderson alludes to Wise's influence on Risley, but more work needs to be done here. See C. Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Risley suffered from none of Wise's doubts, which he put down to 'mistaken diffidence as to his literary capacity'. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 1, p. xiv.

<sup>53</sup> A. Abercrombie, 'Extracts from the Crime Report for 1871: Dacca Division', in *Annual Crime Report of the Dacca Division for the Year 1871* (Calcutta, 1872).

husks rice), *māhīfarosh* (fishmonger), and *nīlgar* (indigo-dyer). These professions were despised because, unlike the occupation of the *jildgar* (book-binder) or the *nānbā'i* (baker), they had been originally performed by 'outcast' Hindu groups and tribes.<sup>54</sup> Wise characterised their belief in Sufi saints like Pir Badr Alam, Khwajah Khizr, or Panch Pir, which they shared with their Hindu counterparts, as 'servile veneration', unrecognisable to the orthodox believers.<sup>55</sup>

However, low-caste Muslim groups defied Wise's Hindu-Muslim schema and his understandings of caste. They could not, in his own words, be 'reduced to a formula'.<sup>56</sup> Although, inwardly they were Muslims, it was not outwardly apparent in their behaviour and practice, undermining Wise's scientific labours, which were based on the fundamental idea that difference was observable. The *bediyas* (gypsies) and *halālkhors* (sweeper) placed by Wise in the Hindu category described themselves as Muslim yet engaged in activities that appeared not to reflect their professed faith. The *halālkhors* ate pork, did not practise circumcision, fasted irregularly, did not attend mosques, and were refused burials at Muslim cemeteries. Even in the case of low-caste Muslim groups placed in the Muslim category, a similar blurring of boundaries was evident. The *dhuniyās* and *kutis* engaged in the worship of the tools of their trade at full moon, similar to their Hindu counterparts. Nor were low-caste Muslim groups fully endogamous, or engaged in their 'traditional' occupations. The *hājāms* were *bājaniyas*, and the *bājaniyas* were *julāhās*, and when work was slow, the *chāmṛāfarosh* became *bhistis* (water carriers), and the *kutis* worked in multiple roles as scavengers, boat-men, masons, and goldsmiths. Despite Wise's best efforts, the world of lower-caste groups emerged as fluid, idiosyncratic, and inscrutable. This indeterminacy can be also seen in the changing of caste names in the *District Gazetteer* reports of Lower Bengal in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, with Hindu fishermen recording themselves as Sheikhs, when they turned to cultivation, and Muslims calling themselves Namasudras, when they became fishermen.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to the colonial state's performance of knowledge, these occupational stereotypes of low-caste groups bore little relation to actual social realities.<sup>58</sup>

Wise's difficulties of classifying caste were also exacerbated by the Muslim reformist movements spreading across East Bengal at the same time. In particular, the widespread influence of the Faraizis, the reformist movement founded by Haji Shariatullah in the 1820s among lower-caste Muslim groups, disturbed him.<sup>59</sup> During this period, the Faraizi movement and the Tariqqiyah-i-Muhammadiyah, which emerged as the main reformist movements in Bengal, called for the removal of *bida'ḥ* (innovations) from religious traditions and emphasised the Quran and Hadith as the primary, if not the sole, sources for regulating life.<sup>60</sup> Wise's notes referred to followers of the Faraizi movement

<sup>54</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, pp. 34–35. Furthermore, the word 'Beldar' in contemporary usage denotes a digger in Bengali (i.e. the one who digs up mud to construct roads, or uproots plants and trees). See Haricharan Bandyopadhyaya, *Bangiya Sabdakosh: A Bengali-Bengali Lexicon, Dwitiya Khanda* (New Delhi, 1966), p. 1618; Jnanendramohan Das, *Bangala Bhashar Abhidhan*, 2nd edn (Calcutta, 2019), p. 1635.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> A. Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (London; New York, 2011), p. 53.

<sup>58</sup> Ramnarayan Rawat shows how colonial officials constructed occupational stereotypes about Chamars, and their persistence up to the contemporary period. See Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*. Vijay Prashad also makes a similar argument in Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> For more details on the Faraizi movement, see M. A. Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*. Publication no. 41 (Karachi, 1965); N. H. Choudhury, *Peasant Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal: The Faraizi, Indigo, and Pabna Movements* (Dhaka, 2001); N. Kaviraj, *Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal*. (New Delhi, 1982); I. Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840–1943* (Basingstoke, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> For more on the Muhammadiyah in Bengal, see Rajarshi Ghose, 'Politics for Faith: Karamat Ali Jaunpuri and Islamic Revivalist Movements in British India Circa 1800–73' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2012).

and, to a lesser extent, the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah, as 'narrow minded', 'bigoted', and 'despiser of all classes who follow the practices of their forefathers'.<sup>61</sup> The Faraizis elicited such a strong repulsion from Wise because of the threat they represented on three levels. First, the Faraizis posed a security problem to the colonial state and to the Wise family's extensive business concerns. The Faraizis' relationship with the state was a history of violence. During the movement's most active period, in the reign of Dudhu Miyan (1840–62), the Faraizis attacked zamindars (landlords), indigo planters, and moneylenders, occupied government lands, and set up alternative centres of power.<sup>62</sup> Second, Wise's Oriental curiosity was threatened by reformist efforts; in his notes, he despaired at the Faraizis turning low-caste Muslims into 'uninteresting and prosaic Muslims', apparently oblivious to the creative work of such transformations.<sup>63</sup> Finally, the reliability of colonial science was called into question; as the Faraizis actively changed caste practices and erased differences between groups, Wise's knowledge was rendered obsolete. The Faraizis demonstrated that caste was not a timeless or immutable reality of Indian Muslim life, but in moments of rebellion and reform, it could be sloughed off in favour of alternative ideals.

Unlike North India, where, as Sherali Tareen has argued, reformist activities emerged as polemical debates between elite Muslim scholars, reformist movements in Bengal were low-caste movements.<sup>64</sup> Wise described Haji Shariatullah, the founder of the Faraizi movement, as born in Faridpur, possibly to weaver parents, thus 'springing from one of [the] lowest and most despised classes'.<sup>65</sup> Although, Shariatullah's parents' profession is disputed, his opponents, nonetheless, insultingly referred to him as the 'pir of the julahas' (saint of the weavers).<sup>66</sup> The Faraizi movement primarily worked among low-caste groups in Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Pabna, and Bakarganj. Their followers were predominantly poor cultivators, and in the Pabna district included *julāhās* (weavers), *telis* (oilmen/oil manufacturers), and *chāmrāfaroshes* (hide merchants), and in Noakhali *dā'īs* (midwives), *nikāris* (fish-sellers), and *naqarchis* (drummer).<sup>67</sup> Karamat Ali of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah also worked among Muslim *qasā'īs* (butchers), as well as *binds*, an 'outcast' caste who worked as palanquin bearers, diggers, hunters, and manufacturers of salt and mud-brasiers.<sup>68</sup> Both reformist movements, especially the Faraizis, were strongly motivated by subaltern egalitarian concerns.

The Faraizis insisted on maintaining complete equality among themselves, which involved the discontinuation of hierarchical titles such as *pir* (spiritual leader and saint), as well as dropping caste surnames. For instance, in Pabna, Muslim hide curers called themselves *khālifas* (deputies) or *kārigars* (workers), names which were also adopted by *julāhās* and *kalu* in other districts.<sup>69</sup> In the 1872 Census, over 574,740 Muslims dropped their caste names altogether, and registered themselves as unspecified.<sup>70</sup> The Faraizis also argued for common ownership of land and refused to pay taxes

<sup>61</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, p. 85.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* See also Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*; Kaviraj, *Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal*.

<sup>63</sup> Wise notes that Faraizis argued that the Bediyas were descendants of Nuh (Noah), who 'lived in a big boat with all his family'. See Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades*, p. 213.

<sup>64</sup> S. Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*. (Notre Dame, IN, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>66</sup> Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*, p. 249.

<sup>67</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *Pabna* (Calcutta, 1923), p. 3, pp. 62–64; J. E. Webster, *Noakhali (With a map and supplementary statistical tables.)* (Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers) (Allahabad, 1911), p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> Ghose, 'Politics for Faith', p. 184.

<sup>69</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *Pabna*, p. 64; F. A. Sachse, *Mymensingh* (Calcutta, 1917), p. 35; Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*, p. 249.

<sup>70</sup> Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*, p. 250.



and levies on it. Although the most serious doctrinal contention between the Faraizis and other *maslaks* was over the non-observance of Friday, and Eid prayers, it was the Faraizis' religious judgements, challenging ideas of caste purity and pollution, that caused popular outrage. According to James Wise, the Faraizi doctrine on the cutting of the umbilical cord post birth 'roused a spirit of revolt which caused many to fall away'.<sup>71</sup> The cord was traditionally cut by low-caste Muslim midwives from the *dā'i* caste, as contact with bodily fluids was considered polluting. However, Haji Shariatullah rejected this stigma, and suggested that it could be done by anyone, including the father.<sup>72</sup> The Faraizis also tackled food taboos, a central feature in caste practices, insisting that the common grasshopper could be eaten because of its similarity to locusts, historically consumed as famine food in the Middle East.<sup>73</sup> Despite their egalitarian commitments, some saw the presence of a caste logic to the Faraizis' refusal to marry or dine with non-Faraizis. This rejection, however, was more likely a result of their desire to avoid incorrect religious beliefs; therefore these were acquired differences rather than ones preordained by birth and kinship.

Wise's notes, an attempt to improve on his predecessor's tools and knowledge of Indian social life, failed to do what they intended. His writings revealed an everyday world of low-caste practices that was not as rigidly delineated as colonial ethnography suggested. Low-caste Muslim beliefs were creative and autonomous, and important to the shaping of the radically egalitarian agenda of Muslim reformist movements. However, it was not simply colonial ethnographers who found it difficult to classify subaltern Muslims. Native ethnographers like Maulvi Abdul Wali were also frustrated in their attempts to define low-caste Muslim groups, even as they claimed privileged access to the community.

### *Maulvi Abdul Wali: frustrations of the ashrafī ethnographer*

Dirks argues that the colonial state relied on 'native informants' for its historical and anthropological knowledge of the Indian state.<sup>74</sup> Up to a point, Maulvi Abdul Wali fitted this role. He was commissioned by colonial officials such as E. A. Gait, superintendent of ethnography in Bengal, to produce knowledge for the 1901 Census.<sup>75</sup> However, Wali proved to be more than a lackey of the colonial state; his work had its own set of questions and agency. The corpus of his writings represent an important contribution to early Indian anthropology.<sup>76</sup> Wali's notes and essays appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, and other similar publications. Unlike the other Muslim writers, who focused on Islam in the Middle East and Persia, Wali investigated Indian Islam.

Maulvi Abdul Wali was born in 1855 to a zamindar family in Khulna, East Bengal. His family had arrived from Baghdad and settled in South Asia, during the time of Emperor

<sup>71</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, p. 22.

<sup>72</sup> Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement, 1818–1906*, pp. 250–251. The stigma around midwifery persists in the contemporary period. See also S. Rozario, 'The dai and the doctor: discourses on women's reproductive health in rural Bangladesh', in *Maternities and Modernities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, (eds) K. Ram and M. Jolly (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 144–176.

<sup>73</sup> Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Dirks, 'Colonial histories and native informants: the biography of an archive', in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, (eds) Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 279–313.

<sup>75</sup> Wali, 'Ethnographical Notes on the Muhammadan Castes of Bengal', pp. 98–113.

<sup>76</sup> Muslim ethnographers, sociologists, and anthropologists continue to be absent from the scholarship examining the early development of Indian social sciences. See P. Uberoi, N. Sundar and S. Deshpande (eds), *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology* (Calcutta, London, New York, 2008); @withintheteam, 'About | Caste and Tribes: Indian Anthropologists and Nation Building', theotherfromwithin, 15 December 2020, <https://www.theotherfromwithin.com/about> (accessed 10 July 2023).



Shah Jahan. They had served in various army departments over time, and his grandfather taught Arabic and Persian at the Fort William College. Wali was trained at the Calcutta Madrasah, St Xavier's, and Presidency College, and then served in the Registration Office in various positions, from 1884 until 1915.<sup>77</sup> During this time, and thereafter, he was an active member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal as well as other societies. The Dutch Orientalist, Johan Van Manen, in his obituary of Maulvi Wali, described him as a 'somewhat lonely man' whose tastes and temperament were out of step with current times.<sup>78</sup> Ironically, it was this changing environment that Wali was grappling with in his work. His interests were eclectic, ranging from translation to etymology to archaeology, but he focused centrally on caste in Islam. Wali, like Wise, was motivated to identify and classify the Muslim social structure, but for different reasons.

Wali's well-known essay 'Ethnographical notes on the Muhammadan caste of Bengal' points out errors in Wise's understanding of caste. He argued against Wise's claims that Muslim weavers were mainly Shias, or had converted en masse from Hinduism, stating: 'his opinions are the outcome of his local knowledge, but this is not always very accurate'.<sup>79</sup> Wali's desire to demonstrate his more intimate knowledge of Muslims over Wise was not simply based on his familiarity as a member of the community, but also in a conviction of his own superior knowledge of Islam. As a member of the *ashrāf* class, who traced his genealogical roots to the caliph Abu Bakr, Wali argued that 'higher qualities as uprightness, independence, honesty and implicit reliance on God' could only be found among this distinct *ashrāf* class.<sup>80</sup> Wali, like other traditional elites, found his position affected by changing ideas and forms of representation, the rise of new commercial classes, low-caste reformist movements, and the introduction of elections in local and municipal bodies. Eve Tignol notes the effect of these changes in Muslim political discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which moved from ideas of 'wakālat' (trusteeship), centred on Indo-Persianate ideals of the 'just ruler' and the colonial state's need to identify 'natural leaders', to 'numā'indagi' (representation), based on ideas of 'sameness'.<sup>81</sup> Wali, confronted by the political decline of his class under colonial rule, was concerned about the political dangers of misrepresentation. He was convinced that the *ashrāfi* class alone possessed those moral qualities and skills needed to identify the different ranks of Muslims, unlike colonial officials, such as Wise, whose views were prejudiced by their own vested interest and anti-Muslim beliefs. Wali worried that the wilful misrecognition by colonial officials meant that the importance of certain Muslim groups, like the Faraizis, was inflated and others undermined. He noted how in the 1901 Census, *julāhās* and other occupational caste groups were returned as 'Shaikhs' by Hindu pleaders, and retractions of *hajjāms* registered as 'Shaikhs' in Salkopa were only made when he pointed out the mistake, thwarting their efforts at upward mobility.<sup>82</sup> Wali's writings were motivated not only by British fears of not knowing the Muslim population, but also his own self-interest in caste preservation.

<sup>77</sup> M. S. Husain, 'An introduction to the life and works of Maulavi Abdul Wali', *Folklore: Journal of the Folklore Research Institute* 2-3 (1978), pp. 37-50.

<sup>78</sup> Johan van Manen was the general secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal at the time of his writing Wali's obituary; see J. Manen, 'Khan Sahib Maulvi Abdul Wali Saheb (1855-1926)', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, 23, 1927, pp. clxxiv-clxxv.

<sup>79</sup> Wali, 'Ethnographical notes', p. 107.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110; Wali, 'The cause of backwardness'.

<sup>81</sup> Eve Tignol, 'Who is Representative? Evolving Concepts of Political Representation in Urdu, 1858-1919', On Leadership and Authority in the 20th Century 'Muslim World', Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, 2022. On Bengal, see Dasgupta, 'Labors of Representation'.

<sup>82</sup> Wali, 'Ethnographical notes', p. 102.

Despite Wali's attempts to uphold class distinction between *ashrāf* and *atrāf* Muslims, his classification of the Muslim community in Bengal reveals the complexity and overlaps of caste. This is most evident in his categories of the 'tainted Ashraf' and the 'Atraf bhālamānus' (*atrāf* gentleman).<sup>83</sup> According to Wali, the genuine *ashrāf* Muslims were descendants of Arabs and *Ajams* (Mughals, Pathans, and people of Central Asia), who had not contracted marriages outside of their groups. The *atrāf* Muslims were low-caste Hindus from the subcontinent who had 'drifted' into Islam. However, in between these two groups were different gradations of descent. The line between the 'tainted Ashraf' and the 'Atraf bhālamānus' was blurred. The former was the product of miscegenation, and the latter, who he described as 'Atraf turned gentlemen', were lower-caste Muslims who had intermarried with high-caste Muslims, because they had acquired wealth or abandoned their former occupations and associated surnames.<sup>84</sup> Wali's explanations mirrored theories about caste differentiations and mixed varnas through *anuloma* (hypergamy) and *pratiloma* (hypogamy) marriages in the Hindu caste order. For example, Inden shows how marriages with *Kulin* (high-ranking) brahmins were conducted in order to raise and 'transform' the status of 'fallen' brahmins and Sudras to a superior rank, while at the same time, marriage of *Kulin* brahmins to non-Kulins rendered them as 'ruined'.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, Wali's theory of the caste order was a reaction to the economic advancement of new Muslim groups and their 'Ashrafisation' efforts like that of the Punjabi Muslim traders in Delhi, who secured a more visible presence in the community after 1857 through philanthropy, adopting 'Sheikh' surnames, and performing religious patronage.<sup>86</sup> Wali also noticed groups abandoning and acquiring titles like 'Maulvi', 'Mullah', and 'Kārigar' in Bengal, as a result of Muslim reformist efforts.

Wali documented the diversity of religious sects and traditions of low-caste communities that he perceived as peculiar, unorthodox, and, perhaps, titillating for the readers of Orientalist journals.<sup>87</sup> For instance, he wrote notes on the 'Chaklai Muslims' of Jessore, 'low class Muhamadans' excommunicated by other Muslims for selling fish from their own village embankment, described by his informant, a 'Brahman lad', as a 'ruffianly' group. In another essay, he discussed the 'Hari Allah sect', who believed in the 'curious doctrine' that Allah and Balarama, the Hindu god and elder brother of Krishna, were the same entity.<sup>88</sup> Although Wali shared similar sentiments with the colonial officials who believed that the Faraizis were bigots or puritans, it was the radically antinomian and egalitarian beliefs he encountered among Sufi sects followed by low-caste Muslims that most disturbed him. He described the beliefs of a certain group of faqirs in East Bengal, whose followers were generally lower-caste Muslims and Hindus, who 'possessed a common bond of fraternity and sympathy among them, although to different castes or creeds they might have originally belonged'.<sup>89</sup> The sect centred women in their practices,

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108–110.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>85</sup> R. B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* (Berkeley, 1976).

<sup>86</sup> M. Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*, 1st edn (New Delhi, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> M. A. Wali, 'Note on the Chitliyā Faqīrs', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17.2 (1898), pp. 112–116; M. A. Wali, 'Notes on the Hāri-Āllah sect', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17.2 (1898), p. 112; M. A. Wali, 'On the origin of the Chākai Musulmāns', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 18.1 (1899), pp. 61–62; M. A. Wali, 'On curious tenets and practices of a certain class of faqirs in Bengal.', *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* 5.4 (1900), pp. 203–217; M. A. Wali, 'Note on the faqirs of Baliya-Dighi in Dinajpur', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 72.2 (1903), pp. 61–65; M. A. Wali, 'The origins of the Nikmard fair in Dinajpur', *Journal of the Moslem Institute* 5.1–2 (1909), pp. 1–6.

<sup>88</sup> Wali, 'On the origin of the Chākai Musulmāns'; Wali, 'Notes on the Hāri-Āllah sect'.

<sup>89</sup> Wali, 'On curious tenets and practices', p. 207.

perceived them as part of the ‘middle of the earth’ where God resided, did not consider their beliefs to be bound by law, and argued that earth was the common property of all. Among them, the relationship between excrement and disgust, central to the affective structure of caste, was disavowed.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, they rejected the idea that dirt produced by the human body was disgusting and argued for its importance to spirituality.

Where Wise emphasised outward differences to identify caste and religious groups, Wali focused on the inward practices of faith—on belief itself—to distinguish who was a Muslim, and who was not. Wali argued that although some of the sects followed by low-caste Muslims spoke as if they were true believers, and traced their spiritual lineage to recognised *tariqas* (Sufi lineages), they were anything but. He wrote of their ‘satanic beliefs’, charging that they practised deception by hiding their true feelings like ‘gipsies’, invented histories, and altered the meaning of the Quran.<sup>91</sup> According to Wali, the Baliya-dighi Sufis of Dinajpur changed the Quranic verse ‘kullu nafsin zaiqatul maut’ (every soul shall taste death) to ‘kullu nafsin zauq-o-shauq’ (every soul shall taste ecstasy), which he believed referred to wine-drinking and other acts contrary to Islamic law.<sup>92</sup> However, despite Wali’s claims of intimate familiarity, he could not fully access or decipher the beliefs or practices of these low-caste religious sects. He concealed this through dismissal of these sects, arguing that they were inaccessible to men of ‘culture, education and birth’, and open to only men and women of low-birth. These Sufi sects were part of many ‘deviant orders’ that flourished in Bengal from the late eighteenth century onwards. Their practices, informed by their interaction with Hindu Tantric traditions, challenged conventional religious boundaries, and some even took ‘delight’ in it. They pursued secrecy and obfuscation as deliberate strategies at certain times for various purposes—as protection, as weapon, or as a performance of symbolic power.<sup>93</sup>

Both Wali and Wise’s writings demonstrate the inscrutability of low-caste Muslim religious lifeworlds to outsiders. Despite claims of superior knowledge, due to either being a member of the colonial class, or as *ashrāf* Muslims, both groups were confounded by the outward practices and internal beliefs of low-caste Muslims. Their failure to classify transformed into a suspicion of low-caste Muslims as false or vulgar adherents of the faith. In the 1920s, however, reformers would use the creative articulations and practices of equality among low-caste Muslims to turn this suspicion on its head. Were *ashrāf* Muslims—who practised *barā’i* (pride), *ghrinā* (disgust), and *tānā* (abuse) with other Muslims—actually believers themselves?

### Muslim reformers and caste: subaltern Islam

In the 1920s, as communal tension and disturbances punctured the Bengal landscape, the problem of caste among Muslims assumed greater importance. This urgency was reflected in two Ahl-i Hadith texts, Muhammad Yaqub Ali’s *Jāter Barā’i* (Caste Pride) and Muhammad Enayetullah’s *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* (The Ashraf and Atrāf Problem). Muhammad Yaqub Ali was the secretary of the Kakran Anjuman, Ahl-i Hadith in Dhaka district, and Enayetullah’s pamphlet was published by the Mohammedi Press, owned by

<sup>90</sup> J. Lee, ‘Disgust and Untouchability: towards an affective theory of caste’, *South Asian History and Culture* 12.2–3 (3 July 2021), pp. 310–327. This is a response also found in Tantric and Buddhist traditions.

<sup>91</sup> Although I have not discussed it in this article, it would be useful to think of the secrecy practised by these sects in terms of Joel Lee’s discussion of the Shi’a doctrine of Taqiyyah (concealment). For more information, see Lee, *Deceptive Majority*, pp. 252–290. The writings of Hugh Urban are also important in this regard, see footnote 93.

<sup>92</sup> Wali, ‘Note on the Faqirs of Baliya-Dighi in Dinajpur’, p. 63.

<sup>93</sup> H. B. Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal* (New York, 2001).

the son of Mohammed Akram Khan, an Ahl-i Hadith activist.<sup>94</sup> *Jāter Barā'i* was published in Shimulia, south of Dhaka, in 1926, at the height of one of the worst periods of communal rioting across Bengal. Two years later, *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* was published, before religious tensions had fully subsided. Both texts were cheaply priced at 2 to 3 annas and aimed at a popular readership. These texts were part of a flourishing economy of religious primers published across the late nineteenth and twentieth century by Deobandis, Bareilvis and Ahl-i Hadith for lay Muslims, which scholars argued contributed to the production of more essentialised communal identities.<sup>95</sup> However, unlike other primers, these two texts were also part of a growing discourse on caste and community. Lanzillo shows how low-caste Muslims, such as the butchers in North India, authored and published community histories in order to improve their social standing and wrest control of historical narration of Muslim pasts from the *ashrāf* Muslims.<sup>96</sup> Although, these texts were not the self-representations of specific caste communities, they reflected increasing democratisation, participation of low-caste Muslim groups in *anjumans* and reformist groups, as well as the threat of Hindu reform.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, caste associations mushroomed as a response to the centrality of identity in the colonial state's recognition of economic and political claims and to lower caste struggles for dignity. *Anjumans*, elite Muslim civil associations, became key sites of caste contestations as they experienced a growth and change in the membership of their local chapters, based in mofussil towns and villages. While Tajul Islam Hashmi argues that a more uniform Muslim identity emerged as a result of *anjumans'* communal patronage (building of mosques and madrasas, financial support of the poor through zakat and loans, and public sermons), he overlooks the internal tensions within them.<sup>97</sup> These associations were originally composed of members of the *ulamā* and *ashrāf* Muslim classes, such as landlords and government officials. But in order to expand their patronage, they opened their memberships to upwardly mobile low-caste Muslims between the 1910s and the 1920s. Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan, secretary of the Faridpur chapter of Anjuman-i-Islamia, recalls these tensions in his memoir, particularly his triumph in appointing a member of the weaver class as a *qāzī* (judge) against the objections and unease of fellow *anjuman* members. Dasgupta argues that *anjumans* in the first half of the twentieth century proffered contradictory ideas of Islam, as a conservative hierarchical order and an egalitarian community.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, reformist movements like the Ahl-i Hadith were also undergoing changes in membership and activities. In the mid-nineteenth century, despite being an offshoot of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah, led by Sayyid Ahmed Bareilwi, which had been involved or influential in peasant uprisings in Bengal, the Ahl-i Hadith sect in Bengal was regarded as an 'exclusive, upper-class and sectarian group'.<sup>99</sup> However, in the twentieth century, in the context of increasing

<sup>94</sup> Sumit Sarkar's essay on two Muslim peasant tracts directed me to Muhammad Yaqub's text. While it is obvious that Yaqub Ali's text is an Ahl-i Hadith text, I am speculating that Muhammad Enayetullah's text is also an Ahl-i Hadith text because of its publisher and the similarities in theme, language, and context to Yaqub's text. Ali, *Jāter Barā'i*; Muhammad Enayetullah, *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* (Calcutta, 1928). See also S. Sarkar, 'Two Muslim tracts for peasants: Bengal, 1909–1910', in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, pp. 96–111.

<sup>95</sup> B. D. Ingram, 'The portable madrasa: print, publics, and the authority of the Deobandi `ulama', *Modern Asian Studies* 48.4 (July 2014), pp. 845–871.

<sup>96</sup> Lanzillo, 'Butchers between archives'.

<sup>97</sup> Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*.

<sup>98</sup> Dasgupta offers an excellent discussion on the role of *anjumans* in developing the politics of Islamic egalitarianism in Dasgupta, 'Labors of Representation', pp. 61–90.

<sup>99</sup> H. O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (Ann Arbor, 1981), p. 197.

intra-communal competition with other reformist movements, particularly the Deobandis, the Ahl-i Hadith rose to popularity among lower-caste groups like the weaver caste groups in North India.<sup>100</sup> Although, there is little information about the role of the Ahl-i Hadith in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century, the texts I examine here suggest a similar broadening of the movement. For instance, Yaqub Ali's text was published in Shimulia, where, the 1914–1915 village reports note, that 'there [were] no bhadrolok[s] (gentlemen) either Hindus or Muhammadan residing in the mouza (village)'; the Muslim residents were mainly from the *julāhā* caste, and Hindus from the Namasudra caste, indicating that the Ahl-i Hadith texts like these were written, shaped, and consumed by these communities.<sup>101</sup>

These anti-caste texts were also a communal response to Hindu reformist currents in Bengal. During this period, the Arya Samaj organised the Shuddhi (purification) movement to enfold Untouchables and low-caste groups more fully into the Hindu community, as part of what Joel Lee described as their strategy of 'majoritarian inclusion'.<sup>102</sup> The Arya Samaj, fearful of Hindus becoming a 'dying race', and possible coalitions between Muslim depressed classes, engaged in purification ceremonies that transgressed caste rules of commensality, and created myths about Muslims inventing Untouchability.<sup>103</sup> In Bengal, the Arya Samajis enacted 'music before mosque' processions, and put out leaflets accusing Muslim men of lusting over Hindu widows.<sup>104</sup> Both *Jāter Barā'i* and *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* were responses to Arya Samaj activities. It was apposite that Ahl-i Hadith, whom Deobandi scholar Ashraf Ali Thanvi characterised as the Muslim equivalent to the Arya Samaj, for their non-conformism, offered the main contention to the Samajis.<sup>105</sup>

Reflecting a parallel effort to the Arya Samaj, Yaqub Ali, and Enayetullah's texts emphasise strengthening Muslim numbers and opposing Hinduism through addressing low-caste exclusion. Enayetullah even invoked the idea of the 'dying Muslim' to persuade the community of the need to unite. He wrote:

Open your eyes and look around you once. What is above your head? It's the huge sword of different communities swinging. Now hurry and gather swords, armour and shields, otherwise the glory of your nation will disappear. Whether Sharif or Sayyid, your shadow will not remain. If you want to be spared your life, you will have to embrace the Shudras.<sup>106</sup>

Unlike the Arya Samaj, however, who maintained a degree of conservatism, if not disgust, towards the Untouchables as a 'fallen' or 'lost' caste requiring educational upliftment, for the Muslim reformers the burden was not on the *atrāf* to improve themselves. Both Enayetullah and Yaqub Ali's texts offer more radically egalitarian content and approaches towards caste. The fallen were not low-caste *atrāf* Muslims but the higher-status *ashrāf*. On the one hand, these reformers were responding to a longer and recurring discourse on Islamic egalitarianism. Yaqub Ali, for example, refers to Muhammad Ismail's admonitions

<sup>100</sup> S. K. Rai, 'The fuzzy boundaries: Julaha weavers' identity formation in early twentieth century United Provinces', *Indian Historical Review* 40.1 (1 June 2013), pp. 117–143.

<sup>101</sup> H. K. S. Arefeen, *Changing Agrarian Structure in Bangladesh: Shimulia, a Study of a Periurban Village* (Dhaka, 1986), pp. 32–33. There is not much information on the village Kakran, but contemporary studies suggest that a majority of the inhabitants there were traditionally from the potter caste; see F. Mahmud, *Prospects of Material Folk Culture Studies and Folklife Museums in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1993).

<sup>102</sup> Lee, *Deceptive Majority*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77–120.

<sup>104</sup> Datta, *Carving Blocs*, pp. 148–296.

<sup>105</sup> Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*, p. 248.

<sup>106</sup> Enayetullah, *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya*, p. 48. Author's translation.



on caste in the *Tazkhirut al-Ikhwān* text to support his own position.<sup>107</sup> A Deobandi reformer, Shah Muhammad Ismail (d. 1831), found favour among the followers of the Ahl-i Hadith because he was noticeably more nonconformist in his interpretations, compared to his peers. Ismail condemned caste and hierarchy among Muslims, which he believed undermined God's absolute sovereignty. Even so, Ismail could not overcome his disdain for the *chamar* caste.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, however, these texts reflected the contemporary political zeitgeist. The rise of the praja-peasant movement against landlordism, growth of the urban Muslim poor, and the increasing presence of subaltern groups in the public life of Islam in Bengal, produced emancipatory ideas, imaginaries, and politics that could not be easily ignored.<sup>109</sup> Enayetullah's text was published at a time when communists were organising strikes and labour unions along the Hooghly jute belt. Bengali Muslim intellectuals and activists established and supported the growth of worker organisations, the Communist Party, and their publications. Muzaffar Ahmed, Abdul Halim, and Abdur Rezzaq Khan, disillusioned with nationalist politics and pan-Islamism, were drawn to Bolshevism and helped found the Peasant and Workers Party in Bengal at the time these texts were published.<sup>110</sup> The language of equality permeated Muslim cultural and religious life, seen in journals and newspapers like *Samyabadi*, and in *jari* and *baul* songs.<sup>111</sup> The politics of Islamic egalitarianism went hand in hand with discussions of caste and labour.

Therefore, both *Jāter Barā'i* and *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* were a response to three key currents of this period. First, the texts represented wider currents of religious and caste reformism that were located in an emerging associational culture, and social movements. Second, they responded to a broad set of socio-economic transformations in Bengal—urbanisation, proletarianisation, and agricultural changes. They were also part of a recurring discourse on Islamic egalitarianism, taken up by reformers situated in low caste Muslim communities, and articulated in new and different ways to those in which Islamic reform in South Asia has been generally understood. The next section contrasts the response to caste in *Jāter Barā'i* and *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya*, with community histories authored by Muslim occupational caste groups that claimed new and respectable genealogies for themselves. The two texts represent what Gopal Guru describes as 'rejection of rejection'; self-respect that was secured by oppressed communities through their refusal to be reduced to an emotion (such as disgust) or a less-than-human object.<sup>112</sup> Both texts rejected the *ashrāf's* claim to piety, distinction, or titles; refused 'respectable' histories for Islam; and rejected the centrality of law to understanding the faith. In short, the *atrāf* refused to be 'Ashrafised'.

<sup>107</sup> Yaqub Ali is referring to Shah Muhammad Ismail's 'Taqwiyat al-Iman ma Tazkhir al-Ikhwan' published in 1825, and translated in Urdu in 1834. For more on the author and text, see Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India*; Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*.

<sup>108</sup> Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*, pp. 128–129.

<sup>109</sup> K. H. Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims (1917–1947)*, 1st edn (Karachi, 2015); N. Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*. Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society 8 (Cambridge, 2001); S. Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1913–1929*, 2nd edn (New Delhi, 2012); N. Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal*, 1st edn (New Delhi, 2014).

<sup>110</sup> S. Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1913–1929*, 2nd edn (New Delhi, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> N. Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal*, 1st edn (New Delhi, 2014); Amit Dey, *The Image of the Prophet in Bengali Muslim Piety, 1850–1947* (Kolkata, 2014).

<sup>112</sup> Gopal Guru, 'Rejection of rejection: foregrounding self-respect.', in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, (ed.) Gopal Guru (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 209–225.



### Fighting *ashrāf* fever

In his book, Yaqub Ali asked his readers what caused ‘Ashrafer jwar’ (*ashrāf* fever)? A fever that totally consumed *ashrāf* Muslims, such that even after having abused the *atrāf* Muslims, they could not fulfil their ‘maner ākāṅsā’ (heart’s desire).<sup>113</sup> In other areas of the text, the fever transmutes into a plague. This fever fed on the emotions of *barā’i* (pride) and *ghrinā* (disgust). In his article on disgust, Lee shows how the affective economy is central to the enactment of caste in everyday social and material relationships. Disgust, he argues, functions as a casteist emotion reproducing hierarchical social relations and regulating the boundaries between the Untouchables and caste Hindus in the material-corporeal and social-moral terrain.<sup>114</sup> However, in Ali and Enayetullah’s Bengali texts, *barā’i* was the primary casteist emotion, which enabled the expression of other emotions. *Barāi* activated ‘bārābāri’—an exaggerated performance of importance—and ‘tānātāni’—tussling for privilege, through which *ghrinā* was produced and sustained. Both texts show how *barā’i* and *ghrinā* were embodied in ritual insults and the humiliation of low-caste Muslims by *ashrāfi* Muslims, in everyday life and significant public festivals. In *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya*, Enayetullah offers detailed descriptions of how Bengali *aimadars*, who were the *ashrāf* of Hooghly, ‘drunk’ (*matta howā*) on pride, performed their disgust towards low-caste Muslim in different ways.<sup>115</sup> They abused them with profanities, made them sit at the ‘dehliz’ (threshold) of their houses, and degraded them at weddings, funerals, and community feasts. Enayetullah wrote on the *ashrāf*’s treatment of *atrāf* Muslims after having invited them to a feast:

The *sharif miya* (noble gentleman) sat his guests in the *dastarkhwan* (guest room) and filled their stomachs with the finest ingredients. Finally, the poor people, who fought with fire and burnt their hands to cook the food, were seated on piles of manure and bamboo mats and given leftovers to eat. This is how they (the *ashrāf*) maintained their *sharafāti* (nobility).<sup>116</sup>

Yaqub Ali’s book focuses on the upper-caste *tānās* (insults) which followed low-caste Muslims everywhere, even into areas of life that he considered ought to have been free of caste prejudice, like government employment. It thus demonstrates his implicit acceptance of colonial ideas about a neutral state and standing apart from society.<sup>117</sup>

These Ahl-i Hadith reformers argued that *ashrāfi* pride was misplaced, based on false claims of importance and distinction. They offered alternative descriptions and names for the *ashrāf* Muslims. For Enayetullah, they were ‘jāl Ashraf’ (fake *ashrāf*), ‘nakal Sharif’ (fake *sharif*), ‘swarnalatā’ (parasitic vines), ‘naraker kīt’ (hell’s worms), and ‘arzāl’ (despicable), and for Yaqub Ali, they were ‘gubare poka’ (dung-beetle), ‘khabis’ (fiend) and ‘battar’ (nasty). Although, it is possible that the ‘jāl’ or ‘nakal’ *ashrāf* was a reference to the social mobility of low-caste Muslims, and their changing of occupational caste names to ‘Sheikh’—the subject of much satirical comment and verse elsewhere—there is an insistence throughout both texts that the *ashrāf-atrāf* distinction did not exist in Islam. Yaqub Ali argued: ‘When God addressed us in the Holy Quran, every time he referred to us as “O believers”. He never mentioned or called us by Ashraf,

<sup>113</sup> Ali, *Jater Barāi*, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> Lee, ‘Disgust and Untouchability.’

<sup>115</sup> Enayetullah, *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya*, p. 10. *Aimadars* were individuals rewarded with land grants or remission from revenue during the Mughal period on the basis of them being Sayyid or members of the ‘*ulamā*’.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. Author’s translation.

<sup>117</sup> Ali, *Jater Barāi*, p. 3.

Atraf, Sheikh or Sayyid.<sup>118</sup> God, he insists, had no interest in those who boasted and waved around carefully preserved genealogical documents which confirmed their forefathers were *qāzīs*. The disparaging references to *ashrāf* ‘certificates’ or ‘horoscopes’ gestures to the importance of caste in the colonial legal order.<sup>119</sup> Muslim Personal Law, which applied in cases of ‘succession, inheritance, marriage, and caste, and all religious usages and institutions’, privileged custom over scripture, placing it in direct contestation with reformist efforts.<sup>120</sup> The texts contrast it with God, who had no need of bureaucracy, could not be deceived with forged documents or fraudulent claims, and cared less about spurious titles and distinctions. His judgement was swift, even handed, and based on things that humans had agency or control over such as *imān* (belief) and *amal* (action). God, like the *ashrāf* Muslims, practised disgust, but reserved it for those who acted on a false sense of *barā’i*.

### Sacred genealogies of labour

If not the *ashrāf*, who were the most noble in Islam? The main protagonists in Yaqub Ali’s history of Islam were slaves, concubines, and weavers. Prophet Yusuf had been a slave to a merchant, Bibi Hazera, who ‘carried Prophet Ismail in her womb’, and did ‘leundigiri’ (concubinage); Prophet Shish had come from a family of weavers.<sup>121</sup> Yaqub Ali wrote: ‘those (*ashrāf*) who insult others as “golām” (slaves), “bāndi bangsha” (offspring of slave-girls), or use “jāt” (caste), are insulting their forefathers’.<sup>122</sup> In the community history of Delhi’s Muslim butchers, Lanzillo shows how the authors traced their lineage to the Quraish tribe of the Arab lineage as a way of improving their social prestige and arguing against their low-origin status.<sup>123</sup> Both Ahl-i Hadith reformers, Ali and Enayetullah, also traced the lineage and descent of various low-caste communities to Arab lands; not necessarily for the purpose of seeking respectability, but to reject respectability based on birth and nobility. Both texts, in particular Ali’s *Jāter Barā’i*, claimed an ‘Atrafised’ history of Islam. They present sacred genealogies of labour, tracing the lives of prophets, their wives, and family through work. These religious characters were involved in various manual occupations: weaving, carpentry, grave-digging, selling fish, milling rice and pulses, leatherwork, and tailoring. Enayetullah writes:

Hazrat Shish did weaving, Hazrat Nur did carpentry, Hazrat Idris did embroidery, Hazrat Musa was a shepherd, and Prophet Dawood was a blacksmith. Oh Bengal’s *nakal sharifgan* (fake *ashrāf*)! How much more can I explain. Do you know that Hazrat Maryam Bibi spun cotton, Hazrat Fatema Khatun milled pulses, and Hazrat Sulaiman wove mats?<sup>124</sup>

These texts drew upon older traditions that narrated histories of prophets, for instance in Saiyad Sultan’s seventeenth-century text *Nabivamsa* (Lineage of the Prophet), Prophet Adam is portrayed as a farmer and Prophet Shish as weaver.<sup>125</sup> These stories of working-class prophets gained new traction in Bengal in the twentieth century in journals, newsletters, and peasant improvement tracts for the purpose of the moral and economic

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, preface.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; Enayetullah, *Ashraf o Atrāf Samasya*, p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> J. Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, Empire, and Secularism in South Asia* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 1–22, 105–131.

<sup>121</sup> Ali, *Jāter Barā’i*, pp. 5–6, 13.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Lanzillo, ‘Butchers between archives’.

<sup>124</sup> Enayetullah, *Ashraf o Atrāf Samasya*, pp. 16–17. Author’s translation.

<sup>125</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, p. 290, 299.

advancement of the community. Various scholars have shown how improvement tracts were employed to encourage indebted Muslim peasants to be thrifty and refrain from indulgence as an act of piety. Although *Jāter Barā'i* and *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya* appear to have been written in the same vein, the emphasis is less on the moral upliftment of peasants and workers, or a sermon on equality; rather they appear to be a panegyric on labour in Islam. The charisma of the prophets was an effect of their work; therefore, insults directed at weavers, blacksmiths, tanners, etc., were considered an attack on the character of the prophets who practised the same professions. Interestingly, the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, a merchant by trade, is markedly absent in both texts, despite the commitment of the Ahl-i Hadith to his words and deeds, as an exemplary model for Islamic life. Yaqub Ali offered numerous virtues of the cloth produced by weavers, and its value in everyday life. He wrote:

When a mother gives birth to a son, wiping his navel, she wraps him up in cloth. You need clothes everywhere. If you die, your clothes follow you. On 'Hashr' (Day of Judgement) you will rise up again in these clothes. In Heaven, Allah will keep you comfortably draped.<sup>126</sup>

God himself appears in the text as a weaver, who made *kudrati* (divine) clothes for the community of Prophet Moses in Tiya. In these texts, labour becomes an integral part of a sacred ontology, shaping the way that Muslims understood and interacted with the world and God.<sup>127</sup>

### Felt Islam

If caste was an embodied experience, perceived and cultivated through the specific emotions of pride and disgust, as well as physical contact, then both authors countered it with their vision of an anti-caste and egalitarian Islam, that was also 'felt', but in radically different ways. Rudolph Ware writes about the fundamental relationship between the body and Islam, in particular the ways in which it is used to 'transmit, decode and actualize' knowledge.<sup>128</sup> In his descriptions of the physical regime and lifestyle of Senegalese students in Quranic schools, he shows how they were taught the values of submission, humility, and compassion through acts of fetching water, cooking breakfast, wearing rags, and begging. The bodily aspect was an integral part of Islamic tradition and training. Schools disciplined and shaped the body of their students in order to transform them into living manifestations of God's words, or, in other words, 'walking Qurans'. These two anti-caste texts also talk about Islam as an embodied experience in a different context—about how comradeship and solidarity was to be comprehended through feeling and doing things. Contrary to scholarly analysis of reformist groups such as the Ahl-i Hadith, which advanced an individual, rational, and disembodied understanding of Islam, these texts proposed a collective, bodily, and emotional approach—a felt Islam. Enayetullah argued that the unity of Muslims was dependent on the *ashrāf* 'learning' to physically embrace the low-caste Muslim.<sup>129</sup> Where *barā'i* and *ghrinā* prompted physical revulsion, withdrawal and distance, the hug contracted and transgressed the emotional, social, and physical

<sup>126</sup> Ali, *Jāter Barā'i*, p. 16. Author's translation.

<sup>127</sup> Similar sacred ontologies can be seen in Deepak Mehta's study of the weaver community in Bankabari, UP, and Richard Eaton's study of Sufi folk poetry '*chakki-nama*' and '*charkha-nama*'; see D. Mehta, *Work, Ritual, Biography: A Muslim Community in North India* (Delhi, 1997); R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton; Guildford, 1978).

<sup>128</sup> Ware, *The Walking Qur'an*, p. 4.

<sup>129</sup> Enayetullah, *Ashrāf o Atrāf Samasya*, p. 47.

space between the *ashrāf* and *atrāf* Muslims, and overwhelmed and normalised different touches, smells and noises. An anti-caste Islam was not to be sensed through these transient, one-off moments of embrace however, but sustained through regular contact between both worlds. Enayetullah urged *ashrāf* Muslims to take up the plough, dig graves, do ‘mehanat majuri’ (hard labour), and sit and dine with other Muslims.<sup>130</sup> Anti-caste Islam was envisioned as a concrete social (pedagogical) experience, which required the *ashrāf* to learn from the *atrāf* and draw closer to them in work and life. There was no demand on the *atrāf* to know or emulate the *ashrāf* Muslims. However, there were limits to the radicalism of the reformers’ anti-caste politics, seen in the absence of reference to *ashrāf*-*atrāf* marriages, despite the centrality of the institution to the reproduction of caste order, values, and practices.

This emphasis on a felt Islam can also be seen in the author’s vernacular styles and techniques of writing, intended to generate a sense of the *ummah* (community), not in an abstract and intellectual manner, but through a dense and visible gathering of emotional listeners. In the nineteenth century, reformers embraced the vernacular printing presses as an opportunity to access the everyday lives of the masses more than they were previously able to through translations.<sup>131</sup> Building on existing literary traditions, these texts were written in a simple versified form, so that they could be orally recited, or sung, to usually non- or semi-literate crowds in rural villages and mofussil towns. Beyond serving a functional purpose, the act of reading aloud demanded active listening, and generated collective gestures and emotions from the audience, creating an immediate physical bond between the listeners. Aurality was also a powerful act in its public commitment to specific beliefs. The anti-caste and egalitarian nature of Islam was to be experienced in the public defiance of *ashrāfi* values, and in the valorisation of labour. Moreover, Yaqub Ali’s stories and poems about demon battles, the brahmin pandit, and the *mājhi* (fisherman), and the elephant and the goat, demonstrated that reformists also felt that Islam could be imagined and felt in creative, intimate, and emotional ways, beyond rules and law.

## Conclusion

Yaqub Ali, writing on the vitality of caste among Muslims, stated: ‘Because there is no extensive “ālochanā” (discussion) or “āndolan” (movement) within society, people are doing “bārābāri” (showing off) with Ashraf, Atrāf, high, low, Sayyids, and Mughals.’<sup>132</sup> His statement shows that equality in Islam was not a given norm, but deeply contested; something that had to be fought for, and emerged from the struggle between groups. This article has tried to centre and historicise this struggle for egalitarianism in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial Bengal, during a period when caste emerged as an important social category, fundamental to colonial knowledge, and the governance of Indian society. This article departs from other scholarship that takes Islamic egalitarianism as a scriptural norm, which crumbles in the face of caste being perceived as a lived reality. Rather, I argue that attending to caste-based struggles and tensions foregrounds other voices, to force through creative and radical interpretations of Islam.

Islamic reformist movements in colonial Bengal have been understood in rather limited ways; their contributions have largely been reduced to debates with traditionalist groups, and the creation of a more communal environment. The Ahl-i Hadith texts I have examined were responding to a period of heightened communal politics, and a

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>131</sup> Bose, *Recasting the Region*; Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India*.

<sup>132</sup> Ali, *Jater Barā’i*, p. 2.

fear of Hindu majoritarian politics. Yet, this article attempts to complicate how Islamic reformism worked in, and was guided by, the different socio-economic contexts. Reformist movements like the Faraizis also took on the character of low-caste movements, led by low-caste leaders, and with a mass following among those communities. The content of these movements was shaped by the problems of caste and social struggles, as seen in their challenging of taboos and practices, vital concern with social struggles, and creative articulations of Islam. By the 1920s, these caste considerations among reformist groups deepened because of the vigorous anticolonial and left movements and associations in Bengal, inflecting and informing Islamic imaginaries. Muslim reformers might have been, as Francis Robinson described them, ‘true harbingers of Islamic knowledge’, but they were also social creatures, conditioned by time, space, economy, cultures, and politics.<sup>133</sup> Their relationship with people was a two-way traffic of knowledge, which circumscribed and expanded the scope of their reformist agenda.

The four authors examined here offer an imperfect picture of low-caste Muslim politics and lifeworlds in Bengal. We, perhaps, move closer to knowing more as the authors become less distant from the caste and classes they study. Despite the frustrations of the colonial and native ethnographers about the inadequacy of caste as a category, or a suspicion of never fully knowing, low-caste Muslim practices and lifeworlds appear as mobile, autonomous, and egalitarian. The provenance of the Ahl-i Hadith reformers is not known, but both texts offer a clearer vision of the potentialities of an anti-caste subaltern Islam. Labour is the basis of piety, low-caste histories are master narratives of Islam, and equality is an embodied Islamic practice.

Analysis of these particular discourses of low-caste Muslim politics, lifeworlds, and radical egalitarianism, however, is necessarily limited. These texts offer only a partial sense of low-caste Muslim politics, or the actual transformative force of the visions of subaltern Islam. How did other reformist groups like the Deobandis respond to caste or these particular imaginaries? What were the limits of these reformists’ anti-caste visions when they intersected with other categories? Were any of these egalitarian ideas or visions adopted by anti-caste, anticolonial, social movements in Bengal or elsewhere? How do these texts compare with more professed low-caste Muslim writings or politics? What are the legacies of subaltern Islam? While the visions of a radically egalitarian Islam did persist into the post-colonial period, most notably in the politics of Maulana Bhashani (1885–1976), the ‘Red Maulana’ of East Bengal, who mobilised poor peasants and working-class Muslims on the grounds of Islamic socialism, caste among Muslims in South Asia has remained resilient, and continues to be a source of tension. The struggle for equality in Islam, too, remains.

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<sup>133</sup> Robinson, ‘Islam and Muslim society in South Asia.’

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