JOLAHA: A TALE OF A POLLUTED MUSLIM CASTE

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ABSTRACT

This paper will provide the nature of caste system among the Muslims of Bangladesh which was observed in Jolaha communities' people. Data of this study was collected applying the anthropological method of participant observation from a village in Bangladesh where Jolaha, an occupational group, predominate. Based on religious belief the weavers of South Asia are divided into two. The term Tanti is referred to the Hindu weavers whereas the Muslim weavers are known as Jolha, Jolaha, Julaa, etc. But one aspect is same for both; they occupy very lower strata in our stratified South Asian Society. As for the Jolahas, there is the very reason for believing, belonged to a despised Hindu caste (Tanti), who in a body became converts to Muhammadanism. But even after the religious conversion, till today, the Jolahas are considered as a lowly occupational caste group. They are looked upon polluted and stigmatized by the Muslims in general for their hereditary occupation. The occupation of the Jolaha now a day is no longer considered as impure. The pattern of mobility has also been changed over the past few years to some extent. But it is unfortunate that, after occurring mobility, the people still recognizes them as Jolaha even after few generations. At least the non - Jolaha Muslim consider them as lower castes people. Keywords: Caste, Jolaha, Grihastha, Muslim stratification.

INTRODUCTION

Jolaha comes from the Persian word "julah", meaning a ball of thread. They are an ethnic group of India, which adopted the profession of weaving. The weavers of Bangladesh and South Asia are divided into two groups based on their religion. Those who are Hindu are known as *Tanti*, and the Muslim ones are known as *Jolaha*, *Jolha*, *Julaha* etc. But one aspect is the same in both the religious groups; the weavers occupy very lower strata in the social order.

The name '*Jolaha*' is repudiated by all classes of Muhammadan weavers, being considered as an abusive one, and synonymous with the Arabic 'Ahmaq', a fool (wise 1883: 78). *Jolahas* are believed belonging to a despised Hindu caste, who has become converts to Muhammadanism (wise 1883:78). Nowadays the *Jolaha* are no longer a lower caste occupational group, as they have raised themselves as owners of small enterprises. The weaving industries of Pabna districts of Bangladesh, which are mostly owned by the *Jolaha,* have gained reputation and fame in and out of Bangladesh for their clothes.

This paper will mainly focus on the pattern of mobility of *Jolahas* in a village A*rshi(*pseudonym of the research locale) at Pabna district and the present situation of *Jolahas* after occurring mobility.

But why these type of mobility pattern has to be observed as Muslims deny the existence of caste or caste-like divisions in their society. They point out in support of this denial to verse 13 of sura 49 of the *Koran* which reads:

"O Mankind, we have created you male and female and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God fearing of you. God is All-Knowing, All-aware". (Arberry, 1955: 232)

Although Koran says equality and brotherhood, but history says opposite and I have observed same.

According to the census report in 1891, it is seen that Muslim society of Bengal classified into titled and occupational groups. In the titled category, the following groups are found: Gazi, Khan, Mir, Mughal, Pathan, Sardar, Sayid, and Sheikh; and in the occupational category groups like Darzi, Dhopa, Dhunya, Fakir, Hajjam, Jolaha, Kulu, Karigar, Kunjara, and Laheri are found (Census of India, 1891).

According to 'The New Encyclopaedia Britannica', in South Asian Muslim society a distinction is made between the *ashraf* (Arabic, the plural of *sharif*,"nobleman"), who are supposedly descendants of Muslim Arab immigrants, and the non-ashraf, who are Hindu converts. The ashraf group is further divided into four sub-groups: (1) *Sayyids*, originally a designation of descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and son-in-law ''Ali", (2) *Sheikhs* (Arabic: "Chiefs"), mainly descendants of Arab or Persian immigrants but also including some converted Rajputs, (3) Pashtuns, member of Pashto-speaking tribes in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, and (4) Mughals, persons of Turkish origin, who came into India with the Mughal armies (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 6, 2002: 411).

The non-*ashraf* Muslim castes are three levels of status: at the top, converts from high Hindu castes, mainly Rajputs, insofar as they have not been absorbed into the Sheikh castes; next, the artisan caste groups, such as the *Jolahas*, originally weavers; and lowest, the converted untouchables, who have continued their old occupations. The converts of Hinduism observe endogamy in a manner close to that of their Hindu counterparts (The New Encyclopedia of Britannica, vol.6, 2002: 411).

When the lower caste of social hierarchical structure follow the rituals and lifestyle of higher caste to make his social status like them and increase their status in the caste system, this process is called in terminology 'Sanskritization'.

Indian Culture has gone through several rounds of changes. In this process of change, several factors have acted as a catalyst which M.N. Srinivas's 'Sanskritization' concept has a special significance. M.N. Srinivas first introduced the notion of Sanskritisation to explain the process of cultural mobility in India, in his book *'Religion and Society among the Coorgs in South India'*. Sanskritization or Sanskritisation is a particular form of social change found in India. It denotes the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. It is a process similar to passing in sociological terms. It means,

"A process by which a low caste or a tribe or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and a way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice-born caste."

Muslim society follows this process of 'Sanskritization' from early Islamic Arab.The social hierarchy between *Ashraf* is determined by the claim of Arab ancestry or lineage linkage. The ones who can claim their ancestry with the prophet Muhammed's lineage stands in the upper strata of the *Ashrafs*

Amongst the huge Muslim population of Pakistan and India... who are by tradition the upholders of the hereditary principles of Islam,the class of *Sayyids* is an important one. As elsewhere they trace descent from the prophet's grandson Husayn and form a distinct group… Rather lower in the scale of honour is the class of "Shaykhs"… who claim descent from the first two caliphs or from Abbas the prophet's uncle. Other honored classes are also the Afghans and the Mughals (Moguls), persons of foreign descent whose privileged position is due to their being by origin natives of the nearer than India to the source of Islam (Levy,1957).

Like the *Ashrafs*, the non-*Ashraf* also relate to each other in a hierarchical manner. In their case, the superiority or inferiority of a group is determined by the relatively pure or impure nature of the occupation. In addition, there is another related criterion, viz. physical proximity of a non-*Ashraf* to *Ashraf* while performing services for them (Bhatty, 1996). Singers are thus higher than barbers because their women sat among *Ashraf* ladies to sing and singing had no pollution connotation. On the other hand, women of the barbers who massaged *Ashraf* women and male barber who cut hair performs services in physical proximity to the *Ashrafs* but were rated lower than singers because both services were regarded as impure. At the same time, both singers and barbers enjoy higher position than the *Dhobi* (laundrymen). The *Dhobi* not only washes dirty clothes, which was a polluting occupation, their services did not require physical proximity to the *Ashrafs* and hence they are lower in the hierarchy. Thus, things are not only impure or pure, but some things are more impure than others. Human secretions (particularly night soil), dead animals and animals eating filth (pigs), are regarded as the most polluting, and occupations associated with them occupy the lowest rungs of the hierarchy. These groups also regarded as unclean. In their case, group pollution also attaches to individual members of the caste. (Monmoy, 2007)

MOBILITY PATTERN IN BENGAL

The general difference of Muslim stratification from Hindu caste system is its flexibility and mobility from one stratum to another. A tendency of lower strata to connect themselves with upper strata to increase their social ranking can be observed throughout the country. Muslim stratification in Bangladesh is based on the reckoning of the nobility of descent. But at the same time, there exists a well-argued debate about the true origin of these noble descents.

As discussed earlier, the nobility of descent in Bangladesh is recognized and ranked through their connection with Arab and foreign lineage. In this regard James Wise remarks, "In Muhammadan histories no mention is made of a large Muhammadan immigration from Upper India; and we know that in the reign of Akbar the climate of Bengal was considered so

uncongenial to the *Mughal* invaders, that an order to proceed thither was regarded as a sentence of banishment"(Wise, 1883: 2).

The census report of 1891 also shows a considerable doubt about the authenticity of the descent groups. The report remarks that "It is quite certain that there are no quarter million of true *Sayyids* or a half million real *Pathans*. These titles are adopted by the families of the higher rank of Muhammadan society, particularly by those whose ancestors came from Hindustan" (Census, 1891: 269-70).

This remark was later supported by Gait in the 1901 census where he states, "The conventional division of the Muhammadans into four tribes –*Shekh*, *Said, Mughal,* and *Pathans* – has very little application to this province" (Gait, 1901: 439). He then supplies an example of how local occupational groups or caste enters in the ranks of the four-fold *Ashraf* descent groups:

"… any Muhammadan who is well off, though he cannot go from one caste to another can gradually enter the ranks of *Ashraf*. The proverb "last year I was a *Jolahs,* this year I am a *Shekh*; next year if prices rise I will be a Said", is well known, and it represents what often occurs through the process of promotion is not quite rapid in reality as it is in the proverb. A well to do man of a functional group, say a *Jolaha*, will discard the word *Jolaha*, call himself *Shekh* and assume a more respectable name, and if he will slowly secure for himself a circle of friends from the poorer classes of *Ashraf* community. He will then marry into an *Ashraf* family probably of doubtful status and his son will be recognized as a true *Ashraf*. The process is earlier in towns then in the villages where people are more conservative and is a distant place than near home, where a man's connections are well known" (Gait, 1901: 441-42).

It is clear from the above statement that one does not necessarily need to change his occupation in order to assume any fictitious honorific descent.

The early invaders of Bengal were the Pathans. But as the census of 1901 shows, the ratio between Shaikh and Pathans is 50 to 1. Same can be said about the Mughals. Gait was very much surprised at the higher population of Shekhs in Bengal. In this regard, he remarks, "… that the *soidisant Shekhs* is more than twenty times as great as the estimated population of Arabia" (Gaits, 1901: 166). He was very much convinced that "many of these *Shekhs*, moreover, have recently begun to claim this appellation" (Gait, 1901: 166).

Gait here collects another local saying about the social mobility of Muslim community

Age thake Ulla Tulla sheshe hay Uddin

Taler Mahamud uprare jay Kapal phere jaddin.

Translation: When a man's fate changes his name also starts changing from Ulla then Uddin, and begins with Muhammad instead of ending. (Arefeen, 1975)

Gait gives an excellent example of the above sayings. "The Saying can best be illustrated by the successive Meherullah who became Meharuddin, then Meharuddin Muhammad and then Muhammad Meharuddin. He will probably at this stage prefix Munshi, then add Ahmed, and finally, blossom into Maulvi Muhammad Meharuddin Ahmed" (Gait, 1901: 173).

The 1921 census report shows an incredible population decrease in occupational groups and on the other hand population increases among the noble groups from 1901-1921. Among the occupational group, the castes of Behara decreased by 17.40%, *Jolaha* 42.90%, *Kulu* 27.80%, and *Nikari* 16.30%. At the same time, on the nobility of descent groups, *Pathans* have increased by 41.80%, *Saiyad* 16.40% and *Sheikh* by 21.50%. This statistical fact affirms the idea of assuming fictitious descent reckoning. (Arefeen, 1966-67).

Curiously, the census report of 1921 also shows a reverse process. "Since 1911, the number of *Saiyads* in the Chittagong Division appears from the statistics to have decidedly decreased, probably due to a similar reaction to that to which reference had already been made against extravagant claims amongst those who have risen in the world" (Census, 1921). Similarly, Arefeen shows an interesting example from his study of a Muslim Zamindar Family where a *Patwari* family changed their title to Choudhury in protest of the mushroom growth of the *Patwaries* in that locality (Arefeen, 1966-67).

"Promotion" and "demotion" in Muslim social ranking can also happen through the matrimonial connection. Karim's study of Nayanpur village and the social stratification patterns in certain districts of Bangladesh contains such data. "If there is a matrimonial connection between a member of the upper social grade with one of a lower social grade, it is still talked about in the district that there has been an unexpected "promotion" of the members of the lower "caste" while there has been an uncalled for "demotion" of the members of the upper "caste" although many members of the so-called "lower caste" occupy very important positions in the government or have made their mark in business, industry and professional fields" (Karim, 1962: 138).

But as Karim mentioned, marital connection not necessarily always promote ones social standings. It can play a reverse role. Zillur Khan in his reports from the village Bhanderikandi in the district of Faridpur shows how some *Khankars* lost their social status for having a marital connection with the wealthy *Dhalis* (Shield-bearer). In this case, the *Dhalis* failed to improve their status and at the same time the *Khankars* lost there because of the non-cooperation of the other *Khankars* of the area. (Arefeen, 1966-67).

Begum in her study of a village in Comilla district shows how one can raise their status through good social connections and how the opposite can happen because of low marital connection. She mentions two cases: the first one is the case f a college professor who in spite of being from a *Khandan f*amily degraded his social status by marrying to an ordinary farmer family. The second case is the case of a government high official whose status has gone down in the eyes of the villagers because he married the daughter of a petty clerk. These two cases clearly show that marital relation is more influential than any other social relationships. Arefeen in his study of a Muslim Zamindar family also shows how an individual member possesses lower status within the same family for being a son whose mother was from an ordinary peasant family (Arefeen, 1966-67).

Mukherjee (1949) shows two examples of how one couple was ostracized and the other was welcomed by their respective communities. In the first case: a general Muslim (upper class) was forced to leave his community because he married a *Khulu* girl (lower class). The general Muslims broke off all relation with the man to keep their social status from downgrading. In the second case: a *Khulu* Muslim married a general Muslim girl as a result girl relatives broke off all relations with her. But when the couple reached the *Khulu* community, the girl was heartily welcomed because her marriage in the community is the indicative of "social promotion", although her marriage was not recognized by her own community at all. (Arefeen, 1966-67).

The above discussion is the picture of mobility pattern of lower castes in different time periods where different scholars observed their (lower caste) promotion and demotion tendency accordingly. Now I will discuss the mobility of *Jolahas* which I have observed in Arshi in 2011 and try to show that after occurring their mobility whether *Jolahas* can change their status or not.

MOBILITY OCCURS IN ARSHI:

The weaving of cotton cloths or handloom is an old industry in Pabna, which has survived the competition of the European, Bombay and Karachi mills and is still the most important cottage industry in the district. The industry was started in this district at the beginning of the last century. The

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*Tanti*band Zamindar was one of the pioneers of this industry. (Population census of Bangladesh 1974:17) In Pabna district, Arshi is very much famous for '*Gamca' tant or* loom. It is a Muslim inhabitant village comprising 157 households with an average size of 4.105 members in each house according to the field census. Populations are divided into two categories *Grihastha's* and *Jolaha's*. A total population of 708, among them 76% is Jolaha's. They are mainly related to weaving. The literacy rate is almost same among the male and female *Jolahas*. During my study, I have seen that dropout rate of a male from primary school is higher than female. Because at the age of 13 or 14, male child physically capable of operating *tant*. That's why parents pull them in their home industry. It should be mentioned that operating a weaving industry requires a lot of manpower. And the cheapest source of manpower is none other than one's own family members.

Social mobility is a usual occurrence among the Muslims of Bangladesh. To do so, a particular person or sometimes a whole group tries to improve their social status through changing their lineage title, occupation and by other means.

OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY

Jolahas in Arshi are leaving their ancestral profession and now they become farmers, rickshaw pullers, day labors, businessman etc. Their transformations are not necessarily in the intent of improving their status, but mostly because of the economic uncertainty. They want to leave their occupation mainly for the purpose of increasing their income and repay their loan. During my fieldwork, I found some inhabitants; Mojibur Rahman Mullah was one of them who had a small weaving industry five years ago. He had to close his factory due to the high rate of the thread. The income from his small factory was not enough to support his family. Now he is a businessman. Another inhabitant Akhter Jamana who was a *tanti* labour in Arshi now he is a sharecropper. He did not want to leave his ancestral occupation. But he

had to do so to earn more in order to give proper education of his children. It was not possible to maintain his family by working as a *tant* labour. That is why he left his occupation. Miraj mollah a businessman who has a grocery shop in Arshi bazaar left his ancestral occupation because of increased price of the thread. He could not run his loom. If he does well in his grocery store business, he will return to his ancestral profession. However, Leaving their occupation does not change their old *Jolaha* identify. A prime example would be Sharif Pramanik who became a contractual farmer or sharecropper but non-Jolaha muslims call him as Jolaha even after changing his occupation.On the contrary, Grihastha's who are related to tant occupation are considered businessman.

MOBILITY THROUGH MARRIAGE

One very effective and probably the best way of upward mobility are marrying into upper stratum family. If a person can acquire a bride from an upper stratum family and get the acceptance of the upper stratum men then it is said that he has got a promotion in Muslim social ranking. But on the other hand, if an upper stratum man marries a lower stratum woman his social status will fall. That means, in the first example, the bride does not lose her status rather the groom improves his, but in the second case, the brides' status is not procreating rather the groom's status is going downwards. Of course, marriage into upper stratum family does not necessarily mean that the person's lineage title is going to change; rather it means that he now has important and powerful alliances in the community acquired through marriage relation.

Now, let us come to the circumstances that revolve around marriage in Arshi. The data I received while asking my informants about their preferable marriage patterns which were pretty much contradictory and interesting. Iunus Mullah who had made *gamca* and *lungi* in his factory. When I asked about his preference of choosing a bride for his son. He said that his son can marry anyone whom he likes, whether the girl is from

Jolaha family or of *Grihasthas*. He also said that in this village no one cares about marriage between *Jolaha* and *Grihasthas*.

Another person who told me the opposite of Iunus. Nion Paramanik is a non-*Jolaha tant* labour who works in a *Jolahas* factory of *Jolaha* family. At that time, he was single. He told me strictly that there is no way that he is giving to marry into a *Jolaha* family. He told me that "If I marry a *Jolaha* woman then I will become a *Jolaha* too and I am not going to let that happen."

These two different and contradictory answers reflect a very clear picture of the social mobility in Arshi. In the first case, Iunus mullah does not have any objection of letting his son marry a *Grihastha* girl because it can improve his social position. On the other hand, though Nion Paramanik is working in a weaving industry owned by a *Jolaha*, he did not consider himself a *Jolaha*. But when he marries a *Jolaha* girl, he will lose his social status and will be recognized as a *Jolaha*.

Even a qualified engineer from a Jolaha family was rejected as a bride by the non-Jolahas as they didn't want their daughter to carry a Jolaha identity. In the case of marriage negotiation Jolahas are neglected though they have high literacy rate.

I have found a clear picture of *Jolaha* endogamy when i asked about lineage preference in a marriage arrangement. When I asked Nurujjaman paramnik about this he told me that he would like his daughter to marry another paramanik. He does not have any objection about the lineage Mullah, but to him, same lineage marriage is better. He also told me that, his elder daughter is already married to a Parmanik he is now looking for a suitable bridegroom from a Paramanik family for his second daughter.

In Arshi I have found many women and men came from *Grihasthas* family. They told me that although now the discrimination about *Jolahas* and *Grihasthas* have been changing but the same occupation is always preferable. One of them is Maleka. She was a child of *Grihasta*

family. But now is a member of *Jolaha* because of her marriage. Her father agreed to the marriage with her husband because they are not related to *tant* profession now. If her husband related to this profession she told that her father would not agree to this marriage. Maleka also has an opinion like her father that same profession is always preferable. My another respondent Amena is from a *Grihastha* family also. But her father was very poor. So, her family only looked at the family who are rich. So this marriage took place because her husband has a loom factory and from this factory her husband earns a lot of money.

it is seen that, about 29% *Jolahas* in Arshi practice exogamy. These occur sometimes who have no problem to marriage with *Grihasthas* or who want to upgrade his social status.It is also seen that *Grihasthas* are married with *Jolahas* who are rich and only who have left their *tant* occupation. Very few *Jolahas* in Arshi are forging marital relations with *Grihasthas* and fewer *Grihasthas* forging marital relations with the *Jolahas*. The few exceptions occurred due to some reasons. Either the marriage is a love marriage or the educated parents or children did not care where they were being married or the two families are very close. Even if a *Jolaha* marries a *Grihastha*, their social status is still considered less solely for their occupational identification.

CHANGING OF *BANGSHA* TITLE

In Arshi all the *Jolahas* belong to either mullah or paramanik lineage or *bangsha*. The *Jolahas* are considered lower stratum in Muslim society. They should not belong to the same lineages as the non-*Jolahas Grihasthas*. During my study, I have found many mullah lineage families in Arshi. When I meet Amirul mullah(one of my key informants) he told me that all the mullah do not belong to real mullah lineage. He again told me that many mulllah people who belong to paramanik lineage took title mullah in order to improve their social standing. It needs to be mentioned that, mullah is higher than paramanik in Arsh.

I have heard that the best way to change one's name and title completely is through (a) education board registration (b) National ID registration and (c) birth registration.

Anyone who wants to take the S.S.C. examination and further, he or she must complete the registration process required by the education board. In that registration, one can change his/ her name. The transformation given here receives national recognitions. A member of Arshi *Union Parishad* told me that many *Jolahas* of the *Union Parishad* changed the title of their sons to non-*Jolaha* ones while in the process of this registration.

In Arshi, many of the students have changed their title by S.S.C. registration board. Also, the best way to change one's title is through the Birth and National ID registration, both of which are now compulsory for every citizen of Bangladesh and gives government recognition of the information that is given. Most of the *Jolaha* paramanik family recently took the title of mullah.

A few years ago, birth registration is made mandatory for everyone. A member of the Arshi village health complex confirms that many of the *Jolahas* of Sara changed their names and titles while registering. In some occasions, many simply leave the title.

During my field study, Iunus mullah who changed his Paramnik title during birth registration. He thought that it would upgrade his social status. The same situation was seen in the works of Monmoy(2007).

But their *Jolaha* identify is still attached to them. So, their title change is becoming a subject of ridicule. There is a hierarchy in the Arshi, which is a determinant of Muslim caste system and also determinant that *Jolahas* are a caste.

POLITICAL MOBILITY

In Arshi, among the *Jolahas*, one of the people who contested for the position of member and won in two or three years ago. Village people wanted to select one of them from the *Jolaha* for the Chairman post. They are hoping that this person will win and change their fate. Also, their social status will upgrade. I talked to a *Grihasthas* about a *Jolaha* becoming a member of *union Parishad*. He said it was no problem that one of them became a member. He also said that it is a little troublesome as their occupational ranking is low, so no one listens to them.

The phenomenon of electing a Chairman or a member came to light during my observation. Although, there is seen political mobility amongst the *Jolahas* but it is not well received by many *Grihastas*. They think that the *Jolahas* are a lower class and they do not want to abide by the authority of a *Jolaha*. Their political mobility did not get a positive change in their social prestige. According to the village member Mobarak, who did not like the fact that a *Jolaha* got elected as a member of the *union Parishad*. He believes that if a *Grihastha* were selected, then the authorities might have taken the members decision more seriously and better improvements could be made in the village. A lot of *Grihasthas* commented that they feel the same way.

CONCLUSION:

The occupation of *Jolaha* is for sure a specialized work. The *Jolahas* of Arshi acquired this profession generation after generation with specialization. But that does not mean that they are bound by some religious or social laws that restrict them from leaving their ancestral profession. As we have seen, the *Jolahas* of Arshi frequently changes their profession to meet their economic necessity. It is not only the *Jolahas* who changes their profession but the other commoners of the villages, the *Grihasthas* are also taking the job of weaving, which is not degrading their social status. In Hindu caste, the other characteristics-'repulsion' is

based on the notion of purity and impurity. But this notion is not fully present among the *Jolahas* of Arshi, at least not in the present days. In regards to the marital relation, the non-*Jolaha* Muslims greatly resist the entrance of *Jolaha*. No matter how good relation the other Muslims have with the *Jolahas*, no matter how equally they act in the social occasion, a non-*Jolaha* Muslim always think several times before having marital relation with a *Jolaha* family

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