

Pasmanda Muslims of Jharkhand

Razaul Haq Ansari

***Abstract:** Jharkhand is relatively a newly formed state in Eastern India; however, it has had a long history of struggle against imperialist and Brahmanic forces. This article explores what it means for the author to engage with and be a part of the Pasmanda movement in his home state Jharkhand. It poses and answers significant questions central to understanding the development of the Pasmanda movement, such as: what is it like to be a Pasmanda activist? How do changing governments impact the status and representation of communities in Jharkhand? What is the nature of relationships of different communities that constitute societies in Jharkhand? It goes ahead to explore the way Pasmanda movement informs itself and other communities impacted by the social hierarchy in Jharkhandi societies and challenges dominant notions of religion-based identification of oppression.*

Keywords: Pasmanda Muslims, Jharkhand society, Ashrafization, Muslim castes, Jharkhand social history



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Introduction

I am from the Santhal Pargana division in Jharkhand. Here a large population—nearly 31%—is made up by Adivasis. There are many castes of Pasmandas¹ in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; similarly, we have many such Pasmanda castes in Jharkhand. The upper caste Muslims in Jharkhand have a very small population, and in terms of political power their clout is very low. There is a word used here—*Jolaha*; all the Muslims here are referred to as *Jolahas*. It is because the population of Momins² is more than 90% among Pasmanda Muslims. If you ask my *Ammi* who a Syed is, she will say I do not know. They know Pathans but do not know the names of other castes. In Jharkhand, the presence of upper castes is close to nil. They do not have much representation in politics either. It is almost insignificant.

The Momin-Pasmanda and other *biraderis* (communities) are lagging behind in all domains and all walks of life. They have multiple problems and issues. When the Adivasis were the kings here and were in control, Momins used to be on good terms with them. But after the 1990s, when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) invaded these regions and started spreading its ideology among the Adivasis, the Adivasis started using the word ‘diku’ a lot. Diku is the word used by Adivasis for non-Adivasi people. RSS has been working on Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs (other backward classes). The Christian missionaries were working in this region and they were doing good humanitarian work here. In order to counter that, RSS started working against them. RSS has also been working towards dividing OBCs and the Adivasis.

Pasmanda Movement

I have been using Facebook since 2011. In October 2018, I came across a post which was shared by one Sunil Janardan Yadav. It read that the Muslims are divided into Ashraf, Ajlaf, Arzal and so on, and the latter two divisions are referred to as Pasmanda Muslims. It was a new idea of division for me, and that too on the basis of castes. So, I started to look it up on Google to check whether these categories exist for real or is it a new trick to divide Muslims. Slowly, I started reading up on it, and also read many articles on Round Table India (RTI), including some by Khalid Anis Ansari and others. Slowly, I understood that this exists among Muslims and it is not a joke. It exists among Muslims but it is not so visible to them yet that Muslims are divided into different castes and classes such as upper caste, lower caste, Dalit Muslim etc. So yes, I read the term ‘Pasmanda’ for the first time on Facebook.

Somehow, this word ‘Pasmanda’ has slowly made its entry and people are learning about it and will get to know more about it and will work to secure their rights. They will also talk against the caste discrimination. They are not doing it currently because they are not able to understand what

¹ See Ansari, 2018 for the conceptualization and discussion around the term Pasmanda and Pasmanda movement.

² Momin is an Urdu word which literally translates to ‘person who has faith/belief (*imaan*). It was used primarily by the Julaha community to assert their Muslim identity alongside their caste/ community identity.

is happening to them, and that they should not be in this state. Slowly, as the Pasmanda will become aware and the movement will become stronger; people will come forward and will share their stories. We are trying to expose the discrimination based on caste and others forms of discrimination, so that people understand it. Our Pasmanda people should understand what is being done to them. These things will take time. So far, we have somehow been able to take this word 'Pasmanda' to them, their homes and their mobile phones. It has taken a lot of effort, but slowly we have been able to do this and we are doing it and have brought in many people together with us. Now, many people want to read 'Masaavaat Ki Jung' by Ali Anwar Ansari (2001) to understand the Pasmanda movement. So at least a new beginning has been made which was missing for the past four or so decades. Now slowly people will understand and different Pasmanda castes will share their stories about their conditions, and the discrimination they go through. We would like them to become part of the movement and make it stronger and come forward to claim and secure their rights.

There is some discrimination, especially in the city neighbourhoods, between upper castes and Pasmandas, but these issues do not appear in mainstream media or social media. I am slowly getting connected and acquainted with different people from other districts of Jharkhand. My association with the Pasmanda *andolan* hasn't been for very long. I have only been associated with it for the past few years and am still trying to understand it. These are quite new ideas for me and I am slowly learning about it and trying to understand this discourse. I read and try to understand this movement through many writings that are published on Round Table India. Not much work has been done on the Pasmanda discourse, hence, we cannot just say many things and simply form an opinion randomly.

Composition of Pasmanda Castes in Jharkhand

In the Santhal Pargana region Pasmandas constitute 97% of the Muslim population³ (Ansari, 2021). In the state of Jharkhand Pasmandas constitute 14-16% of the total population; it also has 2-3% Ashrafs. Pasmandas are there in Ranchi and Chotanagpur region too, but most of them are in Santhal Pargana. Caste discrimination isn't so rampant here. The usual attitude among lower caste Muslims is that they hide their identity and they want to call themselves Syeds or Pathans. They are determined to make themselves upper castes. For example, there are Kalal, Churihar, Faqir castes; they do not want to come out with their castes, they want to hide it from others. They refer to themselves mostly as Muslims. The same problem is there in our Momin society that even though they are Momins or Ansaris they do not use it in their names. They are largely influenced by Brahmanwaadi and Syedwaadi thinking. They try to think like them. However, our roots are connected with the Adivasis. Most of the Momins here have been converted from the Adivasis. This fact is missing from the narratives and it is slowly being erased. As we would say '*Jolha Kolha Bhai Bhai*'. The relations between Momins and Adivasis were very strong earlier. The

³ The figures provided here are derived from the author's fieldwork and observations.

Adivasi kings of the Adivasis had provided support to the Momins. They even had a department that was involved in business and the Adivasis would carry out agricultural activities. It was the Adivasis particularly, who worked to prepare Momins for business activities. After conversion, the Adivasis retained their land but the Momins lost their land. And slowly, as Muslims went through the processes of Ashrafiization, it led to the erosion of these relations. The Pasmandas of Jharkhand don't even know that they are Pasmandas. They don't even know that they are lower castes and that they are also OBCs. Their leaders and others do not understand the politics of Pasmanda. They are making the same mistake which was made during 1947, or before that. There are many issues with the Pasmandas—politically, socially and culturally. If they work towards making an identity by working with the Bahujans and the Adivasis, it will lead to opening up various avenues for them. And that will also strengthen the idea enshrined in the slogan Jolha Kolha Bhai Bhai and will also weaken BJP's idea of a Hindu state.

Pasmandas are slowly understanding these issues. This term 'Pasmanda' is new and strange for them and they have never heard about it. The Pasmandas of Jharkhand do not know much about Urdu and Arabic (languages). So, these are quite new things for them. What will be the future of all this?

Ashrafs (upper caste Muslims) cannot create many problems for the Pasmandas here because their population is very less here and they are not very strong here either. They are surely capable of causing that kind of damage in other states but not in Jharkhand. There aren't many religious institutions of theirs in Jharkhand either. Their own institutions aren't very powerful here so they cannot harm us. What is more important is that Pasmandas have to understand how they perceive themselves and how they can get together with the Bahujans and take forward newer ideas.

Some of the lower caste Muslims here avail OBC reservations and through that they are moving forward to some extent. Then there are also some Adivasi Muslims or ST Muslims. They talk and use Adivasi languages. They do not change their religion in the column meant for filling in religious affiliation during the census taking exercise: they remain as scheduled tribes. There must be 28-30 Pasmanda castes in Jharkhand. Upper caste Muslims such as Syed, Sheikh, Pathan, Malik are there but they are less in terms of population. I think Maliks have the largest population among upper caste Muslims. In Jharkhand, Maliks come under OBC. There was an MLA from Dhanbad, Jharkhand—Mannan Malik. In 2009, when he became a cabinet minister in Jharkhand, the Malik caste was added in the state OBC list. Now, Pathans are also trying to add their caste to the OBC list. There are currently four Muslim MLAs in Jharkhand—Alamgir Alam from Pakur (Sheikh-upper caste), Sarfaraz Ahmad from Gandey (Sheikh-upper Caste), Hafizul Hassan Ansari from Madhupur (Julaha-lower caste), and Irfan Ansari from Jamtara (Julaha-lower caste).

Castes such as the Julahas and Kalals do not marry among themselves. And there is no question of marrying upper castes at all. It is the same way here as it is in the Hindu society, it is the same here. At the level of mosques, there may have been division along caste lines before the 1990s, but

now there isn't that kind of discrimination. Before 1990 there used to be many mosques for different castes. The mosques that would serve the upper castes would not have lower caste visitors and vice-versa. Now even Dalits are going inside temples, and Pasmandas are also going to the same mosques as upper caste Muslims.

Dalit, Pasmanda, and Adivasi Relations

I would like to say that the Adivasis here are coming forward and are making their societies aware but the Dalits and Adivasis do not have very good relations. The reason behind this is that you will see very few Ambedkarwadis here. The ideology and thought of Ambedkar has been able to reach Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to some extent but it has almost negligible presence in Jharkhand. After the entry of BAMCEF (The All India Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation) and Bhim Army, there has been some mobilization. It is not that there are no Ambedkarites at all. But the kind of concentration that should be there isn't seen here. Adivasis are more (politically) aware here. Similarly, Pasmandas haven't even started asserting their struggle. But the hope is that in the years to come these people will get strengthened. It is true that they want to come forward but they haven't understood these ideas yet. The radicalization of people has led to some kind of distance between the Dalits and Pasmandas. It is not the same with Adivasis. Pasmandas have good relations with Adivasis.

Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas are our home. We Pasmandas have lived with tribal groups and other Sadan⁴ castes for centuries. Here, Pasmandas, especially the Jolahas, had always opposed the Muslim League and the communal policies of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. That is why the elite Muslims used to call us Congress' dogs. Pasmandas did not go to Pakistan at the time of Partition owing to this cordial relationship with the Tribals. The real meaning of the slogan *Jolha-Kolha Bhai-Bhai* is that Pasmandas and Adivasis are brothers. The ongoing Hinduization of Tribes, saffronisation of Dalits and backwards castes, and Ashrafization of Pasmandas work towards weakening this *Jolha-Kolha Bhai-Bhai* slogan. As much as Tribals, Dalits and backward castes are indigenous they are also Jharkhandi. Similarly, Pasmandas are indigenous to this land and they are also Jharkhandi.

Ashrafization

Ashrafization has led to forming a kind of distance between Momin Pasmandas and Adivasis, and the common roots that they share have been impacted by it. There has been a change. A new culture has come into being which has emphasis on *Qawwali, Mushaira, Adab-Tehzeeb*. There are also traces of the Wahhabi movement springing up. Ashrafization is taking place in multiple ways. The Muslims of Jharkhand live and behave like Adivasis even after converting to Islam. But after Ashrafization there have been many changes that have taken place among them. A sort of distance has been formed between them and the Adivasis. They are adopting *Ashrafiya* culture. They started

⁴ Sadan refers to various caste groups or non-tribal ethnic groups of Jharkhand.

considering themselves as *alpsankhyak* or minority. Until the time this Ashrafization hadn't taken place, they would consider themselves part of the majority. That has also led to the erosion of their ties and connections with the Dalit-Bahujans. Rest of the work has been done by the BJP and the RSS by neglecting them and separating them from the rest of the local populace. Ashrafization has led to them being more "religious". Earlier they would participate in Muharram and would play lathis (sticks) like the Adivasis. As I came to know from some sources, the Momins (weavers) of Chotanagpur (now Jharkhand) used to celebrate Muharram first, used to play lathis, and make Tajiya⁵. It was the first festival of Momins and later, they started celebrating festivals like Eid and Bakrid. There used to be Dargahs in every village of Momins where they used to play lathis and special preparations were made for the month of Muharram. Even today you will find this tradition in many villages here. Apart from Momin, the Adivasi or other Sadan castes used to play with lathis and still celebrate some of these. Another festival which started only a few years ago, is Milad Un Nabi (the birthday of Prophet Mohammad).

But now they have started going to mosques, started offering namaz and joining ranks with the Tablighi Jamaat. In a way, these processes have also contributed to the rupturing of ties and of loosing of the shared roots they had with Dalits, Adivasis and other Bahujans.

Role of Pasmandas in Jharkhand's Social History

Abdur Razzaque Ansari was a freedom fighter and leader of the Momin Conference. There is a hospital in Irba (Ranchi) named Abdur Razzaque Ansari Memorial Weavers Hospital. From 1946 to 1975 Abdur Razzaque Ansari established 17 schools for boys and girls in his and neighbouring villages. The first school he opened was in Irba in 1946 named after Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, followed by about one and half dozen schools in the region. After education he took up the task of economic upliftment of the weaver community.

He established about 40 weavers' cooperative societies. He was against the Muslim League and its two-nation theory from the very beginning. Because of his efforts, all the five seats of Chhotanagpur division came into the Congress fold in 1946. Someone asked him why you talk only about the weavers/Ansaris. He said, "About 70 per cent of the Muslim population in Chhotanagpur belongs to Ansari (caste) alone. They are all extremely poor and backward people. If I solve the problems of 70 per cent of the people, the problems of the rest will be solved on their own."

The Muslim League supporters contended that Momins were dogs of the Congress. They also referred to us as *kuffar* [plural of *kafir*, nonbeliever]. Jinnah had told the Adivasis that they should ask for Adivasistan and he would demand for Pakistan. He told Jaipal Singh he himself desired to be included in Pakistan and he would give Bengal to the Adivasis. But we, as a community, were

⁵ Taajiya/ Taziya is a replica of the mausoleum of Imam Hussain, the grandson of prophet Muhammad. It is made in various forms and types and is carried out in a procession on any of the first nine days in the month of Muharram.

proud of ourselves. The All India Momin Conference condemned even the Congress' decision to support the two-nation theory. Amanat Ali is cited in Sinha-Kerkhoff's paper thus: "When Nehru paid a visit here I competed with my school friends over who would touch his feet. We were punished for this in school. The teachers (some of whom were English) did not like us to welcome Nehru. The history of our involvement in the freedom struggle is very old. In 1857 more than 70 percent of the sepoys who were killed in the movement against the British were Ansaris. We were called the "bloody Julahas" [Amanat Ali, 30 November 2000, A Momin Conference member and "politician by profession"] (Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2004).

State Government's attitude towards Pasmandas

The new government is quite good, especially for Pasmandas. It is a stable government and we can ask questions about it. There were many lynchings of Pasmanda Muslims like Alimuddin Ansari, Tabrez Ansari, Minhaz Ansari, Mubarak Ansari and others under the previous Raghubar Das government (BJP). We were not even able to ask questions to that government. Since 2019, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) has come to power in Jharkhand and we can at least ask them questions. Minorities such as the Pasmandas are at least heard now, which was completely missing in the previous government. They even had a Pasmanda minister in the cabinet—Hafizul Hassan Ansari.

When Hemant Soren had become the Chief Minister in a previous term there was a discussion around ST status for the Pasmandas in Jharkhand. There is a caste referred to as Kurmi or Kurmi, who are also known as Mahto caste. So, the Kurmis carried out a movement demanding ST status in Jharkhand. That matter had involved a lot of Pasmanda leaders such as Furqan Ansari who is a former Member of Parliament. So, they also demanded that the Pasmandas should also be given ST status. This matter slowly died down and has not been revived since.

RSS has been working to radicalize Dalits, but it hasn't been very successful in the case of Adivasis. In the Tabrez Ansari case, they were mostly lower caste Dalits who were involved. RSS has been working to form a stranglehold over Dalits and OBCs in Jharkhand as being against the Adivasis.

Afterword

I will close this discussion with two small examples of how caste appears in everyday conversations and interactions of Pasmanda Muslims. When I was completing my intermediate from a government college in Patna I lived in a small lodge where there were more than 20 students living with me. My roommate also came from the same town as me and he too was from Julaha caste. Of the twenty students, there were 7 students who belonged to Muslim lower castes; the rest were all Ashraf upper caste Muslims. One day an Ashraf, who called himself a Siddiqui-Sheikh, was debating on some topic with my friend Hussain, who is from the Julaha caste. Suddenly the discussion got heated up and they started fighting each other in front of my room. When we heard

the sound, we came out of our rooms and pacified them. But when Hussain was going to his room Siddiqui abused him saying that you are a Julaha, you don't have any status, don't even try to fight me again I will beat you up brutally next time.

In my first semester of graduation, I had three friends: one Ashraf, another Bhumihar and the third one, a Rajput. One day all three asked my caste and I told them that I was a Sheikh Muslim. I believed it would pass since there was no mention of Ansari or any caste marker in my title in my college identity card or certificate. Both the Bhumihar and the Rajput friends started calling me Sheikh from that day onwards but the Ashraf friend did not believe me to be a Sheikh or even an upper caste Muslim. One day he came up to me and told me that you are a lower caste Muslim. When I told him that there is no caste among Muslims, he said that it is there but you can't see it.

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