Appendix-B

Caste among non-Hindus

There has been a dispute among the authors as to whether the concept ‘caste’ is peculiar to Hindus or it is also applicable to other religious categories. Some social scientists have argued that caste norms are based on ideals, which are unique to Hinduism, and that ‘true’ castes is to be found only among those who profess the Hindu faith. Yet, this presupposes much firmer boundaries between ethno-religious ‘communities’ that was often the case in the past centuries. Certainly, caste like forms of rank and corporate allegiance have been very prominent in the lives of most people, who would now a days be thought of as non-Hindus. The difficulty here is that, so many studies of the supposedly casteless minority faiths have played down those elements of religious and social life which adherents of these faiths have shared with the wider society. Yet if one looks at the millions, who subscribe to India’s minority faiths- Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Jainism and in the past and today a high level of sensitivity to the nuances of caste, especially in matters of marriage and ritual pollution (Bayle, Susan; 1999:18) Sriniwas (1980:1) also claimed that caste is found among the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jainism, and Jews. Caste is ubiquitous, and this has resulted in an ideology tolerant of diversity.

The scholars who studied the social stratification of the Muslim society of India were of the opinion that though the Muslim society differed from that of the Hindus on some points but the former shared some of the dominant characteristics of the later. Elliot(1869), Ibbetson(1920), Risleley(1891), Rose(1911) and Russel and Lal(1916) suggested the existence of a number of Muslim groups of various backgrounds which are almost analogous to Jati. Similarly, a number of social scientists like Weber(1947), Hutton(1946), N.K.Bose(1958) and Srinivas(1964) have also shown the existence of caste attributes in the Muslim society.

There is enough documentary evidences to confirm the existence of the caste system among other religious categories in India, particularly among the Christians and Muslims (Forrester,1980). But Imtiaz Ahmad, who has edited an important volume ‘Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims in India’ has come to the conclusion that ‘caste’ among Muslims of India owes directly to the Hindu influences, but it has been reinforced by the the justification offered by the idea of birth and descent as the criteria states in Islamic law’ (Ahmad;1978:15).Yet he recognizes that the major differences between the caste among the Muslims and the Hindus lies in the fact that “Caste status among the Muslims does not rest on the ideology of pure and impure so that Muslim castes observe social distance on the basis of differences, privileged and descent”(ibid:12). D’Souza (1981:78) rightly criticized Ahmad’s view
when he says “If the system of stratification among the Muslims does not possess the supposed fundamental feature of caste, namely the ritual status, where is then the necessity for Ahmad to characterize it as caste. The necessity arises because in other aspects, the stratification systems among the Muslims and the Hindus are remarkably similar. As he can not imagine that such a similarity can be independently generated, he has to assume that it has been handed down from the pre-Islamic ancestral period”.

In the dynamics of rural society, Mukherjee (1947) obtained first-hand information to provide a picture of both the Muslim and Hindu societies of Bengal. While discussing the caste pattern of the village, he says “the basis of society in this sub-continent is caste”. In his attempt to give a picture of Muslim society, he pointed out that although Islam strictly prohibits any distinction between the believers of Islam, but in India, ultimately caste differentiation began to take place in these communities. As a result, like the Hindus, the Muslims began to prohibit intermarriage and some places also interdining between the different categories (For instance, Mughals, Pathans, Shias, Sunnis, Khojas etc.) and various occupational groups of weavers, oil-pressure etc., which are hardly in any way different from the previously formed Hindu Jatis, also emerged in this community. Talke(1914) refers to this feature among the Muslims in Bengal, when he says “Socially, the community has had the misfortunes to inherit the traits of both their Hindu and Muslim forbears. Caste prejudices left their mark upon many. Ther are about 35 separate Muslim castes in Bengal”. There is no denying the fact that, Islam in India patterned its social classes roughly in imitation of the four main Hindu Varna (caste divisions). The Indian Muslims used to divide themselves in to: (i) Syed, (ii) Mughal, (iii) Sheikh, and (iv) Pathans; the Hindu counterparts being: (i) Brahmans (ii) Kshtriyas (iii) Vaishyas (iv) Sudra. On this aspect of Islamic society Cunningham (1903:31) remarked that “The Mohammedan of India fancifully divided themselves into four classes, after the manner of the Hindus, viz., Syeds, Sheikhs, Mughuls, and Puttans”. However, this classification of Muslims of India on the caste pattern has been opposed by Karim ( 1956:116). He recognized that Muslim populations of Bengal as in rest of India were organized more or less like the Hindus but he says”--- the ‘fanciful’ fourfold divisions of the Muslim society does not correspond strictly to the Hindu caste structure in fact”. In fact, Karim studied only the cultural aspect of caste, not its structural aspects, as a result failed to realize that in the structural aspect (refers to the determinants of castes) the term caste is applicable to all societies.

Caste among Sikhs
As the roots of the Sikh religion found in Hindu religion. Therefore, their social institutions do not differ vitally from the Hindus. Suffice it to say that Sikhism in the beginning was absolutely
free from caste prejudices and any considerations of high or low in society. Free from caste and social barriers of Hinduism, it immediately attracted the people of the lower castes who embraced it en masse. They felt relieved being rated on par with their co-religionists. “But after the downfall of Banda Bahadur, the forces of disintegration crepted in and defouled the whole system founded by the worthy Gurus. The same social evils, caste barriers and caste prejudices, from which the people of the so called lower castes had tried to escape, were thrust upon them by their co-religionists who happened to be in the majority” (cited in Mehta; 1965:28).

Sikhs are broadly divided into Sardars and Mazhabis (the scavengers), the former consisting of high castes and the latter of sweepers. The Sardars include Jat and Kamboh (landowners), Tarkhan (carpenter), Kumhar (potter), Mehra (water carrier), and Cimba (washer). The first two castes regard themselves as superiors to others. The Mazhabis, not only came from low castes but were converted to Sikhism later than the higher caste groups. In some parts of Punjab there exists the Sansi (shepherd) who were formerly included among the ‘criminal tribes’. Sansi converts to Sikhism rank even lower than Mazhabis.

The low caste Sikhs are now termed as ‘Kamin Sikhs’, ‘Rehtia Sikhs’, ‘Majhabi Sikhs’, ‘Ramgarhia Sikhs’, ‘Rai Sikhs’, and so on. “The Sikhs who were casteless in the beginning are now a caste by themselves. With in the Sikhs, there are a number of gradations, very much similar to the Hindu society, and, for all practical purposes, they function as exclusive, endogamous groups” (Prasad; 1957:112).

The above discussion concludes that the castes are found not only among Hindus of India, but other religions particularly Islam and Sikh also have social groups which shows caste like features.