

Working Paper – 5



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

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Muslims of Nohsa Panchayat

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Fieldnotes on Caste Practices among Muslims of Nohsa Panchayat

KHURSHEED AKBAR¹

The commonly held view is that the caste based stratification is a feature of the Hindu model of social organization. Other religious communities, who lived in India or in the Indian sub-continent, are organised on the basis of egalitarian principles. There is some truth in this view because Hindu religious philosophy and ideology sanctions the caste based social inequalities and hierarchies on the basis of birth among its followers (Ghurye, 1961). The ideology and philosophy of other religions practiced in India are egalitarian in nature as their great traditions teach equality and disallow inequalities and social hierarchies among its followers on the basis of birth (Ansari, 1960; Ahmad, 1978; Thapar, 2014). However, their ideological egalitarianism has been compromised to a certain extent in the Indian-subcontinent (Ansari, 1960). The adherents of these egalitarian religions, especially Islam and Christianity, have organised themselves on the hierarchical notion of high and low.

The concept of caste based hierarchy is opposed to Islamic ideology. Islam stands for perfect equality for all individuals and groups in social and religious spheres (Siddiqui, 1978). The followers of Islam represent a single homogeneous group of Muslim Ummah (brotherhood). With the passage of time Islam spread to distant lands and civilizations, and the interactions with other cultures and civilizations gradually reshaped the social organisation of Muslims and some sort of stratification started featuring among Muslims (Ansari, 1960). In India, the influence of Hinduism can be seen in the form of certain caste like features among Muslims (Nazir, 1993). Some studies carried by different scholars on Muslim society, such as Ghaus Ansari (1960), Zarina Ahmad (1962) in Uttar Pradesh and Imtiaz Ahmad (1978) in various parts of India, suggest the presence of caste and caste-like features among Muslims. On the other hand, some sociologists and most theologians argue that caste does not exist among Muslims and the practice of untouchability is disallowed in Islam. However, on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission some Muslims groups were included in the Central List of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Of late, the term 'Dalit Muslims' has also been frequently used to denote the traditional backward Muslims in the discourse on castes among Muslims. However, there is a lack of clarity about the usage of the term 'Dalit'.

¹ Khursheed Akbar worked with the TISS Patna Centre as a Research Fellow from March 2016 to April 2017. The present paper was prepared as part of the fellowship and presented in a symposium in February 2017 at Patna. The author is thankful to Prof. Mohammad Sajjad and Prof. Masood Alam Falahi for their insightful comments on the first draft.

On one hand, it has been used to denote all the Muslims groups which are currently included in the category of the OBCs. On the other, it has been used to denote those Muslims groups who are converted from untouchable Hindu castes (Anwar, 2000) whom Ansari (1960) had called *arzal*.

The present study is an attempt to understand the caste based social stratification among Muslims. The study is based on the field work carried out in Nohsa gram panchayat, Phulwari Sharif, Patna. When I approached the field, my hypothesis about caste among Muslims was based on my lived experiences in my ancestral village in Ghazipur district of eastern Uttar Pradesh. In my village, different Muslims are organised in terms of *biradaris*.² *Biradaris* are structurally and functionally comparable to the caste system. Endogamy is strictly practised and the relationship between different Muslim groups is hierarchical. The Muslims of Nohsa Panchayat also call endogamous groups as *zat*, *jati* or *biradari*.³ I have chosen to retain the term *biradari* in this fieldnote because it is used widely among local Muslims to denote Muslim endogamous groups. The duration of the fieldwork was about four months from August to November 2016, divided into two phases and was based on semi-structured interviews combined with observations. I conducted formal and informal conversations with various *biradari* members, community leaders, religious scholars, political leaders, working women and youth. I also attended a few marriage ceremonies during the fieldwork which provided me an opportunity to observe inter-*biradari* relationships. Further, I spent time at the ICDS Centre, shops and other public spaces to augment my field observations.⁴

PROFILE OF NOHSA PANCHAYAT

Nohsa panchayat has three major villages in its jurisdiction, namely, Nohsa, Nawada and Hinduni. The number of voters in the panchayat is approximately eleven thousand, out of which six thousand are Hindus and five thousand are Muslims. The members of the two religious communities mostly live in

² "Dumont used the word 'marriage circle' as an equivalent for the vernacular term *biradari*. I find this translation somewhat erroneous and unsatisfactory. The vernacular word *biradari* implies that the members of the group share a common feeling of brotherhood and are thus united through that feeling. The Sheikh Siddiquis regard themselves as members of a single *biradari* to the extent that they can be treated as a *biradari* in the absence of that institutionalized expression of the feeling of brotherhood called *panchayat*. Caste brotherhood would appear to be a more appropriate translation of the word *biradari*" (Ahmad, 1978:172-73).

³ "...the term *biradari* in its entire connotation is not exactly identical to what is meant by the term *caste*, yet in its inner structure it exhibits the fundamental characteristics of *caste-membership* is determined only by birth, the group boundaries are maintained through endogamy, and group councils and occupational specialisation are present.....(Ali, 1978:24)".

⁴ ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) was launched by the Indian Government in 1975. The ICDS centres provide supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-education, nutrition and health education, immunization, health check-up and referral services to mother and child.

separate residential localities. It should be noted that Nawada and Hinduni are predominantly Hindu dominated and, therefore, these villages were not a part of the fieldwork. Villages with majority Muslim population were chosen. The residential localities are also, by and large, separate for different *biradaris*. Nohsa panchayat is divided into fourteen wards. The first five wards were taken up for fieldwork. Ward Number One has approximately forty households of which eight to nine households belong to the Ansari *biradari* and rest to the Sheikh *biradari*. Ward Number Two comprises of about hundred households. In this Ward, the Shah-Faqirs, the Ansaris and the Sheikhs each have around twenty households and the Sayyads nearly four to five. Ward Number Three does not have a single Muslim household and hence was not studied. Ward Number Four consists of multiple small localities, segregated on religious basis as well as *biradari* groups. This ward has a large number of voters amounting to around three thousand and five hundred persons. Out of these voters, two thousand and eight hundred are Muslims and seven hundred are Hindus. Ward Number Five is essentially dominated by Muslims and is also divided into several localities, each named after the *biradari* living in it.

It is important to understand that communities in Nohsa panchayat are shifting from village settlement to a township model. Yet they have successfully retained many rural characteristics. With the coming up of AIIMS, one can see unplanned development in the form of construction of apartments and other buildings, such as schools, shops, and so on. Yet the streets are too narrow to allow vehicles to pass through, there is no proper drainage system and drain-water pours out directly onto the streets.

Each of the two main religious groups are further divided into several *biradaris* and caste groups which are as follows:

- 1) Muslim *biradaris* include: a) Sayyad; b) Sheikh; c) Pathan; d) Mallick; e) Ansari (Julaha); f) Rayeen (Kunjra); g) Mansoori (Dhunia); h) Rangrez; i) Qureshi (Kasai); j) Pamaria; k) Hawari (Dhobi); l) Siddiqui (Churihar); m) Salmani (Nai); n) Nat; o) Bakho; q) Halalkhor (Lalbegi); and r) Shah-faqir (Sai).
- 2) Hindu castes include: a) Brahmin; b) Bhumihaar; c) Kurmi; d) Yadav; e) Koeri; f) Daagi (Mahto); g) Kumhar; h) Teli; i) Paswan; and j) Chamar.

It is important to mention here that one can also observe the differences in the way the houses of the different *biradaris* are constructed. Houses of the upper groups and to some extent mid-level *biradaris* are large in size made with quality building material, whereas houses of the lower groups are much smaller. Thus, the size of house indicates the socio-economic standing of different *biradaris*.

BIRADARIS IN NOHSA PANCHAYAT

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

The above verse is thirteenth verse of srat *sūrat l-hujurāt* in the Holy Quran which doesn't give religious legitimacy to the existence of any form of social hierarchy within Islamic societies. However, in Nohsa panchayat is home to several *biradaris* that are hierarchical in nature. I have identified eighteen *biradari* groups, which I discuss below:

SHEIKH

Sheikhs are found in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India. The term Sheikh means elder (*bujurg*).⁵ The Sheikhs of Nohsa panchayat claim that some of them are local converts while others have come from foreign lands. Ahmad pointed that Sheikhs claimed to have descended either from the Arab tribe of Koraish, the tribe to which Prophet Muhammad belonged, or from one of the close associates or friends of Muhammad (Ahmad, 1978). Sheikhs of Nohsa panchayat further claim that there is belief among some people that the Sheikhs are converts from Bhumihaar caste.⁶ There is no evidence, however, for this claim.

The Sheikhs of Nohsa panchayats are the numerically dominant *biradari*. In the past, they were landlords and, presently, majority of them are engaged in agriculture. Apart from agriculture, a number of Sheikhs are also government employees as well as own family businesses. Sheikhs are basically an endogamous group, with the exception that marital alliance between Sheikhs and Pathans is permissible.

PATHAN OR KHAN

Pathan *biradari* is dispersed in different parts of India and is believed to have its origins in Afghanistan. Ansari (1960), for instance, has argued that "Pathans are generally considered to have come either from Afghanistan or from the

⁵ "Literally, the word 'Sheikh' means chief or leader and is used in its Arabic form as an honorific title for the head of a tribe, lineage or family. However, in India the term has come to enjoy a somewhat specific meaning and connotes a status group" (Ahmad, 1978:179).

⁶ "Gait rightly noted that the Sheikh category is comparable to the Kshatriya category among the Hindus and groups have frequently used this to stake a claim to superior status in the social hierarchy of Muslim castes" (Ahmad, 1978: 184).

Pashto-speaking tribes of the North-West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan". Sheikhs of Nohsa themselves claim that some of them do have foreign origin while others are converted from the Rajput caste.⁷ They also claim that, historically, Pathans and Rajputs shared a friendly relationship.

The Pathans are not original inhabitants of Nohsa panchayat but have come from different parts of Bihar. Pathans in this Panchayat are primarily endogamous groups. However, there are cases of marriage alliances with Sheikhs. There are also cases of Pathans marrying their daughters to Sayyads, but no account of a Sayyad woman marrying a Pathan could be obtained.

SAYYAD

Sayyads are generally considered to have descended from Prophet Muhammad through his daughter who married the fourth Caliph, Hazrat Ali. This claim was generally accepted by all Muslim *biradaris* and Sayyads command respect from all other Muslim *biradaris* on the basis of this claim. Sayyads occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy. According to traditions, it is forbidden to help any Sayyad in the name of charity (*khairat* and *zakat*) (Ansari, 1960). A member belonging to the Pathan *biradari* of Nohsa said that if anybody will give *zakat* (charity) to Sayyad, he will never receive the blessings (*sawaab*) of Allah. It is pertinent to note here that during another fieldwork (July-November 2014) in my village, Bara, in Ghazipur, a Sayyad informant told me that the food grains offered to Sayyad is termed as *Rasooli*, which is etymologically derived from the term *Rasool*, meaning Prophet. The legitimacy for the higher position of Sayyads comes from the fact that in the past, most of the religious duties were performed by them. According to a Sheikh informant, the meaning of Sayyad was 'leader,' therefore, they are placed high in the social order.

In Nohsa, Sayyad is a very small community. According to a Sheikh informant, there are only four to five Sayyad households in Nohsa Panchayat. They are mainly engaged in government service. It is a popular belief among the people of Nohsa panchayat that Sayyads can marry a girl from any *biradari*.⁸

MALLICK

Mallicks are spread over a large area of Bihar. The word Mallick is derived from Arabic and means 'king' or 'lord'. The Mallicks of Bihar claim that they are the descendants of Sayyad Ibrahim Mallick, popularly known as Mallick Bayah

⁷ "There are numerous instances in Uttar Pradesh where converted Rajputs have added the title of 'Khan' to their names and have claimed Pathan descent" (Ansari, 1960:37).

⁸ This has also been reported by Bhattacharya (1978) and Siddiqui (1978) in their respective studies.

Rahmatullah Alhe. He served as a general in the Delhi Sultanate and later was appointed as the general of Bihar. His tomb (*mazar*) is situated over a hill known as '*Peer Pahari*' in Bihar Sharif. Those who trace their ancestry to him started calling themselves Mallicks.

Mallicks of Bihar consider themselves as a sub-group of Sayyad. However, due to illiteracy and unemployment their economic condition is very poor. A Mallick informant told me that they spend their youth either as hawkers on footpaths in different parts of India or migrate to countries in the Gulf as labourers. Very few Mallicks are in government service. Due to their impoverished condition, they have been included in the OBC category in Bihar. In contrast to this claim, a journalist who belongs to the Mallick *biradari*, argues:

Mallicks are a very small, but influential caste of Muslims. Mallicks are the most developed among all the castes in Bihar.....There is no doubt that some Mallicks are poor yet nobody can deny the fact that even though their numbers are small, this caste has the largest percentage of Zamindars – of course in proportion to their population.....The truth is that declaring Mallicks as Backward is injustice to the real Backward Caste Muslims, as all the present and past records prove that among Muslims they are the most developed caste. A few examples would be enough to understand it. Of the last four Chairmen of the Minority Commission, two were Mallicks; of the four Muslim IAS Officers in Bihar, one is Mallick; the only Muslim chairman of the Bihar State Electricity Board was a Mallick, the first Chief Minister of Bihar before Independence (Barrister Yunus) was a Mallick, the President of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee (just before Independence) was a Mallick (Abdul Bari), the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University before Partition, A B A Haleem, was a Mallick (he later became the Vice Chancellor of Karachi University).⁹

JULAHA OR ANSARI

Julahas are spread across Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India. Their main occupation is weaving. They are also known as Ansari and Momin. Julahas are one of the few occupational groups who continue to engage in their traditional occupation. They are also one of the largest occupational *biradaris* among Muslims in India (Ansari, 1960; Ghosh, 2010). Julahas are the second largest *biradari* in Nohsa panchayat and claim that they are the descendants of Ayub Ansari, one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad.

⁹ For details see [Online: web] Accessed on 7th February, 2017, URL: <http://www.radianceweekly.com/146/3351/davos-misses-the-bus/2009-02-15/muslim-affairs/story-detail/caste-in-a-muslim-moulda-shortcut-road-to-success.html>

The Julahas of Nohsa panchayat have stopped identifying themselves with the term 'julaha' and call themselves Ansari or Momin.¹⁰ They trace their origin to Ansar tribes of Arabia. Several scholars are of the opinion that a large section of weavers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar was converted to Islam from local Hindu populations (Ansari, 1960; Sikand and Katju, 1994; Ghosh, 2010; Thapar, 2014). Some scholars believe that the Julahas were the first among all indigenous occupational castes to convert to Islam (Ansari, 1960).

Due to their historical engagement with traditional occupation, they were allotted lower position in the social hierarchy. However, the observations from the field reveal that because of their progress in the field of education or improvement in educational status, their social position has improved as compared to other *biradaris*. The Ansaris or Julahas have been ranked at the top among all occupational *biradaris*. Apart from their attainments in modern education, Ansaris have also been able to improve their status in terms of religious education. Their status with regard to religious education can be assessed by the fact that among all occupational *biradaris*, only a Julaha has succeeded in reaching to the position of Imam of Imarat-e-Shariah in Phulwari Sharif.

MANSOORI OR DHUNIA

Mansooris are found in the northern region of India. In eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bhojpur region of Bihar they are known as Dhunia or Dhuna, derived from Hindi word *Dhunna*, that is, to card with etymological roots in the Sanskrit word *Dhu*, which means, to agitate (Crooke; 1896). In the Mithila region of Bihar they are known as Naddafs. The term *Naddaf* is Arabic, which means 'someone who separates'. In Rajasthan, they are known as Tilanga or Pinjara. In some pockets of Uttar Pradesh, they are known as Behna. They claim that *behna* is a Urdu word. But in the writings of Crooke, *behna* is described as a Sanskrit term, which means 'seed'. In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, they are known as Ruikars which is an Arabic word. Though the members of this community are known by different names in different regions, they are traditionally associated with the occupation of cotton-carders.

Mansooris trace their ancestry to Sufi Saint Khawaja Mansoor-Al-Hajjaj (Crooke, 1896). A Mansoori informant told me that they came along with Khawaja Mansoor-Al-Hajjaj from Baghdad. He further said that some of them are converts from lower caste Hindus under the influence of Khawaja-Al-Hajjaj. Crooke (1896) states that some Hindus also engage in cotton-carding but it is

10 "From around the late nineteenth century many north Indian Julahas shed their pre-conversion Hindu prefix and rejected the name Julaha altogether. This was in favour of 'Momin', meaning the faithful/men of honour, or 'Ansari', after the name of the Arab ancestor they claimed themselves, or 'Momin Ansar' or 'Sheikh Momin'. The term Momin was perhaps in use even before the nineteenth century, at least in Purnea, but the trend became more noticeable in the 1911 census returns. The change of the name was made both to gain an equal standing with upper classes, as well as to establish a purer Islamic status". (Ghosh, 2010:90).

primarily the occupation of the Muslims. He also says that *biradaris* consider themselves to be Sunni Muslims, but still practise many lower castes Hindu rituals and thereby probably are converts.

The Mansooris residing in Nohsa panchayat are migrants from different parts of Bihar. Compared to other communities, Mansooris are relatively better off in terms of educational and economic conditions. My own impression from the field is that Mansooris are next to Ansaris in the social hierarchy.

KALAL OR IRAQI

Kalal is an occupational *biradari* which lives in Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. They are also known as Iraqis or Rankis. This *biradari* has traditionally been associated with distilling of liquor. It is believed that *kalal* is derived from the Sanskrit word '*kakyapla*', meaning 'a distiller of liquor' (Samuiddin and Khanam, 2008). It is also believed that Kalals are mostly Persian immigrants, but Crooke describes them as a sub-caste of Kalwar, who embraced Islam (Samuiddin and Khanam, 2008).

The Kalals of the Nohsa Panchayat have given up their traditional occupation of distilling liquor. Presently, they are mainly engaged in the manufacturing and sellings of kites. My sole informant belonging to the Kalal *biradari* told that since the last three generations his family has been mainly engaged in manufacturing and selling of kites. He too is engaged in this business in Nohsa whereas his brother does similar work in Kolkata.

My observations reveal that though the Kalals have disassociated themselves from their traditional occupation of distillation of liquor the stigma does not leave them. As one of the participants from the Churihar *biradari* (bangle makers) informed, "Muslims neither accept donation (*chanda*) from Kalals for any religious work, as it is considered forbidden (*haram*), nor do they accept their invitations of social ceremonies like marriage." Similar observations have been made by Russell and Hiralal in 1916 in their study in Calcutta (Samiuiddin and Khanam, 2008).¹¹

QURESHI

Qureshi is an occupational *biradari* which is found across the country. They are traditionally engaged in meat and hide business. They are popularly known

¹¹ "Risley (1891) merges Kalal with Kalwar while Russell and Hiralal describe Kalal and Kalwar together, and note that in Bengal the Muslim distillers and liquor-sellers are regarded as outcaste because of their profession and that other Muslims do not eat, drink or inter-marry with them" (Samiuiddin and Khanam, 2008: 352).

as Qassab. *Qassab* is Urdu term for 'butcher.' The traditional occupation of Qureshis has been the slaughtering of animals. This *biradari* is also known by different names such as Kasai, Chikwa, Bakarkasab and Badekasab. Qureshis are further divided into two sub-groups, namely: i) Kasai; and ii) Chikwa. Both sub-groups are endogamous and also differ in terms of their occupation. Kasais are the ones who slaughter big animals like buffaloes and cows. They are also known as *badekasab* (big butchers). On the other hand, the Chikwas deal in small animals like goats, chicken and sheep. They are also known as *bakarkasab* (goat butchers). The majority of the Qureshis continue to be engaged in their traditional occupation.

The Qureshis of Nohsa panchayat believe that some of them are the descendants of the Arab Quresh tribe king, Qassa, who came along with their kings and soldiers and settled in different parts of India. They also believe that some of them are the descendants of Hindus who converted to Islam. However, Ansari (1960) is of the opinion that Qureshis are converts from a Hindu caste, Khatik, who were engaged in dealing with meats and hideskin. He further argues that the Muslim Khatiks are divided in two separate castes: Chikwa and Kasab. Chikwas do not slaughter cows because of having descended from Hindus while the Kasabs supplied all sorts of meats and did not hesitate to butcher cows.

Observations in the field show that Qureshis are economically better off due to their engagement in the lucrative business of meat and tannery. But the educational status of Qureshis is very low. This is mainly due to the fact that they start working at a young age.

RAYEEN OR KUNJRA

Rayeen or Kunjra is the second largest Muslim *biradari* in Bihar after Ansari (Ghosh, 2010). They are found in the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab and several others parts of India. They are known by different names such as Bagwan or Bagvan, Sabzifarosh and Kabariya. They are traditionally engaged in cultivation and selling of fruits and vegetables. The Rayeens of Nohsa panchayat claim that they are the original inhabitants of Rayeen mountain in Arab. Contrary to this claim, Bukanan writes that under the influence of Sher Shah, they were converted from Khatik caste of Hindus (Anwar, 2000). Anwar argues that the word Kunjra is quite derogatory. But in Nohsa Panchayat I found that the words Kunjra and Rayeen were used interchangeably and generally no shame or derogation is attached to the term.

A large number of Rayeen is still engaged in traditional occupations. According to one of my informants, approximately seventy per cent of Rayeens

are still engaged in their traditional work. The educational status of the community is low in comparison to that of Ansari and Mansoori but better when compared to other occupational *biradaris*.

SHAH-FAQIR

Shah-Faqirs are engaged in begging which is generally considered their traditional occupation. They are also involved in digging graves and burial of dead bodies. They are known by different names such as Shah Sahib and Shah. They are popularly known as *sai*. The word *faqir* literally means 'a poor one in the need of god.'

Shah-Faqirs trace their origin to the Arabs. They claim that they are descendants of the Sufi saint Hazrat Shah Vadiuddin Urf Jinda Julan Shah Madaar, whose shrine is located at Makkanpur in Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Shah-Faqirs believe that Hazrat Shah Vadiuddin's life span was about 569 years long. He was a great scholar and engaged in spiritual activities. According to Samiuddin and Khanam (2008), Shah-Faqirs are religious mendicants belonging to a number of Sufi orders which are: Qalandariya, who trace their lineage with Qalandar Shah; Chishtiya, who identifies themselves with the lineage of Saint Moinuddin Chishti; and others that include Barakara and Takiyadar, the former sells brushes for white washing and the latter digs graves (Samiuddin and Khanam, 2008).

The Shah-Faqirs of Nohsa are mainly engaged in different forms of labour. But still a small section is engaged in traditional occupations and can be found begging outside the *mazar*.

CHURIHAR OR SIDDIQUI

Churihars are found in north India. They are traditionally associated with bangle-making. The word *churihar* meaning 'maker of glass bangles' is derived from Sanskrit language. Locally, they are called as *churiharas*, *churifarosh*s and *churiwalans*. The other name for Churihar is Manihar from the Sanskrit word *mani* meaning 'jewel' (Crooke, 1896).

Churihars trace their descent from the first Caliph of Islam, Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique. They use Siddique as their surname. Some use Sheikh as a surname and claim that they are a sub-group of Sheikh-Siddique, but others seem to be aware about their origin and think that such false claims do not help them in enhancing their status.

There are around twenty five to thirty Churihar households in Nohsa

panchayat. A very small population of Churihars is educated and done well in professional career. A large population including women of this group continues to be engaged in their traditional occupation. Since women of this group participate in the work-force, they are accorded a lower position in the social hierarchy.

NAT

The Muslim Nats are a semi-nomadic community. They converted to Islam from among the Hindu Nats. The Muslim Nats claim that they follow the lifestyle of Prophet Musa Ali Salam. He lived as a nomad and roamed with his tribe from one place to another. They trace their origin to Barabanki, Bahraich (U.P) from where, they claim, they dispersed to different parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In Bihar, they are found in the districts of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur and Patna.

Muslim Nats are divided into twelve sub-groups, which they call *Barah Pal*. These are Turkatha, Lodhra, Kongar, Junarhar, Avaan, Dhatu, Radhi, Mushariya, Kodariya, Gulgooliya, Satbhaiya and Raidayit. The Nats in Nohsa Panchayat belong to the Turkatha sub-group. They also call themselves Turkatha Pathan. They are traditionally associated with wrestling, selling cattle and bird trapping. A large number of them are engaged as daily-wage earners. Only a small section is engaged in selling cattle. The educational attainment of this community is pathetic. Out of forty households not a single person was found to be a matriculate. The head of their *biradari* Panchayat is known as *mukhiya*.

CASTE AND CASTE-LIKE SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS AMONG MUSLIMS IN NOHSA

1. Marriage

Endogamy is one of the important features of caste system (Ghurye, 1961; Hutton, 1946). The practice of strict endogamy is considered as contrary to the spirit of Islam and the principles of Quranic teachings (Ali, 1978). However, in Nohsa panchayat the Muslim *biradaris*, like the Hindu castes, are strictly endogamous. Thus, marriage within the *biradari* is the accepted norm and marriage outside the *biradari* is strongly discouraged or frowned upon. A Mallick informant said, "We marry within our *biradari*, we do not marry outside the *biradari*." He further said, "if someone marries outside the *biradari*, the *biradari* does not keep any relation with the offending person and the family to which that person belongs. Children born out of such marriages would also face difficulty in finding a suitable match within the *biradari*."

During my discussions, people used to rationalize or justify the practice of marriage within a *biradari* on the ground that they shared similar culture and life-style. Hence, marriage within a *biradari* ensures long-term stability. Inter-*biradari* marriages are assumed to be unsuccessful because of cultural differences. An informant, who is a practicing Imam (one who leads prayers in the mosque) said, “Yes, marriage within *biradari* is good. They speak the same language, their food habits are also similar. Due to this, the possibility of a breakdown in marriage is reduced. For example, the lifestyle of Khan *sahib* (Pathan) is different from that of a lower *biradari* such as Rayeen or Ansari. In case a marriage takes place between two *biradaris*, where the female is from an upper *biradari* and the male is from a lower *biradari*, there is a possibility that the wife might taunt her husband for belonging to the lower *biradari* and, thereby, the marriage will end up in trouble. Therefore, marriage should take place within a *biradari* even though marriage between different *biradaris* is legal.”

Though people agree that the tradition of Islam and teachings of Quran permit marriage between different *biradaris* and it is desirable, but it is discouraged on the ground of the notion of ‘purity of blood and bone’ even if both sides share similar class status (Siddique, 1978). On the contrary, Hasan Ali (1978) based on his study in the Southern Bihar (currently Jharkhand) concluded that the most important factor upholding *biradari* consciousness is maintaining the distinctiveness of groups among the various Muslims ethnic categories. However, my finding is similar to that of Siddique’s study (1978) of Calcutta (now Kolkata) as several people belonging to both higher and lower *biradaris* told me in personal conversation that if one marries outside the *biradari*, the bloodline will not remain pure. It will become of mixed descent.

However, inter-*biradari* marriages regularly occur between groups of similar status without any conflict. For example, marriage alliances between Muslims having surnames Pathan and Sheikh are permissible as they claim it to be a long standing tradition. A Pathan informant told me that marriage alliances between Sheikh and Pathan occur in entire Bihar. He said, “It’s an old tradition; in my knowledge my great grand-father and grand-father had permitted marriage alliances between Sheikh and Pathan.” He further added that the mentality of these two groups matches with each other which is not found in case of other *biradaris*.

I came across a few cases of inter-*biradari* marriages in the Panchayat (see Table 1) but most of them are confined to the new settlements of the panchayat. The inter-*biradari* marriages are both hypergamous and hypogamous in nature. Not a single inter-*biradari* marriage between the upper and lower *biradari* groups was reported in the old settlements of Nohsa village. A Sheikh informant of Nohsa village told that he had not seen any

inter-*biradari* marriage in Nohsa village except between Sheikh, Pathan and Sayyad. There is a notion of hypergamy among local Muslims that a Sayyad can marry a girl from any other ethnic groups, but the reverse is not possible (Ali, 1978). A Pathan informant said, “We marry with Sayyads but we only give our daughters to them, we do not accept their daughters”. But this claim was contradicted by a Sheikh informant who said that inter-*biradari* marriages normally took place only between Sheikhs and Sayyads. Siddiqui (1978) and Bhattacharya (1978) also observed that intermarriage was allowed between upper categories, particularly between Sayyad and Sheikh.

It emerged from my field study that inter-*biradari* marriages are not arranged but they are the result of personal choice of individuals, which are often accepted by family either prior to the marriage or later.

TABLE: 1

Reported Inter-biradari Marriages in Nohsa Panchayat

Grooms’ <i>Biradari</i>	Brides’ <i>Biradari</i>	Nature of marriage (as described by informants)	Attitude of families after marriage
Churihar (Siddiqui)	Rayeen (Kunjra)	Love	Accepted after marriage
Mallick	Ansari	Love-cum-arranged	Accepted before marriage
Pamaria	(Julaha)	Love	Accepted after marriage
Sheikh	Sheikh	Love-cum-arranged	Accepted after marriage
Shah-Faqir	Dhunia	Love-cum-arranged	Accepted before marriage
Lalbegi (Halalkhor)	(Mansoori) Ansari	Love	Accepted before marriage
Rayeen (kunjra)	(Julaha) Ansari	Love-cum-arranged	Accepted before marriage
Lalbegi (Halalkhor)	(Julaha) Sheikh Rangrez		Not yet accepted Accepted before marriage

2. Occupation

The upper Muslim *biradaris* are not attached with any hereditary or traditional occupations in Nohsa Panchayat. The Sayyads are mainly in government service. Sheikhs and Pathans are mainly associated with agriculture and business. Mallicks either migrate to countries in the Gulf or

are engaged in business. However, Muslim *biradaris* of lower and middle groups are partly associated with their hereditary or traditional occupations (see table 2). These occupations can be divided into two categories: clean and unclean. The unclean occupations can further be graded into different degrees of lowliness. The traditional occupations of Dhobi (washing clothes), Nat (jugglery) and Bakho (singing) are considered relatively higher occupations as compared to that of Halalkhor (manual scavenging).

Table:2

Biradari Groups and their Traditional Occupations

<i>Biradari</i> Groups	Traditional Occupation	Present Status of Traditional Occupation
<i>Upper</i>	Not associated with any particular traditional occupation	
Sayyad	"	-
Sheikh	"	
Pathan	"	
Mallick	„	
<i>Middle</i>		
Julaha	Weaving	Not following
Dhunia	Cotton carding	"
Kunjra	Vegetable and fruit selling	Following
Kalal	Liquor distillation	Not following
Rangrez	Dying	Subsidiary occupation
Kasai	Slaughtering animals and meat selling	Following
Nai	Hair cutting	Following
Dafali	Drum beating	
Shah-faqir	Begging	Subsidiary occupation
Churihara	Bangle selling	Not following
		Subsidiary occupation
		Subsidiary occupation

Lower		
Pamaria	Singing and dancing	Not following
Dhobi	Washing clothes	Subsidiary
Nat	Juggling and cattle trading	occupation
Bakho	Singing and dancing	"
Lalbegi	Manual scavenging	Not following
		Subsidiary
		occupation

3. Social Hierarchy

Now, I will discuss the third important attribute of the caste system, i.e., hierarchical order (Ghurye, 1950). Social hierarchy is considered as “essence of the caste system” (Jodhka, 2012). In a caste based society, each caste is ranked in relation to other castes (Ghurye, 1950; Dumont 1970).

In Nohsa, every *biradari* occupies a position of superiority or inferiority in relation to other *biradaris*. However, the precise position of *biradaris* placed at the mid-level of social hierarchy are not very clear or well defined. Each *biradari*, in this case, claims foreign ancestry in order to place itself in superior position.

Informants broadly categorized Muslim *biradaris* into three fold division of upper, middle and lower. In local lexion, these are called *badi jat*, *Chhoti jat* and *Sabse Chhoti jat*. This broader categorization was done on the basis of descent (Arab and others) and traditional occupations (either clean or unclean). Except the upper category (Sayyad, Sheikh, Pathan and Mallick) other two categories are attached to specific traditional occupations. Apart from this, the other criteria which play important role in social ranking at the middle and lower levels are the educational attainment (either religious or mainstream education), observance of purdah, employment in govt. services and the numerical strength of the community.

The Pathan, Sheikh and Mansoori informants of Nohsa panchayat roughly placed the *biradaris* into three fold strata (see table 3). In fact, there is no agreement on Shah-Faqirs position in the hierarchical division. The Pathan and Mansoori informants placed Shah-Faqir at lower level on the basis of their occupation of begging which is considered very low whereas the Sheikh informants placed them in the middle level because, according to them, begging is a degrading or unclean occupation. My Sheikhs categorised the Muslim *biradaris* into the following:

- (a) Sayyad, Sheikh, Pathan and Mallick: Upper level
- (b) Ansari or Julaha, Rayeen or Kunjra or Sabzifarosh, Qureshi or Kasai, Mansoori or Dhunia, Kalal or Iraqi, Hashmi or Dafali, Siddiqui or Chudihara, Salmani or Nai, and Shah-faqir or Sai: Mid-level
- (c) Pamaria, Nat, Bakho, Dhobi or Hawari and Halalkhor or Lalbegi: Lower level

Table:3

Social hierarchy of Biradari groups

Level	<i>Biradaris</i>
Upper	Sayyad, Sheikh, Pathan and Mallick
Middle	Ansari, Mansoori, Kalal, Qureshi, Kunjra, Churihara, Rangrez, Dafali, Nai and Shah-faqir
Lower	Pamaria, Dhobi, Nat, Bakho and Halalkhor

Upper Level Biradaris

Within each level, there are further divisions among *biradaris*. Among the four *biradaris* in the upper level of the social hierarchy, Sayyads almost by common consensus were placed at the highest position in the social ranking by the virtue of their lineage from Prophet Muhammad’s family. They are considered as the leader of Islam. The other factor also attached with Sayyad’s superior position is that they would never beg or accept charity (*zakat*), even if they live in extreme poverty.

The higher status of Sayyads in social hierarchy can be compared with that of Brahmins in the Hindu society (Bhattacharya, 1978). There is a common belief in Nohsa Panchayat that Sayyads are Brahmins who converted. A Sheikh informant said, “some people are local converts and some came from outside. Some people who converted from Brahmins became Sayyad in Muslim community.”

The next in social hierarchy after the Sayyads are the Sheikhs. The other factor for their superior status is that they are considered to be of an Arab origin. Even Mallick and Pathan informants acknowledged and accepted their superior social status. The Pathan, due to their warrior background, are assigned the third position in social hierarchy, above Mallick. A Sheikh informant told that Pathans were considered as a symbol of bravery. The other factor that plays an important role in social standing of the Pathan is that they

are considered to be descendants of an Afgan ruler. Mallick is assigned the fourth and lowest position among the upper level *biradaris*. They also accept it on the ground that they are poor in comparison to other three *biradaris*, though they are considered as sub-groups of Sayyad. A Mallick informant told that Mallick is a sub-group of Sayyad though the former adopted the *biradari* system much later than the other three *biradaris*.

Mid-Level Biradaris

The largest numbers of *biradaris* are placed in the middle level of social hierarchy. Apart from the nature of occupation, other important factors in relative ranking of different *biradaris* are: educational attainment, government employment, numerical strength and the observance of purdah. Ansaris (Momins) are placed at the top on account of their claim to descent from the Ansar tribe of Arabia. A Sheikh informant told that the term Momin means believer, which is considered pious in the Islamic tradition. Thus, every practising Muslim can be considered as Momin. But due to their engagement in occupations, which are considered low, Ansaris/Momins are not considered as upper *biradari*. This was confirmed by an informant who was an Ansari. However, Ansaris are considered the highest among mid-level *biradaris* because their occupation is considered clean, have attained a certain degree of educational qualification, have numerical strength and have a fair representation in government jobs. A Mansoori informant who is currently an Imam told that among all occupational *biradaris* only Ansaris qualify to become Imam in Imarat-e-Shariah.

Sheikh and Mallick informants in this study ranked Mansoori next in the social hierarchy. Among those *biradaris* engaged in clean occupations, their occupation of cotton carding and quilt making is considered better. Their educational achievements are also better.

According to Mallick informants, other mid-level *biradaris* are more or less equal in ranking. However, the Sheikh informants differed and placed Kalal and Qureshi together in the ranking order. Informants from other *biradaris* had different views about Kalals whom they placed lowest in ranking because of their engagement in liquor distillation. The occupation of making and selling of liquor is considered as a taboo (*haram*) in Islamic traditions. The Sheikh informants argued that Kalals had abandoned liquor distilling long back. My own assessment is that the claim of Sheikh informant is fair. As one Kalal informant put it, "since childhood I have seen my grandfather, father and people from my generation being engaged in making and selling of kites. My elder brother is also engaged in the same profession in Kolkata". The Sheikhs placed Kunjra (vegetable and fruit seller *biradari*) next in ranking. The occupation of Kunjras is considered to be clean and are relatively better placed

in terms of educational qualification.

Churiharas enjoy a relatively better social position due to their claim of descent from the first Khalifa of Islam, Abu Bakr Siddiqui. However, sheikhs place them next to Kunjra in the hierarchy on the ground that Kunjra women work outside their homes. Churiharas accept that women of their *biradari* do not observe purdah and as a consequence other *biradaris* up in the hierarchy consider them lower in the social strata. The Sheikhs placed Rangrez, Dafali and Nai relatively equally in hierarchy on the ground that the occupation of all these *biradaris* were considered as equal in nature. The Shah-Faqir are placed at the bottom in the hierarichical order on the ground that their occupation is begging. Though, the Shah-Faqir claim higher position next to Sayyad in social ranking as they trace their lineage from mystic Sufi saints. But observations in the field indicated that their claims are not accepted by other *biradaris*.

Lower Level Biradaris

The traditional occupations of the *biradaris* of this section are unanimously considered as unclean occupations by other *biradaris*. Among the *biradaris* placed lower down the hierarchy, Pamarias are relatively better placed in comparision to other *biradaris* whose occupations are considered unclean. This is so because their traditional occupation of playing drum is considered to be relatively better. Pamariaa are followed by dhobis in the hierarchy as understood by sheikhs and pathan informants. Their occupation of washing clothes is regarded better and they are placed relatively better compared to other occupational *biradaris* which are considered unclean. Nat and Bakho follow next in the hierarchy. Both *biradaris* claim to be superior as compared to the other, but other *biradaris* assign them the same position in social hierarchy. Lal Begi or Halalkhor are lowest positions in the hierarchy and they accept it on account of their association with manual scavenging.

4. Jati Panchayat

Caste Councils or Panchayats are a normal prerequisite for a caste or *jati* (Siddiqui, 1978). On similar lines of the Hindu Caste Panchayats, among Muslims the *Jati* Panchayat¹² has been found as one of main features of their social system, especially in occupational *biradaris* (Ansari, 1960; Ali, 1978; Ghosh, 2010).

12 "In Bihar, a *biradari*'s Panchayat of the Julaha usually had a jurisdiction over 10 to 50 households headed by a Sardar or Headman who presided over meetings and was assisted by Chharidar. These are elected posts..... Other Peshawar (occupational) *biradaris* too, had Panchayat system. Thus, the Dhuniyas (cotton carders) and Kunjras (vegetable growers and sellers) in north Bihar had permanent Headmen called Manjans (Ghosh, 2010:90)".

At Nohsa Panchayat, I came across the institution of panchayat in different *biradaris* but the importance of this institution was varied. In upper *biradaris*, a panchayat did not figure in the collective management as these *biradaris* deal with their problems through collective sentiments (Siddiqui, 1978). The reason behind the absence of Panchayat according to a pathan informant was that, “pathans are enthusiastic and obsessed people (*Joshilay* and *Junooni*). Every individual believes himself to be a leader and do not want to submit under any leadership.”

Among the the mid-level *biradaris*, there is also a striking absence of Panchayats or any such organisation. Except Rayeens (Kunjras) and Qureshis (Kasais) none of the *biradaris* in Nohsa Panchayat are organised or governed through their traditional Panchayats. In response to my query regarding the absence of Panchayats, Ansari and Rangrez informants said that people of Nohsa were not original inhabitants. They migrated from different parts of Bihar and added that *biradaris* have their panchayats in their respective native places. However, Rayeens and Qureshis have panchayats because they migrated or shifted from nearby Pethiya Bazar. They called the head of their panchayat as Sardar. The regular meetings of the Rayeens on an occasion of conflict is called ‘*panchit*.’ They nominate their head (*Sardar*) through collective decision. The term for a sardar is permanent, unless he voluntarily gives up the position.

Among *biradaris* lower in the hierarchy, except Nat and Bakho, do not have traditional panchayats. Among Nat and Bakho, the tradition of panchayat is very strong. The leader of the panchayat is called a *mukhiya*. Nat have two *mukhiyas*. The panchayat deal with matters related to marriage, divorce, dispute and conflict (within the *biradari* as well as outside). They also deal with matters that come directly under criminal law such as murder and other crimes. One informant said, “the police do not take up our cases, therefore, the panchayat started handling cases of murder and other criminal activities within their *biradari*.” Nat and Bakho organised their panchayats in an open area and they are inclusive in nature. Both men and women members participate in meetings without any hindrances. Panchayats become important for *biradaris* which are lower down the hierarchy.

SPATIAL PRACTICES AND MODES OF SOCIALITY

1. Religious Spaces

At religious places like mosques, *mazars* (Mausoleums), burial grounds and *akhadas* (a place where *Tazias*¹³ halt during Muharram) no discrimination

¹³ Tazia: a replica of the tomb of Husain, the martyred son of Muhammad's daughter Fatima, that is carried in processions during the Shi'ite festival of Muharram (Merriam-Webster dictionary meaning).

was observed against Pamarias, Halalkhors, Nats, Bakhos and Dhobi Muslims. My findings contradicts that of Ansari ¹⁴(1960) and Siddiqui (1978).¹⁵ Once Muslims across all *biradaris* wash themselves and wear clean clothes they are considered as clean and offer the *namaz* in mosques along with their co-religionists. This has been reported by upper and middle level *biradari* groups and also supported by those down the hierarchy. During the *Jumma Namaz* (Friday Prayers), I went along with Nat-Bakho people and observed that they could offer the prayers without any obstacle in the front row of the congegration. Nats and Bakhos said that they offered *namaz* in mosque without discrimination of any form.

Discriminations have been reported in case of *akhadas*. The *mukhiya* of Bakhos reported that they have been debarred from performing the *fatiha*¹⁶ at the *akhadas* located in the front of Pathan houses. They have now constructed their own *akhadas*. The *mukhiya* also reported that during the procession of the *tazia* they have been disrupted by other *biradaris*.

2. Anganwadi Centre

In my observations, I could ascertain that children of Nat-Bakho *biradaris* were discriminated against. During instruction the teacher who was a Sheikh touched the students with a stick. In the absence of this teacher, the helper who is a Pasi (Dalit Hindu) at the Aganwadi Centre did the same. During an informal conversation with the teacher, she said, "They live uncleanly and their women are quarrelsome. Therefore, I do not kept any personal relationship with them and never visit their houses." Instruction through using a stick in my view is a conscious effort on the part of the teacher and the helper to make sure that they did not touch the children of these two *biradaris*.

During mid-day meal at Aganwadi Centre, I also observed that the helper (*sahayika*) while serving food to children of Nat-Bakho made sure that she didn't touch their plates.. She told me during an informal conversation, "I don't touch their plate. After school when I return home I take a bath. I do not drink the water I carry as it smells differently when here."

14 "A bhangi, either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time. Although in theory a Muslim Bhangi or Chamar is allowed to offer his prayers in a mosque, but in usual practice their entrance into such pious places as mosques and shrines of Muslims saints is socially disapproved and thus it is resisted. Even if they could get into mosques and shrines, provided they have had a bath and are dressed in clean clothes they can not usually proceed beyond the entrance steps (Ansari, 1960:50)".

15 "on the account of their being unclean and they often experience difficulty in getting their dead buried in the common graveyard (Siddiqui, 1978:264).

16 Fatiha: according to the Oxford dictionary meaning 'It is first sura of Quran, used by Muslims as an essential elements of ritual prayer'.

3. Tea shops

There are two kinds of tea shops depending on the ownership of such shops. Shops owned by upper or mid-level *biradaris* and those who are lower in the hierarchy. I did not find any evidence of discrimination in tea shops owned by the former. Bakhos, Nats, Halalkhors and Dhobis were served tea and snacks in the same utensils as it was served to other *biradaris*. However, I observed that at tea shops owned by *biradaris* lower in the hierarchy, particularly the Nats, other *biradaris* do not consume tea or snacks. A Sheikh said, “it is better to remain hungry rather than eat or drink anything cooked by those people.” A Qureshi said, “they are neither Muslims nor Hindu, so we do not eat or drink with them”.

4. Commensality

On occasions of wedding ceremonies, I was told by some people of upper *biradaris*, that those who belong to Nat, Bakho, Halalkhor and Dhobi *biradaris* are invited, while others clearly said they do not invite them on any occasion. A Nai informant said “Lalbegi, Nat, Bakho and Dhobi belong to one category. Other *biradaris* avoid eating with these *biradaris*. Some political leader and some close friends do have a relationship of eating together with them, but they also avoid these as far as possible.” A Sheikh informant said, “earlier people did not eat with them. Even when someone attended their marriage ceremonies, they tried to avoid having food. But now days people from other *biradaris* attend weddings and eat their food. Those who believe in traditions still do not eat with them.” A Shah-Faqir informant narrated his story of having food at a Halalkhor’s house: “We went to a Halalkhor’s house who was a station master. He got us some food but I could not swallow it down and felt like vomiting because his occupation was manual scavenging.”

Biradaris who are lower in the hierarchy are not homogeneous. They too practice endogamy. Pamarias are the top and Halalkhors are at the bottom of the hierarchy within those *biradaris* who are considered lower in status. A Nat said that they do not eat, invite or have any relations with Bakho and the Bakho made a similar claim with regard to Nats. But with Halalkhors, both *biradaris* claim that they do not have any relationship with them. The *mukhiya* of Bakhos said, “we do not eat or drink with them nor do we invite them to our marriages.” A Nat informant said, “our ancestors did not eat with the Bakhos, therefore we have also carried forward that tradition.”

Conclusion

The fieldnotes suggest that different Muslim *biradaris* of the Nohsa panchayat are essentially endogamous in nature with specialized hereditary occupations and are ranked in a hierarchical order on the basis of descent and commensality. Therefore, it can be argued that these *biradaris* are organized along structural and functional lines of the Hindu caste system.



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A large, stylized tree graphic in a dark green color dominates the lower half of the page. The tree has a thick, rounded trunk and a wide, spreading canopy of branches. The branches are depicted with thick, dark green lines, creating a dense, textured appearance. The background of the page is a solid, dark green color, which makes the white space of the tree's canopy stand out.

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