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Caste Dynamics, Muslim Community, and Agrarian Transformation: A Study of Western Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Muslim community in India, representing 14.2% of the population, remains the nation's most substantial religious minority (Census, 2011). A significant number among them trace their lineage to historical conversions from the lower castes, influenced by the egalitarian principles of Sufi saints. This vast community, contrary to monolithic perceptions, embraces an array of sects and socio-religious divisions (Alam, 2022). This article delves deep into the socio-economic contours of Muslims in Western Uttar Pradesh. It underscores the transformative consequences of tenancy reforms and the green revolution on the region's agrarian landscape. Utilizing primary data, the study examines the rise and power of organizations like the Bhartiya Kisan Union and the Tabligh Jamaat, and these organizations in addition to the established structures that exist in the landscape of power in the region, like Khap panchayats, provide a depth of understanding of the relationship among politics, religion, socio-economic conditions, and gender relationships. Additionally, the paper highlights the continuing struggles of the women: abuse, gender violence and political maneuvering, in a region that continues to struggle with them. The study should serve as a useful prism through which to gain insight and knowledge of the complex nature of the lives of Muslims and women in Western UP.

Keywords: Caste, Pashmanada, Discrimination, Socioeconomic, Muslim, Women

Introduction

Muslims in India constitute the largest religious minority in the country with a population of approximately 14.2% of the total, according to the 2011 Census. Over their history of over a millennium, they have made remarkable contributions to the cultural, artistic, architectural and culinary tapestry of India. While they come from varied ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, they represent a wide array of sects, traditions, and practices. Challenges related to socio-economic disparities, education, and representation often confront the community. Yet, their lasting influence on the nation's ethos stands firm. This study focuses on Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts in Uttar Pradesh, a state that comprises 16.59% of India's population. Importantly, Western Uttar Pradesh is a major agricultural and financial area. Although Western Uttar Pradesh is rich in history and agronomy, the Muslim community in this area faces unique socio-economic challenges (Pai, 1987). Even in an affluent area, the educational gap, employment disparity, and lack of representation abound (Alam & Kumar, 2019: Ali, 2021).

A mixed-method research design was undertaken to map the socio-economic terrain of Muslim communities in Western Uttar Pradesh, specifically Muzaffarnagar and

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Shamli districts. The first stage included primary data collection through in-depth interviews with community leaders, local historians and community populations, as well as focus group discussions. The primary data was complemented with secondary data through sources found in archival records, government documents and published academic literature. A stratified random sampling method was used throughout to ensure balanced representation from all parts of the diverse community, and all ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study, including anonymity and informed consent. Even though answering the research question relied on data, it was clear to researchers that systemic issues compounded by interlocking identities contributed to bias and marginality, for example Muslim women, who faced doubly compounded bias by virtue of being both a member of a minority and targeted by gender bias. Despite the evidential socio-cultural context surrounding echo historical trauma of deprived and marginal socio-economic status, the study sought to illuminate the realities of Muslims in the region not as tragic victims, but as successful socio-economic contributors to their social and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural dynamics in the Western Uttar Pradesh context, and India generally, highlight the complexity of conduct surrounding Muslims so as to adequately consider broader and significant issues in what is among the most prosperous parts of the world. Muslim communities in the socio-cultural context lie in the nexus of these complexities presents a regionally informed report. As India propels forward, recognizing these subtleties is paramount for informed policymaking and fostering an environment conducive to unity and shared growth.

The demographic structure of a region provides great perspective to the region's social structure, cultural traditions, political affiliations and economic development. The population and religious composition of the region may also reflect previous migrations, socio-political events, and historic population growth. Our understanding must take into account, not just the numbers, but how the different population's interact, relate and coexist within the region. The population and religious composition of the region is as follows:

Table 1: District wise Religious Proportion in Western Uttar Pradesh in %

S.N.	District Name	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Buddhist	Jain	Others	Not Available
1.	Aligarh	79.05	19.85	0.21	0.16	0.07	0.08	0	0.58
2.	Agra	88.77	9.31	0.23	0.27	0.09	0.49	0.01	0.83
3.	Auraiya	92.32	7.39	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.12
4.	Bareilly	63.64	34.54	0.33	0.63	0.1	0.02	0.01	0.73
5.	Badaun	77.89	21.47	0.17	0.03	0.05	0.02	0	0.37
6.	Baghpat	70.41	27.98	0.14	0.04	0.01	1.24	0	0.18
7.	Bijnor	55.18	43.04	0.17	1.37	0.05	0.06	0	0.13
8.	Bulandshahar	77.37	22.22	0.12	0.08	0.02	0.04	0	0.15
9.	Etah	90.79	8.25	0.14	0.04	0.16	0.32	0	0.30
10.	Etawah	92.17	7.2	0.03	0.07	0.11	0.25	0.01	0.11
11.	Farrukhabad	84.67	14.69	0.17	0.17	0.17	0.03	0.01	0.11
12.	Firozabad	84.75	14.8	0.13	0.08	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.18

13.	Gautam B. N.	84.58	13.08	0.45	0.56	0.05	0.27	0.01	0.10
14.	Ghaziabad	72.93	25.35	0.41	0.49	0.07	0.35	0.01	0.39
15.	Mainpuri	93.48	5.39	0.09	0.03	0.41	0.22	0	0.32
16.	Mathura	90.72	8.52	0.12	0.11	0.03	0.08	0	0.41
17.	Meerut	63.4	34.43	0.31	0.72	0.05	0.54	0.01	0.54
18.	Moradabad	52.14	47.12	0.28	0.16	0.03	0.05	0.01	0.22
19.	Muzaffarnagar	57.51	41.3	0.16	0.45	0.04	0.39	0	0.15
20.	Pilibhit	71.34	24.11	0.17	4.17	0.02	0.01	0	0.17
21.	Rampur	45.97	50.57	0.39	2.8	0.02	0.06	0	0.18
22.	Saharanpur	56.74	41.95	0.19	0.54	0.06	0.29	0	0.23
23.	Shahjahanpur	80.24	17.55	0.15	1.7	0.08	0.01	0	0.26

Source: Census 2011

The 2011 Census data also suggests some complex patterns of religious diversity, which exist on different scales and across the various districts of Western Uttar Pradesh. First and foremost, the overwhelming observation is that nearly all of the districts maintain a Hindu religion majority. The exception here is Mainpuri which has a massive Hindu religion majority that commands a (93.48%) Hindu majority. Rampur also stands out, because it is the only district with a density of (50.57%) Muslims and therefore the district with the concentration of Muslim population. There are a number of districts which include Rampur, Moradabad, and Muzaffarnagar, which suggest there is a balancing population of Hindus and Muslims suggesting there is vibrant socio-religious diversity with blended traditions and histories. Returning to the religious diversity closely, Baghpat is intriguing because it has a Jain population that suffices for (1.24%) and this is serious when compared with the population size of the other districts. It should also be noted that Pilibhit has a Sikh population with just (4.17) demonstrating also the diversity of religion. There is substantial data to draw on in the 2011 Census and there are cases where there is either ambiguity, not reported, or no data available at all. For example, the highest percentage for (0.83%) in the "Not Available" population category is in Agra. This suggests that there are areas where this data was not properly reported as captured in the Census.

Ultimately, the religious composition of Western Uttar Pradesh, as revealed by the 2011 Census, is emblematic of India's well-known diversity. Western Uttar Pradesh is more than a geographical place. It is a tapestry of many beliefs, practices, and traditions. The diversity eventually affects the socio-cultural interactions of the region, allowing for both challenges and opportunities for the ways in which communities interact, integrate, and coexist.

The 2011 Census table on the religious composition of Western Uttar Pradesh is an effective instrument in examining the complexities of political representation. In examining complexities, the process of gerrymandering, manipulating electoral area

boundaries to benefit political purposes is relevant historically (Bickerstaff, 2020). This manipulation has occurred in numerous countries and throughout the history of India (Morrill, 2018). It may well be that the Table 1 types of distributions in table are not wholly foreboding - and that once again Muslim majority areas in Western Uttar Pradesh have been manipulated into smaller parts to diffuse their political power. Table 1 shows that in districts like Moradabad, Muzaffarnagar, and Saharanpur with nearly half and half proportions of Hindus and Muslims, were the proportions animated enough to act collectively, it would negatively impact the formation of a solid majority. Spreading out may also affect the results in significant legislative organizations like the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly. Historically, districts are separated into smaller organizations as tools for covertly rubbing out the representation of groups (Arora & Singh, 2015). In similar ways, these divisions result in political fragmentation and may also lead to socio-economic costs. There is evidence in history that changing administrative boundaries may undermine communities with respect to access to development, resources, and administrative action (Hussain et al, 2012). In situations in Western Uttar Pradesh, potential administrative distri^tution may have systematic effects on the socio-economic status (Sarangi & Pai, 2020) of the Muslim community etc. If the intentionality in administrating would be taken into consideration; it would highlight the need for a supportive account of research, combining historical evidence, electoral measures, and socio-political patterns to identify the potential direction of these administrative matters.

Ashraf to Ajlaf: Hindu-Muslim Socio-cultural Interplay in India

The history of Muslims in India is complex and significant with many journeys, routes, and timeframes. The primary means by which Muslims entered the Indian subcontinent were through either sea, traveling across the Arabian Sea, and land moving across the northern borders. The first wave predominantly consisted of Arab traders and merchants seeking commerce opportunities. In contrast, the subsequent groups were mainly invaders who managed to annex vast territories in the northern plains of the region (Risso, 1989). Intriguingly, while both groups were of foreign origin, they came to be acknowledged as 'Ashraf' - denoting purity in lineage. Following the influx of these foreign Muslims, a significant segment of the indigenous Hindu populace embraced Islam. Yet, many of these converts retained vestiges of their pre-Islamic socio-cultural practices, notably the caste system - a pivotal aspect of Hindu societal stratification. Consequently, these converted individuals were designated 'Ajlaf' or the non-pure, juxtaposing them against the Ashraf or pure-blooded Muslims (Hansen, 2000). This Ashraf-Ajlaf dichotomy isn't localized but resonates throughout the country, underlining the multifaceted socio-religious fabric of India (Ahmad, 1967).

The process of Hindu conversions into Islam is typically delineated into three distinct categorizations. First are those who hail from the higher echelons of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Their conversions often led to their assimilation into the Ashraf class, facilitated by their prior social standing, economic affluence, or other influential factors. The next segment consists of those originating from 'clean' occupational castes. Their skills and professions had a societal acceptability and respect. Finally, this included those identified as “impure” occupational castes. Such distinctions carry significant implications in making sense of group dynamics and inter-group relations, as well as socio-economic inequalities among Muslims (Ahmad & Chakravarti, 1981).

The complexity of the Muslim community in Western Uttar Pradesh, with its detailed nature of social hierarchy and identity, also comes across in caste. The Muslim community, generally divided into 'Ashraf' and 'Ajlaf', also has a number of sub castes under both categories with their own historical, occupational, and socio-economic characteristics. Table-2 makes this difference explicitly, detailing not only the distinctions between 'pureblooded' Ashraf and 'indigenous' Ajlaf but also the many sub castes that fall into each of those two categories.

Table 2: Castes among Muslim in Western Uttar Pradesh

Ashraf with Sub-castes	Elevated to Ashraf with Sub-Castes	Ajlaf with Sub-Castes and Occupation
Sayyad- • Abidi • Askari • Hasani • Husaini • Qazmi • Naqvi • Rizwi • Zaidi • Alvi • Abbasi • Hashmi • Jafri **Seikh-** • Faruqi • Khurasani • Kidwai • Malik • Quraishi • Qazi • Siddqui Ansari • Usmani • Ansari **Mughal-** • Chagrai • Qizilbash • Tajik **Pathan-** • Taimuri • Turkman • Uzbeg • Afridi • Bangash • Barakzai • Barush • Daudzai	**Rajpoots-** • Bhulesultan • Khanzada • Ranghar • Lalkhani • Chauchan • Panwar • Rathaur • Tomar	Atishbaz-Firework Maker Banjara - Bairagi- Bawarchi-Cook Bhatiyara-Innkeeper Darzi-Tailor Dafali-Drum Maker Dhobi-Washermen Dhuniya-Cotton Carder Faqir-Begger Gada- Ghosi-Milk Seller Gurjar-Herdsmen Halwai-Confectioner Jaat-Cultivator Jhojha- Jogi- Julaha-Weaver Kashgar- Kasai-(Bucher) Kumhar-Potter Luhar- Blacksmith Mansoori-Trappers or Or Dhuniya- Dealer of Birds Meo- Dairyman Miragi- Musician Nai/ Hazzam- Barber Nalband - Nanbai- Baker Neelgar/- Cloth Printer Rangraze Patwa- Painter Rai or Kunjra-Green Grocer SaikhSarwari- Sakka- Water Carrier

• Durrani • Ghorkushti • Ghouri • Kakar • Khalil • Lodhi • Mohammad • Muhammadzai • Orakzai • Rohila • Yusuzai		Saikalgur- Metal Sharpmen Teli- Oil Presser

Source: Compiled from S. Shamim Ahmad and A. K. Chakravarti, 1981 and Ghaush Ansari, 1960

The 'Ashraf' category is extensive, with many categories, such as the Sayyads, the sub-Sayyad group, Abidi or Naqvi, or even the Mughals, such as Chagrai or Tajik, to name a few. Also, there are sub-castes, such as Rajpoots - or Bhulesultan and Ranghar, who have been considered Ashraf, adding to the fluidity and complexity of social-religious scenarios. In contrast, the 'Ajlaf' category provides an interesting view into the occupational landscape of western UP. It includes groups such as Banjaras, Bawarchis (Cooks), Jaats (Cultivators), and Neelgar (Cloth Printers). This category shows both the occupational variety and the socio-cultural frameworks. Even more interesting is that some sub-castes in Ajlaf do not have a listed occupation. This marker is based on endogamy and perceptions of being distinct from overtly occupationally - based groups, and it points to the complex nature of Muslim social stratification. This discussion references the work of noted scholars in the field such as S. Shamim Ahmad and A. K. Chakravarti (1981) as well as Ghaus Ansari 1960, and their studies of Muslim social structures. However, it is important to recognize that caste and occupation regarding the Muslims of western UP do not only indicate names, but rather reflect the historical journey, social and economic relations, and plasticity of cultural norms of the community.

The detailed listing of the Ajlaf category of Muslims in western Uttar Pradesh does seem to hint at a historical connection to occupation and identity, a characteristic of the Hindu caste system. Many of the occupations and sub-castes of the Ajlaf, such as the Banjara, Dhobi (washers), Halwai (sweet makers) and Luhar (blacksmitsh), seem to closely reflect the similar occupations in the Hindu castes. This suggests a significant part of the Ajlaf community may have developed from converted Hindus, retaining their profession and familial backgrounds after converting to Islam. This overlap further cements the notion that while religion might have changed, the socio-professional structure - a deeply rooted system in the Indian subcontinent - remained largely consistent. Such an observation aligns with the historical understanding that numerous indigenous Hindus converted to Islam over various periods, for myriad reasons, ranging from spiritual quests to socio-economic motivations.

Drawing upon the socio-cultural fabric of the Muslim community in regions like Western Uttar Pradesh, the Ashraf-Ajlaf distinction emerges as a key pointer to nuanced socio-economic dynamics (Ansari, 1960). This distinction, while not an exact replication, mirrors to some extent the Hindu caste hierarchy, indicative of shared historical and cultural roots between the two communities (Ahmad & Chakravarti,

1981). Although Islam does not inherently sanction a caste system, vestiges of pre-conversion Hindu caste structures are evident, leading to intra-community dynamics reminiscent of caste-based discrimination seen in Hindu society. These latent biases, while less overt than the Hindu caste system, play a significant role in shaping the experiences of the Muslim community, especially in the context of professional hierarchies and socio-economic disparities (Ansari, 1960). The Ajlaf have been historically marginalized and are typically pathologized into common professions; this exemplifies the need for affirmative action and reservation categories which are tailored to the specific exclusions of the Ajlaf's moment. The Ajlaf are placed in the OBC, owing to the staggering diversity of the OBC category in the context of lack of representation of only the Ajlaf.

There are double standards concerning the political weight of Ashraf people, as they are socioeconomically and historically privileged over Ajlaf and marginalised communities. Ajlafs have been predominantly oppressed being categorised in a broad OBC category and have to deal with the biases of their community (Ahmad & Chakravarti, 1981). This situation fits perfectly into an overview of the ongoing debates related to reservation in India concerning a more broadly defined approach to sub categories, as a systemically marginalised community level perception spills over to those layers below it; and, the one best suited to assist those below is using the diversity of human occupations, within this construct, rather than placing all marginalised communities within a construct as the OBC. A single intervention policy in a diverse nation such as India, can easily exclude a few marginalised communities, possibly due to the unique challenges of a sub-group such as Dalit Muslims. More importantly, all citizens must understand the unique struggles of different sub-groups, in order to foster actions towards their socio-economic development. As important, community development is crucial to achieving inclusive, equitable, equitable and just socio-political environment.

Socio-Economic Disparities in Uttar Pradesh's Muslim Community

Uttar Pradesh, recognized as the real agricultural heartland of India, has had its economic development consistently connected to agricultural activities and their individual associated industries. As a state with a population of 226 million, it is home to one out of every six Indians, and so contributes a significant percentage of India’s agricultural produce. However, the nature of agriculture and its social and economic perspectives changed quite a bit after the land reforms and Green Revolution. With the agricultural economy starting to change, the potential changes were not equally distributed across caste groups. As an example, the Jats experienced, indirectly, a socio-economic transition at this time. Traditionally, the Jats had occupied in the land they farmed, as occupying tenants but the introduction of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act in 1952 allowed a large number of Jat tenants to acquire private title (and ownership) to land they had previously lease-in and with the initiation of the 'green revolution' after 1965, the Jat's were expanding even further in terms of capitalist agriculture (Ramakumar, 2017). Conversely, certain communities, many with the title Zamindar, faced economic headwinds. Zamindars who were mostly Brahmin or Thakur by caste during the colonial era in Western Uttar Pradesh found themselves facing significant challenges in their economic situation during this agricultural transition. The socio-economic changes created by land reforms and technology changes offered from the green revolution changed the agrarian social hierarchy and contours of land ownership.

The disparities in land ownership in Uttar Pradesh, as outlined in an ICSSR report, are significant and informative. According to ICSSR, the Jats and Brahmins accounted for around 80 percent of the total arable land in Uttar Pradesh, demonstrating their agricultural preeminence (ICSSR, 2008). In contrast, almost 78.8 percent of Dalits did not own any land. The aforementioned dominance of Jat landowners influenced the mobilization of the BKU. The BKU movement under the leadership of Mahender Singh Tikait originally represented the economically affluent Jat landowners. Tikait recognized the opportunity to broaden the movement with his expansion. He included other landholding communities with landholdings, especially those within the Muslim community, which generally represents a large population of landlords in the region. Examples of these include the Sayyads, Rajpoots, Jats, Tyagis and Gurjars, most of whom have large farming properties and considerable power. Nonetheless, the BKU's mobilization strategy and agenda assumed some glaring omissions. Despite the historically growing influence, demonstrating that they were representing the agricultural community, the BKU chose not to support the issues of agrarian labour, primarily the agrarian labourer from the Dalit community. This is significant given the wide socio-economic gaps and systemic realities of oppression. Landlords, many of whom are historically wealthy, have systematically oppressed Dalit and other agrarian labour. The BKU's general strategic refusal to advocate for their issues further complicates the levelling factions within the broader agrarian struggle.

The socio-economic struggles of Muslims in India have been documented widely. For example, the literacy rate for Muslims is just 58.76%, well below the state-level average of 67.68% (Census, 2011). This is just a small indicator of the many challenges faced by the community. The Sachar Committee, in its in-depth analysis, went on to highlight that Muslims in India, in terms of socio-economic indicators, are even more disadvantaged than traditionally marginalized groups such as the Dalits and Adivasis (Sachar, 2006). Several factors contribute to this dismal situation, and one prominent reason is the caste dynamics within the Muslim community. A significant proportion of Muslims in India belong to the lower castes, which compounds their socio-economic vulnerabilities. The broader societal factors affecting employment opportunities further accentuate these disparities. By way of example, just 27% of Muslim workers in urban areas have regular employment. In contrast, the figures for other communities are considerably higher: SCs (679), 40 percent; STs (680), 36 percent; and upper-caste Hindus (676), 49 percent (Census, 2001, NSSO, 2006). Added Complications arise within the community itself, with the difference between the Ashraf (the 'nobler' classes) and Ajlaf (the 'lower' or 'base' classes). While exact figures are difficult, it is generally accepted that the majority - some 80% - of the Muslim population would be classified into the Ajlaf group. It should be noted that this internal classification of Muslims is not as strict or as historic in nature as the Hindu caste system. Nevertheless, it still affects the socio-economic circumstances and opportunities for many Muslims living in India. In summary, the various economic and educational adversities facing Muslims is complex, needing to be grounded in both internal community dynamics and external social contexts. Addressing these will need to be multifaceted and tailored interventions.

Islamic Sects of Muslims in Western Uttar Pradesh

Islam was founded on the belief in one God, and many interpretations and practices have developed over time. Upon the death of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), the Islamic community was faced with a vacuum in leadership that would ultimately lead

to the community being divided into a number of sects. This initial schism gave rise to two prominent sects: the Sunnis and the Shias. Each of these two sects fostered their own distinct jurisprudential traditions, known as madhhab, reflecting varied methodologies and approaches to Islamic jurisprudence (Ramadan, 2006). Globally, Sunnis dominate the Muslim population, constituting approximately 80%, while Shias account for nearly 20% (Winter, 2022). In the specific context of Western Uttar Pradesh, the religious landscape predominantly features two sects: Shia and Sunni, each with its distinct traditions and practices (Ahmed, 2023).

Sunni, as a sect, asserts its lineage to the Prophet Muhammad through Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique, who was both a close companion and the father-in-law of the Prophet. They consider him as the rightful caliph or successor after the Prophet's passing (Ahmed, 2002). Over the years, Sunni branched out into four primary schools of thought or madhhab: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafyi, and Hambali. Each of these schools was developed by distinguished Islamic scholars, who, based on their interpretations and understandings of the Quran and Hadith, formulated specific jurisprudential tenets (Nasr, 2009). Different countries or regions predominantly follow one or more of these schools, depending on historical, cultural, and sometimes political factors. In a further evolution of the Hanafi school of thought, two significant branches emerged: Deobandi and Barelvi. Both of these branches have their roots in the state of Uttar Pradesh and are named after the places of their origin – Deoband and Bareilly respectively (Metcalf, 1982). The Deobandi movement, with its more conservative approach to Islamic teachings, spread its influence not just within the Indian subcontinent, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, but also reached places like Afghanistan and the UK (Zaman, 2012). This was majorly facilitated through missionary movements like the Tablighi Jamaat (Metcalf, 2002; McClure, 2009). On the other hand, the Barelvi movement, often viewed as a more moderate and inclusive interpretation of Sunni Islam, has its influence primarily within India and Pakistan (Sanyal, 2021). Despite these multiple schools and branches, Sunnis still make up the most share of the global Muslim population, accounting for approximately 80% (Ibid).

The Tablighi Jamaat, a Sunni Islamic missionary movement, also has its origins rooted in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Founded by Maulana Ilyas Rahmatullah in Kandhla, now part of Shamli district in Muzaffarnagar, the movement seeks to revive individual Islamic practices and strengthen personal faith (Metcalf, 2006). Advocating a return to fundamental and orthodox practices of Islam, the Tablighi Jamaat operates with the principle of grassroots dawah, or proselytizing. Volunteers of this organization travel from village to village, interacting with local communities, conducting sermons, and organizing individual meetings to propagate what they believe to be the pure teachings of Islam (Alam, 2022). The movement emphasizes specific practices and symbols believed to reflect the true essence of Islam, aimed at forging a uniform and devout community. For instance, men are encouraged to offer Namaz (prayer) five times a day, maintain a long beard, wear a topi (cap), don a long kurta and short payjama (pants). This attire is believed to resemble the traditional dress of the Prophet Muhammad, signifying a return to original Islamic practices (Metcalf, 2006). Women, on the other hand, are advised to wear the burka, a garment that covers them from head to toe, and primarily remain within the domestic sphere, reflecting conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings on modesty and gender roles. While the movement's emphasis on orthodoxy has drawn both followers and critics, its influence in certain regions, particularly within the Indian subcontinent, is undeniable.

As Rani says:

> *Tablig[2] focus on religious practices and they strongly condemn the women mobility and preach women to be controlled by their husbands. During their meetings, they talk about only those hadiths3 which talk about women's veil practices, but they never talk about those Quranic verses and Hadith which tell about women's rights. After the meetings these men go back to their home and tell women about these hadith. They insist women to stay at home and do not step out without their husband's wish. They focus on veil and only religious education for women*. (Rani, 28, Staff of Astitwa, Purkazi).

Further, Akram Akhtar expresses:

> *Tablig do not talk on the social issues; they only focus on religious practices and obligations; they should also talk on caste discrimination and other type of discrimination which Muslims have been facing*. (Akram, Founder of Afkar India Foundation (AIF), Kandhla, Shamli).

The Tablighi Jamaat, stands out not just for its overt religious objectives but also for the more understated ways in which it wields influence over its followers. At the core of this influence is a deeply entrenched belief system that often veers towards a more traditional, and arguably, restrictive interpretation of Islamic teachings. The focus on promoting specific norms and etiquettes, especially pertaining to women, underscores their attempts to endorse a version of religious authenticity that aligns closely with patriarchal values. By placing these standards under the umbrella of religious adherence, the organization effectively merges religious conviction with gendered roles, making any dissent or deviation from these roles seem like a departure from true religious practice.

Additionally, the Tablighi Jamaat's skepticism towards modern education and the English language further cements its conservative stance. By discouraging English readings and modern academic pursuits, they inherently limit the worldview of their followers, creating an environment where religious teachings remain unchallenged and unexamined through contemporary lenses. The aversion to political debates and discussions on the socio-economic upliftment of Muslims is particularly concerning (Alam, 2023). While on one hand, the organization advocates a return to 'true' Islamic practices, on the other, it seems reticent to engage in discussions that could tangibly improve the socio-economic conditions of Muslims (Alam, 2022). This dichotomy underscores a selective approach to community welfare, where spiritual well-being is emphasized, but tangible socio-economic progress is side-lined. Such an approach not only hinders holistic community development but also perpetuates a cycle where religious conservatism overshadows pressing socio-economic concerns.

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[2] Tabligi Jamaat is a Deobandi Islamic missionary movement which focuses on Muslims to be more religiously observant and encouraging Muslims to return to practising their religion as per the Prophet Muhammad, and give dawah (calling) to non-Muslims (Metcalf 2006).

[3] Hadith is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran.

Green Revolution and Class Shifts in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli

Building on the earlier discussion about the influence of religious organizations on the socio-cultural dynamics, the socio-economic landscape of Western UP, particularly in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli, underwent a significant shift post the Green Revolution (GR). Being heavily reliant on an agrarian-based economy, the GR brought about substantial changes to the traditional caste-based occupation dynamics in these regions. As agricultural practices modernized and yields increased, some castes, who were traditionally landholders, fortified their dominance in terms of landownership and economic prowess. Meanwhile, others found themselves relegated to labour-intensive roles on these very lands. This stratification further influenced the socio-economic disparities and inter-caste dynamics, reflecting the broader changes in India's rural socio-economic fabric during this period. As Muflti Julfikar states that:

> *Muslim royal families in pre-independence period ruled the entire region from Jansath (A town in east of the district) Abdul Hasan Khan and second Nawab Liyakat Ali Khan (first PM of Pakistan) during pre-independence and in the Sahmli region Lala Udayram occupied the lands; all the families belonged to the upper caste Hindu and Muslims. But post-independence, Jat communities became new Jamidar (landlords) and became dominating caste in this region due to land reforms*. (Muflti Julfikar, Former member of Uttar Pradesh Minority Commission, Muzaffarnagar).

During colonial times, landownership was primarily in the hands of Brahmins and Thakurs, with Jats mostly being occupancy tenants (Ramakumar, 2017). The turning point came with the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms (ZALR) Act of 1952, enabling a large number of Jat tenants to secure ownership rights over the land they had previously leased. The ripple effects of these transitions were amplified with the advent of the 'Green Revolution', which instigated the rise of new classes within the region. Sahay (2004) underscores this transformation by noting Western UP's rapid advancement in terms of rural capital investment, processing, and small-scale industries during this period. Several factors fuelled this growth, including robust canal irrigation systems established during colonial times, the abolition of the Zamindari system, increased investment in agricultural-based industries, and, of course, the innovations brought about by the Green Revolution itself.

During the era of the Green Revolution, societal classes were distinctly bifurcated: on one end stood the land-owning middle peasants, rich peasants, kulaks, capitalist farmers, "bullock capitalists", and landlords; while the other spectrum comprised agricultural labourers, poor peasants, small peasants, and marginal peasants (Singh, 1992; Sahay, 2004). As the Green Revolution progressed, a subset of these prosperous peasants evolved into entrepreneurs, seamlessly blending into the urban and peri-urban middle classes. Conversely, some fragmented into poorer echelons, primarily delving into sectors outside agriculture. In the villages of Muzaffarnagar, it's predominantly the Jat community, encompassing both Hindu Jats and Mule Jats, who hold land. In contrast, castes like Teli, Mansoori, Faqir, Baddi, Dhobi, Nai, Luhar, Neelgar etc. are largely landless. The changing contours of the agricultural realm in western UP are striking. An overwhelming 85% of non-Jat Muslim households are bereft of land ownership (ICSSR, 2008). While in the past, the predominant labour forms were footloose and agrarian, a shift is palpable today. A significant number of adult males are venturing outside their native villages for work opportunities,

indicating a decrease in traditional agricultural jobs. However, the discourse on these shifts misses a gendered perspective, side-lining potential insights into the intricate socio-economic shifts underway.

Following this, the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), once a beacon of agrarian unity and a significant force in the region, began to wane in influence. Several factors contributed to decaying the BKU and the most prominent being the political affiliation of volunteers with other parties, which diluted the central principles and main focus of the movement. As volunteers participated in a range of protests and activities, their unity and purpose were compromised. As the above diverging instances continue to accumulate, the BKU's leadership and control over the socio-political culture of the region waned.

Women's Honour, Leadership and Communal Violence

In Muzaffarnagar, Shamli and other areas of western UP, it is unsurprising that social, traditional, and religious institutions that underpin social norms and attitudes were deeply entrenched in patriarchal values that were explicitly anti-women. The patriarchal structures not only delineated specific roles and responsibilities for women but also limited their autonomy and decision-making capacities. Many cultural and religious practices, interpreted through a patriarchal lens, further reinforced gender disparities and curtailed the rights and freedoms of women (Alam, 2023). Whether it was access to education, participation in socio-political matters, or even basic rights like choosing a life partner or deciding on reproductive issues, women in these regions often found themselves at a disadvantage. The entrenched patriarchal attitudes dictated their lives, limiting their potentials and aspirations (Rathod, 2025). The consequent lack of female representation in decision-making bodies and forums meant that women's issues often went unaddressed, perpetuating the cycle of gender-based discrimination and marginalization. As Rehana opines that:

> *In the evenings, Muzaffarnagar's traditional gathering spot, the 'Chaupal', becomes a hub for male discourse. As they share the 'Hukkah', a significant portion of their conversations revolves around their perceived need to exert control over women. These discussions delve into topics ranging from monitoring women's mobile phone usage, scrutinizing their attire, curbing their educational aspirations, and restraining their freedom. The timeliness of this issue has been very prominent in these discussions is around the societal outcome of DJ, where it reinforces the social belief that women can act freely in the public sphere of men. That validation is fundamentally part of a entrenched patriarchal ideology which seeks to limit women's agency and autonomy in the region (Rehana, Astitwa Samajik Sanstha Purkazi).*

These customary panchayats, in particular the Khap panchayats, feel the irbm of back pressure, as it were, and struggle with persistent changes in society. There are several issues that aggravate them, one of which revolves around preserving their social culture in front of a burgeoning youth that does not hesitate to push the already out-dated bounds of acceptable behavior. Their need to maintain their perceived control often translates itself into reactionary behavior and, in particular, towards youth. This is where Khap panchayats, with their highly ranked and extreme behaviour, come into play at a tipping point as they try to hold on to their accepted version of morality and social codex by targeting youth willing to challenge their boundaries. This delicate

push and pull between youth and atavism reverberates as they respond as a culture whose social base of relations is crumbling. Aa Naresh Tikait expresses:

> *Our daughters are becoming increasingly independent and assertive in their decisions. If we don't provide them with an education, we are criticized for keeping them illiterate. But when we invest significantly in their education, sending them out of the village, some of them make choices that go against our traditions, such as eloping without considering the boy's caste, religion, or background. Parents believe that after investing in their education, they should have a say in their marriage. If the girls wish to go against this, perhaps they should pursue their education without our support. They should prove their worth to us.* (Naresh Tikait, President of Baliyan Khap, Sisauli)

He further adds:

> *The Supreme Court should not have backed them. Their endorsement has made these women bold, much to our distress. Is it any wonder, then, that we hear of such women found lifeless in the fields or on the roads?.*

The tension between traditional values and emerging modern sentiments is palpable in the region. An undercurrent of resentment brews as traditional power structures, led predominantly by senior male members, feel increasingly threatened. They've long relied on social and religious edicts to maintain their grip, often expressing their disdain for the judicial system's perceived overreach in supporting women's rights. By expressing these frustrations, those making this remark initially indicate a societal transition occurring around them. This new generation is more educated, has more socio-economic and additionally worldly opportunities, and no longer wants to be historically bound. Despite their being traditionally rooted, these new upwardly mobile groups are radically shaking the foundations of the old mystifying norms. They defy the myths of caste and kinship, rebel against the strictures of status quo, hypergamy, and village endogamy as they are reconceptualizing honour - and it is this change that Chowdhry (1997) has identified as a major turning point in the socio-cultural landscape in the area.

> *Naresh Tikait claims that the Supreme Court should respect long-standing traditions and not interfere, noting that while the constitution is relatively young at 70-75 years, they have traditions that have been practiced peacefully for much longer. He notes they are not against the Supreme Court but would like it to be in dialogue with social norms and consider them within the boundaries of their decisions.*

Naresh Tikait's insistence on traditional practices and customs, in light of the relatively new constitution, marks a deep conflict between past and present. He acknowledges the constitutional power of the Supreme Court (SC) and affirms, instead, that the SC and the customs should coexist, mutually obeying and respecting each other's authority. Tikait proposes that the law and customs operate collabouratively, while considering and respecting the customs. However, the feelings and sentiments in the narratives above speak volumes about the attitudes of Khap Panchayats today. Their sense of unease derives from their decreasing, once unquestioned, authority. With modernity increasingly encroaching on traditional spaces, and younger relatives resisting Khaps' decrees, Khaps feel slighted. They do not view these competing influences as a shift in customs, but instead view modernity and the resistance of

younger generations as a rejection of their leadership. Overall, these representations portray how many think Khap Panchayats experienced — obstinately holding on to a past firm in tradition, resistant to change, and sometimes, even aggressive. The interplay of tradition and modernity in the region represents complex relations of power, culture, and politics.

Conclusion

The complex socio-cultural and economic realities of Western Uttar Pradesh show a distinct history along with struggles and transitions. The interplay of caste characteristics, religious connotations, and changes in agriculture reflect the complex transitions from Ashraf to Ajlaf, highlighting complexities in Hindu-Muslim relations and cultural histories. The socio-economic differences are pronounced, despite the significant presence of Muslims, especially their divisions and sects. The clear need is to more formally provide reservation for Muslims similar to Hindu Dalits, to promote social justice and improve socio-economic capital. The Green Revolution was characterized not only by a new social formation in agriculture, but also by class differences, especially in districts such as Muzaffarnagar and Shamli. Globalization has also expedited the transition from agricultural labour to migrant labour, particularly for landless categories of individuals such as lower-caste Muslims. The other category, women, many of whom descended from agricultural labourers, still face the legacy of exploitation and harassment. The socio-economic changes after the Green Revolution coupled with tenancy reforms and the presence of groups such as Tabligh Jamaat and BKU expose a socio-economic fault line. It is necessary to appreciate and disentangle this tangled knot of caste, religion, and socio-economic issues in Western UP as part of the policy-making process, building community wholeness and equity, and moving towards sustainable growth for the region.

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