

Analysing the Nature of Muslim Leadership in Northern India

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Muslims are the second largest group in India; their population in northern India, particularly in UP and Bihar, also occupy the second position against the total state population. However, when it comes to their political representation, either at the assembly or at the parliamentary level, they are inadequately represented. This kind of low representation of Muslims in the democratic setup leads to the question of their leadership. In this context, this article tries to unfold the nature of Muslim leadership, particularly in northern India. It attempts to shed light on three dimensions of leadership: *Ulema* leadership, *Ashraf* leadership and *Pasmanda* leadership through Weberian lens. It also elucidates the grassroots activism and leadership among Muslims. This paper argues that Muslim leadership in northern India does not fall under Weber's charismatic leadership; against it, it follows "party or institution-based leadership style", where the leadership is fragmented and follows different shades of ideologies.

Keywords :Ashraf Leadership, Muslim Leadership, Pasmanda Leadership, Pasmanda Muslims, *Ulema* Leadership

It is a popularly imagined fact that Muslims have ruled this country for nearly eight hundred years. However, those Muslims were not of Indian origin; they came here from different parts of the world. Most of them settled here and ruled this country, unlike the Britishers who came here and ruled us and then went away. The dominance of Muslims in medieval India cannot be linked to modern India's Muslim leadership. In the true sense of the term, it can be traced back to the time of the first war of independence in 1857, wherein various religious scholars participated in the freedom struggle. Later on, during the Khilafat movement, the leadership of the Ali brothers was known to everyone. Just before India's independence, the role of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as a Muslim leader cannot be forgotten. Similarly, the leadership of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari can be highlighted with the golden words for the advocacy of the downtrodden section among Muslims in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In other words, "... a century earlier, the All India Momin Conference, a platform of lower caste Muslims, particularly the Ansaris, had mounted a serious challenge to the Muslim League's attempt to speak on behalf of all Indian Muslims" (Alam, 2007, p. 130).

However, after the post-independent India, Muslim political leadership can be divided into three phases. At the outset of the first phase, immediately after partition, "Indian Muslims had to grapple with the fact that despite the emergence of Pakistan as a state of Muslim majority provinces, in the independent state of India the issue of Muslim minority rights remained unresolved politically, socially, and culturally"

(Reetz, 2010, p. 31). “A second phase was introduced by socio-economic and political changes that arrived with the modernisation processes of the 1970s, triggering the emergence of radical politics and regional, cultural, and ethnic conflict” (Reetz, 2010, p. 32). “Globalisation and development marked the third phase of the leaders’ evolving emergence. In this phase, Muslim activism in India intensely refocused on the status and development of the Indian Muslim community, especially general education, the schooling of girls, and professional, technical, and computer education” (Reetz, 2010, p. 32).

Nevertheless, after the three phases of Muslim leadership, their political representation at all India level in general and northern India in particular is a matter of grave concern. In other words, they are not adequately represented in the assemblies and parliament. There is the absence of any national-level Muslim political parties or, for that matter, any charismatic Muslim leader under whom all Muslims are united. The question of Muslim political leadership and their political representation is more appropriate in regions like northern India, where they have a significant vote share. Therefore, this paper strives to understand the nature of Muslim leadership in northern India at the present time. In analysing so, it tries to trace the *Ulema* (religious scholars) leadership among Muslims. Further, it attempts to comprehend the *Ashraf* leadership and thirdly, it traces the footprints of *Pasmanda* leadership in the northern India region. Lastly, it analyses the grassroots activism and leadership among Muslims in the same region.

Review of Literature

The history of Muslim leadership in modern India can be traced back to the first war of independence. This could be considered as the first phase of Muslim leadership in modern India, where a large number of religious scholars or *Ulema* participated in the freedom movement. In other words, numerous Ulema participated in the freedom struggle, particularly during the *Khilafat* movement (Hasan, 1981). During the time of freedom struggle, the educational sphere has also witnessed Muslim leadership in India. In this period institutions like Mohammad Anglo Oriental College (later it became Aligarh Muslim University) was the product of vibrant leadership of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (Lelyveld, 1996). Similarly, Jamia Millia Islamia was also the product of nationalist leaders like Maulana Mehmud Hasan, Maulana Mohamed Ali, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, and Abdul Majid Khwaja. Prior to the making of these institutions, Darul Uloom Deoband was one of the prominent institutions, built under the esteemed leadership of Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi (Metcalf, 1982). This institution further produced prominent scholars and intellectuals who have contributed to the intellectual and educational development of Indian Muslims. This suggests that the pre-independence Muslim leadership was largely dominated by the religious scholars.

However, in the post independence period, this kind of leadership was not quite evident. In this period, one of the prominent Muslim leaders Maulana Abul Kalam Azad appeared on the political landscape. Although his contribution during the freedom movement cannot be overlooked (Engineer, 1988), he has made the significant contribution in the field of education and politics, which led to the development of Muslims in the independent India. However, in the wake of partition, Muslims in India were stripped of their politics (Devji, 2023). Although, Muslim leadership was not very assertive, most of the time in post-independent India, Muslim

leadership was largely concentrated in the hands of upper caste Muslims (Alam, 2009). The dominance of elite Muslims can be seen with the rise of Muslim leaders like Owaisi in the last two decades. He is not able to unite the Muslim community under one political banner. On the other hand, he has been seen as the leader of elitist Muslims, not entire Muslims (Ansari, 2021). The dominance of upper caste Muslims in politics led to the development of Pasmanda politics, which demanded the adequate share of Pasmanda Muslims in the political spectrum. However, this kind of politics or movement is also not able to unite a large number of Pasmanda Muslims under one political banner (Alam, 2022).

On the basis of the above-mentioned discussion five important points can be drawn. First, the Muslim leadership was largely concentrated in the hands of Ulema. Second, in post-independent India, Muslim political leadership was not very vibrant and independent. Third, Muslim leadership in post-independent India was in the hands of upper caste Muslims. Fourth, due to this approach Pasmanda politics came into existence; however, this kind of politics too is not able to unite the Pasmanda Muslims under one camp. Fifth, these works try to analyse Muslim leadership at national level. In these backdrops, this research is an attempt to analyse the nature of Muslim leadership in northern India.

Methodology of the Paper

This paper has used Weber's charismatic leadership as its conceptual framework. This has been used to understand whether there is any charismatic leader among the Muslims community in general and Pasmanda Muslims in particular under which a large number of Muslims are united to become a socio-political force to get the power as it happened in case of various backward and Dalit castes in northern India. Weber's charismatic leadership is an important tool to understand the nature of leadership in the democratic set up. This paper is based on the primary and secondary sources to substantiate the arguments.

Analysing the *Ulema* Leadership

The history of *Ulema* leadership can be traced back to the freedom struggle of 1857. Numerous *Ulema* participated in the freedom struggle, particularly during the *Khilafat* movement (Hasan, 1981). On the other hand, in post-independent India, the participation of religious *Ulema* in politics is not considerable enough to trace their footprints. However, it is a general perception that they influence Muslims and their politics. This kind of popular imagination can be substantiated by the facts. The political outreach of various political parties toward religious scholars such as Imam Bukhari, Arshad Madani and others for the support of the Muslim community during the election can be understood as the socio-political influence of these religious *Ulema*. These religious scholars and Imams have issued letters in support of different political parties at different junctures. For example, Syed Imam Bukhari of Jama Masjid, Delhi, has extended his support to various political parties at different times. In his appeal for the support of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), he argues that the "so-called secular political parties have been exploiting Muslims for the last fifty years. They treated Muslims as a vote bank and did nothing for their educational development and/or employment" (Ahmad, 2019b). Further, the Shahi Imam says that the "BJP has realised that India cannot move on the path of development by ignoring the presence of the crores of Muslims in the country" (Ahmad, 2019b).

Moreover, Muslims related issues (as the mainstream media have perceived it) such as Muslim personal law and Babri Masjid cases have been dealt with Muslim religious scholars and *Imams* (religious leaders).

Although madrasas or institutional Islam (Khursheed, 2019) do not promote the politicisation of madrasa students, the various stakeholders of madrasas indirectly participate in mainstream politics. It is worth mentioning the appeal of the head of the religious seminaries for Muslims to participate in the electoral process. A famous Islamic scholar and chief rector of Darul Uloom Theological School of Lucknow, Maulana Rabey Hasan Nadwi, said, “All that I can say is that Muslims should participate wholeheartedly in the electoral process. They should support the best candidates and hope for the best. They will suffer if they remain aloof from the political system” (The Hindu, 2014). Similarly, Qasmi’s (2019) request regarding the casting of a vote in the light of Islam during the 2019 general election is a testimony of the indirect participation of *Ulema* in politics. It is worth mentioning him: “If thought deeply, it will come out that not exercising the right of vote is not considered to be good in Islam, rather casting it more carefully and honestly for the interest of the nation is compulsory for each and every citizen” (Qasmi, 2019, p. 30). The comments of Arshad Madani with regard to the government’s policy on minorities (The Economic Times, 2016) are testimony that religious scholars or institutions make an essential intervention in politics. Similarly, the remarks of Mahmood Madani on NRC and Kashmir (Ahmed, 2019a) also suggest that religious scholars or *Ulema* indirectly participate in politics without contesting the mainstream election.

Muslim religious leaders’ political intervention can also be felt as they have also been approached by right-wing politics during the protest against the CAA. They were contacted during the protest and agitation in the case of the National Register for Citizens (NRC) in India and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) (Arnimesh, 2019). With the emergence of the BJP government in 2014, religious leadership has taken a new trend. In other words, “the religious scholars (*ulama*) negotiate with the government for public space of their communities” (Reetz, 2020, p. 271). To achieve this purpose, various religious leaders of different *Maslak* (sects or identities) continuously communicate with and support the government on various occasions. For example, “Maulana Asghar Ali Imam Mahdi Salafi, general secretary of Markazi Jamiat Ahle Hadees extended his support to Modi government on abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and rolling out NRC across the country on ... when he met with home minister Amit Shah along with the leaders of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind” (Muslim Mirror, 2019b). He also holds the Supreme Court’s decision on Babri masjid as a “historic judgment” (Muslim Mirror, 2019a). Similarly, then, the Shia Wakf Board chairman asked the centre to include Shia Muslims in the citizenship bill (Scroll, 2019).

These kinds of stands are hotly debated among Muslim circles “whether these religious leaders accommodate the BJP and RSS out of fear or out of social and political calculations in the face of a growing and resolute generation of younger Muslim activists increasingly crossing the sectarian divides” (Reetz, 2020, p. 271-272). At the same time, the spokesperson of Darul Uloom Firangi Mahal, Maulana Sufiyan Nizami, said on the Uniform Civil Code that “it is wrong, and this nullifies the essence of unity in diversity” (Aaj Tak, 2022). Further, he said that “a uniform civil code would not ease the matter of people. This law is neither needed by the government nor by the people of this country” (Aaj Tak, 2022). This kind of statement in the

public sphere is the testimony that religious scholars of different *Maslak* indirectly participate in the political arena of this country in general and northern India in particular.

However, it is also worth mentioning that a group of “Ulama-e-Keram (Intellectuals) (religious scholars, my addition) came forward and decided to start a resistance movement which was named Ulama Council” (Rashtriya Ulama Council). Later on, this Ulama council evolved into Rashtriya Ulama Council (RUC), as its name suggests that it was mainly started by the religious scholars of the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. However, this party lacks potential to unite Muslims under one banner. The party was founded on 4 October 2008 and fought the election on five seats in the parliamentary election of 2009. But could not win any seats, however, secured 2.5 lacs votes. Later on, it also participated in the assembly election in 2012. “The Azamgarh based outfit, Rashtriya Ulama Council released a list of 170 candidates for the state assembly elections ... In the seat distribution, Jan Sangharsh Morcha and some communist groups have also been given fair representation” (Fareed, 2012). RUC contested 70 seats out of 170 in 2017; however, this time, too, it was not able to win any seats. However, it secured only 155527 votes, which is 0.21 per cent of the total vote share (Election Commission of India 2012, Statistical Report on General Election, 2012 to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh). In the 2019 parliamentary election, the party contested on 9 seats but was unable to save its deposit and got 25756 votes only (Election Commission of India, 2019). Its continuous defeat is the testimony of its failure to woo Muslim voters in the region.

Based on the above discussion, two pertinent points can be drawn. First, certain sections of *Ulema* in northern India do not directly participate in politics by contesting the election. But they try to influence the Muslim political landscape and attempt to represent themselves as the voice of Muslims. Second, organisations like RUC, which mostly comprises religious scholars or *Ulema*, try their fate into politics. But they failed to unite all Muslims under their banner in the eastern part of UP. However, this kind of *Ulema* leadership is not for the socio-religious reform within the Muslim community except *Tablighi Jamaat*, which strives to change the daily life of Muslims according to Islamic principles. These religious leadership could not culminate into the movement, which ultimately converted into a full-fledged and vigorous political movement or party, unlike the *Bahujan* leaders who motivated through the movement and succeeded in mainstream politics (Kumar, 2006 ; Kumar, 2007). For example, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram ran the movement and provided directional leadership to this country’s marginalised and backward community.

***Ashraf* Leadership and its Dominance**

The dominance of *Ashraf*’s leadership can be traced to their presence in religious institutions, democratic institutions or the democratic public sphere. The All-India Muslim Personal Law Board is one such religious institution which directly influences the common Muslims. If we see at the organisational structure, “the AIMPLB has accepted the distinction between *maslaks* (different groups/ideologies under the same sect) and *firqas* (different sects), and based on their population, given representation to *Ulema* (scholars) of different *maslaks* and *firqas* on the board” (Fyzie, 2022). Although, organisation recognises the *maslaks*, it does not acknowledge the social stratification in terms of castes among Muslims. The organisation does not give representation to any indigenous *Pasmanda* (backward, Dalit and tribal) Muslim

castes in the organisation on the basis of their population” (Fyzie, 2022). “It is not that the board is not aware of the caste stratification of Indian Muslims. In the book *Majmua-e-Qawanin-e-Islami* published by the AIMPLB, the chapter related to marriage recognises the racial-ethnic, high-low, indigenous-foreigner differentiation ...” (Fyzie, 2022). However, it “claims to speak on behalf of all Muslim sects, castes and creeds in India, is also involved in promoting caste system among Muslims” (Falahi, 2011). He further argued:

In May 2001, it issued a Compendium of what it called Islamic laws (Majmooa’-e-Qawaneen-e-Islami) mainly related to personal law issues. The Compendium specifically refers to kaffaa, and insists that birth, and, therefore, family status, which also includes caste in the Indian context, is a basic ingredient of it. It says that a non-Muslim convert to Islam is of the same kaffaa as an original Muslim, but in the footnote, it says that this applies to Arabs only. Presumably, therefore, according to this bizarre interpretation, an Indian male non-Muslim convert cannot marry a woman from an original Muslim (Sayed and Sheikh) family. Interestingly, the Board suggested that the Indian courts should accept this Compendium to govern Muslim personal law-related issues. Given the Compendium’s sanction of birth-based kaffaa this suggestion is quite unacceptable. It would mean giving legal sanction to caste inequality. It promotes casteism on the name of ‘kufu’. (Falahi, 2011)

From this kind of long quote, it can be discerned that it is dominated by the upper caste Muslims. This type of interpretation also leads to their leadership in that religious institution. The upper caste leadership and dominance can also be felt in socio-political affairs. To illustrate this, the prolific writer on the *Pasmanda* Muslims, such as Ansari, has argued that in the general election of 2019:

Only one out of seven Mahagathbandhan’s Muslim candidates in Bihar is a Pasmanda and both BJP-led NDA’s candidates are Ashraf..In Uttar Pradesh, only one of the nine Muslim candidates fielded by the Congress is a Pasmanda. Bahujan Samaj Party has fielded two Pasmanda candidates out of six Muslims and one Pasmanda is fighting on a Samajwadi Party ticket (out of four Muslims). It is true that in the BJP, there seems to be no space for Pasmanda Muslims, but the flag bearers of secular and social justice politics have also disappointed the Pasmanda Muslims. (Ansari, 2019b)

While discussing the representation of *Pasmanda* Muslims across the political parties, he argued that “out of 25 Muslim MPs, 18 are from higher caste, and only 7 MPs are from OBCs/STs. Further, within the OBCs/STs, one MP is from ST and six from OBCs” (Ansari, 2019a). This is the situation of all India scenario of dominance of upper caste Muslim in Indian politics. If we further elucidate, then it appears that only one backward Muslim MP was chosen from northern India particularly UP and Bihar in the 2019 general election (Ansari, 2019a).

The upper caste Muslims dominate not only the political realm but also educational institutions or their leadership can be seen in these institutions. To substantiate this claim, it is worth quoting Alam and Kumar (2019), they try to unravel the dominance of upper-caste Muslims in one of the leading minority educational institutions in India in general and north India in particular, Aligarh Muslim University. Alam and Kumar “clearly bring out that the teaching faculty is dominated

by upper caste Muslims (88.35 per cent). Muslim OBCs in the faculty constitute 4.81 per cent of the total faculty ...” (2019, p. 90). This suggests that the upper caste Muslim leadership dominates not only in politics but also in other public institutions.

***Pasmanda* Leadership and its Assertion**

The discussion on Muslim leadership would be incomplete without reflecting on the *Pasmanda* (literal meaning is those who have been left behind, it is a socio-political discourse which tries to unite Backwards, Dalits and Tribal Muslims) Muslim leadership. It is commonly understood that Muslims are a monolithic category. However, it is just a partial understanding. They are very much divided as the Hindu community is fragmented into several caste groups (Ahmad, 1978; Ansari, 1960; Ahmad, 1962). As far as Muslims’ political representation is concerned, they are inadequately represented in the Indian political discourse (Punyani, 2013; Hasan, 2009). However, within the Muslim leadership, *Pasmanda* Muslims are far below their population percentage (Ansari, 2019b). In this context, a certain section of the Muslim community asserts their socio-political issue under the banner of *Pasmanda* Muslims. This group of Muslims demand their due share in the political sphere, Scheduled Castes status for Dalit Muslims (Ansari, 2019b; Alam, 2019 and Alam, 2022a) and other related issues. In this context, it is imperative to shed light on this kind of discourse that how far *Pasmanda* leadership effectively mobilises their mass base to get their political share or assert independently to diminish their political marginalisation. To understand their present situation, there is a need to elucidate their historical lineage.

“The history of *Pasmanda* leadership can be traced back to the 1930s when leaders like Maulana Ali Hussain ‘Asim Bihari’ and Abdul Qayyum Ansari raised the issues of backward Muslims” (Alam, 2022c). In other words, “the history of caste movements among Muslims can be traced back to the commencement of the Momin Movement in the second decade of the 20th century ...” (Ansari, 2009, p. 8). This suggests that it is a nearly century-old discourse. However, any discourse can grow further when its first-generation leaders strive hard and try to mobilise the masses to join that movement and prepare the second-generation leadership. This could not have happened in the context of the first-generation leadership of the *Pasmanda* movement. “The appropriation of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari by the Congress party in Bihar” (Salim, 2013) ceases its independent outlook. The co-option of this first-generation leader did not provide enough guidance to expand its contour during the emergence of the discourse. In other words, the organisation or movement “could not remain active after independence when its top leader Abdul Qaiyum Ansari (1905-1975) became a minister in the Congress-led Bihar government” (Kumar, 2016).

Later on, this movement or leadership gathered momentum when leaders like Ejaz Ali and Ali Anwar established their organisations to assert the *Pasmanda* identity. At this juncture, it is worth analysing their efforts to unite the *Pasmanda* Muslims for the upliftment of their wretched condition. Ejaz Ali, the founder of All India Backward Muslim Morcha (AIBMM) tried to raise the *Pasmanda* consciousness among the *Pasmanda* Muslims. The establishment of AIBMM was called “a new Muslims leadership and changing discourse of community identity” (Sikand, 2001, p. 291).

In less than a decade of its founding, by early 2001 the AIBMM had emerged as an umbrella group of over 40 organisations claiming to represent various

different Dalit Muslim castes. It now has branches in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Delhi, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, in addition to Bihar, where it has its headquarters. It has also established contact with Muslim backward caste organisations in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, in south India. Ejaz Ali serves as its all-India convenor, and there are state convenors in each of the states where it has branches. (Sikand, 2001, p. 289)

Although, the AIBMM strive hard to raise consciousness, unable to unite and make an effective intervention at the political level. Although, he became a 'Member of Parliament', he failed to convince the common mass of the Muslim community to join the movement or organisation and was unable to fight the election independently.

At the same time, Ali Anwar, founder of '*Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz*', also tried to accommodate the backward and Dalit Muslims under the umbrella of *Pasmanda* Muslims. The emergence of two organisations from the same region (Bihar) during the same time frame suggests that there was a lack of unity among the *Pasmanda* Muslims as far as their issues and demands were concerned. The situation would have been different when these two organisations were under one banner. However, these two stalwarts of early *Pasmanda* leadership were subsumed by Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United). This is the movement's criticism, as these leaders were just gratifying their vested interest. They were not interested in the political representation and upliftment of the ostracised community. The appropriation of these stalwarts by the political parties suggests that the *Pasmanda* movement lost its independent outlook (Alam, 2022b).

Most of the time, the '*Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz*' or, for that matter, AIBMM focused on the political goal. These organisations, particularly the former, could not become a mass social movement to create awareness among the *Pasmanda* Muslims. Smith long ago bemoaned that there is a lack of will on the part of Muslim leadership to introduce social reform in community (Alam, 2003) He argued, "In the area of social reform no legislation has been enacted to promote the social progress of the Muslims since independence. During the same period, vast strides have been made towards the social reform of the Hindu community" (quoted in Alam, 2003, p. 4882). Although, Smith has highlighted the lack of reform within the Muslim community as a whole, Ansari (2009) vociferously discussed this lacuna of the *Pasmanda* movement in the following manner:

Right from the days of the All India Momin Conference (its pre-eminent leader being Abdul Qayyum Ansari) way back in the 1930s to its present post-Mandal avatars, the PM (*Pasmanda* Movement-my enlargement) has singularly concentrated on affirmative action (now the politics around Article 341 of the Constitution) and electoral politics at the expense of other pressing issues. It has been completely ineffective in developing a comprehensive alternative social/cultural/economic agenda and the corresponding institutions and mass mobilisation that it necessitates. (Ansari, 2009, p. 9)

The low strength of *Pasmanda* leadership and mobilisation can also be understood that it has no independent political party that has a share in the government formation or in the opposition in northern India, particularly in UP and Bihar, unlike other caste-based parties such as "*Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party*" in UP, which had

political share in the government during 2017-22. This party has *Rajbhar* caste as their main vote share. The lack of mobilisation of *Pasmanda* Muslim leaders can also be understood in addressing their issue, particularly the demand of SC status for Dalit Muslims by the Political parties. In the last general election of 2019, any political party did not mention providing the SC status for Dalit Muslims in their manifesto (Alam, 2019). However, During the 2022 state election of UP, it was reported that BJP was trying to break into the Muslim votes by addressing the *Pasmanda* Muslims (Ansari, 2021; Sharma, 2022). However, this can be falsified by saying that if BJP had tried to woo the *Pasmanda* Muslims, it could have included the main demand of *Pasmanda* Muslims, the SC status to Dalit Muslims.

Nevertheless, the 2022 state election of UP witnessed a new turn with regard to mobilisation of *Pasmanda* Muslims. Ahead of the state election of UP, lower-caste Muslims forge new solidarities (Azam, 2022). In this group, 15 lower castes Muslims come together to demand their rights such as “SC status to Dalit Muslims, flat electricity rate for weavers, renewal of licenses of butchers and a nationwide caste census” (Azam, 2022). In this context, the “representatives of several of these groups travelled across three districts of eastern UP, including to create awareness about their issues and to form new solidarities” (Azam, 2022). However, despite such mobilisation, their demand, particularly SC status for Dalit Muslims did not find a place in the manifestos of any significant political parties during the state election of 2022. The voting pattern of backward Muslims (as they give the vote to different political parties) is also evidence which proves that *Pasmanda* leadership is weak.

Moreover, the fragile *Pasmanda* leadership can also be substantiated by their low presence in the parliament and other legislative assemblies. The prolific writer on the *Pasmanda* Muslims, such as Ansari, has argued that in the general election of 2019 “out of 25 Muslim MPs, 18 are from higher caste and only 7 MPs are from OBCs/STs. Further, within the OBCs/STs, one MP is from ST and six from OBCs” (Ansari, 2019a). This is an all India scenario concerning the marginalisation of *Pasmanda* Muslims in Indian politics. If we further explain, then it is evident that only one backward Muslim MP was chosen from northern India particularly UP and Bihar in the 2019 general election (Ansari, 2019a). This suggests that *Pasmanda* Muslims are not adequately represented in the political realm, and their leadership is not marking its presence on the Indian political landscape in general and northern India in particular. To put these above discussions into a consolidated argument of Kothari (1970), wherein he argued that “it is not the politics which is caste-ridden; rather, it is the caste which gets politicised”. This perspective is inappropriate in the context of *Pasmanda* Muslim castes as they could not politicise themselves to become any large independent political party under which backward and Dalit Muslims are united in northern India.

Tracing the Grassroot Activism and Leadership

This section attempts to trace the grassroots leadership among Muslims in northern India. In this context, it has been tried to unravel the different shades of grassroots activism or leadership in the region. *Tablighi Jamaat* (a society for spreading the faith) activism on the ground is known to everyone when it comes to religious activism on the ground. In this *Jamaat*, they motivate people to live according to the teachings of the Quran and Hadith. This “proselytising movement aims to reach out to ordinary Muslims and revive their faith, particularly in matters of ritual, dress, and personal

behaviour” (Sheriff, 2020). The practice of participants “to spend one night a week, one weekend a month, 40 continuous days a year, and ultimately 120 days at least once in their lives engaged in Tabligh missions” (Metcalf, 2001). The *Tablighi Jamaat* “members travel to different cities, villages or towns, stay at a mosque there and go from door to door reminding Muslims to study the Quran and pay more attention to Islam” (Masoodi, 2013). Moving from door to door, called *Gasht*, is a tool to mobilise ordinary Muslims to come to the mosque so they can learn and understand Islam. This kind of practice can be understood as grassroots activism, though its nature is religious. By doing so, they try to prepare Muslim as the man of Islam in practice. “Tabligh’s interpretation of Islam is solely driven by grassroots social reform that aims at achieving a higher level of spiritual enlightenment and proximity to God. Their immediate goal is to make progress in personal reform and societal regeneration” (Agha, 2020). This suggests that the people of Jamaat try to reform Muslims as true and faithful followers of Islam. From the above discussion, it is apparent that they (the people of Jamaat) do grassroots activism for religious reform among the Muslim community. In the words of Masoodi:

The Jamaat tries to replicate the way Muslims lived in the time of Prophet Muhammad. They dress the way Muslims did then—the men sport beards of a certain length, and they use miswak (teeth-cleaning twig) instead of a toothbrush. Nothing that this Deobandi-inspired movement preaches is not taught in Islam, but the movement just prefers to be selective in terms of which parts of the religion it focuses on. (Masoodi, 2013)

This kind of grassroots activism does not encourage the politicisation of its followers. To put it in Ahmed’s words, “Tablighi Jamaat tells its followers not to pursue political dominance in this world” (Ahmed, 2020).

However, it has been found that a small section of Muslims who call themselves *Pasmanda* activists work to uplift the wretched condition of the *Pasmanda* Muslims and elevate their political representation. This movement had its epicenter in Bihar (Alam, 2007; Sikand, 2001), but later on, it also expanded to other parts of India in general and northern India in particular. Nevertheless, “there is contestation among Muslims on demand for SC status to Dalit Muslims and *Pasmanda* movement” (Alam, 2022a). The upper caste and class Muslims do not advocate the *Pasmanda* consciousness. It is mainly cherished by the small section of the *Pasmanda* Muslims themselves. This group does activism on the ground but not of great strength. Their weakness can be substantiated by saying that their issues and concerns did not find a place in the manifestos of any prominent political parties in the UP-state election of 2022. Their articulation has also taken a new mode, social media, to raise the consciousness among the *Pasmanda* Muslims and their issues. This is not only limited to *Pasmanda* activism, which is also run through the same platform. Various socio-religious groups are also using this mode to raise awareness.

Internet blogs such as Sunni News not only help to circulate news and theological concepts but also promote sectarian debate. The youthful missionary movement of this tradition, Sunni Dawat-e Islami, which formed after the model of the Tablighi Jama’at and their Barelwi pendant, the Dawat-e Islami in ... , possesses a modern web presence, offering podcasts, an e-journal, and e-books. (Reetz, 2020, p. 272)

It is also a fact that social media is not limited to any region. It has a worldwide

approach to influence the masses. In this sense, grassroots activism is not just on the ground; it has also taken a new shape and pattern, social media.

Moreover, there is a dearth of literature which discusses the grassroots activism of upper-caste Muslims in northern India. On the other hand, it is a well-established fact that they dominate politics. Although, the party-based mobilisation of the upper caste Muslim candidates during the election time can be observed, it cannot be considered grassroots activism as *Pasmanda* activists try to mobilise the *Pasmanda* Muslims for their political and social upliftment.

Conclusion

It is commonly understood that religious *Ulema* do not participate in politics; it is just a partial understating. However, on the basis of the above discussion, it appears that they tacitly try to influence the political arena of this country in general and northern India in particular. It has also been observed that religious *Ulema* or Muslim scholars also made a political party but failed in wooing Muslim voters in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. This suggests that there is an emergence of a new pattern as far as Muslim religious *Ulema* or leaders and their intervention in the political realm of the region is concerned. Moreover, the article also found that Ashraf leadership dominates not only in the country's religious institutions but also in politics. They are everywhere, ranging from All India Muslim Personal Law Board to mainstream politics. Although they dominate Indian politics (Ansari, 2019a), this is aristocratic leadership. In other words, they have not grown out of any vigorous activism or any Muslim political movement of recent times in northern India. As far as *Pasmanda* leadership is concerned, there is a need to analyse this phenomenon from the lens of Kothari (1970), wherein he has argued that "it is not the politics which is caste-ridden; rather, it is the caste which gets politicised". This framework is not very much applicable to the *Pasmanda* Muslims or movement. Despite being a century-old movement, they are unable to vehemently mobilise *Pasmanda* Muslim castes for their political assertion and benefits under one banner. However, it has also been observed that a small section of Muslims is doing *Pasmanda* activism in northern India, particularly in UP and Bihar, to get an adequate political share and SC status for Dalit Muslims. As far as grassroots activism and leadership is concerned, there is a lack of political activism on the ground by the *Ashraf* leadership. *Pasmanda* activism can be witnessed on the ground but not of great strength, which could unite all *Pasmanda* Muslims under one banner. On the other hand, it appears that the *Tablighi Jamaat* is active for its socio-religious reform in the region. Lastly, if we analyse from the perspective of Weber (1958), Muslim leadership does not fall into charismatic leadership; their leadership is fragmented and follows different shades of ideologies by associating with different political parties and institutions. There is lack of any charismatic leadership among the Muslim community in general and *Pasmanda* Muslims in particular, under which a large number of Muslims are united to become a political force to get their adequate share in the parliament and legislative assemblies.

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