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Rafia Kazim

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## Who will Speak for the *Pasmandaa* Women? —Dalits, Women, Muslims, and the Politics of Representation

By Rafia Kazim<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article questions the deliberate omissions of disadvantaged Dalit Muslim women, also known as *Pasmandaa* women, from feminist, Dalit, and subaltern discourses. To understand the multiplicative nature of oppression and discrimination that these women are continually subjected to, this article foregrounds the intersectionality framework to get a nuanced picture of intersecting vertices of discrimination. It argues that by excluding these severely disadvantaged women from their respective agenda, feminist and Dalit activists have contributed towards their perpetual marginality. Underlying such unaccounted absence of these women is an insouciant attitude of the *Pasmandaa* leaders towards them. Their approach towards non-representation of their women and their specific concerns raises questions about the very efficacy of the *Pasmandaa* movement. This article has tried to seek answers to such questions by directly interrogating women of these communities through an exploratory study. Data for this article was gathered by intensive interviews of women from the community. The article draws on data from a larger ongoing study of these women in the states of UP and Bihar.

*Keywords:* *Pasmandaa* women, Dalit Muslims, Intersectionality, Representational politics, Ashraafization, *Arzaals*.

### Introduction

'*Pasmandaa*' is a Persian word that refers to those who lag and are backward. Though the category '*Pasmandaa* Muslims' refers to the most downtrodden groups who indulge in demeaning and menial occupations such as cleaners, scavengers, butchers, bangle sellers, washer men, vegetable vendors, fishermen, potters, blacksmith, and weavers, this category is fluid and accommodates even those castes, which are considered relatively well off. In the 1990s, when all of India was protesting the Mandal Commission<sup>2</sup> recommendations, Dalit Muslims, with the

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Rafia Kazim is an Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, LNM University. She was earlier associated with CSD, Hyderabad, and was a Senior Lecturer at SC College, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India. She has publications in international and national peer-reviewed journals and is the author of a book on linguistic prejudices: *Learning the Infidels' Language: Muslim Women and the English Language* (2020). Her areas of interest are gender and language, multilingual education, early childhood education subaltern groups, and legal pluralism. Email: [rafiakazim@gmail.com](mailto:rafiakazim@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> On 1st January 1979, the Indian Government under Prime Minister Moraraji Desai formed a committee on the socially and educationally backward classes (OBCs) of India. It was headed by BP Mandal—an Indian parliamentarian—with the key objective of ameliorating the socio-economic situation of backward castes through reservations in various sectors of employment, especially in government jobs. The Committee recommended that these OBCs that constituted 52% of India's total population should be granted reservations to 27% of jobs in the Central government and public sector undertakings. However, it was only after a decade (in the 1990s) that the intent to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations was declared by the then Prime Minister, VP Singh, to which most upper-caste students objected and led to some violent protests across India against the Mandal Commission recommendations.

intention of making their presence felt in the political arena, formed organizations to highlight their plight. Thus, in the tumultuous decade of the 1990s, we witnessed the rise of Dalit Muslims' organizations such as Eijaz Ali's All India United Muslim Morcha (1993) and Ali Anwar's the All India Muslim Mahaz (1998). What is interesting about the latter is the use of the term '*Pasmandaa*' as the rubric under which it intended to accommodate all the Dalit Muslims. *Pasmandaa*, a word with Persian etymology, means the fallen one or the backward. The politics behind choosing a word of Persio-Arabic roots could have been a) to provide an ethnic-racial legitimacy to the Dalit Muslims by subtly hinting at their distinctiveness from the Hindu Dalits and/or, b) the use of the Persian word instead of the colloquial word reflects their latent desire to be associated with the *Ashraafs*<sup>3</sup>, i.e., a longing for *Ashraafization*. Ali Anwar and other activists from the Muslim backward caste communities realized that if they wanted to ameliorate the sordid plight of the backward caste Muslims, they would have to fight for their rights of their caste identity and not on their religious identity alone. They were also aware of the discriminatory politics of the *Ashraaf* Muslims who deliberately distanced themselves from the wretchedness of the backward Muslims. These advocates of the *Pasmandaa* movement<sup>4</sup> felt the urgent need to choose representatives from within their caste who could fight exclusively for backward Muslims' rights. However, the founders of the *Pasmandaa* movement failed to give due representation to the problems of women of their community that are so distinct from those of the *Pasmandaa* men and upper-caste Muslim women.

It is at the background of this that the study questions the deliberate omissions of the disadvantaged women from the feminist, Dalit, and subaltern discourses. To understand the multiplicative nature of oppression and discrimination that these women are continually subjected to this study foregrounds the intersectionality framework to get a nuanced picture of intersecting vertices of discrimination. It argues that by excluding these women from their respective agenda, feminist and Dalit activists have contributed towards their perpetual marginality.

Underlying such unaccounted absence of women of their community is an insouciant attitude of the *Pasmandaa* leaders towards their women. Their approach towards the non-representation of these women and their specific concerns raises questions about the very efficacy of the *Pasmandaa* movement. This study has tried to seek answers to such questions by directly engaging with the women of their community. Given the exploratory nature of this study, data for this article were gathered through intensive interviews of these women. The paper draws on data from a larger ongoing study on these disadvantaged women mostly from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India.

### **Caste-like Formations among Indian Muslims**

Insofar as documentation of caste among Muslims is concerned, Imtiaz Ahmad's edited volume *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*. (1978) provides a cogent description of caste-like formations existing among Muslims across India. The volume provides valuable accounts of the anomalies existing between the ideal/textual and the real/experiential in the context of Islamic praxis. However, before this volume, the main account was Ghaus Ansari's

<sup>3</sup> Ashrafs are the upper caste Muslims such as Sayyads, Sheikhs, Mughals, and Pathans.

<sup>4</sup> The movement started by the most backward Muslims is known as the *Pasmandaa* movement in the decades of the 1990s in the northern states of India, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. The movement challenges the myth that the Muslim community is a monolithic community premised on the Islamic concept of egalitarianism, and lays bare the internal differentiation within the Muslim community in India.

work on caste among Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, published in the 1960s. Subsequently, Imtiaz Ahmad's seminal work, 'The *Ashraaf* and *Ajlaaf* Categories in Indo-Muslim Society' (1967), on the efficacy of the distinction between the *Ashraaf* and *Ajlaaf* categories highlighted the ambiguities associated with these two categories. He found that the categories of Ashraf and Ajlaf in most parts of India were not sufficient as there were other region-specific categories and subcategories that reflected the internal distinctions within the Muslim communities of that particular region, i.e., distinctions based on the sects of Shia and Sunni. For instance, in most parts of Western and Southern India, sectarian categories such as the Ismailis, Sulaimanis, Khojas, Bhooras, etc. reflect the internal distinctions within the Muslim community more prominently than the caste categories. Additionally, across India there are several caste-like distinctions that do not fall within these two categories of *Ashraafs* and *Ajlaaf*.

However, the extant literature on caste among Muslims in India refers only to the *Ashraaf* and the *Ajlaaf* castes. What distinguishes the Hindu caste system from that of Muslim caste-like formations is the fact that the latter is based on ethnic origin and descent of people. Imtiaz Ahmad (1967) observes:

'The *Ashraaf* or the Upper class include all undoubted descendants of foreign Muslims (Arabs, Persians, and Afghans, etc.) and converts from the upper castes of Hindus. Like the higher Hindu castes, they consider it degrading to engage in menial occupations or to handle the plough, and they look down upon all other Muslims whom they call '*Ajlaaf*' (ibid: 887).

The *Ajlaafs* are mostly the functional and service castes such as the weavers, barbers, washermen, tailors, etc. More recently, the third category of *Arjaals* is also added which includes castes that indulge in supposedly unclean jobs such as tannery, butchery, sanitation, shoe making, etc.

### **Hierarchical Distinctions within Muslim Castes**

Thus, castes within the Muslim community broadly categorize Muslims under three hierarchical rubrics: *Ashraaf*, *Ajlaaf*, and *Arzaals* (Ansari 1960, Ahmad 1967 & 1978, Singh 1994, GOI 2006). However, even among the *Ashraafs*, there are internal distinctions too. The *Ashraafs* comprise four groups of *Sayyads*, *Sheikhs*, *Mughal*, and *Pathans*. While the *Sayyads* claim themselves to be the direct descendants from the Prophet's line (hence purest of all other Muslims) the *Sheikhs* claim to descend from the Muslim nobility of various ethnic groups that came from Central Asia. The *Sayyads* are the Muslim parallel of the *Brahmins*. They, like their Brahmin counterparts, are mostly concerned with learning and administration. The *Sheikhs* too claim their descent from the nobility that settled in India from Central and West Asia. Likewise, the *Mughals* and the *Pathans*, as the names suggest, came from elsewhere (mostly from Iran and Afghanistan). They are mainly warrior groups and correspond to the *Kshatriya* of the Hindu community. By contrast, the *Ajlaafs* are those who converted to Islam long ago, and who, unlike the *Ashraaf*, primarily happen to be members of the indigenous population. They are mostly artisan groups like carpenters, ironsmith, etc., associated with clean occupations. The third category is that of the *Arzaals*, again believed to be converted from the autochthonous Dalit caste of the Hindu community and who more recently rechristened themselves as the *Pasmandaas*.

The Orientalist ethnocentric undertone of the *Ashraafs* becomes evident when they take pride in the fact that they came from the foreign lands to the west of India, i.e., from the Occident. It is this undercurrent of ethnocentrism that becomes a pertinent criterion of their identity which they flauntingly use to differentiate themselves from the *Ajlaafs* and the *Arzaals*. There is some sort of sanctity that is attached to the purity of descent that makes it essential for the *Ashraafs* to maintain the ritual purity of blood through strict adherence to endogamous rules (Ahmad 1978). Thus, even though caste rules among Indian Muslims may not be as stringent as those among the Hindus, especially when it comes to the concept of pollution and purity, Muslim castes normally try not to dilute the rules of endogamy. It is through the mechanism of endogamy that inter-caste hierarchy is maintained even among Muslims. However, those castes which are associated with scavenging, tannery, butchery, midwifery, and other allied activities, reportedly face discrimination even in mosques and graveyards where they are denied entry to these places for their association with 'unclean' occupations. But these kinds of discriminations do not reflect or indicate any possibility of pollution through touch or shadow as is witnessed in the Hindu upper-caste groups. In fact, such social distancing is practiced not on the lines of ritual purity and pollution but with the intention of maintaining the cultural distinctiveness of the *Ashraafs*.

Such is the concern of the *Ashraafs* in maintaining their cultural distinctiveness from the *Ajlaafs* and *Arzaals* that they are derogatorily referred to as *badzaat* (bad caste) or *kamzaat* (low caste) in the popular discourse. Even in mainstream Urdu literature, authors like Ismat Chughtai address the *Pasmandaas* as *kunjrde* (vegetable sellers), *kasais* (butchers) (Kazim 2008). Any deviant behavior within the *Ashraaf* microcosm is derogatorily labeled as *bakhkho-bakhain* (the vagabond-beggars caste) or resembling that of *kunjrde-kasais's*, i.e., lowly and bereft of any genteel mannerisms. By prioritizing their cultural distinctiveness, the *Ashraafs* ensured that the social cleavage within the Muslim community was maintained through endogamy. During interviews, one of the participants recounted her colleague's (*Ashraaf* Muslim) marriage to a Brahmin and the reaction of her relatives. The relatives would have objected more had she married a Muslim low caste instead of marrying a Hindu Brahmin. Such is the abhorrence of the *Ashraafs* with the *Ajlaafs* and *Arzaals*. In fact, an *Ajlaaf* would have reacted in much the same way had a member of his community forged a marital alliance with the *Arzaals*.

Thus, these earlier works on caste among Muslims in India have been significant in refuting the belief that Muslims adhere to the core concept of the egalitarianism of Islam. The concept of egalitarianism in Islam is challenged, even within the Muslim community, by the irrefragability of caste-based discriminations that become obvious in the practices of endogamy and connubiality.

The subtleties of discriminatory practices may, to some extent, camouflage the social crevices among Indian Muslim communities at large, but the fact of the matter is that such practices become overtly visible in the domains of marriage and social dining. The *Pasmandaas* in general face two problems: i) the *Ashraaf* group is reluctant to admit to their discriminatory approach towards the *Pasmandaas* which further complicates the chances of them getting the same benefits that the Hindu Dalits are entitled to, and- ii) *Pasmandaas* remain the most backward on multiple indices of social, economic, and educational development, even within the already disadvantageous Muslim minority community. Owing to the social ostracism that they are subjected to at the hands of the *Ashraaf* Muslims, the non-*Ashraaf* groups (mostly belonging to the *Arzaal* community) decided to spearhead a movement that would be solely for and by the Dalit Muslims.

Whereas the term Dalit means oppressed and is aptly self-explanatory, the term *Pasmandaa*, by contrast, betrays the very oppressive practices that the lower caste Muslims were

subjected to, even though in their case, the degree of oppression was milder than that to which Dalits were subjected to within the Hindu caste structure. More recently, there have been scores of articles on *Pasmandaa* Muslims who, in their quest for benefitting from caste-based reservation policies, have spearheaded their political activism by demanding Scheduled Caste (SC)<sup>5</sup>, a status that is otherwise confined only to the Hindu Dalits.

The *Pasmandaa* movement was initiated by men, and there was barely any involvement of women in this movement. It focused mostly on pressurizing the state to identify them also, just like their Hindu counterparts, as 'Scheduled Caste' and not as Other Backward Caste (Article 341 of the Constitution of India). The benefits associated with SC are numerous; for instance, reservations in government jobs, age relaxation for the same, stricter laws against any instance of oppression against them, and other social welfare policies sponsored by the state for SC/ST under protective discrimination policies. These benefits are seen as compensation for centuries of oppression and discrimination that Hindu SCs were subjected to by the High caste Hindus. The *Pasmandaa* political leaders resented the denial of similar identification and the benefits thereupon accruing from such identification. The identity politics obliterated the other more pressing issues of which they lost sight of—such as the empowerment of women through modern education, addressing female-related issues of child marriage, alcoholism, domestic abuse, etc. By not taking cognizance of women-centric issues, these leaders failed to further the cause of their community at large. They could not sustain their struggle for long as they focused only on instant political gains through electoral politics and not on reforming their community from within.

### ***Pasmandaa Women***

What is rather piquing is the fact that nowhere one finds the mention of Muslim Dalit women (hereafter *Pasmandaa* women). So conspicuous is their silence that one is forced to ponder as to why there is no documented work available in the corpus of extant literature either on Dalit women or on Muslim women that would help provide a glimpse of the lived experiences of these women. *Pasmandaa* women are situated at the intersections of multiple disadvantageous axes—for instance, they are women, Muslims, and lower caste. And usually, they happen to be from the poorest sections of the society. Their voices remain unheard while their existence, unacknowledged.

### *Unaccounted Absences*

It is now a well-acknowledged fact that the representation of Dalit women by non-Dalit women fails to capture their lived realities. Often these non-Dalit, upper-middle-class, English educated, urbanized women fail to factor in the caste-based oppressions of the Dalit women by both upper caste men and women in feminist epistemologies. Owing to such grave elision by non-Dalit feminists, Dalit women strongly objected to their “guest appearance”<sup>6</sup> by non-Dalit women in their texts and speeches that barely depict the differential experience of the multiply oppressed women (Guru 1995: 2549) in totality. The category of Dalit too is not monolithic, nor is that of the category of Muslim. Both have their respective shares of internal fissures that become distinct by the intersecting axes and, a very good example of this is the category ‘Dalit-Muslims’/Muslim-

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<sup>5</sup>SC= Scheduled Castes

ST= Scheduled Tribes

OBC=Other Backward Class/Castes

<sup>6</sup> For more on the concept of “guest appearance” see Gopal Guru (1995)

Dalits (*Pasmandaas*) and even within it we have Dalit-Muslim-women or women who are Muslim but more Dalit.

The marginalization of these women is informed by the fact that there are several axes of discrimination (gender, caste, religion, community) that work simultaneously towards the systemic erasure of their existence as the most disempowered group, abandoned by their sororal subaltern groups (here Dalit-women and Muslim-women who all happen to be victims of discrimination, albeit of different kinds). Even as the corpus of Dalit literature grows, and discourses on Dalit lives make their way through distinct centres for Dalit Studies in most universities of India, the invisibility of these multiply marginalized women and men in the university curriculum is glaringly obvious. Even in the Gender/Women's Studies Centres, established now in most universities across India, which of course is the result of the concerted efforts of feminist activists and academicians in mainstreaming feminist studies, women of this community are conspicuous by their relative absence. Who will write for these women, and who will represent them? When will these women have their writers who would narrate the innumerable unaccounted stories of their lived experiences peppered with the instances of both oppression and resilience, exploitation, and celebrations?

## Methods

This article is based on the preliminary round of interviews of a larger study on *Pasmandaa* women which is yet to be completed. The methodology was qualitative in approach and data was collected using multi-sited participant observation, extensive, semi-structured interviews, and life histories (Bernard 2006). Insofar as secondary sources on these women are concerned, I was shockingly surprised that there was none—neither in fiction nor non-fiction academic scholarship. This huge gap was the prime reason why I undertook this exploratory study on women of this community. Participants were mostly from the adjoining states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where the movement for Dalit Muslims was conceptualized and spearheaded.

I interviewed women in the age cohort of 16-76 years old as it gave me a good intergenerational range to understand their lived experiences over the years. The questions that were addressed to them centered on their knowledge about the *Pasmandaa* movement, their educational pursuits, their everyday practices, social interactions with other caste groups, and their understanding of their intersectional identities as *Pasmandaa* women. The younger generation of women from this community appeared to be more informed. They showed keen interest in becoming a part of the mainstream through education and respectable jobs. They also expressed their desire to be recognized formally as multiply disadvantaged, both within the larger Muslim community (as *Pasmandaa* community) and within the *Pasmandaa* community itself (as *Pasmandaa* women).

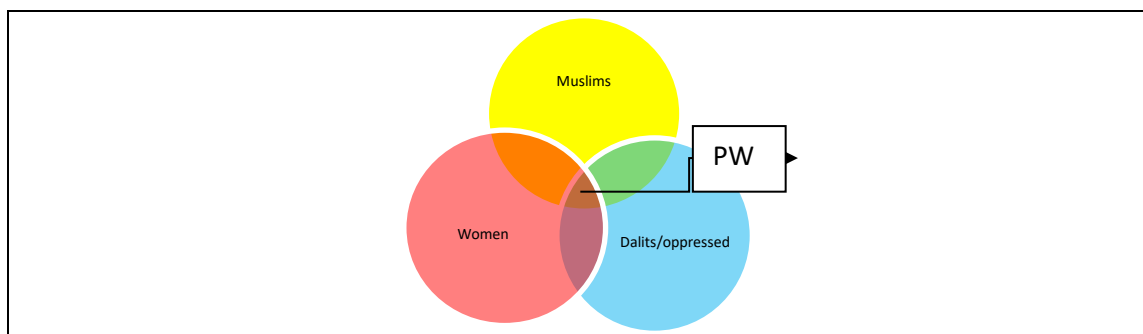
Indian Muslims have caste-like formations that are modeled, to a great extent, on the Varna system. Such hierarchical social arrangement undergirded with discriminatory practices is against the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Yet at the behavioral levels, caste-based discriminations are perceptibly visible during marital alliances, commensality, localities, and even in social interactions.

### Problematizing *Pasmandaa* Women: Challenges and Concerns

*Pasmandaa* women are situated at the intersections of multiple disadvantageous axes: they are women, religious minorities, lower caste, lower class, and mostly illiterate. The intersecting axes of religion, patriarchy, and caste complicate the problematization of these women, thus blurring our understanding of their experiences. Even within their caste groups, women of this community suffer gender-based discrimination. Overburdened by domestic chores and exploitative, demeaning manual wage labor, they live a mechanized life.

In the absence of any secondary source such as autobiographical accounts, poetry, or even folklore, it becomes difficult to have a deeper understanding of their lived experiences through the decades. By contrast, this is not the case within the Dalit communities. They have been written about as there are well-documented research works, along with other sources such as autobiographical accounts by Dalit writers, poetry, etc. In addition to this, to facilitate research on Dalits, the Indian state established several exclusive centres for studying Dalits and proactively engaged in making Dalit lived experiences visible. Paradoxically neither the Gender Studies Centres nor the Dalit Centres have ever even tried to take cognizance of *Pasmandaa* women.

Figure 1: *Pasmandaa Women (PW) Depicted by the Intersecting Circles*



### *Pasmandaa* Women: Narrating their Stories

What is it to be a low caste/Dalit Muslim woman? How does one understand the lived experiences of these women whose community claims to be distinct from the rest of the Muslim community? Even when compared to the Dalit Hindu women, there would be multiple points of convergence and divergence between their experiences. Yet, the Dalit feminists failed to acknowledge the need to study the distinctiveness of Muslim Dalit women and how they were subjected to violence 'engendered by the organization of power around caste, religious fundamentalism, economic exploitation, and the complicit state' (Kannabiran 2017: 4). Are then the Indian mainstream feminists, Dalit feminists, and Muslim feminists collectively, by denying these women representation, inflicting yet another kind of violence on them? By depriving them of their right to document their stories of oppression, obfuscation, violence, religious fundamentalism, backwardness, poverty, discrimination, Indian feminists' core agenda of securing social justice for the oppressed women fall flat vis-à-vis *Pasmandaa* women's lived experiences. Even when Dalit feminists vouched for using intersectionality as an apt tool to articulate efficaciously the multiple vectors of oppression and discrimination that Dalit women were subjected to, they did not even bother to recognize the vulnerabilities of these women in the face of growing communalism post-Babri Masjid demolition. This was also the period when Mandal commission agitation was at its peak. The repercussions of both these eventful moments in the



history of post-colonial India on Muslims, Dalits, and women would have been different, but as far as *Pasmandaa* women are concerned, these would have been more impactful as most of them happen to be manual laborers, street vendors, sweepers, etc.

### **Vulnerability of *Pasmandaa* Women**

According to an estimate, more than 85% of Muslims belong to the Backward Castes and among them, almost half are women (Khawaja 2011). They belong to the occupational castes of service providers such as washerman (*Dhobi*), tailor (*Darzi*), vegetable growers-cum-sellers (*Kunjre*), butchers (*Qasai*), ironsmith and carpenter (*lohar-bardhai*), drum beaters (*dholkiya*), bangle sellers (*churdihara*), drum makers (*dholbaaz*), etc. As in most Dalit households, both men and women are involved in the processes of production/hard labor (Ilaiyah 1999) so is the case with women of this community. Since Dalit women happen to be part of the labor force (service providers), it necessitates their mobility in highly masculinized public spaces. These masculine spaces are 'guided by unwritten normative rules which restrict the entry of females and where the presence of females is considered morally reprehensible' (Kazim 2018: 67). In such public space, they are exposed to various kinds of oppressive practices ranging from derogatory remarks slandering their caste affiliations to lewd comments with sexual overtones.

For instance, Rani, a 45-year-old vegetable seller, earlier assisted her late husband in their home-based- rubber-flap making unit. But after his death, she failed to maintain the unit as it required her to collect the raw material from the wholesale market which was in the vicinity of the slaughterhouse. Women avoided going to such highly masculinized areas, marked with a pungent smell of blood and filth and discomfoting sight of semi-clad men working at the nearby tannery. It was then that she decided to sell vegetables in the middle-class neighborhood where mostly *Ahraaf* Muslims dwelt. With two teenage daughters and a nine-year-old son, life is not easy for her. She barely earns to make ends meet. She used to send her daughters to the nearby *maktab*/religious school, but after reaching puberty it is difficult for her to send them as in *maktabs* only pre-pubescent girls are allowed. Also, the local cleric, who taught the girls earlier, wants them to observe *Purdah* (veiling) as, according to his logic, they are vulnerable because of their gender, hence it is best to guard their sexuality. In the absence of any male head and aware of the fact that they hailed from a low caste group of *kunjrd*, the local cleric/*maulvi* behaved as their *de facto* guardian. He once tried to lecture even Rani about how un-Islamic it was for her to frequent the public space without properly veiling herself. According to him, Rubi and her daughters were a potential source of *Fitna* or chaos and it was his religious duty to guide them of the sins of not conforming to the norms of *Purdah*. To this absurd suggestion, she retorted rather sarcastically- "*Maulvi saab aap humara kharchaa chlaa dijiye, hum bhi aapki aurton kitareh aaram se ghar baith jaayenge*". [Maulvi sir, if you provide for us then we too could stay at home just like women of your family]. After that incident, the *maulvi* never pestered her again.

Rani wants to give formal education to her daughters. She wants them to be educated and employed as a doctor and teacher—respectable jobs—but it is difficult for her to teach them in good private schools with English as the medium of instruction. She, however, intends to teach her son in English medium school and ensure that he gets schooled in relatively good private schools. The decision of most lower-class parents to school sons in private English medium while daughters in free public schools is informed by their financial limitations and the patriarchal notions that are so deeply entrenched in the fabric of Indian society where sons are seen as assets and as care providers in their old age. It is with such expectations that despite their financial

constraints they want their sons to study in private English mediums schools as they are certain that such education would readily translate into decent high salary jobs that would help them break free from the drudgery of a poverty-ridden life. She also expressed her desire to get reservation benefits for her son in educational institutions just like the Dalits/Scheduled Castes get. Being a single mother with two teenage girls and no support whatsoever from her relatives who themselves struggle to make ends meet, Rani constantly lives under uncertainty. On being asked whether she was approached by any organization aimed at ameliorating the plight of Dalit Muslims, she answered in the negative. There is no forum where they could voice their concerns. Since she is the head of her family, it is she who represents her household. By that token, she should be allowed to participate in any event that the leaders organize. But such events are conspicuous by the absence of women. Each aspect of Rani's identity contributes towards her multiply disadvantaged position.

Sabina, 30 years old, is from the *Lalbegi/Chamar*/manual scavenger caste. She works as a charwoman in the doctors' colony. She has been given assurance by one of these doctors that he would try to make her a permanent staff in the hospital where he is posted himself. She further remarked rather poignantly the fact that had she been a Hindu Scheduled Caste, by now, she should be working in the hospital as permanent staff. But for Muslim *Lalbegis*, there is no such provision of reservation. For the lure of a government job, she works hard and remains underpaid. The reason why she chose to work for the doctors is that she lost her elder sister a few years back to childbirth. She stated how her sister, due to a complex imbrication of religion and patriarchy, could not get herself operated on for birth control. Tired of incessant pregnancies, she wanted to get sterilized, aware of the fact that her husband would not ever agree to vasectomy. But she was not allowed to do so as permanent birth control measures are proscribed in Islamic tradition. She ultimately died delivering her tenth child. In contrast with this, in the case of any Hindu Dalit woman opting for birth control measures could not be seen as a violation of religious norms. She wants to give good education to her deceased sister's children and hence is trying to get a permanent government job as a ward cleaner in this government hospital. These are some issues that the *Pasmandaa* men fail to take cognizance of. Their focus is on first giving priority to the concerns of the male members of their community. Issues of women rarely take precedence over those of men.

## Conclusion

It is observed that *Pasmandaa* men, in their fight for getting official recognition as Scheduled Caste by the Indian State, barely include their women as participants in this collective struggle for claiming their rights to a political identity that discriminates on the grounds of their religious identity. Owing to the multiply disadvantaged social positioning, these women also happen to be the most backward as far as education and employability are concerned. Also, the political discourses of mainstream feminists, Dalits, and Muslim activists reflect badly on their agenda for liberation and social justice for the *Pasmandaa* women. Furthermore, any such inhuman practice, prevalent within the Muslim community, by its very nature is antithetical to the core principle of Islam. Thus, for them to speak, it becomes essential to create an environment that enables them to do so. However, until then the Dalit feminists and the Islamic feminists need to 'Speak for them' (Spivak 1988). Even this would be sufficient to render visibility to the acutely marginalized *Pasmandaa* women and help them recuperate their voices from the abyss.

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