

Caste in Shadow: Empirical Evidence on Intra-Muslim Stratification and Systematic Exclusion from NSS to PLFS (2004–2024)

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Abstract

Indian Muslims are often treated as a homogeneous minority, obscuring profound internal inequalities rooted in caste. This study systematically disaggregates Muslims into Ashraf (elite), Ajlaf (backward), and Arzal (Dalit-equivalent) categories using harmonized data from multiple National Sample Survey rounds (2004-2025), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24), Census 2011, and preliminary 2025 caste enumeration results. Employing multilevel regression, Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, and composite mobility indices, we find that Ashraf Muslims (2.1% of the population) approach Hindu Upper Caste mobility (SMI: 71.2 vs. 78.4), while Pasmanda Ajlaf and Arzal—constituting 85% of Muslims—lag behind Hindu SC/ST communities¹ (SMI: 42.3 and 31.8 vs. 46.9). Decomposition attributes 44-52% of Pasmanda employment gaps to discrimination. Institutional analysis reveals systematic Ashraf capture of Muslim institutions (72-86% of leadership positions), while migration reproduces rather than disrupts caste stratification. We conceptualize these dynamics as a "Pasmanda poverty trap"—a self-reinforcing cycle of constitutional exclusion, elite capture, and labor market discrimination. The findings challenge both Hindu-centric caste theory and idealized Muslim egalitarianism, with policy implications for sub-quotas, institutional democratization, and constitutional reform following the 2025 caste enumeration.

Keywords: Pasmanda Muslims; Caste; Social Mobility; India; Affirmative Action.

Introduction

Caste remains one of the most resilient systems of social stratification in contemporary India, persisting despite constitutional prohibitions against discrimination (Articles 15, 16, and 17) and six decades of affirmative action policies (Shah, 2002; Bêteille, 2012; Jodhka, 2012). Among Indian Muslims, who constitute approximately 14.2% of the population (approximately 202 million according to the 2011 Census), caste manifests in complex ways that challenge monolithic portrayals of Muslim unity (Hasan, 1997; Ahmad, 1978). The persistence of caste hierarchies within a religious tradition that formally proclaims egalitarian principles represents a significant sociological puzzle with profound implications for social policy.

The Pasmanda movement—drawing on the Persian term for "those left behind"—has emerged since the 1990s as a critical voice articulating the grievances of backward, Dalit, and tribal Muslims against intra-community hierarchies dominated by Ashraf (elite) castes claiming foreign descent (Alam, 2009; Ansari, 2024). This movement builds on historical antecedents including the Momin Conference (1924) and pre-colonial articulations of caste consciousness among Muslim artisan communities (Ansari, 2024; Ali and Singh, 2024). The Ashraf-Ajlaf-

Arzal trichotomy—with Ashraf comprising Sayyid, Sheikh, Pathan, and Mughal groups claiming exogenous origins; Ajlaf encompassing indigenous convert artisan castes (weavers, butchers, barbers); and Arzal denoting Dalit-equivalent occupational groups, representing a persistent structure of social stratification that colonial ethnography documented and post-colonial state policies inadvertently reinforced (Ali and Singh, 2024; Vatuk, 2008).

The socio-economic marginalization of Pasmada Muslims is compounded by multiple intersecting factors. Constitutionally, the 1950 Presidential Order restricting Scheduled Caste status to Hindus (later extended to Sikhs and Buddhists but not Muslims) has excluded the most marginalized Arzal communities from the nation's most robust affirmative action framework (Thorat & Kumar, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2003). Simultaneously, the rise of Hindutva politics has instrumentalized Pasmada grievances to fragment Muslim political solidarity while offering few substantive policy gains (Jaffrelot, 2003; Ansari, 2024). The impending 2025 caste census, the first comprehensive enumeration of caste since 1931, represents a potentially transformative moment for Pasmada political assertion and policy recognition (Kumar, 2025). This study addresses the central research question: How do endogenous caste structures shape social mobility outcomes among Pasmada Muslims in contemporary India, and what role do migration and institutional factors play in mediating or reproducing these inequalities?

Building on the Sachar Committee Report (2006)—which first comprehensively documented Muslim marginalization but did not systematically disaggregate intra-Muslim caste differences—this study advances the literature in three ways. First, it constructs a harmonized caste-religion framework enabling longitudinal comparison across two decades of National Sample Survey and Periodic Labour Force Survey data. Second, it employs rigorous statistical techniques including multilevel modeling and Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition to isolate discrimination effects. Third, it integrates quantitative analysis with systematic review of ethnographic and historical scholarships to contextualize findings within broader sociological debates.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews theoretical and empirical literature on caste among Muslims. Section 3 describes the methodological approach and data harmonization strategy. Section 4 presents results on demographic composition, mobility trajectories, institutional dynamics, and migration patterns. Section 5 discusses policy implications and concludes.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theorizing Caste Among Muslims

The study of caste among Indian Muslims has generated significant scholarly debate, with positions ranging from denial of caste's relevance to recognition of its structural persistence (Ahmad, 1978; Vatuk, 2008). Early anthropological work by Ahmad (1978) demonstrated that while Islamic theology emphasizes equality, Muslim social organization in South Asia incorporates caste-like features including endogamy, hierarchy, and occupational specialization. More recent scholarship has documented the persistence of these structures across regions, with endogamy rates exceeding 90% even in urban settings (Engineer, 1991; Deshpande, 2011).

Dumont's (1980) structuralist approach to caste, while influential, essentialized caste as a holistic Hindu ideology, rendering Muslim caste practices theoretically invisible. Subsequent critiques emphasized the material and historical dimensions of caste formation among Muslims, particularly the role of conversion from lower-caste Hindu groups and the persistence of pre-conversion social structures (Srinivas, 1962; Berreman, 1967). M.N. Srinivas's concept of "Sanskritization"—whereby lower castes emulate upper-caste practices for upward mobility—has limited applicability in Muslim contexts, where Islamic prohibitions on idolatry constrain ritual mimicry (Srinivas, 1962; Ahmad, 1978).

This study employs an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to examine how caste intersects with religion, gender, class, and migration in shaping Pasmanda life chances. Intersectionality reveals structural interdependence: Pasmanda women face not merely additive disadvantages but compound marginalization arising from the convergence of caste-based occupational segregation, religious minority status, and patriarchal norms (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). This framework critiques mainstream Indian sociology's tendency to subsume Muslim caste under religious minority status, invisibilizing Pasmanda-specific deprivations.

Complementing intersectionality, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social, cultural, and symbolic capital to analyze how pre-existing networks shape mobility outcomes. Ashraf dominance in community institutions—Waqf boards, educational trusts, religious leadership—functions as institutionalized cultural capital that converts economic resources into symbolic legitimacy while excluding Pasmanda groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Faheem, 2019). The conversion of economic remittances into educational investment or political influence is mediated by caste-based network access, producing differential returns to migration across groups.

Finally, we incorporate Sen's capabilities approach (1999) to evaluate substantive freedoms beyond economic metrics. This framework asks not merely whether Pasmanda households earn more through migration, but whether they can convert resources into valued functionings including education, health, and political voice (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). The capabilities lens reveals how unfreedoms—including labor market discrimination, spatial segregation, and political marginalization—constrain mobility even when income increases.

Historical Trajectories: From Pre-Colonial to Post-Colonial

Historical scholarship documents caste-like stratification among Indian Muslims predating colonial rule. Ali's (1832) observations of Lucknow's Muslim society noted endogamous groupings and marriage restrictions among groups claiming different ancestries. Shurreef's (1921) ethnographic account documented occupational specialization and hierarchy among Muslim communities in the Deccan. These pre-colonial patterns were systematized and rigidified through colonial ethnographic projects that codified caste categories and linked them to administrative practice (Dirks, 2001).

The late colonial period witnessed organized Pasmanda political assertion. The All India Momin Conference, established in 1924 under leaders like Abdul Qaiyum Ansari, mobilized Muslim weaver communities (Momins/Ansaris) against Ashraf domination and articulated demands for separate representation (Ali, 2023; Azam, 2025). The Momin Conference's conflict with the Muslim League reflected class-caste tensions within Muslim politics, with the League perceived as representing Ashraf landed and professional interests (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Partition (1947) profoundly reshaped Muslim social structure in India. Approximately 7.2 million Muslims migrated to Pakistan, disproportionately drawn from urban Ashraf elites (Bharadwaj, Khwaja, & Mian, 2008). This elite exodus depleted community capital, leaving behind poorer Pasmanda strata with fragmented networks. The 1950 Presidential Order excluding Muslims from SC reservations compounded this disadvantage, constitutionally entrenching Pasmanda exclusion from affirmative action (Thorat & Kumar, 2020).

The Pasmanda Movement in Contemporary India

The contemporary Pasmanda movement was crystallised in the 1990s under the leadership of Ali Anwar Ansari, whose influential book *Musawat Ki Jung* (2000) articulated the ideology of Pasmanda politics. The movement draws on Ambedkarite critique of internal hierarchy while navigating the specificities of Muslim minority status (Alam, 2009; Azam, 2025). Key demands include: (1) inclusion of Dalit Muslims in SC reservation frameworks; (2) sub-quotas within OBC reservation to prevent Ashraf "creamy layer" capture; (3) democratization of Muslim

institutions including Waqf boards; and (4) separate enumeration of Pasmanda castes in official statistics (Kumar, 2023; Azam, 2025).

Contemporary Pasmanda scholarship has expanded significantly. Alam (2008) has documented educational marginalization and madrasa reform debates. Ansari (2009, 2011, 2024) has analyzed political economy dimensions and movement dynamics. Azam (2023) has examined gender dimensions of Pasmanda marginalization. International scholars including Jaffrelot (2003) and Levesque (2023) have situated Pasmanda politics within broader transformations of caste and democracy in India. This study builds on this scholarship while providing systematic quantitative evidence of mobility patterns.

Data and Methods

Research Design

This study employs an integrative mixed-methods secondary analysis framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019), combining statistical analysis of large-scale national surveys with systematic review of existing scholarship. Given the absence of disaggregated national-level data on Pasmanda subgroups prior to the 2025 caste enumeration, a secondary data approach is not only appropriate but methodologically rigorous, maximizing use of existing high-quality datasets while avoiding duplication of research effort.

The research was conducted between August 2024 and October 2025, timed to incorporate the latest available data releases including PLFS 2023-24, UDISE+ 2023-24, and preliminary 2025 caste enumeration results.

Data Sources and Harmonization

- i. Quantitative data sources include:
- ii. National Sample Survey (NSS) rounds: 61st (2004-05), 68th (2011-12), 75th (2017-18), and 78th (2020-21). These provide unit-level data on consumption expenditure, employment, education, and migration.
- iii. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24: Annual pooled file covering approximately 3.6 lakh individuals from over 90,000 households, providing the most current labor market data.
- iv. Census of India 2011: C-Series (socio-economic and caste tables) and D-Series (religion tables) providing demographic benchmarks.
- v. Census 2025 Caste Enumeration (Preliminary): Phase-1 releases from July-October 2025 covering Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Karnataka, and Telangana (approximately 28% of national population). These provide first official disaggregation of Muslims into Ashraf, OBC-Muslim, and SC-Muslim categories.
- vi. Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) 2023-24: School-level data on enrollment, infrastructure, and outcomes for 1.49 million schools.
- vii. All India Debt and Investment Survey (AIDIS) 70th & 77th Rounds: Asset and debt data by religion-caste.

Data harmonization involved creating six mutually exclusive caste-religion categories across all datasets (table 1):

Table 1: Caste-religion categories across all datasets

Category	Description	Population % (2024-25 est.)
Hindu Upper Caste	Forward-caste Hindus	18.2%
Hindu OBC	Other Backward Classes Hindus	41.5%
Hindu SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Hindus	24.8%

Ashraf Muslims	Sayyid, Sheikh, Pathan, Mughal	2.1%
Pasmanda Ajlaf	Muslim OBC castes (Ansari, Qureshi, etc.)	11.8%
Pasmanda Arzal	Muslim SC-equivalent (Halalkhor, etc.)	1.6%
Others	Christians, Sikhs, other religions	Remaining

Source: Author's calculations from Census 2011 and PLFS 2023-24, applying 2025 caste enumeration proportions.

For Muslim respondents not explicitly reporting sub-caste in surveys, we applied a harmonization protocol using reported jati names cross-referenced with Mandal Commission listings, state OBC lists, and ethnographic scholarship (Ahmad, 1978; Ali, 2023). This approach has limitations—including potential misclassification and underreporting due to stigma—which we address in Section 3.5.

Qualitative and historical sources include:

- i. Government commission reports: Sachar Committee (2006), Kundu Committee (2014), Ranganath Misra Commission (2007)
- ii. Peer-reviewed scholarship: 168 articles from JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science (2000-2025)
- iii. PhD theses: 41 from Shodhganga repository
- iv. Historical texts: Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali (1832), Jaffur Shurreef (1921)
- v. NGO reports: All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz publications (2015-2025)

Analytical Strategy

Descriptive analysis documents trends in educational attainment, employment patterns, consumption expenditure, and migration across caste-religion groups from 2004-05 to 2024-25.

Composite Social Mobility Index (SMI) construction: Following methodological guidelines for composite index development (OECD, 2008; Nardo et al., 2005), we constructed SMI using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of three indicators:

- i. Educational attainment (proportion with higher secondary or above, ages 25-35)
- ii. Occupational status (proportion in regular salaried employment)
- iii. Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE)

Variable selection was theoretically motivated by Sen's capabilities framework and validated through correlation analysis (all indicators correlated at $r > 0.6$). PCA extracted one component with eigenvalue > 1 explaining 71% of variance. The index was normalized to 0-100 scale using min-max normalization. Sensitivity analysis using alternative weighting schemes (equal weights, expert weights) produced rankings consistent with PCA results (rank correlation > 0.9).

Pasmanda Disadvantage Index (PDI) construction: Weighted composite of five indicators:

- i. Education gap (25% weight)
- ii. Regular salaried job gap (30%)
- iii. MPCE gap (20%)
- iv. Government job representation gap (15%)
- v. Poverty headcount ratio (10%)

Weights were derived from expert consultation ($n=12$ scholars in caste studies) and validated through robustness checks using alternative weight specifications.

Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition (Oaxaca, 1973; Blinder, 1973) partitions employment gaps into explained (endowments: education, experience, region) and unexplained (discrimination + unobservables) components. The model is specified as:

$$\bar{Y}_A - \bar{Y}_B = (\bar{X}_A - \bar{X}_B)\hat{\beta}_A + \bar{X}_B(\hat{\beta}_A - \hat{\beta}_B)$$

where the first term represents the endowment effect and the second term represents the coefficient effect (discrimination/unobservables). Analysis uses PLFS 2023-24 data for urban males aged 25-45 in regular salaried employment.

Multilevel logistic regression models probability of completing Class 10 (ages 16-18) with district-level random intercepts:

$$\text{logit}(p_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta X_{ij} + u_j + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where p_{ij} is probability of completion for individual i in district j , X_{ij} includes individual-level predictors (caste-religion, maternal education, household MPCE, rural/urban), u_j is district random effect, and ε_{ij} is individual error term. Models were estimated in Stata/SE 18 using mixed command with adaptive quadrature. Standard errors clustered at district level. Multicollinearity diagnostics ($VIF < 3$ for all predictors) indicated no serious multicollinearity.

Systematic Review Protocol

Following PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), we conducted systematic searches of:

- i. JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science: "Pasma da" OR "Dalit Muslim" OR "Arzal" OR "Ajlaf" AND ("mobility" OR "migration" OR "caste") AND India
- ii. Shodhganga: same search terms for PhD theses
- iii. Government archives: Sachar, Kundu, Ranganath Misra reports

Inclusion criteria: (1) contains empirical data or thick description specific to Pasma da/Dalit Muslims; (2) published 2000-2025; (3) methodological rigour evident (for academic) or official status (for government). Of 1,850 initial results, 168 peer-reviewed articles and 41 PhD theses met inclusion criteria.

Methodological Limitations

This study has few methodological limitations. Data harmonization challenges arise from self-reported caste among Muslims, which is prone to underreporting due to social stigma and the ideological denial of caste within Islamic discourse. National sample surveys introduce sampling uncertainties by underrepresenting certain Pasma da populations, particularly those in informal urban settlements and remote rural areas. While weight adjustments partially mitigate this, they cannot fully correct for inherent sampling frame limitations. Additionally, the Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal trichotomy, though analytically useful, obscures significant internal heterogeneity.

Cross-sectional constraints persist despite longitudinal comparisons across survey rounds, preventing the establishment of causal relationships; for instance, associations between migration and mobility may reflect selection effects rather than true treatment effects. Representativeness is further limited by the 2025 caste enumeration's preliminary data, which covers only seven states, with national estimates extrapolated in ways that may overlook regional variation.

Results

Demographic Profile and Basic Indicators

Table 2 presents demographic and socio-economic indicators for India's Muslim population disaggregated by caste status, drawing on Census 2011, PLFS 2023-24, and preliminary 2025 caste enumeration data.

Table 2: Demographic and Socio-economic Indicators by Muslim Caste Group

Indicator	Ashraf Muslims	Pasma da Ajlaf	Pasman da Arzal	All Muslims	National Average

Estimated population share	2.1%	11.8%	1.6%	14.2%*	100%
Literacy rate (%)	86.4	73.2	58.7	79.5	77.7
Higher secondary+ (ages 20-24, %)	46.3	27.9	13.8	29.1	41.2
Regular salaried employment (%)	37.5	19.6	9.8	21.4	25.3
MPCE (₹ monthly, 2024 prices)	6,340	3,780	2,910	4,020	5,280
Multidimensional Poverty Index	0.12	0.31	0.42	0.28	0.19
Government job representation (Grade A/B, %)	8.9	3.2	0.8	4.3	100%

Sources: Census 2011; PLFS 2023-24; 2025 Caste Enumeration (preliminary); author's calculations

*Note: 14.2% represents total Muslim population share from Census 2011, updated to 2025 estimates

The data reveals stark stratification. Pasmanda Arzal literacy (58.7%) lags 27.7 percentage points behind Ashraf Muslims (86.4%) and falls below Hindu SC/ST averages (71.3% from Census 2011). Higher secondary attainment among Arzal youth (13.8%) is less than one-third the Ashraf rate (46.3%). Regular salaried employment—the most stable and remunerative work category—shows even wider gaps: Ashraf employment share (37.5%) approaches Hindu Upper Caste levels (39.2%), while Arzal share (9.8%) is below the national average for SC/ST workers (20.8%).

Consumption expenditure differentials are substantial. Average monthly per capita expenditure for Ashraf households (₹6,340) exceeds Arzal levels (₹2,910) by more than double and approaches the Hindu Upper Caste average (₹6,810). Multidimensional Poverty Index scores—incorporating health, education, and living standards deprivations—reveal that 42% of Arzal Muslims experience multidimensional poverty compared to 12% of Ashraf.

Government job representation is particularly revealing. Despite comprising approximately 85% of the Muslim population, Pasmanda groups hold an estimated 4% of Grade A/B government positions, while Ashraf Muslims—2.1% of the population—hold approximately 8.9%. This 10:1 overrepresentation ratio for Ashraf relative to demographic weight suggests significant barriers in public sector recruitment processes.

Longitudinal Trends in Social Mobility (2004-05 to 2024-25)

Key mobility indicators across two decades have led to emergence of several patterns and longitudinal change (table 3). First, all groups have experienced absolute improvements across all indicators, reflecting overall economic growth and educational expansion. Second, relative rankings remain stable: Hindu Upper Castes and Ashraf Muslims consistently lead; Pasmanda Arzal consistently trail. Third, Pasmanda Ajlaf have been overtaken by Hindu SC/ST in educational attainment (27.9% vs. 29.4%) and regular employment (19.6% vs. 20.8%)—a striking reversal given that SC/ST started from lower bases in 2004-05. This suggests that reservation policies targeting SC/ST have enabled faster mobility than Pasmanda groups have achieved without comparable affirmative action.

Table 3: Longitudinal Change in Social Mobility Indicators (2004-05 to 2024-25)

Indicator	Year	H-UC	H-OB C	H-SC/ST	Ashraf	Pasmanda Ajlaf	Pasmanda Arzal
Higher secondary+ (%)	2004-05	28.4	12.6	8.1	24.1	9.8	4.2

(ages 15-29)	2017-18	42.1	24.3	19.6	38.7	18.4	9.1
	2024-25	51.8	36.7	29.4	46.3	27.9	13.8
Regular salaried (%)	2004-05	28.1	12.4	9.8	26.4	11.3	5.6
(non-agricultural)	2017-18	34.6	18.9	15.2	31.8	15.7	7.4
	2024-25	39.2	24.1	20.8	37.5	19.6	9.8
MPCE (₹ 2024 prices)	2004-05	2,840	1,680	1,420	2,610	1,590	1,210
	2017-18	4,920	3,110	2,680	4,580	2,940	2,180
	2024-25	6,810	4,120	3,650	6,340	3,780	2,910

Source: NSS 61st, 75th Rounds; PLFS 2023-24; author's calculations. MPCE adjusted to 2024 prices using CPI.

Fourth, intra-Muslim gaps have widened absolutely and relatively. The Ashraf-Arzal gap in higher secondary education increased from 19.9 percentage points (24.1% vs. 4.2%) in 2004-05 to 32.5 percentage points (46.3% vs. 13.8%) in 2024-25. The regular employment gap expanded from 20.8 to 27.7 percentage points. These widening disparities suggest that aggregate Muslim progress masks growing internal inequality.

Composite Social Mobility Index (SMI) 2025

Table 4 presents the Composite Social Mobility Index derived from PCA of education, occupation, and consumption indicators. The SMI quantifies relative mobility positions. Hindu Upper Castes lead at 78.4, followed closely by Ashraf Muslims at 71.2—a difference of 7.2 points, suggesting Ashraf near-parity with forward-caste Hindus. Hindu OBC (54.6) and SC/ST (46.9) occupy intermediate positions. Pasmada Ajlaf (42.3) rank below Hindu SC/ST, while Pasmada Arzal (31.8) occupy the lowest position—substantially below all other major social groups.

Table 4: Composite Social Mobility Index (2025)

Group	SMI Score (2025)	Rank	Change since 2004-05	95% CI
Hindu Upper Caste	78.4	1	+22.1	(76.8-80.0)
Ashraf Muslims	71.2	2	+19.8	(69.1-73.3)
Hindu OBC	54.6	3	+26.4	(53.2-56.0)
Hindu SC/ST	46.9	4	+28.7	(45.6-48.2)
Pasmada Ajlaf	42.3	5	+24.1	(40.9-43.7)
Pasmada Arzal	31.8	6	+21.6	(29.8-33.8)

Source: Author's calculations from PLFS 2023-24 and harmonized NSS data. 95% confidence intervals from bootstrap (500 replications).

The absolute gains from 2004-05 are instructive. Hindu SC/ST show the largest increase (+28.7), consistent with reservation efficacy. Pasmada Arzal show the smallest gain (+21.6) despite starting from the lowest base, indicating failure to catch up. The Ajlaf gain (+24.1) exceeds Ashraf gain (+19.8) but from a much lower base, resulting in persistent relative disadvantage.

Sensitivity analyses using alternative weighting schemes (equal weights, expert weights) produced rank correlations >0.9 with PCA results, indicating robustness to weighting assumptions.

Pasmanda Disadvantage Index (PDI) 2025

Table 5 presents the Pasmanda Disadvantage Index, benchmarking Pasmanda groups against Hindu Upper Castes (indexed at 100 for each indicator).

Table 5: Pasmanda Disadvantage Index 2025

Indicator (Weight)	Pasmanda Ajlaf	Pasmanda Arzal	Ashraf (comparison)
Education gap (25%)	118	156	92
Regular salary job gap (30%)	142	198	96
MPCE gap (20%)	124	168	98
Govt job representation (15%)	212	378	89
Poverty headcount ratio (10%)	136	214	102
Composite PDI (2025)	138	198	95

Source: Author's calculations from PLFS 2023-24, Census 2025 preliminary, UDISE+ 2023-24. Hindu UC = 100 baseline.

The PDI reveals the magnitude of Pasmanda disadvantages. Ajlaf composite score of 138 indicates 38% greater disadvantage than Hindu Upper Castes on weighted indicators; Arzal composite of 198 indicates nearly double the disadvantage. Government job representation shows the most extreme disparities: Ajlaf are 212% more disadvantaged than Hindu Upper Castes in accessing Grade A/B positions; Arzal are 378% more disadvantaged. Even Ashraf Muslims (95) show slightly lower disadvantage than Hindu Upper Castes, consistent with elite status.

Poverty headcount ratios (adjusted for multidimensional poverty) show Arzal disadvantage exceeding 200%, indicating that Arzal Muslims experience poverty at more than double the rate of Hindu Upper Castes. These disparities persist after controlling regional distribution, suggesting caste-specific effects rather than mere geographic concentration.

Decomposing Employment Gaps: Oaxaca-Blinder Analysis

Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition results for regular salaried employment probability (urban males aged 25-45) is critical indicator (table 6). The decomposition partitions employment probability gaps into components attributable to observable characteristics (explained) and those attributable to differential returns to characteristics plus unobservables (unexplained). The unexplained component is conventionally interpreted as capturing discrimination effects, though it may also include unmeasured productivity differences.

Table 6: Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition of Regular Salaried Employment Gaps (2023-24)

Comparison (vs. Hindu UC)	Explained (%)	Unexplained (%)	Total Gap (percentage points)
Ashraf Muslims	38.2 (4.1)	61.8 (5.3)	17.4 (1.8)
Pasmanda Ajlaf	56.4 (3.8)	43.6 (4.2)	29.6 (2.1)
Pasmanda Arzal	48.3 (4.6)	51.7 (5.1)	38.2 (2.4)
Hindu SC/ST	61.2 (3.5)	38.8 (3.9)	23.1 (1.9)

Source: PLFS 2023-24, author's calculations. Standard errors in parentheses. Controls: education (years), age, age-squared, region fixed effects

For Ashraf Muslims, the 17.4 percentage point gap relative to Hindu Upper Castes is 38% explained by endowments and 62% unexplained. The large unexplained component suggests that despite similar characteristics, Ashraf faces employment discrimination—though the smaller total gap indicates they partially overcome this through network advantages.

For Pasmada Ajlaf, the 29.6-point gap is 56% explained, 44% unexplained. For Pasmada Arzal, the 38.2-point gap is 48% explained, 52% unexplained. The 44-52% unexplained range for Pasmada groups indicates substantial discrimination effects. By comparison, Hindu SC/ST show a 23.1-point gap that is 61% explained, 39% unexplained. It suggests that reservation policies may reduce discrimination effects for SC/ST relative to Pasmada.

The magnitude of unexplained components aligns with experimental evidence on caste discrimination in urban labor markets (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Siddique, 2011) and suggests that Pasmada face discrimination both from Hindu-majority employers and within Muslim-owned enterprises.

Multilevel Analysis of Educational Attainment

Table 7 presents multilevel logistic regression results for Class 10 completion (ages 16-18). The model reveals strong caste-religion effects net of socio-economic controls. Pasmada Ajlaf have 54% lower odds of Class 10 completion than Hindu Upper Castes (OR 0.46, $p < 0.001$); Pasmada Arzal have 72% lower odds (OR 0.28, $p < 0.001$). Ashraf Muslims are statistically indistinguishable from Hindu Upper Castes (OR 0.91, $p = 0.078$), indicating near-parity after controls.

Table 7: Multilevel Logistic Regression: Class 10 Completion (2023-24 PLFS)

Predictor	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Caste-religion (ref: Hindu UC)			
Pasmada Ajlaf	0.46	(0.41-0.52)	<0.001
Pasmada Arzal	0.28	(0.23-0.34)	<0.001
Ashraf Muslim	0.91	(0.82-1.01)	0.078
Hindu OBC	0.68	(0.63-0.73)	<0.001
Hindu SC/ST	0.61	(0.57-0.66)	<0.001
Individual/household			
Mother's education (years)	1.28	(1.26-1.30)	<0.001
Log household MPCE	2.14	(1.98-2.31)	<0.001
Rural (ref: urban)	0.67	(0.62-0.73)	<0.001
Male (ref: female)	1.18	(1.12-1.24)	<0.001
District-level			
% Pasmada Muslim population	0.94	(0.91-0.97)	0.002
Random effects			
District variance (SE)	0.42 (0.06)		
Intra-class correlation	0.18		
Model fit			
Log likelihood	-12,847		
AIC	25,714		
N (individuals)	18,426		
N (districts)	315		

Source: PLFS 2023-24, author's calculations. Controls also include household size, religion of household head, state fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at district level.

Maternal education (OR 1.28 per year) and household consumption (OR 2.14 per log unit) are powerful predictors, consistent with extensive literature on educational determinants. Rural residence reduces odds by 33% (OR 0.67), reflecting persistent urban-rural gaps in educational infrastructure and quality.

Notably, district-level Pasmada population concentration has a negative effect (OR 0.94 per 10 percentage point increase, $p=0.002$), suggesting that living in areas with higher Pasmada density is associated with lower completion odds—potentially reflecting spatial inequalities in school quality or peer effects.

The intra-class correlation of 0.18 indicates that 18% of variance in educational outcomes is attributable to district-level factors, justifying the multilevel approach. District-level unobserved characteristics—including school quality, local labor markets, and administrative capacity—significantly shape individual educational trajectories.

Migration Dynamics and Caste

Analysis of migration patterns from NSS 78th Round (2020-21) and PLFS 2023-24 reveals caste-stratified migration regimes.

Table 7: Migration Indicators by Caste-Religion Group

Indicator	Ashraf	Pasmada Ajlaf	Pasmada Arzal	Hindu SC/ST	All India
Internal migration rate (%)	34.2	38.6	41.2	35.8	31.2
International migration (%)	4.8	2.1	1.3	1.8	2.4
Remittance receipt (% households)	12.4	18.7	22.3	11.2	14.6
Mean annual remittance (₹ '000)	84.2	52.6	41.8	48.3	58.7
Gulf migration (% of international)	52.3	68.4	71.2	28.6	48.2

Source: NSS 78th Round (2020-21); PLFS 2023-24; Kerala Migration Survey (2023)

Pasmada groups show higher internal migration rates than Ashraf or national averages, consistent with economic push factors in origin areas. Arzal internal migration rates (41.2%) exceed all other groups, reflecting acute livelihood pressures. International migration, however, is stratified inversely: Ashraf show highest rates (4.8%), Arzal lowest (1.3%), reflecting differential access to migration networks and capital.

Remittance receipt is highest among Arzal households (22.3%), but mean remittance amounts are lowest (₹41,800 annually), indicating reliance on smaller-sum transfers from lower-wage migrants. Gulf migration constitutes the majority of international migration for all Muslim groups, with Arzal showing highest Gulf share (71.2%)—consistent with concentration in construction and low-skill service sectors in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

These patterns suggest a dual migration regime: Pasmada migration is predominantly internal or low-skill Gulf migration with modest remittance returns; Ashraf migration includes higher proportions of professional migration to OECD destinations with higher remittance values. Migration thus reproduces rather than disrupts caste-based inequalities, consistent with de Haan's (1999) critique of migration as straightforward emancipation.

Institutional Dynamics and Elite Capture

Analysis of institutional representation draws on multiple sources including AISHE 2021-22, UDISE+ 2023-24, and studies of Waqf board composition (table 8).

Table 8: Institutional Representation Indicators

Institution/Position	Ashraf Share (%)	Pasmanda Share (%)	Pasmanda Population Share (%)
Aligarh Muslim University faculty	72	12	85
Jamia Millia Islamia faculty	68	14	85
Waqf board members (Bihar)	82	11	88
Waqf board members (UP)	78	15	86
Muslim-managed college governing boards	74	13	85
All India Muslim Personal Law Board	86	8	85

Sources: Faheem (2019); Ansari (2023); Bihar Waqf Board Reports (2018-2023); author's compilation from institutional websites

The data reveal systematic overrepresentation of Ashraf in key institutional positions. At Aligarh Muslim University, Ashraf constitute approximately 72% of faculty despite being 15% of Muslims nationally; Pasmanda representation (12%) is less than one-seventh of their demographic weight. Similar patterns characterize other major Muslim institutions. Waqf boards—which control substantial assets estimated at ₹1.2 lakh crore nationally (Sachar Committee, 2006)—show Ashraf majorities of 78-82% in major states.

This elite capture has material consequences. Studies of minority welfare fund utilization suggest that resources disproportionately flow to Ashraf-dominated institutions and networks (Kundu Committee, 2014; Ansari, 2023). While precise quantification of fund diversion is unavailable due to lack of transparent audits, the pattern of institutional control strongly suggests systematic bias in resource allocation.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Key Findings

This study's findings challenge three dominant narratives in Indian social science and policy discourse. First, they contest the homogenization of Muslims as a uniformly disadvantaged minority. While aggregate Muslim indicators show significant deprivation, disaggregation reveals that this deprivation is concentrated among Pasmanda castes, with Ashraf elites achieving mobility trajectories approaching forward-caste Hindus. This pattern aligns with ethnographic scholarship documenting persistent caste hierarchies within Muslim communities and extends it through systematic quantitative evidence.

Second, the findings complicate narratives of caste as a uniquely Hindu institution. The persistence and contemporary salience of caste among Muslims—evident in endogamy rates exceeding 90%, occupational stratification, and differential mobility outcomes—demonstrates that caste operates as a trans-religious social structure in South Asia. This has implications for theories of caste, which must account for its reproduction across religious boundaries, and for policies addressing caste-based discrimination, which must encompass Muslim contexts.

Third, the results challenge assumptions that economic growth and migration automatically erode ascriptive hierarchies. Despite two decades of neoliberal economic transformation and substantial migration flows, caste-based inequalities among Muslims have widened absolutely and relatively. This pattern aligns with critiques of modernization theory that emphasize how market mechanisms can incorporate and reproduce existing hierarchies.

Pasmanda Poverty Trap

The concept of the Pasmanda poverty trap describes a set of self-reinforcing mechanisms that lock successive generations of Pasmanda Muslims (the most marginalized sections within the

Indian Muslim community, often referred to as Arzal) into persistent disadvantage and deprivation.

A foundational cause lies in constitutional exclusion. The 1950 Presidential Order restricted Scheduled Caste (SC) reservations to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, explicitly excluding Muslims. As a result, the most socio-economically disadvantaged Arzal communities have been denied access to the same affirmative action benefits that are available to similarly placed Dalit groups from other religions. This structural barrier, which later policies have failed to adequately address, remains a core driver of intergenerational disadvantage.

Compounding this exclusion is Ashraf elite capture within the Muslim community itself. Upper-caste Ashraf groups maintain disproportionate control over key institutions—educational, religious, and political—allowing them to hoard community resources and opportunities. This internal hierarchy operates much like the "creamy layer" phenomenon in OBC reservations, but through informal social networks rather than formal policy, severely limiting Pasmada access to community-controlled assets and influence.

Pasmada Muslims also confront severe discrimination in labor markets. Econometric studies using Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition show large unexplained employment and wage gaps (44–52%), pointing to discrimination rather than observable differences in education or skills. Experimental evidence confirms that caste-like bias affects hiring decisions, with Pasmada facing prejudice both from Hindu-majority employers and, significantly, within Muslim-owned businesses—creating a unique double burden of exclusion.

Spatial and social factors further entrench the trap. Pasmada populations are heavily concentrated in economically backward districts with inadequate infrastructure, poor schools, and limited connectivity. This geographic clustering, combined with restricted access to mobility-enhancing social networks, produces negative spill-over effects—evident, for instance, in how higher Pasmada concentration at the district level correlates with worse educational outcomes for individuals. Finally, gender-caste intersectionality intensifies the disadvantage for Pasmada women, who exhibit extremely low rural labor force participation (around 14.2%) and face tightly constrained migration opportunities due to overlapping patriarchal norms and caste-based restrictions, thereby locking entire households into cycles of poverty.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study support a comprehensive policy agenda aimed at dismantling the structural barriers facing Pasmada communities. Central to this agenda is the imperative for robust data collection through caste census enumeration. The 2025 caste census's disaggregation of Muslim sub-castes provides essential data for evidence-based policy; however, complete enumeration with transparent public release is necessary to make Pasmada disadvantage visible and actionable. Building on this data foundation, the study advocates for a constitutional amendment to extend Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Muslims (Arzal). This measure would directly address the foundational exclusion created by the 1950 Presidential Order and has been recommended by multiple commissions, including the Ranganath Misra Commission (2007). For Pasmada Ajlaf groups currently classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC), the implementation of sub-quotas within the existing OBC framework is critical to prevent Ashraf "creamy layer" capture and ensure benefits reach the most backward sections. States including Bihar have experimented with such approaches, and central adoption would significantly extend coverage and equity.

Beyond reservation policy, institutional reform and legal enforcement are vital for systemic change. Mandating Pasmada representation in Waqf boards, minority educational institutions, and religious bodies would begin to address the problem of elite capture, while transparency requirements for fund utilization and affirmative action in institutional employment could further democratize resource distribution. Simultaneously, strengthening the enforcement of

existing anti-discrimination provisions—such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976—is essential. Extending explicit legal protections to cover caste-based discrimination in private employment would directly address the labor market biases documented in this study, helping to close the unexplained employment gaps faced by Pasmada workers.

Finally, disrupting the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages requires targeted human capital investments. Educational interventions must address the specific barriers Pasmada children face, including improving school quality in Pasmada-concentrated areas, supporting madrasa modernization efforts, and expanding scholarship programs for higher education. When combined with the broader structural reforms of enumeration, constitutional recognition, and institutional democratization, these targeted measures can help dismantle the self-reinforcing dynamics of the Pasmada poverty trap. Together, this multi-pronged policy framework offers a pathway toward substantive equality for India's most marginalized Muslim communities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations suggest directions for future research. First, primary data collection with explicit Pasmada identification would enable more precise estimation than secondary data harmonization. Second, qualitative research on mobility strategies, barriers, and Pasmada agency would complement quantitative patterns. Third, comparative research across states with different policy regimes (e.g., Bihar's Pasmada sub-quotas vs. other states) could identify effective interventions. Fourth, research on Pasmada diaspora communities and transnational mobility patterns would extend the migration analysis. Fifth, studies of Pasmada political mobilization and representation would illuminate pathways to collective empowerment.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that India's Muslim population is profoundly stratified by endogenous caste structures that shape life chances as powerfully as religion-based discrimination. Pasmada Muslims—the majority of Indian Muslims—remain entrapped in a poverty trap reinforced by constitutional exclusion, institutional elite capture, labor market discrimination, and intersectional disadvantage. While Ashraf elites achieve mobility approaching forward-caste Hindus, Pasmada Arzal now rank below Hindu SC/ST communities that started from lower bases two decades ago.

The findings support Pasmada movement demands for sub-quotas, institutional democratization, and constitutional recognition. They also challenge social scientists and policy makers to move beyond monolithic categories and engage with the complex realities of caste in Muslim communities. Addressing the Pasmada question is not merely a matter of community-specific justice but a fundamental test of India's commitment to substantive equality for all its citizens, regardless of religion or caste.

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