

'CASTE CENSUS NEEDED FOR MUSLIMS TOO'

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Demands for a caste census are not just emanating from political parties in various States but also from organisations connected with the Pasmanda Muslim community, with the All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz raising the demand that people from all faiths be counted according to their caste category.

The Mahaz, headed by Ali Anwar Ansari, former Rajya Sabha member, has announced an awareness campaign on this demand.

Khalid Anis Ansari, scholar with the South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), and active in the Pasmanda community advocacy space, says the counting of castes among Muslims should be included in any kind of format for a caste census that is adopted by the government.

Backward Class Muslims can avail themselves of reservations only in the OBC category.

"We saw drafts of letters by political parties demanding a caste census where only Hindu Most Backward Castes (MBC) were being mentioned. When we raised the issue of Pasmanda Muslims, the letter to Prime Minister Modi from political parties in Bihar dropped any mention of religion. As Pasmanda Muslims, we ourselves are not sure about the contours of the population in the community. The British census authorities in colonial India counted caste categories among Muslims too, but we have no further figures," said Mr. Ansari.

Welfare schemes

He said the issue is not just related to job reservations or electoral mobilisation, but of accessing existing welfare programmes and funds through the Minority Affairs Ministry as well. "Much of the funds meant for minority Muslims is cornered by the elite Muslims as they have the educational and social capital required to access them," he said.

"We need a caste census of the Muslim community in India too, to better access developmental funding aimed at minorities for a real targeting of benefits, and a real democratisation among Muslims," he said.

The Pasmanda Muslims, he said, have been marginalised through history with the Muslim voice only being represented by the elite in the community.

"Even the discourse on partition ignores the fact that the separate electorates for Muslims under the British, which voted for Muslim League candidates in the run-up to the partition, had very limited franchise restricted to those with property or education. Pasmanda Muslims who had neither were out of this process, and were in fact Congress supporters. In my own personal history, my grandfather in Bindki town in Fatehpur district of Uttar Pradesh opposed the partition of India and there were reported incidents of violence between Ashraf vs Pasmanda groups in various towns like Kanpur, Amroha, etc. We were ignored in the post-partition era also, with the secular parties buying into the elite Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb rhetoric. Muslim appeasement happened but only of the elite Ashraf Muslims," he said.

He points to the root of the issue as being embedded in the "first past the post electoral system".

“The time has come to reconsider the first past the post system in elections, as it only encourages tokenism, while the proportional representation system can ensure more honest representation of demographic reality.”

Social justice

“There are limits to the politics of demand without true social justice being ensured. Without a true reckoning of numbers and categorisation and hierarchy in an electoral system, and in the welfare system as well, its like you have invited me to a wedding at a five-star hotel, but I cannot attend as I don’t have the clothes to let me in the door of the hotel in the first place,” he said.

In the mid-2000s, Pasmada outreach was at the forefront of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s political playbook under the old NDA.

After a hiatus of being in the background of any political party’s interest, the Mahaz and the community are hoping the caste census issue will foreground them once again.

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