A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGION AND CASTE AMONG THE NAT MUSLIMS IN INDIA

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Abstract

This research paper presents a sociological understanding of the role of religion and caste in constructing and influencing the social identity of Nat Muslims, originally a peripatetic nomadic tribe, in India. The study was conducted at Semri Village of district Paschim Champaran, in the state of Bihar in India. The research design was descriptive and analytical in nature. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied for the collection of data. The findings are based on the information collected from 54 families that belong to Muslim Nat community. The paper suggests that religion and caste (which is otherwise a feature of Hindu society) have greatly influenced the social standing and identity of the Nat Muslims. Their everyday lives are greatly determined by the overlapping and multiple identities so generated.

Keywords: Identity, religion, caste, Nat Muslim, nomads.

1. Introduction

It has been observed that the oppressed sections, within a larger cultural group, experience religious fallouts differently. They often conceptualize their oppressed religious identities in a more distinct and rigid form, with the systems often turning more patriarchal, prejudiced and violent, thereby predominating the social, economic, political and cultural arrangements (Perales and Bouma 2018; Burch-Brown & Baker 2016; Jereza 2016; Oppong 2013). Many a times it results in identities that are conflicting for an individual and may result in a displaced sense of identity.

In a multi-religious and multi-cultural society like India, these complexities are often expressed

through conventional actions such that socio-economic barriers are constructed on the basis of religion and caste towards the powerless social groups like the tribes and certain castes (Davindera 1997). In order to safeguard the interests of such groups in India, there are over 400 communities who have been legally and constitutionally recognized as scheduled tribes, many among whom are Muslims[1]. Many researchers have analyzed faith and the nature of marginalization among the Muslims (Ali 2001; Azeez et al. 2017; Davindera 1997; Sikand 2004b) while a few have emphasized the existence of caste and the resulting discrimination (Ali 2010; Jangir & Rajnat 2020; Sikand 2004a, Swarankar 1999).

The word 'caste' finds its origin both in Spanish and Portuguese concept of 'casta' and which means lineage or race. The modern caste system in India is often recognized as the 'colonial superimposition' of 'casta' (William, 1915). It was in the 15th century that the colonizers had started using the term in India to describe its stratified society. However, over the period of time the caste system in India became more rigid and discriminatory (Dirks 2001). Many scholars have discussed and tried to build an understanding on the sociological phenomenon of the caste system. The important one among these have been Dumont (1981), Beteille (1965), Ghurye (2016), Dube (2017), Jodhka (2012), Ali (2001), Guru (2019), Rege (2004) and Kumar (2014).

According to Herbert H. Risley (1981), "a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional, callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community." Senart (1930), a French Indologist, defines a caste as "a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary : equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals : bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and, above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group." Sociologist Ketkar (2010) defines caste as "a social group having two characteristics: (A)

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[1] https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/ST%20Lists.pdf

membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born (B) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group." British Anthropologist Nesfield (2015) defines a caste as "a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community." Looking at the above understanding on caste, it can be said that the latter has both the elements of simplicity and complexities.

Most case studies on Muslims contend for their Indian origin and their similarity to concept of caste as it exists in Hinduism. Dumont (1980:210) finds that caste among Muslims is "weakened or incomplete, but not lacking altogether." Ahmad (1978a:12) argues that "among the Muslims caste remains a base for social ties; however, its structure has greatly weakened and changed over time." A few scholars also suggest that in some aspects it varies from the Hindu caste model. For instance, caste among the Muslims is not as complicated as that in Hinduism. There is no sense of purity and pollution, with ill defined work specialization and little established rules on who can and should share food (Ali 2010, Sikand 2004a) While in Hinduism such social bounding have been adequately defined and practiced (Beteille 2012; Sarkar 2006; Shah 2001; Shinde 2005).

Scholars have taken great interest in understanding such unique and interesting social phenomenon existing among the diversified communities in India. Special emphasis has been given to understanding the problems encountered by dalits, adivasis, minorities and nomads in the contemporary socio-cultural and religious scenarios (Michael 2007; Singh 2008; Yengde 2019). However, certain communities have not found much scholarly attention owing to various reasons. A constantly mobile lifestyle with no fixed habitation has been an important one. The Nats are one such community.

1.1 The Nats

The Nats are semi-nomadic people, who lead a peripatetic lifestyle. They are identified as the DNTs[2] i.e., De-notified and Nomadic Tribes[3] and their dwellings can be seen in states such as

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[2] They are nomadic and semi nomadic people, who were listed in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 during British Colonialism in India. This act has been abolished after India got independence and passed Habitual Offenders Act, 1952.

[3] Saksena, H.S. (1975). Denotified Communities of Uttar Pradesh in Perspective, *Indian Anthropologist*,

Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttrakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajsthan, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Their existence is also observed in Nepal (Davindera 1997; Swarankar 1999).

The word Nat in Sanskrit means a dancer, also known as a *nachaniya*. They are, thus, classified as professional amusers who are looked at as part of the lower strata of the social system. Researchers have tried to understand this community in various contexts through some critical works. Swarankar (2007) identifies them as 'vagrant gypsy tribe,' with a long history of nomadic lifestyle. Crooke (1974) calls them a tribe that professionally can be seen as involved in dancing, acrobat and prostitution. Rose (1970) compares Nats with the gypsy tribe of Europe. Swaranker (1999) writes that Wise has suggested that the Nats flourished during the times of the Nawabs while Rizley (1981), coining various terms for the community (Nar, Nat, Natak), finds out that the present day Nats identify themselves as the descendants of sage Bharadawaj. Research also suggests that the Nats have identities that are multiple in nature based on the region, socio-cultural practices and especially religion (Davindera 1997; Jangir & RajNat 2020; Swarankar 1999). The Nat community has five major categories. These are - *karnat*, *kalabaz*, *kabutar bhanmata*, *chamar Nat* and *Muslim Nat*. In Bihar, the Nat Muslim is practically a separate and distinct community. A detailed understanding of the community is discussed in the next section.

1.2 The Nat Muslims of Paschim Champaran

Muslims in India are a heterogeneous group of numerous sects and ideologies, and cannot be treated as a monolithic homogeneity. It is asserted that three castes or class blocks—namely, *ashraf* (elite upper-caste), *ajlaf* (middle caste or shudra) and *arzal* (lowest castes or dalit)—exist among the Indian Muslims (Ali, 2001). Justice B. Sudershan Reddy in T. Muralidhar Rao vs State of Andhra Pradesh (Andhra High Court, 2010) mentioned that: "Non-religions such as Islam, Christianity and Sikh do not recognize caste as such, but the existence of caste-social stratification among Muslims is well acknowledged that, despite Islam's egalitarian philosophy, which opposes all forms of discrimination, almost all forms of caste groups have been recognized."[4]

Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 2. http://www.jstor.com/stable/41919271
[4] Andhra High Court (2010). *Justice B Sudershan Reddy in T Muralidhar Rao vs State of Andhra Pradesh*.

A similar social construct i.e. 'caste' and related biases are observed among the Nat Mulsims of Paschim Champaran in Bihar, the universe of this study. This bias is in addition to the religious prejudices that exist within the larger Nat community and outside of it. It is seen that the Nat Muslims in Paschim Champaran district live at subsistence level and are the marginalized group that were putting up at the outskirts of Semri village when this research was conducted. The sections on data analysis and discussion shall explain these issues in detail.

2. Methodology

The Nat *mohallah* (a group of houses or hamlet) in Semri village in Paschim Champaran district of Bihar is inhabited by 67 families. For the analytical study, 54 families were selected and all of them were Nat Muslims. The rest of the 13 families (not selected) were non-Muslims i.e., Hindus (yadavs, Brahmins and so on). For collection of information, interview schedules and participant observation was applied. The respondents were interviewed for over a period of one month in their context specific settings.

3. Data Analysis & Findings

3.1 Population

It was observed that there is a mixed population of Nat Muslims that live in Semri village. In total there are 295 Nats that have been on and off residing at the village for the last 40-50 years. They are the marginalized and deprived section of this rural area. They are often stigmatized and defamed by members of other castes and sections of the society. The population of Nat Muslims have been represented in Figure 1 and Graph 1.
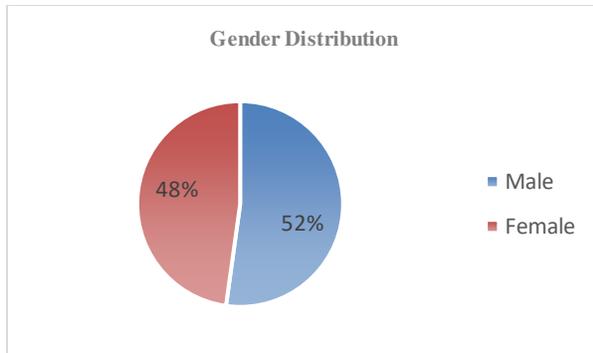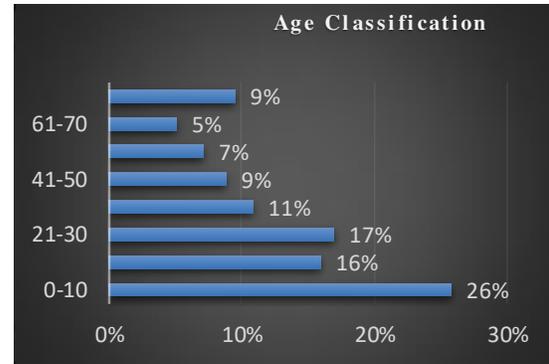
Figure 1 – Gender Distribution (Nats) at Semri at Semri

Graph 1 – Age Classification (Nats)

Figure 1 depicts that the population in Nat Mohallah comprises of 52 per cent males and 48 per cent females. This is an indicator that female survival rate is high among the community. The community is close to maintaining gender neutrality as far as economic activity is concerned. The men were seen sharing the household chores. Graph 1 shows the age distribution. It is observed that 26 per cent of the population falls in the age group 0-10 years, suggesting that the community bears more children. The percentage of young population (ages 11-40 years) is 44. It is this population that is mostly involved in the economic activity.

3.2 Education

Education is an indispensable process through which individuals can be empowered. An educated population is a valuable asset for any society. Education results in the development of human civilization and cultural advancement. Further, the progress of a nation undoubtedly depends on the levels of education and health facilities enjoyed by each member of its society (Sharma 2014). In a country like India with an extremely diverse population, the education system too needs to be diversified so that the entire process becomes more meaningful and beneficial for every section of the society. Further, education should result in the creation of socio-economic opportunities, development and mobility.

There is a need to dismantle the binary of formal and informal education in order to widen the scope of learning, especially in the case of communities who do not have access to educational institutes. However, it is interesting to see how such communities ensure that the process of

learning continues among their younger generation. Historically and even in the present times, religious seminaries like the madrasas and the gurukuls have played a crucial role in providing education (Alam 2011; Gupta 2012; Hartung 2006a; Taylor 2015). It is believed that Madrasas or the religious schools for the Muslims have often been labeled defunct in the contemporary times. However, many researchers have observed that they are still playing a substantial role in educating and socializing the young Muslim children, when many are left behind in getting an access to formal education (Hartung 2006b; Taylor 2015). Madrasas continue to be a source of scholarship, 'ritual leadership,' and jobs for many (Taylor 2015).

Notably, majority of the Nat Muslims of Semri village (before making an entry into other professions) would not send their children to either schools or the Madrasas. The children from a very young age were made to participate in professional activities such as acrobat, singing, dancing, begging etc., suggesting that children were an important part of the economic activity for the community. In the present times as well, the Nat Muslims fail to provide their children with formal education. As a result, the community has not experienced any socio-economic mobility and they continue to live a life of impoverishment. Presently, the livelihood generation activities that they are involved in do not pay off well. The community continues to live with financial instability. Under such circumstances, affording formal education for their children is difficult. Most of the learning among them, therefore, is related to skills that are important for livelihood earning and also for cultural acquirements.

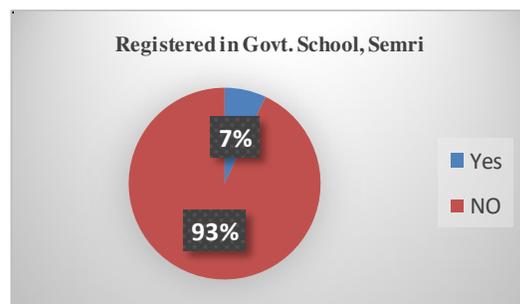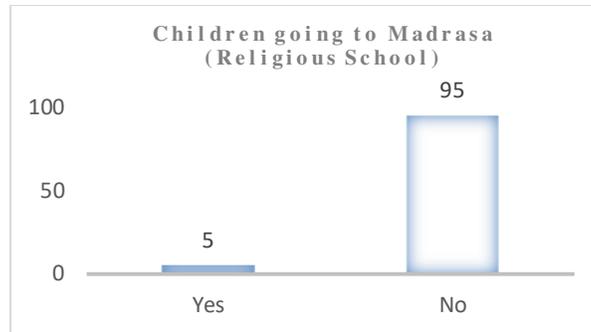| Registered in Govt. School, Semri	
Have you attended govt. school ever?	
Yes	No
05	55

Table 1 – Number of children attending school

Figure 2 - Number of children registered in government schools

Graph 2 – Percentage attending Madrasa

From a randomly selected 60 Nat Muslim, it was observed that only 5 had been attending a government school (Table 1). Putting this in percentages, only 7 percent children were registered in government schools (Figure 2). During interview schedule, only 3 Nat Muslim children out of a total of 60 had attended Madrasa (Graph 2). Therefore, the level and inclination of the Nats towards education is poor, the reasons for which have been mentioned earlier.

3.3 Caste Composition

Table 2 and Figure 3 represent the numbers and percentages of caste compositions respectively at Nat mohallah. The population comprised of a mix of Hindu and Muslim communities such as the Nats, Dewan (Muslims), Muslim dhobi, Hindu kumhar, Hindu mehtar and Brahman (Hindus). Thus, the hamlet is inhabited by different both – people following different religions and belonging to various castes.

Nat Muslims at Semri claim that they follow Islam. As per the fundamentals of Islam, it does not propagate any kind of hierarchy among the Muslims. However, they are labeled as lower caste by the members of various other communities and especially by the upper caste Hindus. This suggests that at Semri, Varna system is strictly adhered to and is also observed among the Nat Muslims. This has supposedly been a result of the dictum of the upper caste and influential Hindus of the village and also because of the partial acceptance by the Nat Muslims for their survival.

This social stratification among the Nat Muslims is somewhat similar to the Varna system of Hinduism and is a result of it. However, the rigidity and hierarchy of the caste system is

not as rigid as in Hinduism. For example, the work of a Dewan (carpenter) and that of a Muslim dhobi (washerman) is different; therefore, they must have different statuses in accordance with the Varna system. Nat Muslims in comparison to other upper caste Muslims, they are considered as Dalit Muslims in contemporary times. They are not respected in their locality, belonging to lower caste. Hierarchy and stratification have not been part of true Islam ever but purpose oriented actions as per time and space. Constitutionally, some states have kept Nat community in Schedule caste and OBC list. However, for the upper caste Hindus both the strata are treated alike. Interestingly, two families (at Nat mohallah) that claim to be Brahmins are not considered upper caste, the reason being that these are poor families. Thus, at Semri 'class' also becomes an important criterion while considering who could be part of the upper caste and who cannot.

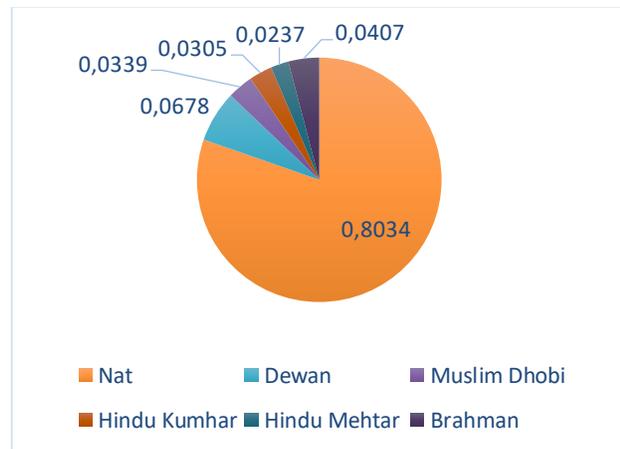| Name of Castes	Number of Families
Nat Muslims	54
Dewan (Shah)	04
Muslim Dhobi	03
Hindu Kumhar	03
Hindu Mehtar	01
Brahman	02
Total number of families	67

Table 2 - Caste Composition of the village   Figure 3 – Percentage caste composition of the village

3.4 The Nature of Occupation

Nat Muslims at Semri have quit the age old peripatetic work styles and economic activity exclusive to the Nats. With the creation of other forms of entertainment and changed demands of the industry, the contribution of the Nats in the field has lost its significance. Therefore, they are

now mainly involved in agricultural labour, contractual animal husbandry, agrarian labour, construction labour, while small numbers are involved in begging. For Anwar (2001), this community is one of the most marginalized communities among the Muslims of Bihar.

During the study it was observed that most of the Nat Muslims were landless and therefore, they had to involve in various other economic activities than cultivation. Landlessness had pushed many towards beggary. Such individuals help the upper caste Hindu families of the village in their domestic chores and get food in return for the services offered. The exchange of these services and social arrangement has ensured that the Nat Muslims at Semri continue to live in a state of penury and hopelessness. Table 3 and Figure 4 give the distribution of various professions undertaken by the Nats.

Name of the profession	Number of People
Agricultural labourer	132
Construction labourer	42
Contractual Animal Husbandry	50
Beggary	35
Rickshaw Puller	20
Others	16

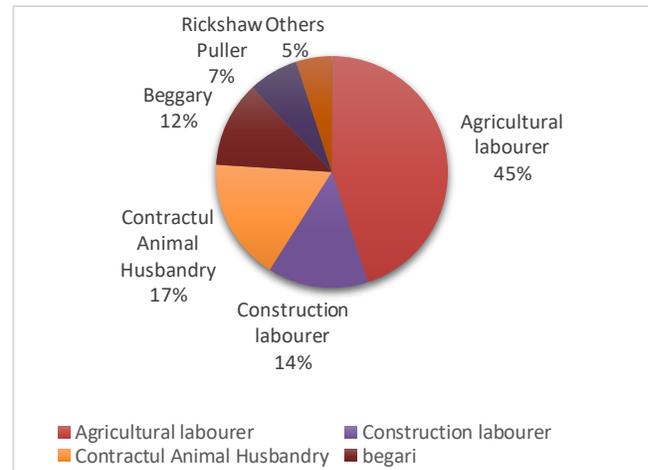Table 3 – Number of individuals involved in a particular profession involved in a particular profession

Figure 4 - individuals involved in a particular profession

4. Discussion

It was found during the interviews with the respondents that when the Nat Muslims were pursuing their traditional economic activities, they did not have to go through the process of acculturation like other members of the main stream Muslim community did. However, with the permanent settlement of a section of the Nat Muslims at Semri in district Paschim Champaran,

the process of assimilation of the community started. The upper caste Hindus would welcome them only if they accepted the lower strata of the Varna system. The Nat Muslims on the other hand would not object to it, in order to sustain in the village.

Over the course of time and during socio-cultural exchanges certain peculiarities of the Varna system were being strictly followed both by the Nat Muslims and other members of the village. While Islam does not accept any hierarchical division of the society, and resulting discrimination (as has been explained in the works of (Engineer 2008; Ashraf 1983; Noorani 2006; Ahmad 1978 and Sikand 2004a), the Nat Muslims have to accept the social divide in order to survive. They continue to face socio-cultural and economic deprivation and which has accentuated over time.

The Nat Muslims, therefore, have in many situations experienced identity crisis. Identity is viewed as a vector that differs through time and space (Burke and Stets 2009). Accordingly, Nats have experienced identities that are multiple in natures, across the length and breadths of India. The identities take form through various agencies such as faith, the region, religion, caste etc. However, this point has been debated at length by scholarship. It has suggested that a change in identity is not a simple process and is a time taking process, however, the case of Nat Muslims commends otherwise.

It is observed that caste hierarchy is not the only factor that determines the socio-cultural exchanges and the discords (arising out of these interactions) among the Nat Muslims and the rest of the communities at Semri. However, it is their historical past that also regulates the position that they have acquired in the present times. Swarankar (1999) in his work has mentioned that the Nat Muslims had converted to Islam from Hinduism during the rule of the Nawabs. However, the exact period is not known. During the field work it was observed and learnt that the Nat Muslims participated in all the non-Muslim festivities like *Durga Puja*, *Chhat Puja*, *Holi* etc., pointing towards the observation made by Davindera (1997) and Swarankar (1999). During the interviews, however, the respondents claimed that they have been following Islam ever since. The Hindus of the village, however, have continued to consider them as part of the wider Hindu religion and treat them as part of the lower strata of the Varna system. They, therefore, are made to live in the periphery of the village and a separate place of dwelling is

marked for them.

Further, the Nat Muslims undergo a dual bias. In addition to the ill treatment meted out to them by the upper caste Hindus, the mainstream Muslims living beside the Nat Mohallah do not recognize the Nat Muslims as the true followers of Islam. An important factor has been the involvement of the latter in non-Islamic festivities. Hence, they are completely forbidden to be accepted as true Muslims. The Nat Muslims, therefore, continue to involve in the socio-cultural and economic activities of the Hindus so that their survival continues.

The identity crisis and the lacking mobility because of various socio-political reasons has left the community in a deplorable condition. They are seen as a community of ignorant people. A very few government schemes reach them. There are no schools or madrasas in Nat mohallah that can encourage or exclusively cater to the needs of the children of the Nat Muslims. There is complete lack of medical facilities for this community. The only government hospital is the region is at a great distance. The immediate aid available when somebody falls sick is the *Bhagat* or the *Molvi* (traditional healers). This community is far from accessing modern medical facilities and depend on traditional medicines, and which often prove fatal.

The politics in Bihar has been another cause of their backwardness in the state. It is observed that when a candidate from a backward caste (including the Nat Muslims) contests elections, he is referred to as a *natwa*, *dhuniya or julaha* etc. However, in similar situations where an upper caste candidate is concerned he is often addressed as the leader and representative of the whole community. This is true for the political leaders following a particular faith. In the process, a strong culture of caste and religious identity is given undue importance. In such situations, the members of the lower strata lose every opportunity and continue to be socially, culturally and politically dominated. Ali (2010) for years has addressed this issue and recognizes that a very few members from the backward Muslim classes could become part of the mainstream political process. Consequently, there issues have not been addressed adequately and they continue to live even without the basic infrastructure.

This continued discriminatory treatment and exploitation of these people have conditioned them into not recognizing their rights and privileges. A few NGO's have come forward in raising their

voices against the caste hierarchy, exploitation and making people aware of the certain benefits under the various policies of the socially and economic distressed sections of the society. However, a few Nat Muslims have preferred an easy way and which is to reconvert to Hinduism, than fight for their rights. Ali (2001) too discusses in his work *Masawat Ki Jung* that how and why they have preferred for the reconversion.

As per book view of various religions including Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, an egalitarian approach is adopted towards people. For example, dalits can show an inclination towards these religions. However, the strong caste and religion based politics does not welcome such conversions. In Bihar, this has been quite visible (Anwar 2001; Engineer 2008; Ahmad 1978; Ali 2010 and Sikand 2004). Ejaz Ali, a doctor by profession and belonging to *kunjera* caste, introduces the concept of *Dalit Muslim* in order to develop an understanding on the politics in the state and the exclusionary process.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Nat Muslims have come a long way in trying to conserve their community. However, owing to the various socio-cultural, economic and political processes they have to a large extent assimilated with the dominant culture of the region. This has resulted in an identity crisis and the community had to pay a heavy price in the process. They have lost their age old traditional lifestyles and now have to completely depend on other communities for their survival. The community has been exploited and continues to live in a deplorable condition. The Nat Muslims deserve necessary attention and protection from the major stakeholders. Their rich cultural heritage needs to be maintained so that their sense of identity is not dislocated, circulation of wealth continues.

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