

The Unseen Majority: An Analysis of Pasmanda Muslim's Political Representation in India

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Received: 26 April 2025

Accepted: 26 June 2025

Published: 28 June 2025

Abstract

This research article is a secondary data based analysis of the political representation of Muslims in the Indian Parliament from 1952 to 2024, focusing on the internal caste-based stratification within the community. It argues that the overarching category of "Muslim representation" has historically obscured a significant disparity, wherein the numerically small elite *Ashraf* community has overwhelmingly dominated legislative positions, while the vast majorities, comprising the *Ajlaf* (backward) and *Arzal* (Dalit) castes, collectively known as Pasmanda Muslims, have remained severely underrepresented. By defining the Pasmanda identity and its historical movement, detailing the sociological framework of Muslim caste, and presenting a comparative analysis of parliamentary data, this paper demonstrates that the political marginalization of Pasmanda Muslims is a dual phenomenon: one of external exclusion within the national polity and another of internal exclusion orchestrated by the *Ashraf* elite. The findings challenge the monolithic understanding of Muslim politics in India and underscore the necessity of a caste-conscious approach to social justice and political representation.

Keywords: Pasmanda, Ashraf, Ajlaf, Arzal, Muslim Representation, Caste, Social Justice.

1. Introduction

The social discourse surrounding Muslim politics in India has often been framed within a monolithic, religion-centric paradigm, treating the community as a homogenous entity. However, this perspective obscures the deep-rooted social stratification that defines the lived experiences of the majority of Indian Muslims. A powerful counter-narrative has emerged from within the community, articulated through the Pasmanda movement, which seeks to reframe the debate from one of religious identity to one of caste-based social justice.

The term 'Pasmanda', of Persian origin, translates to "the ones left behind". It has been adopted as a potent political and social umbrella identity for backward (*Ajlaf*), Dalit (*Arzal*), and tribal Muslims who have been systematically excluded from the benefits of development and political power. While the term was first formally deployed in the political sphere in 1998 by Ali Anwar Ansari with the founding of the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz, the movement's ideological roots run much deeper. Historical antecedents can be traced to pre-independence anti-caste mobilizations, such as the Momin Conference, led by figures like Abdul Qayyum Ansari and Maulana Ali Hussain Asim Bihari of the Julaha (weaver) community. These early movements were significant for their direct challenge to the monolithic politics of the Muslim League, which they argued represented only the interests of the upper-caste, landed elite.

The Pasmanda movement gained renewed momentum in the post-Mandal Commission era of the 1990s, drawing inspiration from the broader politics of social justice that empowered backward castes across India. The formation of organizations like the **All-India United Muslim Morcha** in 1993 and the All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (AIPMM) in 1998 marked a crucial turning point. The core ideological thrust of this modern movement is a sharp critique of the hegemony of the upper-caste *Ashraf* leadership. Pasmanda intellectuals and activists contend that *Ashraf*-led organizations have historically prioritized religious and emotive issues—such as personal law and the status of Urdu—while deliberately neglecting the pressing socio-economic, educational, and political concerns of the vast Pasmanda majority.

This represents a fundamental paradigm shift in Indian Muslim politics. It is an internal subaltern assertion that moves the discourse from a framework of "minority rights" based on religion to one of "social justice" rooted in the constitutional language of caste. By foregrounding their backward and Dalit identities, Pasmanda groups seek solidarity not merely with other Muslims but with Dalit-Bahujan movements across religious lines, thereby challenging the neat binaries of Hindu-Muslim and majority-minority that have long dominated Indian political analysis. The movement's primary demands reflect this shift, focusing on caste-based affirmative action, such as the inclusion of Dalit Muslims in the Scheduled Caste (SC) list and the creation of a sub-category for Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) within the Other Backward Classes (OBC) quota, rather than a blanket religion-based reservation that would disproportionately benefit the already privileged Ashrafs.

2. Social Stratification within Indian Muslims: Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal

Despite the egalitarian tenets of Islam, which explicitly reject hierarchies based on birth, Muslim society in South Asia has historically been structured by a rigid system of social stratification that mirrors the Hindu caste system. This hierarchy first officially documented in the 1901 Census of British India and later affirmed by post-independence bodies like the Sachar Committee (2006), divides Indian Muslims into three broad categories: *Ashraf*, *Ajlaf*, and *Arzal*. The very terms used for this classification are of Arabic and Persian origin—*Shareef* (noble), *Jalf* (degraded), and *Razl* (abject)—which suggests that hierarchical notions were not merely an absorption from the surrounding Hindu culture but were also embedded within the worldview of foreign-origin Muslim elites who established their rule in the subcontinent. This system is not merely notional; it is a lived reality enforced through social practices such as strict endogamy to maintain "caste purity," residential segregation, and, in some regions like Bihar, even separate graveyards for different caste groups.

The *Ashraf* (the nobles) constitute the elite of Muslim society, comprising an estimated 15-20% of the total Muslim population. They claim foreign ancestry, tracing their lineage to Arabs, Persians, Turks, or Afghans, or are converts from high-caste Hindu communities like Rajputs and Brahmins. This category is primarily composed of four groups: Sayyids, who claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad; Sheikhs, who claim descent from the Prophet's companions or prominent Arab tribes; Mughals; and Pathans. Historically, the Ashrafs have been the landowning, priestly (*ulema*), and administrative class, and they continue to dominate Muslim religious, educational, and political institutions. The *Ajlaf* (the backward) represent the vast majority of Indian Muslims, who are indigenous converts from what are considered "ritually clean" artisan and occupational Hindu castes. This group is considered equivalent to the Hindu Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Together with the Arzals, the Ajlaf form the Pasmanda community, which is estimated to constitute 80-85% of the total Muslim population in India.

At the bottom of this hierarchy are the *Arzal* (the excluded), who are converts from the lowest, "untouchable" Hindu castes that traditionally performed "ritually unclean" occupations. They are the social and economic equivalent of Hindu Dalits (Scheduled Castes). However, a significant historical injustice, and a central grievance of the Pasmanda movement, is their exclusion from the Scheduled Caste list. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 originally restricted SC status to Hindus, later amended to include Sikhs (1956) and Buddhists (1990), but continues to exclude Muslims and Christians of Dalit origin, denying them access to crucial political reservations and affirmative action benefits.

This entrenched hierarchy has produced two distinct and opposing responses among the lower castes. For centuries, the dominant path to social mobility was a process of cultural assimilation known as "Ashrafization," wherein lower-caste groups would adopt the surnames, customs, and lineage claims of the Ashrafs to elevate their social standing—for example, weavers adopting the surname 'Ansari' or butchers 'Qureshi'. This strategy, however, implicitly accepts the legitimacy of the Ashraf-dominated social order. The Pasmanda movement represents a radical departure from this approach. Instead of seeking to assimilate into the oppressive structure, it endeavors to forge a new, powerful political identity based on the shared experience of marginalization. This is a counter-hegemonic project aimed not at climbing the existing ladder, but at challenging the structure of the ladder itself.

Table 1: Categorization of Prominent Muslim Castes in India

Category	Definition & Status	Representative Castes/Biradaris
Ashraf	"Nobles." Claim foreign ancestry or descent from high-caste Hindu converts. Historically the ruling and landowning elite.	Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan, Muslim Rajput, Tyagi, Gaur etc.
Ajlaf	"Lowly/Backward." Indigenous converts from ritually "clean" artisan and occupational groups. Equivalent to Hindu OBCs.	Ansari/Julaha (weavers), Qureshi/Qassab (butchers), Rayeen/Kunjra (vegetable sellers), Mansoori/Dhunia (cotton carders), Idrisi/Darzi (tailors), Saifi (carpenters/blacksmiths), Salmani/Hajjam (barbers), Ghosi (milkmen), Teli (oil-pressers), Churihar/Manihar (bangle-makers) etc.
Arzal	"Excluded/Dalit." Indigenous converts from ritually "unclean" or "untouchable" castes. Equivalent to Hindu SCs.	Halalkhor/Lalbegi/Bhangi (scavengers), Dhobi (washermen), Nat (acrobats), Bakho (entertainers), Pamaria (musicians), Faqir (beggars), Mirasi, Chik (butchers of specific animals) etc.

Source: Ahmad, I. (Ed.). (1978). *Caste and social stratification among Muslims in India*.

3. Political Representation in the Indian Parliament (1952-2024)

The political journey of Muslims in independent India reveals a persistent and widening representation gap that extends beyond simple demographic underrepresentation to expose deeper internal disparities central to the Pasmanda critique, where elite Ashraf minorities monopolize political power at the expense of the Pasmanda majority. Since 1952, Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha has consistently lagged behind population share, failing to keep pace as the Muslim population grew from approximately 10% in the 1950s to over 14% by 2014, with parliamentary representation peaking at just 9.3% in the 7th Lok Sabha (1980) before declining steadily to a historic low of 4.2% in 2014. Following the 2024 general elections, only 24 Muslim MPs were elected to the 543-member house, constituting a mere 4.4% against a population share nearing 15%, a trend particularly exacerbated by the political ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has fielded negligible numbers of Muslim candidates in recent elections, thus deepening both the macro-level underrepresentation and the internal elite monopolization that marginalizes the broader Pasmanda community.

Table 2: Muslims Representation in the Lok Sabha

Lok Sabha	Year	Total Seats	Muslim MPs	% of Muslim MPs
1 st	1952-57	489	21	4.29%
2 nd	1957-62	494	24	4.86%
3 rd	1962-67	494	23	4.66%
4 th	1967-71	520	29	5.58%
5 th	1971-77	518	30	5.79%
6 th	1977-80	542	34	6.27%
7 th	1980-84	529	49	9.29%
8 th	1984-89	542	46	8.49%
9 th	1989-91	529	33	6.24%
10 th	1991-96	534	28	5.25%
11 th	1996-98	543	28	5.15%
12 th	1998-99	543	29	5.34%
13 th	1999-04	543	32	5.89%
14 th	2004-09	543	36	6.62%
15 th	2009-14	543	30	5.52%
16 th	2014-19	543	23	4.23%
17 th	2019-24	542	25	4.60%
18 th	2024-	543	24	4.40%

**including Muslims elected in bye-election,

Source- Ahmad, T. (2024). *Pasmanda and Dalit Muslims: A discussion on reservation and representation*.

A comprehensive analysis of Muslim political representation in India reveals a troubling hierarchy within an already marginalized community, where elite *Ashraf* Muslims monopolize limited political space while *Pasmanda* (backward caste) Muslims face systematic exclusion. Ali Anwar's research spanning India's first through fourteenth general elections demonstrates that Muslims as a whole remain severely underrepresented, occupying only 400 of approximately 7,500 parliamentary seats (5.3%) despite comprising 13.4% of the population according to the 2001 census. However, this underrepresentation becomes even more stark when examined through internal caste divisions: *Ashraf* Muslims—including *Syed*, *Sheikh*, and *Pathan* communities—who constitute merely 15% of the Muslim population (2.01% of India's total population), secured 4.5% representation in the Lok Sabha, more than double their demographic proportion. In contrast, *Pasmanda* Muslims, representing 85% of the Muslim community and 11.3% of India's population, achieved a dismal 0.8% parliamentary representation, making them one of the most politically marginalized groups in Indian democracy. This pattern of elite capture has persisted consistently across recent elections: in 2009, 23 of 28 Muslim MPs were *Ashraf* (82.1%) with only 4 OBCs and 1 ST; in 2014, 18 of 23 were *Ashraf* (78.3%) with 4 OBCs and 1 ST; and in 2019, despite marginal improvement, 18 of 25 Muslim MPs remained *Ashraf* (72%) while only 7 came from OBC/ST backgrounds across states like UP, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Lakshadweep. This data exposes the complex intersectionality of Indian social hierarchies, where *Pasmanda* Muslims face "double discrimination"—exclusion from mainstream society due to religious identity and marginalization within their own community due to caste background—resulting in structural barriers including economic constraints, educational gaps, limited social capital, and cultural marginalization that perpetuate their political exclusion. The persistence of this disparity represents a critical challenge to Indian democracy's commitment to equitable representation, revealing how elite capture operates even within minority communities and underscoring the urgent need for conscious interventions including sub-quotas within Muslim representation, strengthened *Pasmanda* organizations, coalition building with other marginalized groups, and systematic efforts by political parties to field candidates from backward Muslim castes, ensuring that true democratic inclusion reflects the diversity within all communities rather than benefiting only their elite segments.

Table 3. Complete Ashraf vs Pasmanda Muslim Parliamentary Representation (1952-2024)

Election/Period	Total Seats	Muslim MPs	Muslim %	Ashraf MPs	Ashraf %	Pasmanda MPs	Pasmanda %
1st-14th LS (1952-2009)	7,500	400	5.33%	340	84.5%	60	15.0%
15th LS (2009)	543	30	5.16%	23	82.1%	5	16.67%
16th LS (2014)	543	23	4.24%	18	78.3%	5	21.73 %
17th LS (2019)	543	25	4.97%	18	66.7%	7	28 %
18th LS (2024)	543	24	4.42%	~15-17*	~63-71%	~5-7*	~21-29%

** 18th Loksabha Pasmanda vs. Ashraf MPs (estimated)

Source-Ahmad, T. (2024). Pasmanda and Dalit Muslims: A discussion on reservation and representation .

The more revealing story, however, lies beneath these aggregate numbers. The term "Muslim MP" has, for most of India's independent history, been a misnomer for "Ashraf MP." A stark analysis reveals that of the approximately 400 Muslims elected to the Lok Sabha between 1952 and 2004 (the first thirteen Lok Sabhas), an estimated 340—or 85%—belonged to the Ashraf community. In stark contrast, only 60 MPs—a mere 15%—hailed from Pasmanda backgrounds. This statistic lays bare an astonishing political anomaly: a community (Ashrafs) that forms roughly 15% of the Muslim population has historically captured 85% of its parliamentary representation, while the Pasmanda community, constituting 85% of the population, has been relegated to the remaining 15% of seats. Prominent Muslim political figures, from the family of Zakir Husain and Salman Khurshid (Pathan) to the Owaisi dynasty of Hyderabad, have overwhelmingly emerged from Ashraf lineages, reinforcing this elite capture of political space.

This gross disparity is not an accidental outcome but a structural feature of Indian electoral politics. Secular parties, particularly the Indian National Congress during its long period of dominance, historically approached the Muslim community as a monolithic "vote bank". To secure these votes, they relied on a small, co-opted group of socially and economically influential Muslim leaders to act as intermediaries or "gatekeepers". Owing to historical advantages in education, land ownership, and social status, these gatekeepers were almost exclusively Ashrafs. In turn, these elites promoted candidates from their own social strata, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of elite representation that systematically rendered the Pasmanda majority politically invisible.

This long-standing dynamic has been disrupted in recent years by the BJP's strategic outreach to Pasmanda Muslims. By directly addressing Pasmanda grievances and bypassing the traditional Ashraf leadership, the BJP has attempted to fracture the notion of a consolidated "Muslim vote bank." This maneuver has exposed the vulnerabilities of both the Pasmanda movement and the secular opposition. It has created a deep ideological schism within the Pasmanda leadership, splitting it into factions that either see an opportunity for empowerment through alignment with the ruling party or view it as a co-optation by a majoritarian ideology that is fundamentally antithetical to their long-term interests. For secular parties, this strategy has created a crisis, forcing them to finally confront the question of caste within the Muslim community that they had ignored for decades for the sake of electoral convenience.

4. Conclusion

This secondary analysis of parliamentary representation from 1952 to 2024 reveals a stark and undeniable truth: the political voice of the Indian Muslim community has been overwhelmingly dominated by its smallest and most privileged segment. The narrative of "Muslim representation" has, in practice, been the story of Ashraf over-representation and Pasmanda marginalization. The data conclusively demonstrates that a demographic majority has been systematically treated as a political minority, not only within the broader national polity but, crucially, within its own religious community.

The implications of this finding are profound. It exposes the failure of the secular political establishment, which, for decades, preferred the convenience of engaging with a small, anglicized elite over the more complex task of ensuring genuine, broad-based representation for the diverse and stratified Muslim masses. This has allowed the most pressing issues of the Pasmanda majority—poverty, lack of education, and caste-based discrimination—to be sidelined in favor of the religious and cultural concerns of the Ashraf elite.

The rise of Pasmanda political consciousness fundamentally challenges this status quo. It forces a re-evaluation of affirmative action policies, shifting the demand away from religion-based reservations, which would likely be monopolized by the already advanced Ashrafs, toward a more equitable framework of caste-based justice. The Pasmanda demand for inclusion in the SC list and for an EBC sub-quota within the OBC category is a call for the Indian state to recognize a reality it has long ignored: that caste is a social disability that transcends religious boundaries.

Today, the Pasmanda movement stands at a critical crossroads. It is caught between the strategic patronage offered by the ruling BJP, which seeks to fragment the traditional opposition vote base, and the ideological necessity of aligning with broader Dalit-Bahujan and secular-democratic forces that share its foundational principles of social justice. The future of Pasmanda political assertion will be determined by its ability to navigate this complex terrain. The struggle is no longer just for recognition or representation; it is for the very soul of the movement itself, as it strives to secure for its people not just affection (*sneh*) but dignity and equality (*sammaan*).

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