

NEGOTIATING A MUSLIM IDENTITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE AHMADIYYA COMMUNITY IN INDIA

Yashfeen Adil

The process of social categorization (Tajfel, 1979 as cited in Trepte and Loy, 2017) helps in creating the distinction between 'us' and 'them', 'in-group' and 'out-group' and the 'self' and the 'other'. Othering is defined as "discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate" (Jensen, 2011). The Ahmadis, since the time they embraced the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, around the world have been the victims of this process of othering. The Ahmadis have a long history of struggle in which they have been subject to persecution and violence, especially in Islamic countries like Pakistan where they were declared 'heretics' in 1974.

This study is about Ahmadi identities vis-a-vis an established Muslim identity. It focuses on how the Ahmadis are trying to maintain their identity as Muslims in India today. My research questions are:

- How did the Ahmadiyya movement emerge in India?
- What are the reasons for the exclusion of this community?
- What are the ways in which they are ostracized?
- What is the position of women in this community?
- How is the community maintaining its identity in the midst of all this?

The main aim of this research is to delineate the ways in which the Ahmadis are otherized today and to explore the implications of this othering on the community. Sociology is interested in looking at how certain social institutions -like religion, family, kinship- structure the thoughts and action of individuals, groups. The sociological significance of my work lies in the fact that it tries to understand how certain differences in religious beliefs play an instrumental role in constructing the Ahmadiyya community as the 'other', and in justifying their marginalization.

It is a qualitative research. For collecting the data, in-depth interviews, both face to face and telephone interviews, were carried out. All the respondents were selected on the basis of non-probability sampling-

convenience sampling and snowball sampling. The sample included 10 respondents, out of which five were Ahmadi Muslims and five were non-Ahmadi Muslims. All the respondents were men of middle class background. The age of the respondents varied from 21 to 30. The interview schedule consisted of 20 questions for the Ahmadi Muslims. All the questions were open-ended. For the non-Ahmadi Muslims, unstructured interviews were carried out.

There were certain problems that I faced in carrying out this research. Firstly, it was difficult to get both Ahmadi and non-Ahmadi Muslim respondents. The Ahmadis in Kolkata expressed an unwillingness to talk. My identity as a non-Ahmadi Muslim may be a reason for this hesitation. All my respondents were from outside Kolkata and hence I could carry out only telephone interviews. Among the non-Ahmadi respondents, most people were unaware of the community and those who knew about them were reluctant to talk about them. Secondly, the sample size of my research is extremely small which may be a reason for acquiring only a partial understanding of the community. Thirdly, I could not interview any woman from the Ahmadiyya community, hence, the understanding of their status and situation is completely from a male point of view. Lastly, very few literatures were available about the situation of the community in India.

Emergence of the Movement: Islamic Revivalism or Ploy of the British Government?

There is an ongoing debate between the Ahmadi and the non-Ahmadi Muslims over the origin of the movement. The Ahmadis believe that it was the British rule that was responsible for the decline of Islam and the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslims. They feel that in India the Muslims are influenced by their Hindu neighbours and have incorporated their traditions and culture. This has resulted in *shirk* or innovation in Islam. They see it as a revival movement that was attempting to rid Islam of any innovation. The non-Ahmadi Muslims, on the other hand, claim that Mirza Ghulam Ahmed was on a religious mission spearheaded by the British and to prove their point they cite some of his statements from his speeches and publications. The non-Ahmadi Muslims consider the emergence of the movement as a part of the British policy to render the concept of jihad irrelevant. This, they argue, was necessary to prevent the Muslims from uniting to drive out the British. The Ahmadis are seen as a creation of the British to ensure the hegemony of the British in India.

The Strategies of Exclusion and its Ramifications.

The Ahmadis differ from the other Muslims in three main ways. Firstly, the orthodox Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) is the final *nabi* or prophet and after him there can be no other prophets. However, the Ahmadis regard Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a *nabi* as they believe that new Prophets continue to make appearances, though they remain subordinate to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). These new prophets are called *buruzi* and they do not bring any new laws. The second difference between the two is in terms of their belief about Jesus. Both the orthodox Muslims and Ahmadis believe that Jesus or Isa (a.s) was not crucified. However, the orthodox Muslims believe that Isa (a.s) ascended to heaven in flesh and blood and will return towards the Day of Judgement to fight the Dajjal while the Ahmadis believe that he travelled to India and died there. Lastly, they differ in terms of their interpretation of the importance of the term '*Jihad*'. The non-Ahmadi Muslims emphasize the importance of all the four forms of Jihad- through the heart, through the hand, through the tongue and through the sword. The Ahmadis, however, only believe in the *Jihad* of the pen.

It is these ideological differences between the Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis that have become the reason for the exclusion of the former. It has helped in defining the Ahmadis as the 'other', as 'them', as *kaafirs* or unbelievers and it has established a kind of social distance between the two communities. However, this 'us' vs 'them' binary operates both ways in the case of the Ahmadis and the Non-Ahmadi Muslims. The beliefs and views of the Ahmadi and the non-Ahmadi Muslims converge along many lines. Like, both of them believe in and practice the five pillars of Islam (*Shahada* i.e. Faith; *Salah* i.e. Prayer; *Zakat* i.e. Charity; *Sawm* i.e. Fasting; *Hajj* i.e. pilgrimage to Mecca), they celebrate the same festivals, etc. However, both the Ahmadis and the non-Ahmadi Muslims categorize each other as the 'out-group' using the accentuation principle.

The Ahmadis do not live in segregated areas. Their neighbours are both Ahmadi Muslims, non-Ahmadi Muslims and non-Muslims. There are however, variations from State to State. Like in Qadian there are only Ahmadis. Even in Kashmir there are certain villages that have only Ahmadis. But in places like Kolkata, Kerala, Hyderabad the Ahmadis live together with both non-Ahmadi Muslims and non-Muslims. In general the respondents denied that they faced many problems in India because they felt that people are generally more tolerant and claimed to have good relations with their non-Ahmadi neighbours. In fact, during the time of festivals the Ahmadis invite the non-Ahmadis to their festivals and are also invited by them. The threat of physical violence unlike other Islamic countries is also absent in India. These ideas that killing one Ahmadi can open your doors to *Jannat* (Heaven), etc circulate but still this fear of physical violence does not exist for the

Ahmadis in India. Constitutional back up was seen as one reason why issues do not escalate against them.

The Ahmadis however felt that these good relations can break down in times of crisis, when anti-Ahmadi campaigns begin because of some incident that may have taken place abroad. Social distance, social boycott, discrimination and their inability to openly proclaim their identity are some of the problems that the Ahmadis face in India and this varies from State to State. Places like Delhi and Lucknow were categorized as more orthodox. It is the *Mullahs* or clerics that are seen as accentuating these differences and sustaining the conflict between the two communities.

Burhani (2016) pointed out that the Ahmadis around the globe face double exclusion today because both their rights as Muslims and non-Muslims are denied to them. There were different views regarding this. A few of the respondents felt that since in India their identity as Muslims takes precedence over their identity as Ahmadi Muslims they face more discrimination from the non-Ahmadi Muslims and the discrimination faced by the non-Muslims is only a by-product of the prevailing Islamophobia. Some felt that they are discriminated by both non-Ahmadi Muslims and non-Muslims. The Hindus object to the claim that Shri Ram and Krishna were Prophets of Islam and Christians detest them because of their view that Jesus was neither crucified nor will the world witness his second coming. Some felt that the non-Muslims prefer them over the non-Ahmadi Muslims because of their insistence on the ideal of non-violence. Nonetheless, the Ahmadis accept their suffering as a sign from God that they are on the right path.

Education - a Means to Empowering Women?

The Ahmadiyya community uses gender equality as a notion to present themselves as different from the rest of the society. The Ahmadis accuse not only the Non-Ahmadi Muslims but also other religions of denying women their true rights. The Ahmadis worldwide insist on the need to educate their women. The community has two auxiliary wings for women whose main goals are education of women. For girls between the ages seven to fifteen they have the *nasiratul* Ahmadiyya and for women above the age of 15 they have the Lajna Ima'illah. A deep interrogation into the kind of education imparted reveals that education among the Ahmadi women is tied to the socialization of children into the values of Ahmadiyyat. It is simply a vehicle to transmit religious and cultural values to their children (Ahmad-Ghosh, 2006). Their emphasis on education continues to be rooted in this notion that women are the reproducers of society. Education is seen only as a part of being a good wife, a responsible mother, and a better Muslim. Like Talcott Parsons, they hold on to the idea that women should be responsible for the affective (emotional) roles while men should be responsible for the instrumental (goal-oriented)

roles. Education is hardly ever thought of in terms of the growth of woman as individuals.

The Ahmadis use their emphasis on education as a means to show that they are different from the non-Ahmadi Muslims. However, a closer look shows that many similarities exist between the Ahmadi and non-Ahmadi Muslims. Both Ahmadi and non-Ahmadi Muslims see women at the foundation of a moral social order. Both continue to see the sexual division of labour as natural and something ordained by Allah. Women are relegated a more natural role than men because of their procreative function. They rely on the same nature/culture association of men and women that Sherry Ortner discerned as the reason for the universal subordination of women (1974).

In the Face of Exclusion and Discrimination.

The Ahmadis today are struggling to maintain their identity in the face of exclusion and otherization. A number of methods have been adopted by the community to keep the 'we feeling' alive. The holding of the *Jalsa Salana* is one such mechanism. The *Jalsa Salana*, an annual congregation, is organized at different levels—local, national, international in the last week of December. This annual gathering was started by the founder of this movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. The main rationale behind it was to induce feelings of brotherhood and love among the members of the community. This convocation involves speeches around issues the Muslim community is facing and ways of solving them, *ayats* or verses from the Quran are spelled out and its meanings are discussed, different *hadiths* i.e. statements or actions of Prophet Muhammad(S.A.W) are highlighted so that people can draw lessons and lead a more meaningful life. The *jalsa* is not just restricted to the Ahmadiyya community. Both non-Ahmadi Muslims and non-Muslims are invited because the Ahmadis also see it as a way to reach out to people and convey the message of Islam.

The Ahmadis are also making use of the media today to make the community feel that they belong together and to carve out their difference from the rest of the society. The MTA (Muslim Television Ahmadiyya and The Review of Religions) play an extremely important role in this regard. Both MTA and The Review of Religions have a global character, and they aim at spreading the message of God while addressing a whole set of other issues ranging from science to international politics.

In the wake of their social exclusion and their persecution, the Ahmadis have embraced endogamy to ensure that the community does not lose out on its members. They feel that endogamy is necessary because people are emotionally attached to religion and any conflict over it can threaten the institution of family which for them serves as the moral base of society. Those who marry outside the community may be boycotted by the family and the community may respond by refusing to

accept any financial aid from them. The concerned couple can apologize by writing a letter to the Caliph, who generally accepts such an apology on the condition that the partner accepts Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims.

The Ahmadis refuse to offer *namaaz* behind a non-Ahmadi *imaam*. While travelling they may use non-Ahmadi mosques to offer prayers but they never read *namaaz* behind the *imaam* in such mosques. They believe that an *imaam* has a really high status because such a person is chosen by God. For them, it is extremely necessary that the one who is leading them in their prayers shares their beliefs and harbours no feelings of hatred. The different interpretation of Jihad is another way that makes the Ahmadis feel that they are not the same as the Orthodox Muslims.

In trying to keep their identity intact the Ahmadis have tried to mobilize all sections of society. The Ahmadiyya community has five auxiliary wings—for young girls and women they have the Nasiratul Ahmadiyya, the Lajna Ima'illah, and for young boys and middle aged men and older men they have the Atfalul Ahmadiyya, Majlis Khuddamul Ahmadiyya and the Majlis Ansarullah. All of these organizations work for spreading the word of God and for the growth of the community.

The Ahmadis, who have migrated because of persecution, insist on tolerating differences and upholding the law of the country even if it contradicts the Islamic law. This compliance however, does not mean complete assimilation. They insist on wearing ethnic clothes, speaking in their mother language, etc to keep this sense of community alive. This sense of community is a deliberate tactic to separate them from the mainstream.

The Ahmadis in India employ the following mechanism that Connley (2016) outlined to withstand adversity: They are fortitude through Faith and Spirituality: The Ahmadis emphasize on the need of being religious and spiritual because they believe that it can help them manage the hardships that they face; Rationalizing oppression: The Ahmadis believe that all prophets faced opposition and none of their claims were readily accepted. They hold that their oppression is just a manifestation of their truth; Ideological maneuvering: The Ahmadis try to turn all the negatives that others associate with them to positives; Harmonising Identity: It involves avoiding any negative reaction to any kind of provocation and also deciding to reveal or not reveal their identity depending on the situation; Satisfying the need to belong: It involves coming together on different occasions like the *Jalsa Salana* and make each other feel that they will be there for one another under all circumstances.

The Ahmadiyya community has faced persecution in almost all Islamic states. India, where they are recognized only as a different sect of Islam should appear as a safe haven but it is not always true. The Ahmadis in India are at the receiving end too. The methods of excluding them

does not always take the form of physical violence but the community has to face discrimination on a day to day basis, which varies according to the State they are in. Though most people in India would claim to be unaffected by their presence, they harbor feelings of hatred, distaste for the Ahmadis. The community resists assimilation too. It does not want to be seen in the same light as the orthodox Muslims. It adopts different ways to ensure this like the use of mass media to forge a global identity of the Ahmadis, a different interpretation of the term jihad, active engagement of all sections, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmad, Mirza Masroor.2017.'The Equality of Women and Their Role in Society',*The Review of Religions*, 112(4):12-25.Retrieved March 7, 2019 (<http://www.reviewofreligions.org/13025/the-equality-of-women-and-their-role-in-society/>)
- Ahmad,Mirza Masroor.2017.'Women's Rights and Equality',*The Review of Religions*, 112(11):14-29. Retrieved March 7, 2019 (<http://www.reviewofreligions.org/13446/womens-rights-and-equality/>)
- Anshori, Ahmad Afnan.2012.'Preventing Religious Persecution Against Ahmadiyah',*Teologia*, 23:193-213.
- Burhani, Ahmad Najib.2014.'Hating the Ahmadiyya: the Place of "heretics" in Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Society', *Cont Islam* 8:133-152.
- Butt, Basil Raza.2019.'Introduction To Jalsa Salana Qadian', *The Review of Religions*, 114(2):8-12.Retrieved March 7, 2019 (<http://www.reviewofreligions.org/14515/introduction-to-jalsa-salana-qadian/>)
- Connley, Aleah.2016.'Understanding the Oppressed: A Study of the Ahmadiyah and Their Strategies for Overcoming Adversity in Contemporary Indonesia', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(1): 29-58.
- Evans, Nicholas H.A.2017. 'Beyond Cultural Intimacy: the Tensions That Make Truth for India's Ahmadi Muslims', *American Ethnologist*, 44(3):490-502.
- Ghosh, Huma Ahmad.2006.'Ahmadi Women Reconciling Faith with Vulnerable Reality through Education ', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1):36-51.Retrieved March 8, 2019 (<http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/3>).
- Hamid, Qazi Abdul (ed). 2016. *Jesus in India*. Punjab: Islam International Publications Ltd.
- Hanson, John H., 2007. 'Jihad and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community: Nonviolent Efforts To Promote Islam in the Contemporary World', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 11:77-93.
- Jensen, Sune Qvotrup.2011. 'Othering, identity formation and agency', *Qualitative Studies*, 2(2): 63-78.
- Khan, Amjad Mahmood.2003. 'Persecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Pakistan: An Analysis Under International Law and International Relations', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*,16:217-244.
- Lavan, Spencer.1972. 'Polemics and Conflict in Ahmadiyya History: The ' Ulama', The Missionaries, and the British (1898)', *The Muslim World*, 62(4):283-303.
- Maududi, S. Abul A'la. 1953. *The Qadiani Problem*.Pakistan: Islamic Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Nagi, Shmaila.2009. 'The Establishment of Lajna Imaillah and the Sacrifices of Early Ahmadi Muslim Women',*The Review of Religions*,104(8):42-63. Retrieved March 7, 2019 (<http://www.reviewofreligions.org/275/the-establishment-of-lajna-imaillah-and-the-sacrifices-of-early-ahmadi-muslim-women/>)
- Rahman, Aziz. Ali, Mohsin. Kahn, Saad. 2018. 'The British Art of Colonialism in India: Subjugation and Division', *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 25(1):2-26.
- Titus, Murray T.2005.*Islam in India and Pakistan: A Religious History of Islam in India and Pakistan*.New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Trepte, Sabine. Loy, Laura S.2017. 'Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory',*The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*,10:1-13.
- Walter, H.A.1918.*The Religious Life of India: The Ahmadiya Movement*.Kolkata:Association Press.