

Politics of Recognition and Caste among Muslims: A Study of Shekhra Biradari of Bihar, India

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Abstract

The caste system among Muslim society has long been an ignorant point of debate in academia. But in recent times it emerged as a thoughtful discourse. The sociological study finds that Muslim society of India is divided into three major social groups, Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal. Most Muslims of India belong to the latter two groups. The present study is an attempt to give an insight into an Arzal caste known as Shekhra. Shekhra has an occupational history of bone picking. The article will discuss how the struggle for social recognition harmed their demand for redistributive justice (reservation). They have been included in the Central OBC and in EBC in Bihar. However, later, reservation has been denied because of their self misrecognition as Sheikh Biradari. The study is an attempt to explore the reasons behind it and suggests the possible way to find a solution.

Keywords

Muslim, caste, Ashraf, Ajlaf, Shekhra, Sheikh, recognition, reservation

Introduction

The concept of social justice in independent India has long been limited mainly to the landless and underprivileged people within non-Muslim society. The social hierarchy and division within Muslim society were not considered urgent and serious themes of study. For instance, social categories such as Pasmanda and Dalit Muslim have not been accepted as part of social and academic discourse in India. Albeit, in Hindu society, categories like Dalits and OBCs have been studied rigorously, and a large volume of literature has been produced so far. Due to the politicisation of lower caste followed by intellectual discourse, the problems and concerns related to the OBCs and Dalits were considered a serious category for social and public policy. As a result, the

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subaltern groups mentioned earlier have benefited in comparison to the Dalit Muslim and Pasmanda Muslim.

In Indian Muslim society, besides the fact that nowhere in their sacred texts (the Qur'an and Hadith) does the implication of social stratification exist, they have been practicing the caste system over the years, which they usually call "Biradari" (Ahmad, 1978, p. 256). On the one hand, they amplify the notion of *Masawat* (equality) in the religious realm, but on the other hand, in the societal realm, there are castes that matter the most. According to Imtiaz Ahmad, they are not like the Hindu caste system. They occupy a middle ground between Islam's egalitarian principle and the very structure of Indian Muslim society. Imtiaz Ahmad dubbed them "caste-like features." (Ibid.)

Muslim society in India is divided into three distinct caste groups.¹ The first is *Ashraf* (noble), which comprises foreign-origin Muslims from Arab countries, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and others, including the native converts from upper-caste Hindus like *Brahmans*, *Rajputs*, *Kayasthas*, and others (Ansari, 1960). The *Ashraf* category has four castes, namely *Syed*, *Sheikh*, *Mughal*, and *Pathan*. The *Syed* and *Sheikh* tend to relate themselves to the Arabs, whereas the rest of the two caste groups, *Mughal* and *Pathan*, consider themselves of Central Asian and Afghan origin (Ahmad, 1967). These *Ashraf* groups are usually, but not necessarily, landowners, religious leaders, and political leaders as well. The second category is notably known as *Ajlaf* (lowly), which comprises clean occupational castes. This category includes various castes such as *Ansari*, *Rayeen*, *Mansoori*, *Saifi*, *Qureshi*, and others. The third and lowest one is the *Arzal* (excluded), which is somehow the equivalent of Hindu Dalits.² In this category, castes like, *Halalkhor*, *Nat*, *Pamaria*, *Hajjam*, *Dhobi*, and other unclean occupational castes are included.

Although earlier, some studies had been done on lower-caste Muslims in the context of Bihar. There has been scarce anthropological studies done on individual Muslim castes. And as far as *Shekhra* Biradari is concerned, no socio-political and anthropological study has been conducted. This article is willing to fill those academic gaps. Alongside, the article also aims to engage with the politics of recognition critically. The central question here is about the struggle for recognition and redistribution of the *Shekhra* Biradari of Bihar. For a long time, the *Shekhra* caste, which used to do menial jobs, was despised, and misrecognised by the society.

¹It is important to note here that the three-caste group first recognised in the 1901 census in Muslim society. However, it recognises Arzals quoting that, 'those Muslims with which no other Mohammedans wants to associate them'. Meanwhile, the same happened in later censuses till the 1931 census. Because after this there was no caste census done. Later, after Independence, the first backward commission Kaka Kalelkar Commission followed the census of 1901 and accepted the first two caste groups among Muslims Ashraf and Ajlaf. However, in 1990 after the implementation of the Mandal Commission, the three caste groups among Muslims got legitimised.

²See the detailed study on different castes in, Ansari, Gaus. *Muslim Castes in Uttar Pradesh*. Lucknow: Ethnographic and Fol Culture Society Uttar Pradesh, 1960. Anwar, Ali. *Masawat Ki Jung: Pasemanjar Bihar Ke Pasmanda Musalmaan*. (in Hindi) New Delhi: Vaani Prakashan, 2001. And, Ansari, Ashfaq H. (ed.) 2007, Basic Problems of OBCs and Dalit Muslims, Serial Publishers: Delhi.

Because of the demeaning treatment they received from society, they changed their social identity from *Shekhra* to *Sheikh*, because *Shekhra* is a demeaning identity that does not receive proper respect, since lack of due respect inflicts harm and self-hatred (Taylor, 1991, 1994). Social recognition is the essential element of one's idea of self for due recognition, which, according to Taylor, is "a vital human need" (Ibid., p. 25). The lack of social recognition compelled *Shekhras* to change their identity and call themselves "*Sheikh*." The latter question intersects with the former because of the dilemma on their self-identity of becoming someone else; they are confronted with the challenge of redistribution (reservation). The politics of redistribution claimed by Nancy Fraser is about claims that lower castes make to get their share of economic opportunities through policies such as reservation in public institutions (Singh, 2020). *Shekhra*, being a bone collector, was not only demeaned by society but also kept resourceless, uneducated, and unemployed. According to Nancy Fraser, the politics of recognition and redistribution is a claim of social justice (Fraser, 2003). She believes that combining recognition and redistribution completes the concept of social justice. According to Fraser, without redistribution, there would be no recognition, and without redistribution, recognition would not do any good.³ The same line of argument is fit for the *Shekhra* Biradari. This article primarily deals with the origin of *Shekhra* Biradari, their social position and their struggle for recognition and redistribution. Furthermore, this article shows that how contradictory have become these two aspects of recognition and redistribution for the *Shekhra* Biradari?

The article is part of my ongoing doctoral research work. The issue of *Shekhra* Biradari came before me during the fieldwork for my theses in Vishshariya village of Bhargama Block of Araria district, which was conducted between September 2019 and February 2020. The whole debate, discussion, and argument are based on the personal interviews conducted with some of the most important people in *Shekhra* Biradari and the documents, letters, and notes provided by them.

The Shekhra Biradari: Brief Discussion on Origins of the Community

Irrespective of ample studies concerning the Muslim caste system, anthropological studies on different Muslim castes still face the challenges of minimal resources. The *Shekhra* community is one such community with a dubious past and no written documents. However, they try to find their linkage in different documents and records. *Shekhra* (also written as *Shaikhda* or *Shaikhra* and also known as Gujarati *Sheikh*) is a Muslim community in Gujarat, also found in the districts of Ahmadabad and Baroda, that is known for its devotees of the Sufi preacher Bala Shah.⁴ According

³Nancy Fraser proposes in her book "Redistribution or recognition? A political-Philosophical Exchange" a "perspective dualist" analysis that casts the two categories as co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice. For details see the 'Introduction'.

⁴Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol. IX, Part. II, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1899. pp. 69–70

to Azeemuddin, the *Shekhra* of Seemanchal migrated from Gujarat,⁵ but they do not believe in any relation between the *Shekhra* of Seemanchal and the Gujarati *Sheikh* or *Shekhra*. There are probably two reasons for this. The Gujarati *Sheikh* or *Shaikhda* never practiced bone picking, and the *Shekhra* of Seemanchal do not believe in the Bala Shah, in whom the Gujarati *Shaikhda* has faith.

While searching the words *Shekhra/Shekhda/Shaikhda/Shaikhra* on the internet, nothing is found about this caste. In an online Rekhta dictionary, the word *Shekhra* (written as *Shaikhda*) means “scornfully, son of a *Sheikh*.”⁶ The *Shekhda/Shekhra* Muslims of Bihar must not know this meaning. However, the *Shekhra* Biradari of Bihar has its own narrative about the community, which entails distinct historical roots about their origin because of its less well-recorded history. Within *Shekhra* Biradari, most people do not recognise themselves as “*Shekhra*,” but as “*Sheikh*”.

Well, *Shekhra* Biradari was involved in a menial job equivalent to the Hindu ‘*Chamar*’ caste in the beginning.⁷ This was the reason for their attempt of changing their identity from *Shekhra* to *Sheikh*. According to a sociological study, no caste claims that it arose from a shameful social practice, which is why castes attempt to elevate their social status through a process of social mobility instead (Sinha, 2010). In other words, *Shekhra* Biradari is an “ancestorless” community (castes which have lower status or whose heredity is not prestigious)⁸ which is why it can be found that there is/was no interest to get to know their history, except among those who fight for their reservation. The latter is now attempting to trace the historical origin of their caste.

Albeit lack of records there has been some mention in different sources. For example, “*Punjab Castes*” (1916) followed the 1881 census mentioned *Shekhra* as a ‘contemptuous diminutive of *Sheikh*’ (Ibbetson, 1916, p. 210). Jabir Hussain in “*Bihar ki Pasmanda Muslim Abadiyan*” (in Urdu) also mentioned *Shekhra* as Pasmanda Biradari (Hussain, 1994, p. 11). *Sheikh* Wahajuddin wrote in his book, *Kulhaiya Sheikh Siddiqui ki Origin* (in Urdu) that in 1760-70, four dynasties came to the west from Bengal. A third of them settled in Dehti village⁹ and called themselves *Shekhra*.¹⁰

⁵The *Shekhra* Biradari is written in different ways everywhere. While *Shekhra* writes himself as *Shekhda* (in Hindi), in Gujarat it is written as *Shaikhda* or *Shaikhra*. Since, here the article is about the *Shekhra* community of Seemanchal of Bihar, I have used the word which is used by the Bihar Backward Classes Commission and National Backward Classes Commission, the word is written as ‘*Shekhra*’.

⁶<https://rekhtadictionary.com/meaning-of-shaikhdaa>

⁷Interview with Razi Ahmad secretary of *Shekhra* Vikas Parishad, and deputy chief of JD(U) of Araria in his residence on January 21, 2020.

⁸See details in, Gillette, J. Ancestorless Man: The Anthropological Dilemma. *The Scientific Monthly*, 1943 57(6), 533-545. Retrieved on March 8, 2021. from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/18232>. Also Kranath, Dilip. ‘Caste among Muslims’, in Ansari, Ashfaq, H. (ed.) *Basic Problems of OBC & Dalit Muslims*, New Delhi: Serial Publications. 2007. Pp.66-87

⁹Dehti is a village in Araria districts, known for the population of *Shekhra* Biradari

¹⁰Wahajuddin, *Sheikh* Muhammad. *Kulah Haya Sheikh Siddiqui Ki Origin*. Patna: The Print Line, 2005.

Qamar Shadan in his book *Tareekh E Purnea* (in Urdu) also makes mention about *Shekhra* Biradari.¹¹ Except for these, there are no detailed written records about this Biradari.

Azeemuddin, an ex-minister and MLA in the Bihar government (1990-1995) and the founder and chief of '*Shekhra Vikas Parishad*' (*Shekhra* development council)¹² addressed *Shekhra* people in 2011 in the town hall in Araria district and delivered his presidential speech. In this speech, he elaborated on the origin of the Biradari. Here is a translation (by the author) of the written version of his speech.¹³ According to him,

The history of *Shekhra* caste in Araria district dates to the era of Aurangzeb when Saif Khan was made a faujdar of Purnea at the request of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan of Bengal. The army that came with him included the soldiers of Gujarat and the *Shekhra* caste of Gujarat also came in the area of Purnea whose original profession was to collect bones and work as a beggar. Going into the depths of history, the roots of *Shekhra* caste go through Gujarat and Punjab and North-Western border province.

In the book of H.A. Rose in *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of Punjab and Imperial Gazetteer of India, Punjab Vol. II* indicate that the profession of 'Chuhra,'¹⁴ the Hindu slum caste of Punjab, was to choose bones and act as a beggar and many of them converted to Islam. The *Shekhra* community has its origins in this Chuhra caste, a branch of which is still found in Ahmedabad and Baroda in Gujarat. *Shekhra* caste is specifically mentioned in Satish C. Mishra's, *Muslim Communities in Gujarat*. It is possible that some *Shekhra* families, along with soldiers from Gujarat, reached Purnea during Saif Khan's time. After defeating Bir Shah of Birnagar,¹⁵ when Saif Khan started to rule the area of Purnea, he also populated the *Shekhra* caste here."

Shekhra Vikas Parishad's proposal notes state that, "the *Shekhra* caste is socially, economically, educationally, and politically backward, depressed, exploited, and marginalised due to working menial jobs, resulting in this *Arzal* caste being kept separate from society's mainstream. On account of the ancestral profession of collecting the bones of dead animals, they have been considered an abomination."

¹¹Shadan, Qamar. *Taareekh E Purnea* (In Urdu) Qamar Nizami Ma'roof Ganj, Gaya, Patna: City Print Bihar, 1991.

¹²*Shekhra* Vikas Parishad (*Shekhra* Development Council) founded by ex-Minister of Bihar Azeemuddin in 1993 for the movement in support of the reservation of the *Shekhra* Biradari. The organization continues to work and fight the new challenges that have emerged after this but could not find solutions.

¹³His speech is available in pamphlet form in Hindi, translated by the author.

¹⁴Report on the Census of Punjab taken on February 17 1881, Para 295 part IV, p.154. There is a mention of Chuhra caste, but no mention of bone collecting but scavenging. However, there was also Muslim Chuhra caste.

¹⁵The problem is with the *Shekhra* community of Araria district, but mostly the people of Bhargama block suffer more of this. Since this study is based on Bhargama block, the discussion of Birnagar is also needed because Birnagar is a village in Bhargama Block.

Besides this, there is another oral narrative of the history of this caste. According to the narration,¹⁶ they were initially and originally ‘bone collectors’. The word *Shekhra* originated from the word “*Seeker*” which means ‘bone’ thus, the collector of bones called ‘*Seekra*’, which eventually turns into the *Shekhra*.¹⁷ The word transformation from ‘*Seekra*’ to ‘*Shekhra*’ is also an influence of ‘*Sheikh*’.¹⁸ The work of bone collecting is considered a demeaning job as per the conventions of society. Hence, they were kept out of mainstream society and forced to live on the outskirts of their villages. They have continuously migrated from one place to another, but eventually settled in Araria District. Most of them gradually left their traditional occupation as the demand for bones declined over time, and they shifted to other occupations. Many sociological writings have corroborated this shift of occupation by lower castes over time. Archana Sinha wrote about the traditional occupational caste, elucidating that “during British colonial rule, the rigidity of the Indian caste system was withering. Different castes were being inculcated in every field of work, but not in the organised sectors” (Sinha, 2010). However, after they leave their conventional job of picking up bones and choose another kind of occupation, it cannot get them into better socio-economic conditions, despite the fact that their educational, economic, and political conditions have worsened. However, as they transitioned from their traditional occupation of bone collecting to mainstream society, they began to refer to themselves as “*Sheikhs*” rather *Shekhra* in order to elevate their social status.

The ‘Sheikh’ and the Process of “Sheikhsation” Among Various Muslim Castes

The sociological fact is that communities have no permanent identities, and these identities are constantly changing. Caste and communities in India have no biological basis but have been given assumed identities and hierarchies based on social and political grounds. With the passage of time, the identities of various castes, tribes, and communities changed. Castes and communities that have acquired economic and political power have been able to enhance their status in the hierarchy of the caste system over time (Joshi, 2015, p. 4). The phenomenon of *Shekhra* Biradari identifying as “*Sheikh*” did not alter their sociological realities but their nomenclature. However, *Shekhra* is not a unique case in this respect. In Hindu society, there has been a practice of raising oneself or at least appearing tall, whereby the adaptation of the name, surname, lifestyle, and dialect of the upper castes has been termed ‘Sanskritisation’ (Srinivas, 2003). Similarly, in Muslim society, a group or individual’s socio-economic upward mobility has been termed as ‘Ashrafisation’ (Vreede-de-Steurs, 1969, p. 56;

¹⁶Interview with Mr. Ashfaque in his residence in the village Vishhariya on November 27, 2019. Ashfaque himself is from *Shekhra* Biradari and a teacher in Vishhariya high school, in the Bhargama block of Araria district and is working for the reservation for *Shekhra*.

¹⁷For the work of bone collecting, they still called by other Biradari by various derogatory words like ‘Haddi chunwa’ (bone pickers), and ‘Haddi Chussa’ (bone suckers).

¹⁸In the words of Razi Ahmad, secretary of *Shekhra* Vikas Parishad, and deputy chief of JD (U) in Araria. Personal Interview done on January 21, 2020 at his residence in Araria.

Ghosh, 2018, p. 181). The definition of Ashrafisation is the process of social mobility by which people in lower positions imitate the upper caste people's lifestyles, customs, manners, etc., so that they are placed in the upper caste category (Momin, 1978, p. 141). Ghaus Ansari calls them pseudo-*Ashraf*. He writes,

It has been a common practice on the part of the lower caste individuals to claim *Ashraf* descent along with a rise in socio-economic status. There are numerous instances in almost all towns of Uttar Pradesh where low caste persons, who have attained a higher economic status, felt it degrading to remain members of their caste. They almost always look upward on the social scale. Whenever they have felt that their caste status is below their social status, they attempt to add some of the *Ashraf* titles to their names, and then they claim *Ashraf* descent (Ansari, 1960 p. 38).

Ashrafisation includes certain aspects like *parda* practice (the Islamic veil system), emphasis on *Dini Talim* (religious education), use of good Urdu language, not letting women out for work, etc. (Momin, 1978; Hasan, 1994). Ashrafisation is more about the social system than the class system, reflecting a higher economic status, which often leads to a change of either the family or Biradari name (Ghosh, 2018, p. 182). But here with *Shekhra* Biradari, the case is different from Ashrafisation. The *Shekhra* Biradari, who had amassed wealth, education, and jobs at the time, attempted to elevate their social standing within the Muslim community by naming and claiming to be *Sheikh*. This process of struggling for social recognition I call "*Sheikhisation*."¹⁹

Why have I called it *Sheikhisation*? There are various reasons for this. *Sheikhisation* is a less intense process than Ashrafisation. Ashrafisation is meant to be a cultural or value aspect that *Sheikhisation* is not. *Sheikhisation* is beyond Ashrafisation in a sense that it does not necessarily acquire the value or cultural traits of *Ashraf* Muslims, but it claims to be one of them, e.g. *Sheikh*. In this process, the most common phenomenon is related to the only caste, e.g. *Sheikh*.

Furthermore, here is a question as to why most of the lower caste Muslims want to be called "*Sheikh*." *Sheikh* is the upper caste category (*Ashraf*), and there are about 28 sub-castes or categories among the *Sheikhs*.²⁰ So it is easier to claim one caste to be a *Sheikh* than other castes, i.e., *Syed*, *Mughal*, and *Pathan*. This whole process is nothing but the struggle for social recognition, because many sociological studies have revealed that the lower castes do not get the respect they want for their status of being lower caste. When they do not get their due identity two things happen on this matter, either they hide their real identity or they change it as happened in the case of *Shekhra*. As written earlier, *Shekhras* were bone collectors, which was a menial job. People identify them as untouchables. They were outcasted and lived outside the

¹⁹See Ahmad, T. "The Paint of Muslim Society: Population, Politics, and Reservation", *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2021

²⁰People's Group of India: Discovering every tribe, Nation, Language and People. <https://peoplegroupsindia.com/profiles/shaikh/>

village. However, by the time they changed or left their jobs, they saw the need to change their identities as well.

However, this is not the only case. The various types of literature show how lower caste people attempted to claim the title of *Sheikh* at the time. Now the first question needs to be addressed: who is the *Sheikh*? Imtiaz Ahmad writes about this caste,

The word '*Sheikh*' literally means the 'chief' (*Sardar*) or *Agua* in Arabic. It is used respectfully for a clan, family, or head of a family. But in India, the word has gained a relatively special meaning and is indicative of a status group. In the entire subcontinent, it is used for individuals who claim to be descendants of the Arab *Quraish* clan of Prophet Muhammad or a close companion or friend (*sahaba*) of the Prophet. Such persons are generally considered noble from birth in India and like *Syed*, *Moguls*, and *Pathan*. Like the *Syeds*, *Mughals*, and *Pathans*, the *Sheikhs* also have a very high status in the idealised system of social staging of Muslims (Ahmad, 1978 p. 179).

In fact, "*Sheikh*" comes just after the *Syed* in the hierarchy. It is also noteworthy that the *Sheikh* is not a caste in itself; it is divided into many different sub-groups (Ibid., p. 181). Those who are trying to identify themselves as "*Sheikhs*" are probably unaware of this. In the below section, I will discuss some examples of Sheikhisation among low-caste Muslims cited by different scholars and authors.

Buchanan accounts of 1809–10 stated that the "low fellows" among the Muslims "tend to assume the title *Sheikh*, implying highly coveted Arab origin" (Buchanan, 1928). According to Satish C. Mishra, the term "*Sheikh*" can cover a community of no definite origin; more precisely, since an individual can call himself a *Sheikh* and this epithet can be claimed by any person of uncertain caste, a group of persons who have no definite associations can be covered (Misra, 1985, p. 115). Imtiaz Ahmad writes about the lower castes' claims to be *Sheikhs*.

The total number of persons claiming affiliation with the *Sheikh* caste was 1300000 in 1931, and this number was 150 per cent more than those claiming the same in 1901. If we remember that no one came from Arabia between 1901 and 1931, then this remarkable growth was not possible in any way other than the slow and gradual inclusion of the members of other castes in the *Sheikh* category. The available evidence also seems to indicate that the *Sheikh* category has always been a little too open and variable. Dynamic groups seeking a new status identity have often used the *Sheikh* category to improve their status. For example, it is easier to convince a *Sheikh* than *Syed's* claim because the *Sheikh's* status can be easily claimed. It is essential for dynamic groups claiming a superior status to add their lineage to an Arab historical figure (Ahmad, 1978, p. 184).

Ali Anwar writes, "In the 1891 Gaya Census Report, there are only a few descendants of the early Muslims who settled in India." Further information is found in the report

that *Mullick* (oil pressure, also known as *Teli*), who claims to be a separate sect, is completely classified as a *Sheikh* (Anwar, 2001, p. 98).²¹ He further writes that,

Weavers are prominent among the Muslims of the lower line. Most of them demand the wrongful right be included in the *Sheikh* caste. In the same book, he further writes, “in 1911, the census officer of Bihar, referring to the flood of records in this regard, wrote that the weight of the applications seeking to be graded among the upper castes in the weight of their castes was increased. This aggressive entry was seen not only among Hindus but also among Muslims. In the same report, it was said that between 1901 and 1911, Muslim Rajput suddenly started calling themselves *Pathan*, ‘*Khan*’ replaced ‘*Singh*’. On the other hand, all the lower caste Muslims, weavers, washermen, barbers, oil pressures, etc. started aspiring for the status of the *Sheikh* themselves. But the Muslims of the elite did not recognise him. Similarly, the lower-class Muslims also did not give them the recognition of high rating (Ibid, p. 99).²²

Ayyub Rayeenin his book *Bharat Ke Dalit Musalman* (in Hindi) describes that,

People of different castes in different places were also affected by an inferiority complex. Many small-caste people were not able to shy away from calling themselves, *Sheikhs* and *Khans*. This shows that as the majority community, the caste classification within the Muslim community is not only irresponsible, but the upper-class Muslims also have respect in the society, due to which some small caste people are affected, instead of their original caste, *Ashraf* Muslims do not shy away from revealing caste, whereas, due to this behaviour, they do not get a reservation for backward, backward classes. He further adds that backward and extremely backward castes socially identify themselves as one of the *Ashraf* castes. But when it comes to the government jobs and other welfare schemes, they secretly get a certificate of their original castes (Rayeen, 2013 p. II-III).²³

According to him, this is nothing but an inferiority complex that these lower castes have. Mohammad Sajjad writes in *Muslim Politics in Bihar: Changing Contours* that, “Henry Miers Elliot also confirmed this observation, saying that most of them claiming to be *Sheikhs* were non-Aryans (non-Persians, non-Arabs, and non-Turks, that is, were local converts)” (Sajjad, 2014, p. 292). This is true: “the category of *Sheikh* is perhaps the fussiest and most fluid among the Indian Muslims; much lower caste Muslims have entered this category” (Alam, 2009). There are various studies that show similar trends among lower Muslim castes. But the question is why they commit such acts. The next segment is about the same question.

²¹Translated by Author

²²Translated by Author

²³Translated by Author

The Dichotomy of Social Recognition and Redistributive Justice

The first backward Commission The *Kaka Kalelkar Commission of 1955* and the *BP Mandal Commission of 1980* placed *Shekhra* in the category of ‘Other Backward Classes’ because of their socio-economic condition.²⁴ For the first time, they have given the reservation benefit in 1962 in Bihar, where they have listed it in BC-I.²⁵ After the implementation of Mandal Commission in 1990, *Shekhra* Biradari got listed in 1993 as *Bekhra* instead of *Shekhra*.²⁶ It got corrected to *Shekhra* in 1997.²⁷ Despite their inclusion in the purview of OBC reservation, they were also involved in the struggle for recognition at a social front. In this case, recognition and redistributive justice have become conflicting. Since upper castes do not fall under any reserved category, those seeking social status must leave the reservation. For social recognition, they claimed to be identifying themselves as *Sheikh*. The discussion about why the *Shekhra* Biradari refused to identify as *Shekhra* can be found here.

The problem with the reservation which will be discussed in the segment below in *Shekhra* Biradari arose when the reservation for backward classes in the Panchayat election was arranged in Bihar. This is also mentioned in the press note dated February 13, 2014, issued by the *Shekhra Development Council*.

According to Mr. Razi Ahmed,²⁸ there were two candidates from Mirzapur Kothi (a village in Forbesganj, Araria) on the seats reserved for women from backward classes. One was the wife of Mr. Ahad, and the other was the wife of K.N. Vishwas. While Mr. Ahad belonged to the *Shekhra* Biradari, K.N. Vishwas belonged to the *Mandal* caste (both included in the OBC). The election is won by Ahad’s wife, prompting K.N. Biswas to write to the Bihar Backward Classes Commission, complaining that in Araria, the people fighting and winning elections with *Shekhra* caste certificates are actually a *Sheikh* Caste. “Therefore, it is requested to the Commission that, because of the subject’s sensitivity, the caste certificate should be given only to real *Shekhras* after local investigation and the mention of the caste in the Cadistrial Survey, C.A. Khatian, before issuing *Shekhra* caste certificates.” (Letter dated February 17, 2007). This leads to huge confusion within the authority; hence the authority stopped issuing certificates, saying that they would first investigate it. However, this was not a single case.²⁹ There were multiple cases like this that went before the authority. There have been other instances of people running for office under the name *Shekhra* Biradari, only

²⁴Presidential speech of Azeemuddin on February 6, 2011, at *Shekhra* conference held by *Shekhra* Vikas Parishad in Town hall Araria.

²⁵In 1962 and 1964 by the welfare department (retrieved from the letter of K.N. Vishwas dated 08-04-2016 and late MP of Araria (2014-2018) Taslimuddin, dated 28-02-2016.

²⁶Central List of OBCs: State: Bihar, Entry list-76. http://www.ncbc.nic.in/User_Panel/GazetteResolution.aspx?Value=mPICjsL1aLt5iq8E5sHcb9aZw5ZegRBykGFG48OgIp4fJY-6woN7b1j2zCe3l0aO

²⁷<http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/9635221885460481701.pdf>

²⁸Interview done on 21st January, 2020 in his residence.

²⁹The recent similar case of Vishhariya village of Bhargama Block is *Khushboo Ara vs State of Bihar*, 31 August 2021 in the High Court of Judicature at Patna, civil writ jurisdiction

to discover after a complaint that he was not *Shekhra*.³⁰ But after a while, it involved politics, and the matter stretched both sides. Since then *Shekhras* have suffered from not having the OBC certificate. Many of the people I met told me that they lagged behind in the socio-economic realm because they could not get the certificate.

The problem does not lie only on the outside of the community—there is also an issue within the community (Biradari). The whole *Shekhra* Biradari is divided into two different dimensions. The first dimension comes from those people who have some landholding or a job or business. They are those who are less concerned with politics, government jobs or benefits of reservations, etc. They strongly claim that they are “*Sheikh*” by caste and not *Shekhra*, ignoring their lineage. When asked about the proof of being an upper-caste *Sheikh*, they claimed they have a *Khatiyaan* (land-owning document) from 1954. According to that document, their ancestors had the prefix “*Sheikh*” with their names. They even demonstrated that the prefix “*Sheikh*” was commonly used with every name of their forefathers. When I investigated about other Biradaris, it came to light that, irrespective of caste differences, every caste has used the prefix “*Sheikh*” with their names. Still, be it *Ansari/Momin, Kunjra/Rayeen, Jat Muslims, Kulhaiya, Duniya/Mansoori*, or other castes of Araria district, they all have the same prefix. However, the point to be noted is that using the “*Sheikh*” prefix does not defy castes but is used as a courtesy title such as “Sir,” “Mr.,” or “Shri.”³¹ However, they all have been added to the OBC list. Nonetheless, castes are denoted as “*Musalmaan*” in that land-owning document for all Muslim Biradari. However, there is no evidence of such a caste in Bihar. And this is a cross-caste phenomenon. Just because in their documents, their ancestor’s name has the prefix of “*Sheikh*,” they claim to recognise them as *Sheikh*, while this claim is false. When asked about the OBC reservation, they rejected it because they needed to accept their backwardness and their true identity (*Shekhra*). On the other hand, they have to abandon the claim of *Sheikh*. They do not want to belittle themselves at the expense of their social standing. Here is the main struggle: social recognition. Hence, they reject any kind of reservation. The story of *Shekhra* is similar to that of the “*Kurmi*” caste, who believe they are upper caste and have been degraded by OBC reservation (Satyendra, 2018, p. 46).³²

However, because of the ground reality, a group of people from the same caste have been demanding reservation. *Shekhras* were inducted in central OBC in 1996 (Entry list 76),³³ but after a few years when the government discovered that these people carrying *Shekhra* Biradari certificates were not genuine *Shekhra* but of *Sheikh* caste, they stopped issuing certificates. The fight begins from there with those who are educated, non-land owners, and job *Seekers*. They are those who want a reservation

case no. 2408 of 2021. Here is the link of full details to the case, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/45036882/>

³⁰Similar case is related to the other Panchayat of the district. See, Dainik Jagran, ‘*Shekhranahin Sayyad Jaatikehain Mukhiya Ejaz*, 24 November 2012. Retrieved on 22 march 2021 from <https://www.jagran.com/bihar/araria-9878630.html>.

³¹<https://peoplegroupsindia.com/profiles/shaikh/>.

³²Translated by Author

³³<http://scbc.bih.nic.in/ObcList.html>.

in educational fields and jobs. They want to be recognised as a backward caste so that they can get a reservation. *Shekhra* Biradari, which was earlier used to get the OBC certificate, has been stopped from getting it because it is believed and claimed by some of them that they are not *Shekhra* because they do not do the jobs that *Shekhra* Biradari is supposed to do.

Meanwhile, a new dimension in this issue emerged from the political front. All such cases came up when those who already had the backward class certificate got the benefit of reservation in local elections. Seats were reserved for backward castes and women in each category in the 2006 Panchayat election. These factors motivate them to fight for the OBC reservation. Exogamous marriages are uncommon among one-another. The majority of inter-caste and Biradari marriages occurred as a result of eligibility for panchayat elections. A person accepts this marriage as pure political intercourse. Three such cases came up, which show that this community is divided among itself for political gain. A family wins the election of the village head with his old caste certificate; those who are denied this benefit filed a case based on the fact that the candidate is not backward but is a *Sheikh*. On this basis, his candidacy should be canceled. According to Ashfaque, three such cases have been reported so far.³⁴ A group that has previously obtained a certificate, is doing a good job, and wants its children to benefit from it is constantly trying to ensure that the Biradari is recognised and benefits as *Shekhra*. On the other hand, some have not been able to take advantage of reservations, and they also believe that this reservation is not going to benefit much; they constantly oppose the identity of their neighborhood and village. *Shekhra*, as a bone-picking caste, will reduce their dignity and self-respect in society. The entire community, or, say, *Shekhra* society, is divided in this dual identity battle. According to Ashfaque and Aslam Beg, it is true that a good chunk of the population, not all, are the descendants of *Shekhra* Biradari. Those who built good houses amplify their economic status and spontaneously claim to be *Sheikh* by the time they had earned it. Because of their strong claim, the rest of the people are suffering from their exclusion from the reservation benefit. Whenever there is a matter of identifying oneself, most of them claim to be *Sheikh*, which creates conflict between them. One accuses another of impersonating a *Sheikh*, while another accuses the first of lowering his status for the sake of reservation benefits.

The Problem

The issue of *Shekhra* Biradari not receiving an OBC certificate arose after K.N. Vishwas filed a complaint with the Bihar State Backward Classes Commission in 2007, alleging that the people of Bhargama block who receive an OBC certificate for *Shekhra* Biradari are *Sheikh*. However, until 2006, many people from Vishhariya village and Bhargama blocks had an OBC certificate. But after the allegation of them being *Sheikh* and making fake certificate in the name of *Shekhra*, they stopped getting OBC certificate. After this, the *Shekhra* Biradari began fighting for what they had

³⁴Interview done on November 27, 2019.

lost. For example, the same person, K.N. Vishwas, whose letter created the confusion, wrote a letter again on April 8, 2016 to the State Commission for Backward Classes of Bihar to issue certificates to the *Shekhra* Biradari. In this letter, he has given a detailed description of the backwardness of the community and demanded to issue OBC certificates to them. This time he did so, because he was a legislative assembly candidate from the *Rashtrya Janta Dal* (RJD) and was fighting from the Forbesganj Constituency, where a large chunk of the *Shekhra* community resides. But still, the problem remains unsolved.

As far as fighting for the rights are concerned, there are two organisation that are fully determined to get justice, *Shekhra Vikas Parishad* (the *Shekhra* Development Council) and the *National Shekhra United Front*. According to Aslam Beg, a member of the *National Shekhra United Front* and a founder of the *Apna Adhikar Party* (AAP), local politics is driven by caste consciousness, which is also responsible for their plight. The leaders, who are not from their caste, have been involved in stopping to get a certificate.

According to Aslam Beg,³⁵ to get back their rights they also went to the Home Secretary of Bihar, Amir Subhani, to solve the problem, and he too gave directions to the lower authorities. But because of the local politics and the lack of will of the concerned authorities, they do not issue certificates. “As a result, our new generation of students who are studying and require reservation benefits is being harmed. There is no leadership from the community in the Parliament or in the legislative assembly to raise our concerns. Their struggle goes unheard due to a lack of political leadership.” Razi Ahmad shared an authority letter that the concerned authority gets from the department of personnel in Bihar. The letter here is the last and latest. The letter mentions the issuance of a certificate to District Magistrate on July 24, 2018.

According to the instructions, by letter dated *Shekhra* Development Council, District Araria, letter- SVP/04/2018, dated – 09.07.2018 attention has been drawn to the difficulties faced by the members of *Shekhra* caste in obtaining caste certificate. Including this, it is requested to take appropriate action. (Photocopy)

It is worth mentioning that in the circular number (9) of the Departmental Circular No. dated, the following records are considered appropriate for proof of caste certificate of the father/ancestor of the applicant/applicant:

- (9.1) Revenue records (e.g. Khatiyans, Donations, Land related documents, Land related records allotted to the landless, etc.).
- (9.2) In case of non-availability of the records mentioned in the Condica, the inspection report can also be made the basis for caste certificate, as and when the situation arises.

Therefore, in the provision of departmental letter number-673, dated-08.03.2011 condica-(09) laid down in the Departmental Circular Number guide, the *Shekhra* caste

³⁵Interview done on 27 November, 2019 in his residence in Vishhariya Village of Bhargama Block, Araria district.

is not mentioned in the revenue record (i.e., Muslim / Muslim inscribed in place of caste). Caste certificate can be issued:

- i. In the name of the applicant/applicant's father, grandfather, caste certificate of *Shekhra* caste has been issued in the past, and then the caste certificate can be issued on that basis.
- ii. After an investigation by the Panchayat Secretary, Revenue Staff, and Zonal Inspector, it will be mentioned in the report that the applicant/applicant belongs to the *Shekhra* caste. It is recommended to issue a caste certificate.

In the light of the above, the applicant/applicant should be directed to issue the *Shekhra* caste certificate to the subordinate officers so that the candidates of the *Shekhra* caste as per the status quo to get the certificate.³⁶

However, this was not the only letter issued by the higher authority, but there were several others. When I talked to the concerned authority, they said that they given explicit instructions to the lower authority (the Circle Officer of a Block) to issue certificates to the *Shekhra* Biradari. However, even authorities are confused about the Biradari because the difference between *Sheikh* and *Shekhra* is blurred. Neither *Shekhra* nor their neighbor from another Biradari accepts them as such but "*Sheikh*." Ashfaque points out that, "The other backward Muslims do not want us to get the same benefit as they are getting. Hence, the authority concluded that there is no such community, and the scenario remains the same." Mr. Ashfaque and Aslam Beg both agree that there is a communication gap between them and authority. According to them, they have pleaded with the authority to once again conduct a survey in their community so that they can get a real picture of the Biradari, but the authority refuses to do so. They claim that the problem is getting worse by the day as other block residents become aware of it. According to them, "Since only this reservation is widely available to *Shekhras* (and other backward Muslims), we do not have another place to go and we must fight for this." The main trouble is happening to the Circle Officer of Bhargama Block. Nonetheless, the fact is that they are eligible to get Dalit reservation for their background, but the community which was getting the benefit of OBC reservation are not able to avail of it when they need it widely.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have reached a point where we can see the dichotomy of caste or caste groups between social status (recognition) and redistributive justice (reservation). On the one hand, there is a race to prove oneself as an upper status group, whereas on the other hand, there are many groups that are fighting for the reservation. The government needs to keep a meticulous eye on this. It is their responsibility to truly identify one group.

The government should not only listen to those who are justifying themselves as *Sheikh* but also listen to those voices that are demanding social justice. This is not

³⁶For original document which was issues in Hindi, please visit <https://state.bihar.gov.in/gad/Content.html?links&page=Old%20Circulars%20and%20Notifications>

the only cause; several castes earlier identified themselves as *Sheikh*, but now are demanding the OBC reservation. *Shekhras* number almost five million in Bihar and are spread across more than 145 villages,³⁷ most of them are socially, economically, and politically weak, and under-represented. Most are uneducated, and the educated ones are unemployed. They are largely labor migrants who have no choice but to migrate because they cannot find work where they were born. The National Commission for Backward Classes has said that to prove backwardness, a lack of adequate representation in education and services could be considered. One such community is the *Shekhra* Biradari, which has significant educational and economic backwardness. Their political representation is limited to local bodies. There is enormous labor migration among the community, and all are unskilled labourers. Whatever survey was conducted about the *Shekhra* Biradari, it was done without a proper attitude and without caution. The *Shekhra* people even claim that the surveyors did not inquire about all the members of society.

Moreover, the people they went to were the same people who do not hold back from calling themselves *Sheikh*. They also maintain that the other communities under other backward classes (OBCs) also do not want this Biradari to take advantage of reservation. Subsequently, these people give the impression that they are not *Shekhra* but *Sheikh*. The government and officials have paid little attention to the *Shekhra* Biradari movement and demands. They are not so numerous politically that their voice can reach the government.

Caste-based occupations did, in fact, end with the passage of time and the development of the economic system, particularly among Muslims. In such a case, the *Shekhra* Biradari's work was completed with the passage of time. But their social, economic, and political situations did not change much with time. The government and the people in power will have to take care of finding the right solution so that they do not fall prey to any kind of legal exploitation. The fact is that even today, they are living their lives only after doing petty jobs. Most of the people work as daily wage labourers, rickshaw poolers, agricultural labourers and so forth. The fact of SC reservation is that people in the scheduled caste category are rarely engaged in their caste work, but they constantly receive the benefit of reservation. Reservations must be made in light of today's socioeconomic and political circumstances.

As far as the *Sheikh* is concerned, it is proven that a large section of the people who are socially, economically, and politically backward have called themselves *Sheikh*. That is why Ejaz Ali (founder of the All India Backward Muslim Morcha and pioneer of the Dalit Muslim movement) labeled them "*New Sheikh*" and advocated for their inclusion in the OBC category (Anwar, 2001, p. 46). *Shekhra Biradari*, after all this confusion and negligence, said that they would continue their fight until they got their rights back. They even say that for now, our political agenda is for this reservation only; whoever will give us a reservation, our vote will go to them.

³⁷Presidential speech of Azcemuddin, an Ex-Minister of Bihar Government (1990-1995).

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