

Features of the Hindu caste system, such as hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation have been found to be amply present among the Indian Muslims as well. The Census of India, 1901 listed 133 social groups wholly or partially Muslim. The present day Muslim Society in India is divided into four major groups: (i) the Ashrafs who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan, (ii) the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam, (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes, Bhangi (scavenger), Mehtar (sweeper), Chamar (tanner), Dom and so on.

These four groups are usually placed into two broad categories, namely, 'ashraf' and 'ajlaf'. The former, meaning noble, includes all Muslims of foreign blood and converts from higher castes. While 'ajlaf' meaning degraded or unholy, embraces the ritually clean occupational groups and low ranking converts. In Bihar, U.P and Bengal, Sayyads, Sheikhs, Moghuls and Pathans constitute the 'ashrafs'. The 'ajlaf', are carpenters, artisans, painters, graziers, tanners, milkmen etc. According to the Census of 1901, the ajlaf category includes 'the various classes of converts who are known as Nao Muslim in Bihar and Nasya in North Bengal. It also includes various functional groups such as that of the Jolaha or weaver, Dhunia or cotton-carder, Kulu or oil-presser, Kunjra or vegetable-seller, Hajjam or barber, Darzi or tailor, and the like.' **The 1901 Census also recorded the presence of a third category called Arzal: 'It consists of the very lowest castes, such as the Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal, and Bediya.**

Similar pattern of descent based social stratification is discernible in other regions as well. In Kerala, the Moplahs of Malabar, are divided into five ranked sections called the Thangals, Arabis, Malbaris, Pusalars and Ossans. The Thangals trace their descent from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and are of the highest rank. Next in rank are the Arabis, who claim descent from the Arab men and local women and retain their Arab lineage. The Malbaris are next in rank. They have lost their Arab lineage and follow matrilineal descent. The Pusalars are the converts from Hindu fishermen called Mukkuvan, the new Muslims. They have low status. The Ossans are the barbers, and by virtue of their occupation, they rank lowest. In Andhra Pradesh, a field study conducted in 1987 found hierarchically arranged endogamous groups among Muslims. At the top of the ladder were those claiming foreign descent—Syeds, Shaikh, Pathan and Labbai (descendants of Arab traders who took native wives). At the lowest level were groups with 'unclean' occupations—Dudekula (cotton cleaners), Hazam (barbers) and Fakir-budbudki (mendicants).