

Negotiating Conversion, Islamisation, and Cultural Identity: A Socio-Cultural and Historical Overview of Kayamkhanis of Rajasthan

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Abstract

This paper will give you a brief socio-historical account of Kayamkhani community of Rajasthan. This paper deals about their origin, conversion and their political and military involvement during medieval times. Further, this paper will also discuss about change and continuity of various non-Islamic customs and Rajput traditions even after penetration of various Islamic reform movement among them. In this paper I will use both historical and sociological method to understand their conversion contexts and their socio-cultural outcomes.

Keywords: Kayamkhani, Shekhawati, Conversion, Rajput, Tabligh Jama'at, Culture.

Introduction

The Kayamkhanis are a small Indian Muslim community who flourished in northern Rajasthan from c. 1450 to 1730.¹ The Kayamkhani is a group, which derives its origin from the Hindu Rajput of Chauhan clan who embraced Islam, and their conversion dates from the time of Feroz Shah. Their place of origin is Shekhawati, and they are scattered all over Rajasthan, but mostly found in Jhunjunu, Sikar and Nagor district. In the census report of 1911, their population was 28,340.² The Kayamkhani are still spread out in various district of Rajasthan particularly in Churu, Sikar,

Jhunjunu, Bikanar, Nagore, Jodhpur, tonk, Ganganagar and Bhilwara. In the past they have also left to Hyderabad and various cities of Pakistan.

Origin and conversion of Kayamkhani's

The Kayamkhani is a community which derives its origin from the Hindu Rajput's of Chauhan clan, who embraced Islam during 14th century. Jaan Kavi (Nejmat Khan) traced the origin of Kayamkhani from its hero Kayam Khan, who laid the foundation for Kayamkhani Nawabi rule in Hissar.³ There are various views and description about the conversion of Kayamkhani community. James Tod and Athar Ali supposed the Kayamkhanis to be Afghan.⁴ George Thomas says that Kayamkhani Tatar came along with the Mughals when they first invaded India. He served Mughals well; he was made in-charge of Junjjunu or Haryana. However, owing to the operation of the Mughals, he moved to Jaipur and started to live there. The Maharaja of Jaipur gave him Fatahpur, and from onwards his progeny came to be known as Kayamkhanis.⁵ But, Sunita Budhwar rejected these views and claimed that Kayamkhanis are actually of purely indigenous origin.⁶

A western Rajasthan chronicler Mumhato Nansi who served in various Rajput rulers also provide narrative about the conversion of Kaymakhanis and report that "Sayyiad Nasir was a military governed of the Hisar region who, one day raided the town of Dadreva. In the aftermath, of his attack, two baby boys were found abandoned, one is Chauhan and the other Jat. Then they were offered to Sultan Bahlol Lodhi and later the Chauhan was named Kayam Khan and Jat boy was named as Jainu. The descendants of Kayam Khan, known as Kayamkhanai's.⁷

Jaan Kavi (Nejamat Khan) who composed the Kyamkhan Raso from 1630 to 1655 at Fatahpur in the Shekhwati region of northern Rajasthan traced the history of Kayamkhani from its hero Kayam Khan, who laid the foundation of the Kayam Khani newabi rule in Hissar. He writes that the founder of this community was Mote Rao Chauhan, a Hindu ruler of the Dadreva state in Churu district. He had four sons named Jainand, Jabar Chand, Jagmal, and Karam Chand. It was Karam Chand whom Feroz Shah Tughlaq met within a jungle near Hisar, where the young Karamchand was resting for a while under a tree, which was completely covering him to give comfort. Firoz

Shah Tughlaq inquired about the young Karam Chand family details and took him to Delhi. After seeking consent from Mote Rao Chauhan, one of his subordinates Feroz Shah sent Karam Chand to Sayyed Nasir for Islamic training. Thus, Karam Chand embraced Islam and changed his name to Kayam Khan. Later on, his two elder brothers Jaichand and Jabardi chand also joined him in the pursuit of Islam. However, it is the descendants of Kayam Khan, who were known as Kayam Khanis, but in due course, the descendants of his brothers, who changed their names to Jainand Khan and Jahardi Khan were also included in the fold of Kayam Khani community.⁸

Interestingly there are no differences on the Chauhan ancestors between Nansi Khayat and Raso. However, the version of Raso and Khyat differ in a story about conversion during the time period. Nansi, emphasized that it was the reign of Bahlol Lodhi when Kayam Khan converted to Islam. In this view, other all facts seem to be correct except the name of the Sultan. Simply put, there is a difference of around 100 years between the reign Firoz Shah Tughlaq and Bahlol Lodhi. If the date of conversion of Karam Chand were assumed to have happened during the time of Bahlol Lodhi, than the chronology of the entire history of Karam Chand would be torn to shreds

Although it is the evidence that when Firuz Khan, the *hakim* of Nagpur on behalf of Sultan Ahmad Shah (1410-1442) of Gujarat led an expedition against Rana Mokal of Chittor, Taj Khan and Muhammad Khani accompanied him.⁹ This is also during the expedition of Fateh Khan the Grandson of Kayam Khan joined Sultan Bahlol Lodhi (1451-89), in his expedition against Ranthambhor.¹⁰ Hence it seems that Kayam Khan did not embraced Islam during Bahlol Lodi's rule.

After the death of Syed Nasir, Kayam khan rose in power and got Hissar in Jagir till at least Khizar khan, the Emperor of Delhi. His son, Tej Khan and Mohammad Khan succeeded Kayam Khan but they were expelled from the Hisar. Meantime, they lived for some time at Jeysalmere and Nagor and subsequently founded two separate principalities of Fatehpur and Jhunjunu which their descendants held under the title of Nawab till 1731. The last Nawab were Kamyab khan and Ruhullah Khan who being overpowered by Shekhawati Kuchhwayas.¹¹

Kayam Khan other brother's Qutb Khan and Momin Khan established themselves in Baruwa and Bagar respectively. Fateh Khan, who founded the town and fort of Fatehpur in March 1451, succeeded Tej Khan.¹² The Sultan Bahlol Lodhi married a daughter of Shams Khan Qayam Khani,

son of Kayam Khan who had established himself in Jhunjun.¹³ Jalal Khan was succeeded Fateh Khan and his son Daulat Kha succeeded Jalal Khan. After Daulat Khan, his son Nahar Khan became the ruler of Fatehpur. Nahar Khan succeeded by Fadan Khan. It is said to have given his daughter in marriage to Akabr.¹⁴

It seems that Kayamkhanis rose to prominence in the 15th century; the climax of their prosperity reached under the Mughal. They not only retained their *zamindari* over their territory, but also received Fatehpur as *watan*, in terms of *altamgha* thus giving them a status at par with prominent Rajput houses. The Kayamkhanis, in return, rendered services to the Mughal Empire in far-flung areas, such as Balkh, Badkshsh, Bengal and the Deccan.¹⁵

The Kayamkhanis were important enough in their corner of the Mughal Empire to have their presence noted in Ain-i-Akbari, the official report compiled by Abu'l Fazl in the 1590s. Abul Fazal listed the Kayamkhanis as the main gentry' community of Fatehpur and Jhunjhunu district and one of three communities in Nahar (to the north-east of Jhunjhunu district). We also learn that Fatehpur and Nahar both had 500 horseman and 2,000 foot soldiers apiece, whereas Jhunjhunu had 2,000 cavalry and 3000 infantry, and all three towns had stone forts.¹⁶ The large numbers represent the militia troops under kayamkhani command, demonstrating that they were a formidably power at the locality level.¹⁷ Cynthia Talbot observed that their military strength was a reflection of their dominant position as controllers of land and its income in the small section of northern Rajasthan.¹⁸

During late 19th century the chief occupation of Kayam Khani were military survives, trade and some involved in *mazuduri*. In Shekhwati there are some Kayamkhani Jagirdars. A few also employed in Marwar and Hyderabad as Jamadars and Resaldars.¹⁹

During the late 19th century, the Kayamkhanis have not been very strict Muslims. In the Province of Ajmer-Merwar, 1881 census, mentioned that, "Kayamkhanis were Rajput Mussalmans, who would neither eat nor drink at the hands of other Mussalmans and they worshiped the pastoral deities peculiar to Rajput, and were even supposed to eat pork cooked by Hindu Rajput. They, however, circumcise their male children, but in most other respect, they observe Hindu rites and ceremonies."²⁰

Munshi Hardayal Singh who was the census superintendent of Marwar, prepared the report on the census of 1891, found them. The Kayamkhanis were mostly found residing in Shekhawati. They

were also living, though at Hisar and Narnol. The Kayamkhanis were Musalman only nominally. They were ignorant of the Quran, Hadies, and other Mohamden percept and on the other hand, they correspond to Rajput in many instances. Unlike the Mohamdens, they use *toran* on marriage occasion and observe the ceremony of *Pheran* after Nikha. They also distributed *tyag* to *Mirasis* as the Rajput do to *Charns*. They abstain from eating together with Pardesi Musalman. In some places at Shekhawati they eat, drink and even smoke together with the Rajput.²¹

He further remarked that Kayamkhani in their dress they are very like Hindus. The same is the case with their women who like Hindu females observe holi and dewali festivals. A Kaim-Khani usually avoids marriage with his uncle's daughter. They can give his daughter in marriage to a Pathan or Syed without taking any from him return.²²

More recently Rima Hooja, also mentioned that the Kayamkhanis basically continued to observe the social customs and practice of their pre-islamized days, and remained close to the Hindu Rajput as far as Marriage customs and other ceremonies and observance were concerned, even their religious practices were to retain many aspects of their Hindu heritage- a feature shared by many clans and community of Rajasthan, who converted to Islam during this general period. They keep the genealogical records.²³

Therefore, Mushi Hardayal in census of 1891 classified the Kayamkhani's that "it is difficult to distinguish them from the Rajputs of eastern Marwar because there is only a very slight difference in their looks, dress and speech."²⁴

So, it is clear from the above that Kayamkhani embraced Islam long back, but they were very ignorant of the Islamic precept until the early 20th century and on the other hand, they retain their resemblance to Hindu Rajput in many respects such as they use *toran* on marriage occasion and observed the ceremony of *pheras* after Nikah. The Kayamkhanis continued to observe the social custom and practiced of their pre-Islamic days, and remained close to the Hindu Rajput as far as betrothal, marriage, birth and other ceremonies and observance are concerned. Their dresses resembled the Hindu Rajput community. They practiced purity and pollution with not only service classes, but even with the foreign Muslims also. They had *jajmani* relations with both service castes of Hindu and Muslims.

Currently their primary occupations service in army, police and other security forces. Some are in

agriculture of late a few of the Kayamkhani have entered into transport business and other petty business as well.²⁵ Socially the Kayamkhanis are divided into Tej Khani and Mohammed Khani. They have thirty exogamous *aals* (lineage) common to each division. They are Fateh Khan, Jalal Khan, Alaf Khan, Dibour Khani, Khanjedi, Daulat Khani, Raju Khani, Rukhan Khani, Selam Khani, Sahab Khani, Saleem Khani, Rukan Khani, Bhoi Khani, Hathi Khani, Elman, Jainan, Joia, Akhan, Bhoil, Chail, Bhati, Naru, Chauhan, Malwan, Jate, Tanwar, Bar Gujar, Bhaleem and Tajvan. The *aals* with suffix Khani are treated to be the superior ones in comparison to other views, Zoia, Choil, Chenel, Jaiuan, etc.²⁶ They abstained from matrimonial relations within their direct branches. They maintain exogamy at the lineage level, but observe endogamy at the caste level. A Kayamkhani strictly avoids marriage with a cross-cousin and parallel-cousin like the Meos of Mewat even today.

In rural area still Kayamkhani, villages do maintain master-client relations with the *kamins* (service caste). The *kamin* castes both Hindu and Muslims service castes include the *Khati, Nai, Manhoar, Kumhar, Chamar, Mehtar, Miru, Sakka, Dhobi* and *Bhangi* have exchange services relations with Kayamkhanis. Recently at the national level, the Kayamkhanis have organized a Maha Sabha named Rajasthani Kayamkhani Maha Sabha. The object of this Maha Sabha is to fight against the evils of the society and bring about betterment in general status of the society.²⁷

If we examine the impact of Islam and Tabligh Jama'at movement as this have made dent into Kayamkhani life and culture particularly after post-independence. This is fact that due to emergence and penetration of various Islamic movement particularly Tabligh Jama'at among Kayamkhanis the degree of Islamic influence on the Kayamkhani culture increased considerably. The life-cycle rituals are being Islamized and many Hindu Rajput elements are being weeded out. The celebration of Hindu festivals such as Holi, Diwali and Teej has been stooped. Islamic life-cycle rituals such *Khatna* (the circumcision) which they religiously observe for every male child provides an outstanding instances of Islamic influence. The recitation of Quran is now common among them. The Nikah ceremony conducted through a Kazi. Burial of the dead shows again the force of Muslims impact. Like other Muslims now they offers five times and observed Roza in Ramzan Months. Now Eid-Bakrid are more popular festivals among them.

But, Kayamkhanis were simultaneously concerned about the complete their Islamization because they fear that they can lose their distinct Rajput cultural identity. Therefore they still observe and

practice many Hindu Rajput rituals and ceremonies in their betrothal, marriage and birth ceremonies. They still use *toran* on marriage occasion and observed the ceremony of *phas* after Nikah. They still performed Haldi ceremony. Their many pre-marriage and marriage ceremonies resembles to Rajput Hindu traditions. For example, coconut still has been kept in the thali that came from the bride's in-laws. The ritual of bride tilak still prevalent. The bridegroom still performed the rituals of wearing chunri to the sisters. The tradition of wearing chunri to their sisters is not performed in other Muslims except Hindu Rajput and Kayamkhanis. Therefore Colonel Shaukat Ali Khan Kayamkhani says in an interview with News 18 that we no doubt follow Islam but we still observed and maintain our Rajput traditions.²⁸

This is also fact that Kayamkhani people were pressured by Tabligh Jama'at people to leave such un-Islamic practices but they are not ready to give up their Rajput customs and traditions. Kayamkhanis are still connected to their roots. Their many life-cycle rituals still practiced in Rajputana manner. It seems that conversion and religious reform movement such as Tabligh Jama'at had no great effect on the culture and traditions of Kayamkhani community of Northern Rajasthan. Their many social customs are unaltered, their many life-cycle rituals are still unchanged.

Conclusion

So, this is fact that Kayamkhani embraced Islam 600 years long back, but still they are preserving and practicing their Hindu Rajput customs and tradition. The conversion of the Kayamkhani to Islam resulted in an amalgam of both Hindu Rajput and Muslim customs and traditions in their unique mode of living. Therefore, Kayamkhanis of Northern Rajasthan have developed unique social, cultural and Muslim Rajput identity. In their distinct social customs they are still observed and practice many life-cycle customs and rituals that resembles to Hindu Rajput community of Rajasthan. I would suggest that Indian Muslims are not homogenous and unified in social and cultural practices and Kayamkhani community can be a good example. In the last, it would be perfect to say that Kayamkhani still not merge their identity completely with the Muslims culture and they should perhaps love to exist as Kayamkhani Rajput first and Muslim second.

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