



SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF MUSLIM MINORITY IN WEST BENGAL: AN ENQUIRY INTO THEIR CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Muslims being largest minority and second religious group in the state of West Bengal are inherently in disadvantageous position since a long time. This has become a challenging issue of discussion and debate not only in the academic circle but also to the community itself as well as to the state. Though there is paucity of literature and data on the Muslim community of West Bengal, an attempt has been made to explore socio-economic situations of the Muslim community of West Bengal, and the government's role for Muslims and their changing social aspects. In the present paper, data have been collected from various secondary sources. Major findings in this study are growth of Muslim population, socio-economical backwardness, cultural homogeneity and socio religious and linguistic heterogeneity, reservation for Muslims OBCs in state and central government jobs, etc. In this connection it could be easily understood the levels of deprivation and improvement.



KEY WORD: Muslim Minority, Backwardness, Socio-cultural homogeneity, Muslim OBCs, Muslim Reservation.

INTRODUCTION

Social, economic, educational status is major important parameters for measuring the progress and development of any community. There could be found so many studies regarding the socio-economic condition or status of Muslims in India. These studies mostly revealed that Muslims are always lagging behind the other socio-religious communities in education, economy, politics, etc. However, the scenario of Muslims of West Bengal is more and less similar as in the other states. In this regard, W. W. Hunter wrote that ".....earlier it was impossible for a well born Musalman to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich" (Hunter,W.W 1969:158). They are most backward, economically poor and politically a powerless community in general and of west Bengal in particular (Mainuddin, 2008 and Hussain, 2009:125).

Majority of Muslims of West Bengal predominantly live in rural areas whose livelihood depends on hard physical labour, agricultural activities, etc. They are socially deprived, economically poor, educationally backward and politically powerless, physically unhealthy. Bengali Muslims adhere to basic principles of Islam and at the same time share the local traditions of Bengal. There is no conflict between the two spheres, although both the boundaries are sharply defined by their respective ideology and practice. Bengali Muslims share little traditions of Bengal, i.e. the Bengali culture, which is common to both Hindus and Muslims of this region. But due to lack of research we do not know much about the social matrix and cultural dynamics of the Bengali Muslims (Mondal, 2003: 281). People of west Bengal belong to various religious faiths, ethnicity,

linguistic group, racial variety, tribal affiliation, caste, class, status groups, minority groups and the like coexisting under the Bengali cultural panorama. However, Muslims of West Bengal are accessing into the opportunities provided by government's policies, programs and schemes. For example, reservation for Muslim OBCs is one of the most significant positive aims which is resultantly bringing some positive changes in economic and educational area among the Muslims of West Bengal.

This paper based on secondary study of various secondary sources on the issues of Muslims of West Bengal. It objects to understand the socio-economic conditions of Muslims with an aims to find out some changes in this community in West Bengal. And the role of govt. has also analysed for the betterment of Muslims minority of West Bengal.

MINORITIES: CONCEPTS AND THE CONSTITUTION

By the term minority, an idea is aroused in the mind that it is talking about something that is small or small group, alike. But actually the use of this term could be traced back in the 1930 that social groups that are oppressed or stigmatized on the basis of racial, ethnic, biological, or other characteristics. The concept of minority could be understood in two sense; namely in numerical and social senses. Numerically, it indicates about the numbers of peoples belong to a particular socio-cultural groups. In this sense many social, ethnic, and religious groups could be considered as minority group. Muslims, for example, constitutes about 14.23 % of Indian population whereas Hindus are about 79.80 % in census 2011. Therefore, in numerically Muslims are the minority group in India. But question could be arise, if social groups become numerically equal more and less, and some groups is ruled, socially tortured by some other group, which social group could be term as minority. In this sense to identify the minority status of a social group, some social condition is considered like exploitation, fleeing of prejudice about other group, social backwardness, etc. Black people, for example, of South Africa who lives in America are considered as minority not in the numerical strength but it is in their racial features that is black and White. In this connection, the views of Louis Writh could be remembered a minority group as *'a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination'*. It might be more useful, therefore, to distinguish between groups which are marginal in terms their access to power (DOS, 2009: 476). A minority is a group of people subjected to prejudice and discrimination in a given society. In sociological sense, minority groups are not necessarily numerically small groups but they are simply victims of differential and unequal treatment. In the United State, black are a minority in both numerical and sociological senses. But in South Africa under the apartheid system, black were the majority group, a predominant majority that was discriminated against by a small group of whites who had the power.

In India, the Ministry of Minority Affairs had notified Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Budhists, Zorostrians (Parsis) and Jains as minority groups in Gazette under section 2 (c) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992. The term "Minority" is derived from the Latin word "minor" and the suffix "ity", which means "small in number". However, the term minority has been used here and there in the constitution of India but no where it has been defined in clear words. In this connection, Mahmood (2001) has pointed out the term minority has been used in the constitution of India 1950 in Articles 30, 350-A and 350-B. The constitution only refers to Minorities and speaks of those "based on religion or language" (Hossain, I; 2012 15 [edit.]). Debates could be observed in both in academic circle and in political milieu regarding the question that who are really minority, why Muslims could be treated as minority being second largest religious group in India and so on. But fact is that on the question of minority, answer always lies around some specific Articles and Fundamental rights of the Indian constitution. And interpretation remains mostly on the question of security of any religious and linguistic groups. It is also become focal point of the discussion that who are more prone to victim of communal riots, victims of prejudice, marginal, etc. India being constitutionally a secular county provide equal right to their religion, guarantees social, economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship' equality of status and opportunity to promote national unity among diversity. But when the question arise on the security of minority, no religious minority communities other

than Muslims become more victim of violence, subject to prejudice, harassment, etc. It is Sachar Committee reported in 2006 some of these evidences as follows;

- a. 'Muslims carry a double burden of being labelled as "anti-national" and as being "appeased" at the same time'.
- b. 'Lack of a sense of security and a discriminatory attitude towards Muslims is felt widely'.
- c. 'Education is an area of grave concern for the Muslim community'.
- d. 'The analysis of differential in poverty across socio-religious communities (SRC) shows that Muslims face fairly high levels of poverty'.

However, Muslims being a religious minority group in India are continuously victim of linguistic and cultural attack. Urdu is considered as the language spoken by Muslims but it lost its significance in the days. The issues of Babri Masjid incident in 1992 still remain an example of a curse victim of cultural attack on Muslims. Muslims bear cap on head, wearing 'kurta-pajama', keeping beard, women wearing burkha, etc are all religious and cultural symbols. And these symbols are under threat of prejudice, social discrimination in day to day life.

In this connection, the status and the safety of Muslim minority of West Bengal has to be analysed in different socio-economic parameters.

MUSLIMS OF WEST BENGAL: AN OVERVIEW

In considering the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims of West Bengal, the words of W. H. Hunter has to be remembered, ".....earlier it was impossible for a well born Musalman to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich" (Hunter, W.W 1969:158). The major facts behind their downward movement in the social ladder could be assumed the great loss of their political power, economic downfall and lack of interest in education. Even though there is paucity of study on Muslims but in the available research study on the status of Muslims in academic circle, the findings has come out with the arguments that Muslims are socially and educationally backward, economically poor, and politically powerless (Md, M; 2011). Coming out from the academic studies, various govt. reports on the Muslims also revealed their socio-economic and educational conditions that Muslims were always lagging behind the other socio-religious communities (like Hindus, Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribes). Rajnder Sachar Committee Report gathered such data on the Muslims community from different states that shocked not only the Muslims but also the others. "The Status of Muslims in West Bengal" (2014) and "Living Realities of Muslims in West Bengal" (2016) were two major reports for the first time on the status of Muslims of West Bengal. These reports found out the pathetic life style of Muslims living in the villages. Muslims are living in very pathetic socio-economic milieu in the state which could be found in different indicators such as infrastructure, electricity, drinking water, irrigation, health, education, employment and other basic amenities. Area is inhabited predominantly by the adivasis, dalits and Muslims had a much larger share of waterlogged roads that what an upper caste hamlet had. The Muslims areas are mostly filthy, lack draining facilities, garbage dumped on the roads, etc. The most significant fact in the report "Living Realities of Muslims in West Bengal" was that *about 80% of the Muslims households in rural West Bengal earn Rs. 5000/- or less per month*. About 38.3% of Muslims households in rural West Bengal earn Rs. 2500/- or less per month, which is one-half of the cut-off level of income for the population below poverty line. About 3.8% households earn around Rs.15000 or above per month. 41.5% of the rural Muslims households owned some land other than their homestead land.

Thus, the Muslims of West Bengal were in worst position in socio-economic and in other aspects in comparison to other socio-religious communities. There was no such policy or positive steps like reservation for the Muslims before the 1977 except land reform policy of then left front govt. of West Bengal (Dasgupta, A 2009:91-96).

Reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and status of Muslims

The West Bengal Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of vacancies in Services and Posts) Act, 1976 provided reservation for Scheduled Castes (STs) 22% and for Scheduled Tribes (STs) 6%. But there is no Act to guide the principles of reservation for OBCs. Notification No. 347-TW/ EC dated 13-07-1994 was the first notification to introduce the matter of reservation for OBCs in services and posts under government control. 5% posts were reserved then for OBCs since 1995. And subsequently, it was increased up to 7% in 1999. This was increased again into 17% in 2010. In case of admission to educational courses, 7% reservation has been provided in respect of admission to primary, secondary and Higher Secondary courses. No reservation for OBC in higher education has been provided then. The Act was amended in various occasions as per necessity. However, in case of Muslims, there was no such reservation separately for the Muslims as OBCs before 2010. And the existing Muslims OBCs population shared very low. As it mentioned in the 61st round survey of NSSO that 'there is an increase in OBCs population in different states, it is marginal in West Bengal. West Bengal's share among Muslim OBCs is about 2.6% in 1999-2000 and is 2.4% in 2004-05 (Government of India, 2006: 203-204) [edit]. But there is slight increase of OBC population among Muslims of West Bengal after an increase in reservation for OBCs (10%) especially for Muslims in 2010.

West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes has been set up in 1993. The commission looks after the matter of identification of communities to be listed as OBC, and other related matters involving OBCs. West Bengal Backward Classes Welfare Department listed many Muslims social groups or classes in the backward class list and their number is still increasing in every years. OBCs have been divided into two categories – OBC Category – A and OBC Category –B. More backward classes within OBC have been included in OBC-A and others in OBC-B. This categorization has been done on the basis of a sample survey conducted by the University of Calcutta. The relative backwardness of 108 classes has been determined through that survey and those classes have been enlisted as OBC –A or OBC-B (Biswas, U N, 2012: 20-21). In 2014, the total numbers of OBCs were listed about 159. And out of these 159 OBCs, Category-A carried about 76 OBCs that included around 63 classes as Muslims and Category-B held about 83 OBCs that listed about 31 classes as Muslim OBCs (Biswas, Z.H, 2015: 74). In 2017, Backward Classes Welfare Department listed total number of OBCs is about 176. Out of 176 OBCs, Category-A consist total number of 81 in the list and Category-B about 95. In OBCs Category-A among 81classes, 73 classless is Muslims OBCs and in Category-B, it is around 43 classes as Muslims OBCs (G.O.WB, 2017). However, the reservation for OBCs has been provided by the state government about 17% (including 10% increase in 2010). It was announced by the state govt. that 10% reservation has been given to Muslims OBCs but in reality reservation is distributed unequally. There are two category for OBCs; Category-A and Category-B. In Category –A, major classes are Muslims and Category-B major classes are Hindus. And for Category-A, reservation is allotted in 10% scale and for Category-B in 7% scale. But there is lacuna in its equal distribution for the more and less backward Muslims OBCs in comparison to the general Hindus. It becomes a matter of fact especially in employment, in admission for higher studies, and other. However, there are so many problems likely. In spite of this difficulties, this reservation for Muslim OBCs become as 'something is better than nothing'. Recently an online news paper (TDN Bangla News, March, 2018) has shown a data about the success of Muslims OBCs in employments in the state. But there is still wide gap between the 'text' and in the implementation of reservation in reality. In some cases, post remains vacant due to lack of availability of deserved candidates. It hence that Muslims OBCs are technically denied to access in the general list in employment and admission for education in the state. Muslims has low performance in the competition in general category in West Bengal Civil Service Examination of 2016. Their performance is very marginal in the general category out of their reserved category. West Bengal Public Service Commission has declared Group-C result of 2016. And among total 321 success candidates, 40 candidates are Muslims and four (4) women. And its contribution goes to the 10% reservation for Muslims OBCs in the state. This outcome in the employment is regarded as marginal success of the Muslims of West Bengal. In general category, six Muslims is listed and thirty four (34) in the OBCs category. In the OBC list, out of thirty four (34) empanelled Muslims candidates, thirty three (33) in the Category-A and only one (1) candidate in the Category-B are Muslims. But the total number of success

candidates in the OBC list is about sixty three (63). And out of these sixty three success candidates, only thirty (30) candidates are in the Category-B in which only one (1) candidate is Muslim. Hence, success of Muslims candidates in Category-A and B are very marginal. And therefore, if there is no such reservation for Muslims OBCs, then only six (6) Muslims got selected in the WBPSC list. There are about 43 classes Muslim OBCs and 52 classes Hindu OBCs in the Category-B. And out of these 43 Muslims OBCs, only one (1) Muslims got job in the WBPSC (2016). Women’s performance in WBPSC is very pathetic. It needs to explore the fact of women’s lagging behind the men among Muslims in such competitive examination. Bureau of Economy and Statistic of the state government provides ‘staff census’ about government staff working in the state administration. And from this ‘staff census’, it was known about the Muslims’ employment data. But in present this ‘staff census’ is not being published for long time. If such statistical data come out in the surface, then the reality of Muslims’ representation in government jobs could be found unchanged or marginal changed. In case of Muslims’ women’s access in the govt. job, it could be found very pathetic condition. In an RTI report in 2007-08 done by Sabir Ahamed, it is known that of total twenty five thousand (25000) police staff, Muslims constitutes about 9-13%. And out of this 9-13%, Women’s were only about 22.

Table: 1, Category-B Muslims OBCs’ employment in the last year (2017) in West Bengal.

Various Post of the Govt. of W B	OBC-B (Muslims)
Civil Engineering	1
PWD	1
Irrigation and water wage Dept.	0
Municipal Affairs Dept.	0
Backward Classes Welfare dept.	0
Panchayate and Rural Development	0
Water Resort Investigation and development Dept.	0
Public Health Engineering Dept.	0
F.A.R.F.D	0

(Computed by the Author himself, Source: TDN)

In an online news report, it was claimed by the govt. that about 95% Muslims has come under OBCs reservation facilities. Backward Classes Welfare Department listed about one hundred sixteen (116) Muslim classes as Backward. And these Muslims are enjoying 10% reservation for Category-A and 7% for Category-B. Whether, among Hindus, total numbers of Scheduled Castes are about 60 groups, Scheduled Tribes about 40 groups, OBCs-A 8 classes and OBCs-B about 52 classes. So they constitutes total number of 160 Hindus groups come under govt. reservation facilities.

Table: 2, Distribution of reservation in West Bengal

Scheduled Cates	22%
Scheduled Tribes	6%
Other Backward Classes-A	10%
Other Backward Classes-B	7%

(Source: Govt. of West Bengal, 2013)

Thus, Hindus share about 45% of reservation in the state. Whether, Muslims share only 17% in OBCs category-A and B. but fact is that majority of Muslims OBCs are in the Category-A sharing 10% reservation and a small chunk of Muslims OBCs are in the Category-B sharing 7% reservation. A major gap is found between OBCs category-A and category-B in job success. Success of Hindu OBCs in the category-A is hardly found. Similarly in the category-B, Muslims are rarely found get job. Most of the success candidates are from Hindu OBCs. They being socio-economically backward still remain lagging behind the SCs, STs, and OBCs-B, in

various govt. jobs. But there are no such records to the Govt. about 'How much percentages of Muslims are lagging behind from the SCs, STs, and OBCs-B'.

However, People generally believed that the reservation for the Muslims OBCs is not equally given to access as it legally should be. Today, Muslims of West Bengal could not be understood as too much backward as it was earlier. Many changes have occurred among them. But still, they are unsatisfied with this OBCs reservation as they believed there is lacuna in accessing into the facilities of reservation for Muslims (TDN, 2017).

Table: 3 Pre-Matric Scholarships to O.B.C Students

Year	Amount Utilised	No. of Beneficiaries
2007-08	2,60,08,890	65,668
2008-09	2,94,31,700	72,805
2009-10	2,00,98,670	48,125
2010-11	3,41,57,750	85,395
2011-12	2,55,27,200	63,818
2012-13	3,84,42,000	96,165

(Source: G. O. W. B, 2013)

Post-Matric Scholarship to O.B.C. Students provides financial assistance to OBC students studying at post secondary stages. This scheme has been implemented from the financial year 2003-04. Scholarship is provided to those students who are studying in professional (Medical, engineering, L.L.B, etc) and general courses (Arts, social science, etc).

Table: 4 post-Matric scholarship to OBC students and achievements

Year	OBC	
	Amount Utilised	No. of Beneficiaries
2007-08	1,11,66,095	10,397
2008-09	4,22,54,746	30,522
2009-10	3,71,49,189	26,352
2010-11	6,80,24,267	44,668
2011-12	11,52,44,450	52,817
2012-13	16,53,56,485	73,681

(Source: Govt. of West Bengal, 2013)

During 2012-13, West Bengal Backward Classes Department and Financial Corporation (WBBCDFC) disbursed about Rs. 2,84,65,511.00/- as loan to 1774 beneficiaries under various schemes like New Swarnima, Margin Money, Shilpi Sampada, education loan, micro finance, etc. Of the 1774 beneficiaries, 696 were Minorities (Muslims) who were assisted with soft loan amounting to 73.288 lakhs as follows.

Table: 5 Details of Minorities (Muslims) among OBCs assisted during financial year 2012-13.

S. No	Schemes	Amount in Lakhs					No. of Beneficiaries				
		Rural	Urban	Male	Female	Total	Rural	Urban	Male	Female	Total
1	General Loan	5.823	0.475	6.298	0	6.298	11	1	12	0	12
2	Margin Money	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

3	New Swarnima	0.75	0	0	0.75	0.75	1	0	0	1	1
4	Education Loan	0.275	0	0.275	0	0.275	1	0	1	0	1
5	Micro Finance	27.36	15.105	7.895	34.485	42.465	287	158	84	361	445
6	Mahila Samridhi Yojana	11.7	11.8	0	15.8	23.5	117	120	0	237	237
	Total	45.908	27.38	14.4675	51.035	73.288	417	279	97	599	696

(Source: G. O. W. B, 2013)

Table: 6 Total Expenditure of Scholarship for OBCs in West Bengal (Pre-Matric and Post-Matric)

Pre-Matric Scholarship for OBCs in West Bengal (2012-13)					
	Total Amount received	Total Amount Utilised	No. of Beneficiaries		
			Boys	Girls	Total
	42892460	38442000	56899	39266	96165

(Source: Govt. of West Bengal. 2013)

Post-Matric Scholarship for OBC in West Bengal (2012-13)					
Total Amount Received	Total Amount Utilised	No. of Beneficiaries			
		Boys	Girls	Total	
167076358	165356485	44215	29466	73681	

(Source: Govt. of West Bengal. 2013)

Government of West Bengal are playing some active roles for the upliftment of Muslim Minority. And the most active positive action of the Govt. of West Bengal is reservation for Muslim minority under OBCs categories. It was needed very earlier for not only the promotion of Muslim but also for the better development of West Bengal as whole. But the previous govt. did not played such active role for the community. It was the land reform policy in 1982 that was their big positive step for the state as whole. Many Muslims were benefited with this land reform policy. This benefited 30.9% Muslims households who had accessed to 25.6% of the total cultivated land in West Bengal (G O WB: 2010). West Bengal is politically very vibrant, culturally and communally very harmonious. Violence on the cultural issues and on religious matters could hardly be found between Hindus and Minorities (Muslims). But a silent communalism could be observed in political milieu. It is generally believed by people that during the Left Front or Communist (CPI-M) government rule more than forty two thousand (42000) were killed in political clash or violence. Amongst these, thirty nine thousand (39000) were Muslims. If we compare statistics of murder with Gujarat, it could be found that in Gujarat total two thousand (2000) Muslims were killed in communal riot in 2002. But in West Bengal, more than thousand Muslims are being killed in each year during the CPI (M) government. So the situation of Muslims is pathetic and marginal in all parameters of socio-economic development in West Bengal. D. Bandyopadhyay stated in an article that in 1997, Budhadeb Bhattacharjee, in reply to an Assembly question, stated that between 1977 (when they came to power) and 1996, 28,000 political murders were committed. Another figure shows that estimate of 27,408 were killed during 1997 to 2009. Thus in political violence total number of murder was about 55,408 (28,000 + 27,408 = 55,408). However, the political

violence becomes the common problem in election periods under each ruling party. The present scenario of the Muslim minority could be grasped far better than that was earlier. Even though the community is still lagging behind other socio-religious community, a section of this community is socio-economically going forward due to reservation for Muslims OBCs. Specially educated Muslims, those who have certified as OBC are receiving many benefits. Though there is lacuna in implementing reservation for Muslim OBCs, it could be assumed that it would pave the path of progress of this community. And for this it is very necessary for the community themselves to come forward for development along with the helping hands of government of West Bengal.

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