



## The Marginal Muslim Minority of Bengal, India: An Anthropological Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*West Bengal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious state of India where various ethnic groups and creeds have been living side by side since long past. Muslims are the principal minority of this multi-religious state and constitute about 27% of the state's total population. Yet little is known about the socio-economic and political dynamics of this community due to lack of fieldwork. This paper focuses on the contemporary dynamics of the Muslim life in West Bengal from an anthropological perspective. A especial effort has also been made in order to find out the factors contributing to form a bottleneck in development and social change.*

### Introduction

The economic growth of a country cannot be attained without the development of its entire population at both micro and macro level. Poverty is considered to be a curse to any economy and Muslims are generally the poorest segment of Indian society in spite of the fact that they are both able and willing to be educated and work in any field. They are considered a backward community in India both educationally and economically. Moreover, unless an assessment is made in order to find out the root causes of their backwardness and poverty, they will remain so and thus continue to contribute negatively to the economic progress of the country (Rahaman and Bhumali 2011:9). As Mistry (2005:408-421), with reference to the underprivileged economic status of the Indian Muslims, indicates: "The Indian economy has made remarkable progress in the last 50 years. Yet, for various reasons, Muslims in India have been unable to enjoy the fruits of development and so they continue to belong to the weaker sections of society. As a result of the ongoing trends of globalization and liberalization, the economic conditions of Muslims are expected to worsen since only highly competitive and skilled individuals and industries are expected to survive in such an economy. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the socio-economic upliftment [sic] of Indian Muslims [...]. Muslims form the largest minority in India. In absolute numbers, they make up the fourth largest Muslim community in the world after Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Muslims have had a long and glorious past in the country [...] During the struggle for freedom from colonialism, they too fought for freedom for India along with the other communities. However, the partition of India in 1947 worked to the disadvantage of Muslims and from that time onwards, communalism against Muslims became

common in the country and it has come to stay. In addition, in the 50 years since independence, Muslims as a community have failed to achieve socio-economic progress even though individually Muslims have in many ways made significant contributions to the arts, culture and even politics of modern India. Thus, the two major goals that need to be reached by Indian Muslims are those of eradicating communalism and achieving socio-economic upliftment [sic] for their community in cooperation with the larger Indian society.” Muslims reside in more or less all the states and union territories of India with various proportions. It has been reported that the Muslims of this democratic, secular and republican country lag behind the mainstream society in comparison to the other religious minority communities of this nation owing to various external and internal factors keeping this very large minority still socio-economically and educationally backward when modernization is the current agenda (Hossain 2012a:45).

Muslims in Bengal are both a cultural and a religious minority and live in a dominant Hindu cultural milieu. By virtue of education, enlightenment and privileged position in the society, the majorities are undoubtedly more resourceful in adapting themselves to the newly emerging institutions than the minorities. As a matter of fact, the Muslim minority is facing a severe trouble to develop and progress because it lacks the resources to provide new ideas and thoughts to its members. Muslims as a minority also find it difficult to develop their society since they require help from the majority (Mondal 1994:199-200). As Abraham (2009:135-136) states: “A minority is a group of people subjected to prejudice and discrimination in a given society. Sociologically speaking, minority groups are not necessarily numerically small groups; they are simply victims of differential and unequal treatment [...]. Literally, prejudice means ‘prejudgement’ [sic], which is an opinion in favour of, or against, something or someone. Sociologically speaking, however, prejudice means negative judgement [sic] or bias against a group. Members of a group may have highly negative opinions about members of another group. When members of one caste regard members of another caste as inferior, unclean, stupid, lazy or uncouth, then they are expressing a prejudice. Ethnic, religious, caste, provincial, and linguistic prejudices can be found all over India [...]. Discrimination is a form of behavior that entails unequal treatment by means of which one group prevents another group’s access to opportunities. For untold centuries upper castes have discriminated against lower castes and denied them most of the civil rights [...]. When members of a particular group have highly negative attitudes towards another group, they usually develop stereotypes about members of that group. A stereotype is a set of biased generalizations about a group of people that is unfavourable, exaggerated, and oversimplified.” The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2009:476) writes: “Since the 1930s this term has been applied to social groups that are oppressed or stigmatized on the basis of racial, ethnic, biological, or other characteristics. Louis Wirth, for example, defines 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’. However, seen in these terms, a minority group could in fact constitute a numerical majority in any society—for example the Blacks in South Africa. It might be more useful, therefore, to distinguish between groups which are actually a minority in numbers and those which are marginal in terms of their access to power.”

### **The Constitution of India and the Muslim Minority**

On 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1949, the Constitution of India was adopted by the India Constituent Assembly and came into effect on 26<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1950. It was enacted on the basis of the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal protection to all its citizens. It declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic and republican nation. It gives recognition to all professed

religions of its citizens and group identities as such. It assures its citizens' social, economical and political justice, freedom of thought, faith, expression, worship, equality, and similar opportunity to each and every citizen of the country. Moreover, it endeavors to promote fraternity among its citizens with the objective of the individuals' dignity and guarantees the unity of the country. Recognizing the special necessities of different weaker sections of the population, the Constitution also dictates the State to make special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens. Part III of the Constitution deals with the Fundamental Rights of the citizens. It not only assures civil rights to all its citizens but also prevents the State from encroaching on individual liberty.

The constitution guarantees equality as well as equal protection of the law to all people inside the province of India before the law as per Article 14. The Constitution also guarantees to all its citizens that no discrimination will be acceptable on the grounds of caste, religion, sex, race, place of birth or any of them as per Article 15. As per Article 16 of the Constitution, it assures equal opportunity to all the citizens in the matters relating to Government employment or appointment and also prevents the State from discriminating in opposition to any person pertaining to employment merely on the grounds of race, religion, caste, descent, place of birth, place of residence, sex or any of them. As per Article 19 of the Constitution, it gives freedom of speech and expression, freedom to practice of profession, freedom of movement throughout the country, freedom to inhabit and settle in any part of the country, freedom of assembly and freedom of association in the nature of civil rights of its citizens. As per Article 25 of the Constitution, it gives the Right of Freedom of Religion to all its citizens and guarantees a secular State. The freedom of conscience or thought and the right to propagate, preach and practice one's religion are also covered in this Article. Furthermore, this right does not include at all the right to convert another person as it will violate the right to freedom of conscience of the person. As per Article 29 of the Constitution, it protects the Cultural and Educational Rights of the linguistic and religious minorities of the country by helping them in preserving their cultural heritage and protecting them against discrimination. It prevents the State from imposing any external culture on those minorities. The Article also prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, caste, language or any of them against any citizen of the country in order to take admission in any State aided or run educational institutions.

The aforementioned provisions of the Constitution of India when applied to the Indian Muslims who constitute the principal minority of the nation are also meant for them.

### **Locale of the Study**

As a constituent state of the Indian union, West Bengal was created on 15<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1947 in consequence of the partition of the undivided British Indian province of Bengal which covers the bottleneck of India in the east, stretching from The Himalayas in the north and up to the Bay of Bengal in the south. In the north it is surrounded by Sikkim and Bhutan, in the east it is delimited by Assam and Bangladesh, in the south it is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal and in the west it is delimited by Orissa, Bihar and Nepal. Hence, the state has three international frontiers to its northern, eastern and western parts. When India became independent in 1947, Bengal was partitioned between India and Pakistan. In the meantime West Bengal remained within India's share and Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan, became part of Pakistan (Rahaman and Bhuimali 2011:77). Inhabitants belonging to diverse ethnicities, religious faiths, linguistic groups, status groups, racial stocks, tribal affiliations, castes, classes and minority groups have been living together in the soil of West Bengal since long past fabricating collectively a multicultural pattern owing to such a diverse cultural panorama found in

West Bengal today.

Muslims in Bengal are fairly more in the rural areas owing to their ties with the land. It is significant to note in this context that the effect of the partition had resulted in the movements of the Muslims from West Bengal to today's Bangladesh took place largely in the urban areas. On the other hand, it is not actually meant that the Muslims in rural areas, after the partition, did not leave West Bengal, they also left the region but in lesser number in comparison to the urban areas. The migration of the Muslims from rural environs to the urban environs of Calcutta and other towns also took place in lesser number (Mondal 1994:56).

The largest Muslim concentration of around 47 per cent of the total India's Muslim population can be found in three states viz., West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar according to the India's Census Report of 2001. While in states like Assam, West Bengal and Kerala Muslims are found to reside in high concentration. In West Bengal, it is estimated that one-fourth of the entire state population is Muslims, and they constitute the largest minority with a population potency of around 96 per cent of the entire minority population of the state. Muslims in West Bengal are found to reside in all the districts in varied proportion and thus, there are twelve such districts where they represent around 25 per cent of the entire population of the respective districts. There are three such other districts that is North Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad where they comprise more than a half of the entire population of the districts respectively according to the India's Census Report of 2001 (Hossain 2012a:46-47; Hossain 2012b:14).

### **Social Stratification and Muslim Society**

Despite the fact that Islam opposes social stratification and its value system stresses equality and universal brotherhood amongst its followers, stratification is very conspicuous in Indian Muslim society. They are separated into various social groups and subgroups along ethnic, social and cultural lines organized in a stratified social order in empirical context. Within the Indian Muslim society, the segmentation and the system of social stratification therein is a situational development conflicting with the egalitarian norms of the Islamic social system. However, the textual Islam and the lived Islam are not the same thing so far as Islamic ideology and Muslim societies are concerned. Due to immense historical, social and cultural diversities among Muslim communities all over, the problems faced by them are also not the same and consequently there are socio-economic and political challenges and impediments. Besides, the Muslims undeniably have been facing severe issues in contemporary India and more so for the reason that they are incorrectly portrayed as a monolithic and homogeneous group while the reality is that Islam and Muslims are not monolithic, rather live Islam has great diversity and heterogeneity (Hossain 2013a:96; Hossain 2013b:278-279; Hossain and Moinuddin 2014:91).

### **The Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**

The Other backward Classes or simply the OBCs are delineated as "socially and educationally backward classes" in the Constitution of India. A community is classified as OBC when it suffers from certain elements of backwardness based on a complex set of socio-economic and educational criteria as specified by the National Commission on Backward Classes of India, a statutory body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. With the dawn of independence and subsequent promulgation of the Constitution of India, those backward segments of population

were identified and targeted for special treatment that is Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). With reference to their job, education, welfare and development, various compensatory discrimination policies are bounded for all the three categories of people.

Muslims cannot belong to the SCs because this category is restricted to Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists but the STs can be Muslims though they are not many. A microscopic number of such minute Muslim tribal groups inhabits places such as Lakshadweep, Gaddis and Bakrewals of Jammu and Kashmir. This clearly means that only the third category, OBCs seems to open for them. Despite the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslims, they could not be able take advantage of this for a long period of time for the most part it remained an unclear category, and criteria for inclusion in this category were not specified in the Constitution (Hasnain 2010:35-36). The backward classes constitute one-third of India's entire population usually made up of the three main groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. They are huge in number and are a mixed category of people with boundaries that are not always understandable. As the OBCs are a residual category, their population within mainstream society is very indistinguishable varying from one religious community to another. It is indeed unfeasible for us to present an exact statistical account of their numerical strength (Moinuddin 2003:4905). Moreover, as the state is empowered to appoint a commission by Article 340 of the Constitution to investigate the condition of socially and educationally backward classes and the difficulties under which those segments of the people work and to make recommendations so as to eradicate such complexities and to improve their situations, two such commissions have so far been appointed at India's federal level viz., the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and the B. P. Mandal Commission by the Government of India for the systematic study of the Other Backward Class citizens of India.

#### *Kaka Kalelkar Commission*

The First Backward Classes Commission was the Kaka Kalelkar Commission. It was appointed in 1953 under the Article 340 of the Constitution and put emphasis on the lower status in the caste hierarchy as the critical factor for backwardness along with other considerations viz., educational levels, levels of income and representation in public employment. The Commission submitted its report in 1955 and the Kaka Kalelkar Commission's Report was the first case in which certain castes/communities amongst Muslims and other religious minorities were also declared backward and brought within the purview of the affirmative action. The Commission identified more than 3000 castes/communities as OBCs.

#### *B. P. Mandal Commission*

The Second Backward Classes Commission was the B. P. Mandal Commission. It was appointed in 1980. In order to identify socially and educationally backward classes, it adopted eleven criteria under three major headings, viz., social, educational and economic and also relied on the caste criteria, though, the tangible indicators to ascertain a caste or any social group as 'backward' incorporated lower position in the hierarchy of caste, lower age at marriage within the group, inaccessibility to drinking water, lower average value of family assets, lower female work participation, higher school dropout rate, higher occurrence of *Kutcha* houses and so forth. A different yardstick was employed in case of non-Hindu communities. The Commission identified 3743 castes as OBCs.

Therefore, the Other Backward Classes in India form a leading underprivileged segment of people. They have remained disadvantaged in terms of their access to education, economy, occupation, representation in services, political empowerment, opportunities, power and privileges in a given society since long past.

### **The Muslim OBCs of West Bengal**

The then Left Front Government of West Bengal had stated that around more than 17.2 million people belonging to the Muslim minority would get the privileges of reservation in services and posts on account of their relative backwardness. Likewise, the present Trinamool Congress (TMC) Government includes 86 per cent of Muslims from the entire Muslim population of West Bengal into the Government list of the OBC groups for Muslims in a declaration. Therefore, for the most part, the Muslims of West Bengal are the Other Backward Class Muslims or simply OBC Muslims today so far as the aforesaid declarations are concerned.

The Government has further categorized those OBC Muslim Groups into two broad categories, 'Category-A' which comprises a 'More Backward' segment of people and 'Category-B' which comprises a 'Backward' segment of people on the basis of their relative backwardness in a given society. All the 53 Muslim groups have been declared OBCs, including forty-nine Muslim groups labeled 'More Backward', and the remaining four Muslim groups simply labeled 'Backward'. Accordingly, Muslim groups such as the *Abdal*, the *Baidya* Muslim, the *Basni* or *Bosni*, the *Beldar* Muslim, the *Bepari* or *Byapari* Muslim, the *Bhatia* Muslim, the *Bhatiyara*, the *Chowduli*, the *Chutor Mistri*, the *Dafadar*, the *Dhukre*, the *Dhunia*, the *Fakir* or *Sain*, the *Gayen*, the *Ghosi*, the *Hajjam*, the *Hawari*, the *Jamadar*, the *Jolah (Ansari-Momin)*, the *Kalander*, the *Kan*, the *Kasai*, the *Khotta* Muslim, the *Laskar*, the *Mahaldar*, the *Majhi* or *Patni* Muslim, the *Mal* Muslim the *Mallick*, the *Midde*, the *Molla*, the *Muchi* or *Chamar* Muslim, the Muslim *Barujibi* or *Barui*, the Muslim *Biswas*, the Muslim *Haldar*, the Muslim *Mali*, the Muslim *Mondal*, the Muslim *Piyada*, the Muslim *Sanpui* or *Sapui*, the *Nashya-Sekh*, *Nehariya*, the *Nikari*, the *Patidar*, the *Penchi*, the *Rajmistri*, *Rayeen* or *Kunjra*, the *Sardar*, the *Shershabadia*, the *Siuli* (Muslim), the *Tutia* were included into the 'Category-A', recognized as 'More Backward' segments within the Muslim communities of West Bengal and the rest four groups viz., the *Darji* or *Ostagar* or *Idrishi*, the *Dhali* (Muslim), the *Pahadia*-Muslim and the *Tal-Pakha Benia* were included in the 'Category-B' recognized as 'Backward' segments within the Muslim communities of West Bengal as per notification no. 6309-BCW/MR-84/10 dated 24<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2010 prepared by the Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal and also as per the data found in the *Anandabazar Patrika*, (Bengali Daily), dated 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct. 2010 and also in accordance with the notification no. 1673-BCW /MR-209/11 dated 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2012.

Subsequent to the defeat of the then Left Front Government who had already declared some Muslim groups of West Bengal deprived and socio-economically backward and also had included them in the pre-existing OBC list of the state into two different categories as mentioned above, the newly formed Trinamool Congress Government of West Bengal, after coming to power in 2011, conducted a sample survey once again in order to find out the relative backwardness of these underprivileged segments of people, belonging to the Muslim community, who were bypassed by the inclusion in the previous list of OBCs. However, with the endeavor and auspices of the present Hon'ble Chief Minister of West Bengal, those bypassed underprivileged segments of people have finally been included in the latest list of backward classes of the state, commonly known as OBC list on the basis of the report coming up from the investigation and subsequently in addition to notification no. 6309-BCW, dated 24<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2010, the Hon'ble Governor of West Bengal also placed the specified classes in the OBC list under

Category-A and Category-B respectively.

Consequently, the newly reckoned and specified Muslim groups such as the *Bhangi*, the *Dhatril Dail Dhaity*, the *Halsana*, the *Kayal*, the *Naiya*, the *Gharami*, the *Goldar/Golder*, and the *Shikari/Sikari* have been included in the extreme backward category i. e., Category-A. On the other hand Muslim groups such as the *Adaldar*, the *Akunjl/Akan/Akhan*, the *Bag*, *Chaprashi*, the *Dewan*, the *Dhabak*, the *Gazi*, the *Khan*, the *Shah/Sahaji*, the *Sadhukhan*, the *Malital/Malithal/Malitya*, the *Mistri*, the *Paik*, the *Pailan*, the *Purkai* the *Sana*, the *Sareng*, the *Sardar*, the *Sarkar*, the *Tarafdar*, the *Mouli* and the *Sepai* have been included into the Category-B or simply backward category in accordance with the notification no. 1673-BCW /MR-209/11 dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

### **The State of Muslim Minority in West Bengal**

Not only there is a lack of data regarding Muslim communities in India but also the information available in the census includes a broad count by religion devoid of socio-economic information concerning religion. Moreover, there is a very small number of studies on the economic profile of Muslims in this country. Although it is reported that there are several studies and analyses on Muslims in the possession of the Government of India based on census reports, however, these are yet to be made public (Kazi 1999:24). Each consideration of the socio-economic situation of the Muslims in India means that the diverse issues faced by them are many-sided as they concurrently face problems concerning identity, security, justice and equity and the interaction of these dimensions is at the centre of the socio-economic and political processes that the community faces on a daily basis. Besides, as a result of the unavailability of relevant 'hard and unbiased' data, an empirical research of these multifaceted problems is typically tainted (Besant and Shariff 2010:2).

Muslims suffer from a number of socio-political problems, some of which stem from their specific social organization, some from their religious conservatism and some from their relative isolation from the dominant Hindus. Various reports on the Muslims' situations in India including the Sachar Committee Report have revealed that the Muslims lag behind their Hindu counterparts in almost all the spheres of development involving education, political participation, occupation etc. The microscopic presence of the Muslims in the aforesaid spheres makes the problem more complex. The specific belief system, cultural practices and value orientation of the Muslims are supposed to be key variables in studying the roots of such troubles. Besides, some ideological issues play an important role in this respect. Consequently the processes like modernization, westernization, and globalization have minute impact on the Muslims (Moinuddin 2013:75-76). Conversely, the socio-economic situation of the Muslims has not been transformed very much in post-independent India. The various reports and research studies clearly reveal that Muslims in India are educationally and economically backward and the backwardness faced by them is a cyclical and ongoing process leading to economic backwardness. They are suffering from ample problems including the problems related to security, identity, and equity. The feeling of insecurity among the Muslims is very high, for the most part in communally sensitive states and among women. Ghettoisation is an outcome of insecurity and prejudice in housing, schools and jobs. Insecurity adversely affects their mobility, especially that of women leading to situations in which Muslims are not competent to completely utilize economic opportunities. Educational backwardness is a key concern of the community besides limited access to good quality schools which is a leading obstruction affecting more adversely female students (Rahaman and Bhumali 2011:8).

### *Economic Condition*

Although there is a lack of availability of perfect statistical data, it has been observed that Muslims in Bengal are poor and their society is typified by poverty and hardship. The causes of such poverty are multifarious. Besides the lack of resources, unemployment and high market price, the underprivileged economic situation of the bulk of the Muslims is also caused by their uneconomical habits, low income and high expenditure. These causes are for the most part due to the going-on growth of population in Muslim households, a few working hands sustain big families and certain cultural restrictions and sanctions towards their earnings and expenses. Certain aspects of their way of life besides external forces and structural constraints are also responsible for their poverty. Their poor economic situation, indebtedness and marginality perpetuate a sort of poverty and culture that prevents them from reaching a life style open to modernity and development (Mondal 1994:196).

Actually, one of the key determinants of the social status of an individual is her or his employment which is a social certainty and a base of self-esteem although it is also an economic activity. In order to take part in the developmental activities of a nation, employment provides opportunities to both men and women. Moreover, productive people can contribute their mite to the income of a nation while unproductive people mainly depend on others. Therefore, it is very disheartening to note in this context that although in the development process a large section of women are capable to contribute their mite, they are being considered unproductive because of the widely prevalent notion that the role of women should be confined in the household and women are expected to be just good housewives and good mothers. But since no development is achievable, leaving aside and bypassing more or less half of the entire human population i. e., women citizens, it is essential to note in this context that the participation in and access to social and economic activities for women is indispensable not only for their own development but also for the development of the country (Azim 1997:89). It is very hard to make out the specific roots behind their meager employment status owing to the lack of existing research and analysis of Muslim women's employment whereas their educational status most apparently puts a significant pressure on the type and ranks of their employment in both urban and rural areas (Kazi 1999:25). Muslims in rural areas of West Bengal are mostly engaged in agricultural pursuits. Most of them work as agricultural laborers and many of others suffer from joblessness and under-employment. Educational facilities are very inadequate and, if these are accessible to some extent, they are beyond easy reach because of their extremely huge number, due to the cost involved. Prompted to alternative self employment a large number of them, to survive, specializes in a few crafts such as carpentry, tailoring, embroidery, paper crafts, gold smith and the like and such odd jobs like rickshaw pulling, which draw these people to cities including Mumbai and Delhi. Kolkata is rather insignificant as this city provides very restricted scope for their survival in the city (Siddiqui 2011:213-214).

### *Educational Condition*

Educational achievement and employment opportunity, which are considered to be crucial for the socio-economic development of individuals, are the two major problems of Indian Muslims. It is evident that Muslims in India as well as in West Bengal are lagging behind in terms of quantitative and qualitative education. One of the prime reasons for educational backwardness among the Muslims is their poor economic situation, limited number of Government and Government-aided schools existing in such areas where large numbers of Muslims inhabit and the limited scope of employment opportunities to the educated people within the community. Muslim women are lagging behind in education probably as a consequence of the socio-cultural pattern of the family and the society.

The pessimistic attitude to the education of the girls and the lack of accessibility to infrastructural amenities for education in Muslim-concentrated areas are two factors which act as a bottleneck to their development. They have not an adequate access to far away schools. Providing job-oriented education and setting up an adequate number of technical schools in the Muslim-concentrated areas are essential (Rahaman and Bhuimali 2011:84-91).

There is also a common belief that Muslim parents think that education is not essential for girls and that it may instill a wrong set of values. Even if a number of girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age without completion of their education in order to marry them off which leads to a high drop-out rate among Muslim girls. Interactions with people in this matter indicate that the problem may consist of the non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, lack of hostels for girls, absence of lady teachers and accessibility of scholarships as they move up the education ladder (SCR 2006:85). However the rates of enrolment have increased considerably at the primary level but many students who register, drop out and as a result very few of them manage to get beyond the primary stage. Inequality and differences between communities is an additional critical aspect of this broader disparity in India. It is a well-known fact that the literacy and educational levels of the Muslims are underneath the national average notwithstanding the fact that the Indian Census Reports do not mention the status of Muslims education. In the field of education, gender discrimination is one key element of educational disparity (Hasan and Menon 2004:47). As Mondal (1994:197) points out:

*“Education is by far the most important cultural trait through which a society changes and makes progress. But it has been seen that the Muslims of Bengal are educationally backward. The resultant effect of educational backwardness creates a type of socio-cultural atmosphere which perpetuates the elements of tradition and backwardness among the Muslim masses. All these together have greatly retarded the emergence of social reform movements in the direction of modernity, development and progress of the Bengal Muslim community.”*

Taking indication from the India's Census Report 2001, Siddiqui (2011:213) has pointed out that with a population of 16,075,836 individuals the Muslims in West Bengal constitute 25.20 per cent of the total state population, out of which 84.26 per cent of the Muslims live in rural areas and 15.74 per cent in urban areas and the rate of illiteracy among the Muslim women of this state is 61.07 per cent compared to 47.04 per cent among Hindu women. Moreover, the first National Family Health Survey (NFHS-1) findings expose that in the age group of 13-49 years, 1.4 per cent of Muslim women have reached high school standard only while 6.9 per cent of non-Muslim women are in the category. Again the percentage of Muslim women in the post-high school education was stated to be 0.5 while that of non-Muslim women is 4.6 and the ratios of Muslim and non-Muslim in the categories are 1:7 and 1:9.

## **Concluding Observations**

In sum, the analysis presented in the preceding survey demonstrated that the Muslims of West Bengal lag behind the mainstream society in almost every sphere of development within our social hierarchy. From a perspective considering their socio-economic situation, educational status and political empowerment, Muslims are the most marginalized, secluded and deprived section of West Bengal society. Poverty and backwardness have retarded this very large minority in their normal progress in the fields of education, knowledge, economy, political participation and culture. This

unfortunate reality concerning West Bengal Muslims has also been revealed when the Sachar Committee Report and the Ranganath Misra Commission Findings presented their respective findings. Muslim educational backwardness helps the conservation of religious orthodoxy and social tradition, hence slowing social change in the extreme, especially changes related to social modernization as well as economic development. This situation, in turn, increases the negative factors leading to poverty and marginalization exponentially.

This vicious circle will add to anxieties concerning identity perception, protection, discrimination, justice and equity. Muslims are a marginal minority both in numbers and in terms of access to power and privileges in West Bengal and Indian mainstream society. Thus, Muslims as citizens of India and as members of the largest minority population of the nation, face considerable challenges even after almost seven decades since Indian independence from the British Raj.

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