

Socio-Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Women: A Comparative Outlook

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Abstract

One-fourth of the entire population of West Bengal, an Indian state, are the Muslims who have been well thought-out as the second largest religious group and meanwhile the biggest minority of the state representing about ninety six percent to the total state minority population according to the census report of 2001 in spite of that it has been reported that in contrast to other religious communities or groups residing in West Bengal, the Muslims with special reference to the Muslim women are lagged behind the mainstream in almost every spheres of social development viz. socio-economic standing, educational attainment, empowerment, political participation and decision making and so on due to various external and internal factors.

The proposed paper attempts to explore the status of Muslim women in West Bengal in a comparative perspective. Emphasis has also been given to enquire the pattern of work participation, employment and inclusion of Muslim women in comparison to the women in other religious groups of West Bengal. An endeavor has also been made to pinpoint the factors which are operating as bottleneck in their social change and development and to provide some suggestions and way forward.

The present paper is based on facts gathered through both secondary and primary sources of data. Numerous relevant published literatures were consulted besides the author's empirical field studies to produce this piece of writing.

Keywords: Muslim women; status; backwardness; development; problems; way forward.

Introduction

So far as the minorities in India are concerned Muslims are the largest minority in the country. Majority of this community is educationally and economically extremely backward. Almost all other minorities are educationally and economically better off. Unfortunately Muslims have not been able to get their due share in total welfare work done by the Government, for economically weaker sections of the society in the country since independence. Different Governments appointed committees time to time to find out the causes of educational and economic backwardness of Muslims. Among these communities the latest one is the Sachar Committee. The committee has clearly revealed that only 4 per cent Muslim population is educated and it is the most educationally and economically backward minority in the country.¹

The social and cultural life of the Muslims, living in various parts of the country, display distinctive features, as they are influenced by both the Islamic as well as regional and local traditions. Muslims are the members of Islamic community (*Umma*) out of common belief and faith. But it is not concern of everyday practical life, where they interact with the local cultures. Therefore, curiosity arises in many quarters to know the nature and character of this community with special reference to their society and culture.

Bengal has a significant Muslim population. 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 unfortunately due to lack of research studies we do not know much about the social matrix and cultural dynamics of the Bengali Muslims.²

Discussion

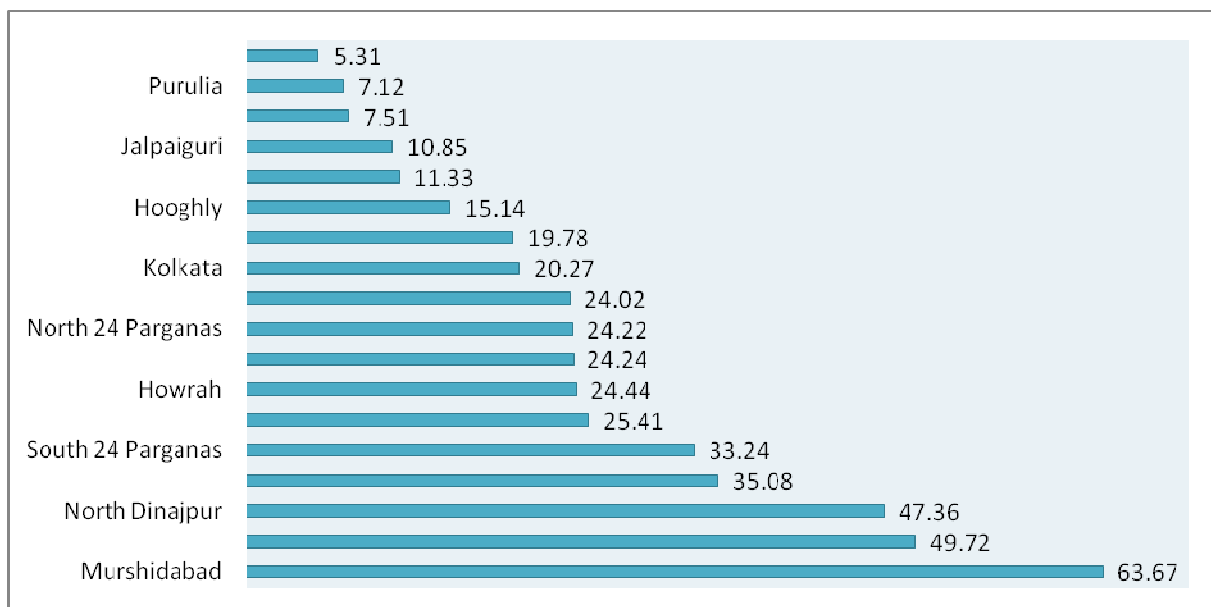
Islam has a very clear notion towards the status of women in the society. The attitude of *Quran* and *Hadish* bear witness to the fact that women is, at least, as vital to the life and society as man himself, and is not inferior to him. The Islam has given women the rights and privileges. The question of status of women in Islam cannot be properly understood without taking social situation into account. As Islam had its roots and beginnings in the folk society of the Arabs, thus it is necessary to find out the position of women in Arabia, just before the advent

of Islam.³

The progress and all-round development of a country depends upon harnessing the skills and abilities of all sections of society regardless of caste, creed, religion and sex. Women have been discriminated against for ages and they have not been given equal opportunities in many social, economic and cultural spheres. If we do not involve women in development activities, if not merely obstructs their own development but also affects the progress of the entire nation. The status of women could be the best indicator of a nation's progress. Women's active role is regarded as an integral part of a progressive social system.⁴

Being a plural community, social organizations and economic conditions of Indian Muslims differ from region to region and within a region from one social group to another. However as a religious or minority community they are found most backward and poor at national level by individual researchers and governmental agencies. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and social justice and socio-economic and educational development in the country, large numbers of Indian Muslims are either unemployed or associated with manual low paid occupations both in villages and cities. Rapidly increasing communalism and frequently occurring communal violence in different parts of the country make their economic condition fragile and vulnerable as well as multiply their woes and agony.⁵

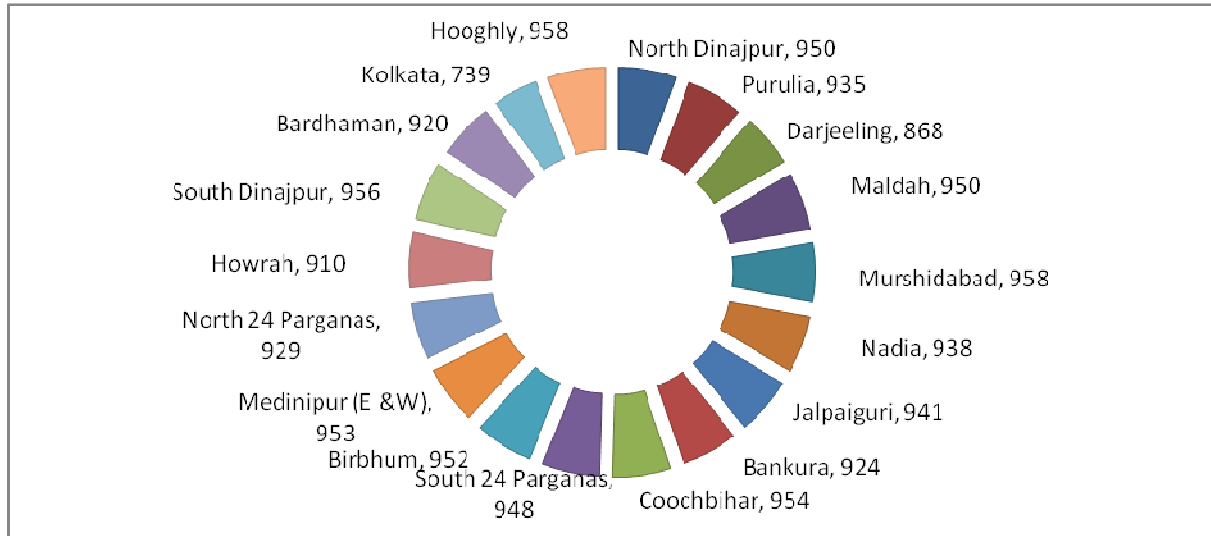
Figure: 1. Percentage Distribution of Muslim population in West Bengal Districts



Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

Over the last two decades, the position of Muslim women particularly their social situation have come to the notice of the academicians, policy makers and development authorities of India. It has been considered that the Muslim women are the most deprived segment of the country's population. Muslim women play a crucial role in well being and very survival of the Muslim families. But unfortunately for various reasons the gender disparity is very much conspicuous in Muslim society. The marginalized status of Muslim women is not well documented. Therefore, information on Muslim women, particularly on their social position, problems and prospects is very much needed for the sake of their empowerment, which is a priority area of our national development. The Muslim women, as of other women as a class, are more undernourished, more under compensated for their labour and more underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies than men, as a class. The only measure in which women collectively come out 'ahead' is lifespan, due to natural capability of survival strength.⁶

Figure 2. District wise Sex Ratio among the Muslims of West Bengal



Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

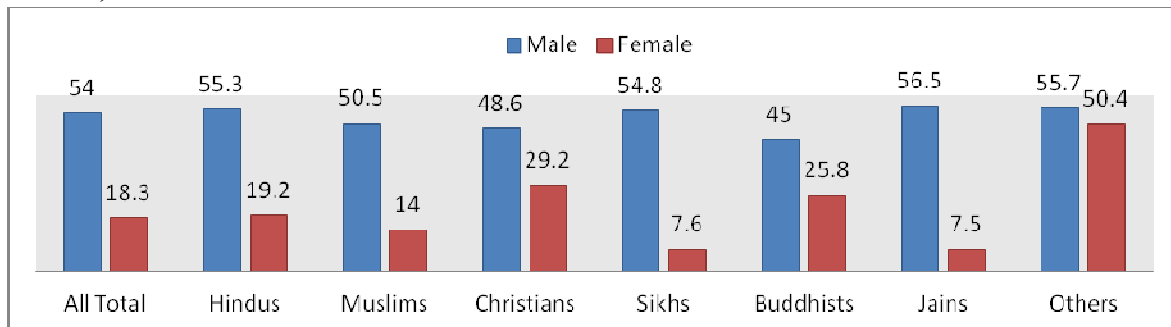
Socio-Economic Situation

Any assessment of the socio-economic conditions of Muslims in India needs to recognize that, like other minorities, issues faced by Muslims are multifaceted as they simultaneously face problems relating to security, identity, and equity. And the interplay of these dimensions is at the core of the socio-economic and political processes that the community is exposed to on a daily basis. An empirical exploration of these multidimensional issues is typically hampered by the non-availability of relevant ‘hard and unbiased’ data. Such data constraints are typically more severe for security and identity-related concerns.⁷

Muslim women have the lowest work participation rate (WPR) among all three categories of work, with a large gap between the WPRs for Muslim women and Hindu or Christian women. Sixty per cent of Muslim women are self-employed – the highest percentage among all three religious categories. Figures for Muslim women’s employment as regular workers in urban areas,

(15.7 per cent as compared to 27.7 per cent for Hindu women and 51.5 per cent for Christian women) highlight their marginal presence in salaried jobs. Figures for rural areas however, dismal as they are, also indicate a more or less similar employment status for Hindu (3.6 per cent) and Muslim (3.0 per cent) women. The high self-employment rates and the corresponding low participation of Muslim women as salaried workers indicate their marginal presence as workers in the formal economy. This does not imply the absence of Muslim women as workers; rather it indicates their ‘invisibility’ as informal workers. In the absence of existing research and analysis in the area of Muslim women’s employment, it is difficult to pinpoint specific causes behind this, their poor employment status, although their educational status must presumably exert a significant influence on the form and levels of Muslim women’s employment in both urban and rural areas.⁸

Figure 3. Work Participant Rate based on Sex among various Religious Communities of West Bengal (In Per cent)



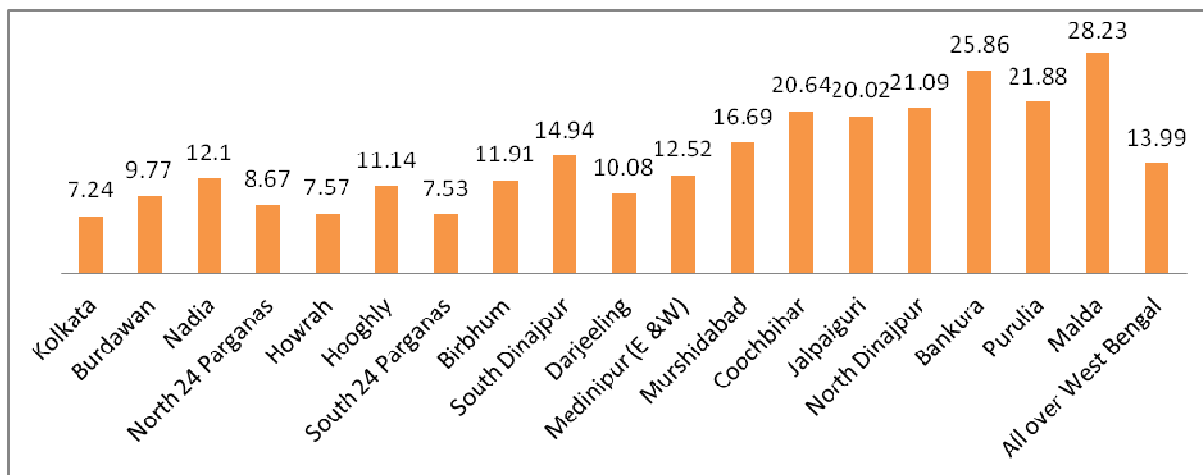
Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

Predominantly rural, the Muslim population in the state is engaged in agricultural pursuits, a very large number of them work as agricultural labour and many others suffer from unemployment and under-employment. Facilities for education are awfully inadequate and to the extent they are available, they are beyond easy reach of their overwhelmingly large number, because of the cost involved.

Impelled to resort to self employment for their survival a substantial number specializes in a few crafts like carpentry, needle and *zari* works, tailoring, embroidery, paper crafts and the occupation of gold smith etc. and such odd jobs like rickshaw pulling, which draw them to cities including Delhi and Bombay. Kolkata provides very limited scope for their presence in the city is not quite significant. Day labourers, including women from poverty stricken families from suburban areas, arriving to the city every morning, largely through local trains quite often get grossly exploited. The sad tales of their sufferings deserve serious attention.

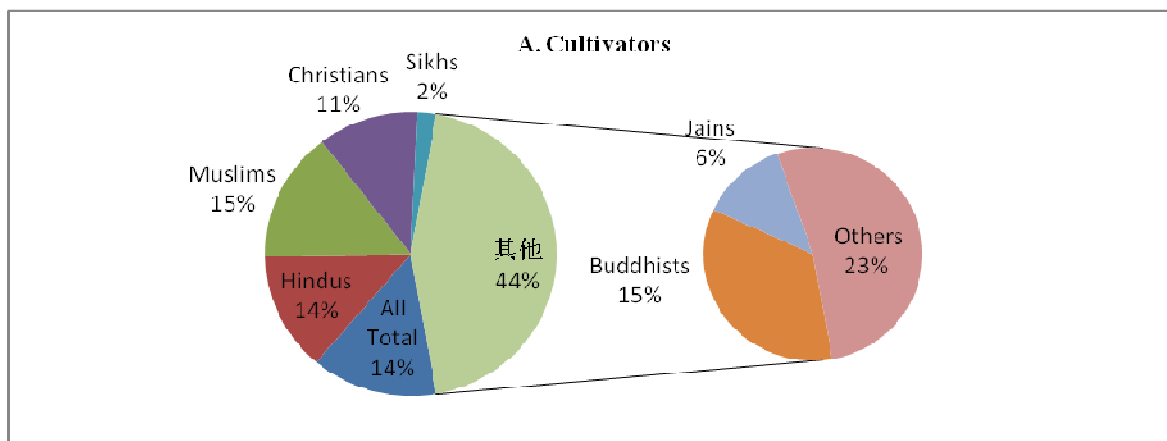
The presence of Muslims from rural areas of West Bengal from districts, in the city is so negligible that a few educated Muslim youth, arriving to the city in search of employment do not find accommodation in suitable areas, and under situational pressure have to change their name for obtaining place to live in non-Muslim areas. These and similar other social facts go to explain the overall prevailing social situation.⁹

Figure: 4. District Wise Work Participant Rate among the Muslim Females of West Bengal (In per cent)

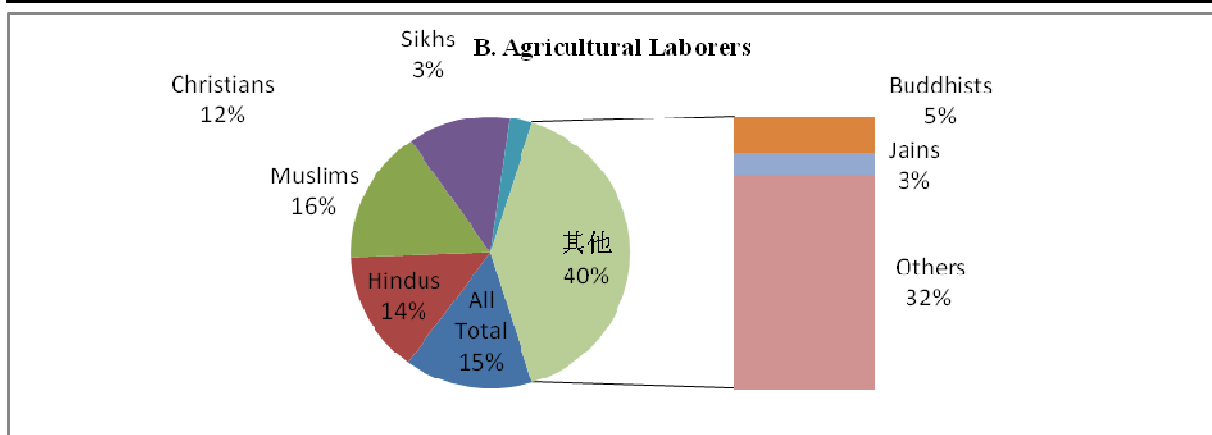


Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

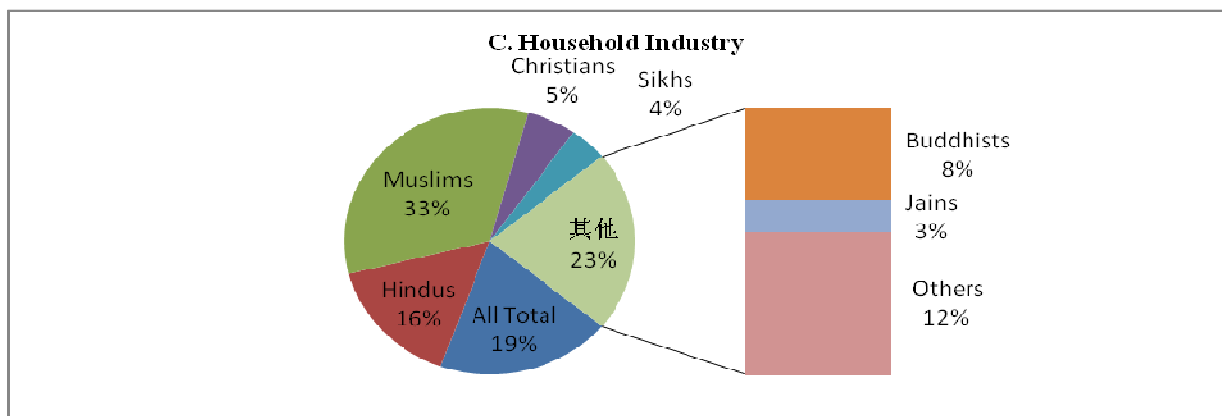
Figure: 5. Various Occupational Pursuits among various Religious Communities of West Bengal (In per cent)



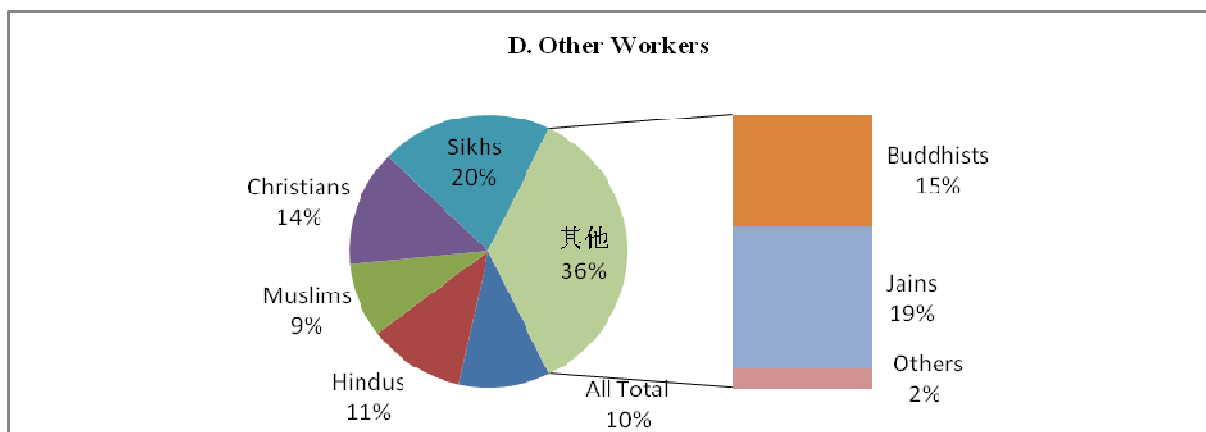
Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.



Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.



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Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

Table: 1. District Wise Female Work Participant Rate in Various Occupations among the Muslims of West Bengal (In per cent)

Sl. No.	Districts	Cultivators	Agricultural Laborers	Household Industry	Other Workers
1.	Kolkata	1.76	0.67	13.04	84.53
2.	Burdawan	11.39	16.83	27.53	44.25
3.	Nadia	18.91	7.95	24.57	48.57
4.	North 24 Parganas	7.50	15.30	23.28	53.92
5.	Howrah	2.50	5.24	52.01	40.25
6.	Hooghly	12.83	14.48	29.30	43.39
7.	South 24 Parganas	10.27	29.51	21.22	39.00
8.	Birbhum	9.76	12.90	46.25	31.10
9.	South Dinaipur	23.05	31.41	6.66	38.89
10.	Darjeeling	7.25	28.49	2.75	61.51
11.	Medinipur (East & West)	12.65	27.19	31.12	29.04
12.	Murshidabad	3.61	4.14	74.13	18.11
13.	Coochbihar	30.77	53.32	3.29	12.61
14.	Jalpaiguri	20.34	47.55	1.99	30.12
15.	North Dinaipur	25.47	45.33	11.81	17.40
16.	Bankura	17.58	19.52	39.40	23.50
17.	Purulia	20.07	55.50	12.46	11.97
18.	Malda	4.88	14.16	74.13	18.11
All over West Bengal		11.01	19.21	38.95	30.84

Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001.

The societal pluralism of India, as fortified by the unique Constitutional concept of secularism, raises the need for the protection and development of all sorts of weaker sections of the Indian citizenry-whether this “weakness” is based on numbers or on the social, economic or educational status of any particular group. The Constitution, therefore, speaks of Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes and makes- or leaves room for making-for them special provisions of various natures and varying import.¹⁰ On the completion of five decades of independence, women in Muslim communities face considerable challenges as citizens of India and as members of India’s largest minority. Their poor socio-economic status reflects a lack of social opportunity which, though not a feature exclusive to Muslim women, is exacerbated by their marginal status within an overall context of social disadvantage for most Indian women.

According to government reports, Muslim women are among the poorest, educationally disenfranchised, economically vulnerable, politically marginalized group in the country.

A lack of information on Muslim women contributes to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes, serving to obfuscate their life experiences and struggles. Consequently, the notion that Muslim women’s status in India is attributable to certain intrinsic, immutable ‘Islamic’ features or that their social status derives solely from Muslim laws is widely prevalent.

In a context where the *Shari’a* is used to justify women’s subordination, it is imperative for Muslim women in India to enter the discourse on the *Shari’a* with reference to personal law, and challenge their historic marginalization from religious knowledge.

The lack of social opportunities for Muslim women is a crucial issue needing urgent action. An improvement in literacy rates would directly influence Muslim women’s socio-economic and political status as citizens of India.

The acknowledgement of the universality of women’s rights by the international community is relevant to the debate on Islam and women’s rights, particularly with reference to women’s rights in the family.¹¹

Muslims in India are facing two major problems-education and employment which are essential for the socio-economic development of human beings. It is evident that Muslims in India as well as Muslims in West Bengal

are lagging behind in terms of quantitative and qualitative education.

It is evident that the condition of Muslims in West Bengal in the field of education is very poor, even poorer than SCs/STs. Again, women's education among Muslims in the state is lower than men. It is seen that the educational status of Muslims in West Bengal, like other parts of the country, is also depressing. Among various reasons, the major reasons for educational backwardness among the Muslims are poor economic condition, limited number of government and government aided schools in Muslim areas and lack of job opportunities of the educated people in the community. Perhaps Muslim women are lagging behind in education because of socio-cultural pattern of the family and the society, the negative attitude towards girls' education and are lack of infrastructural facilities for education in Muslim concentrated areas. Muslims have limited access to far off school. Need of the hour is to provide job oriented education and also to set up sufficient number of technical schools for male and female separately in the Muslim concentrated areas.¹²

Educational Situation

It is universally accepted facts that education is the most potent and effective tool to achieve empowerment of any section of society. Although it is true that economic well-being also makes a significant contribution in this regard, but the nature of positive change brought about by education ensures a position of dignity for the individual and the community which instills a sense of confidence and self-worth. Evolution of social and economic status are usually natural outcomes of good education.¹³ Generally, Muslims lag behind in educational attainment, their prospects of going beyond primary rather lower than that of Hindus and completing school even lower. Enrolling girls in school is only half the battle, because it is meaningful only if they complete the minimum of 8 years of schooling-which requires that their families be able to resist the pressures of income generation and work in the home. For Muslim women, not being able to enter the schooling system seems to be the first obstacle. Those that do manage entry do not seem to be able to continue schooling, let alone go on to higher education. For economically disadvantaged groups, such as Muslims, education would be the most promising means of upward mobility.¹⁴ Backwardness of Muslims is well recorded. It is substantiated by common place observation as well as Government statistics and reports. Different facets of backwardness are also in the sphere of common knowledge now. There is consensus on remedial measures also. It is now well established that education is the core and long term solution to address various facet of backwardness comprehensively.¹⁵

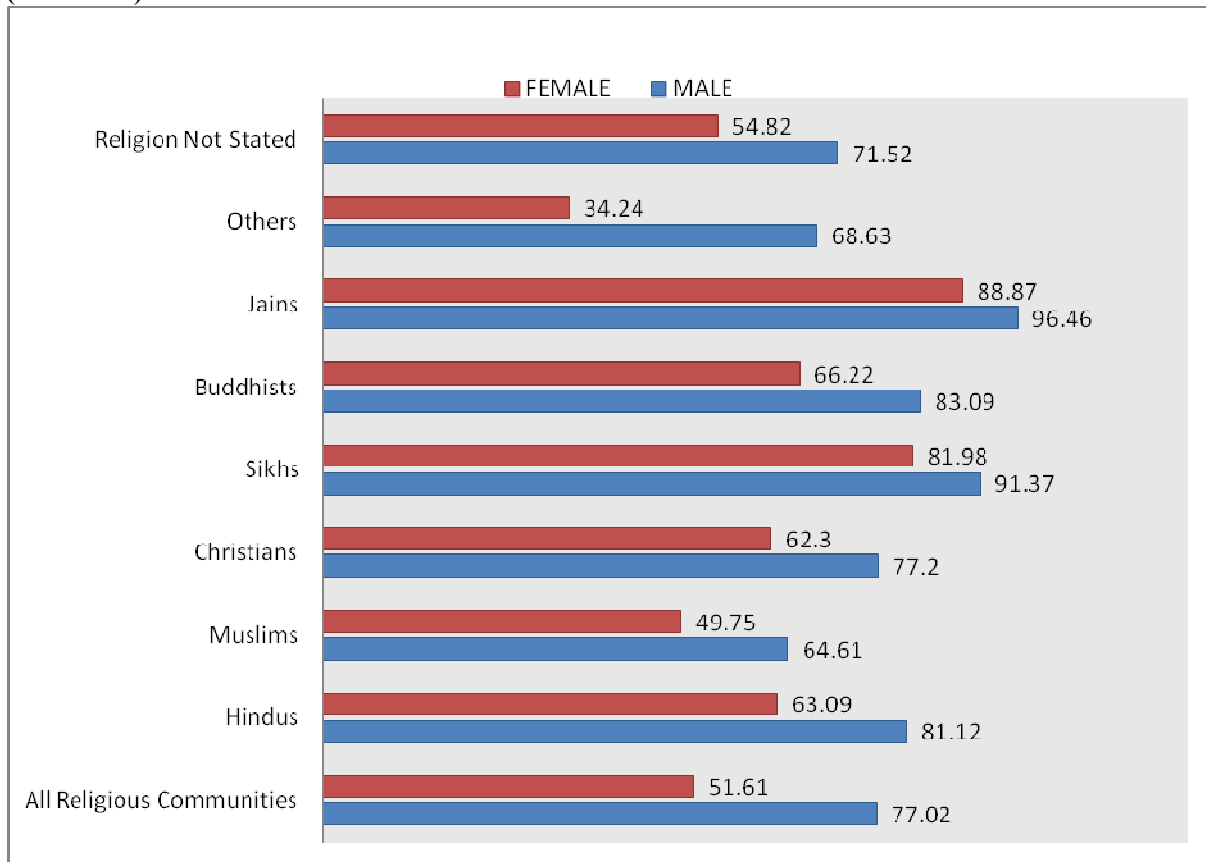
There is also a common belief that Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and that it may instill a wrong set of values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a higher drop-out rate among Muslim girls. Our interactions indicate that the problem may lie in non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl's hostels, absence of female teachers and availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder.¹⁶

According to 2001 census Muslims constitute 16,075,836 individuals or 25.20 per cent of the total population of West Bengal, 84.26% of the Muslims live in rural and 15.74 percent in urban areas. The incidence of illiteracy among Muslim women in the state is 61.07% compared to 47.04% among Hindu women.

According to a report (National Family Health Survey 1992-93) in the age group of 13-49 years only 1.4.p.c of Muslim women have read up to high school standard, while 6.9 per cent of non-Muslim women are in the category.

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. The ratios of Muslim and non-Muslim in the categories are 1:7 and 1:9.¹⁷

Figure: 6. Rate of Literacy on the basis of Gender among various Religious Communities of West Bengal (In Percent)



Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

There is no doubt that Muslim women are educationally backward and their work participation rate is low. However, this reality cannot be understood in a limited way. There is a need to adopt a broader social, economic, political and programmatic perspective along with the prevailing heterogeneity in terms of sect, region, class and gender. And I believe that by adopting a broader perspective we would be in a position to establish the real cause of the lower educational level of Muslim women especially in higher and job oriented education and the interventions required both at the policy / programmatic level and at the community level.¹⁸ The education commission, Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1966, stated that it is the responsibility of the educational system to bring different social classes and groups together to promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society. But unfortunately the educational development is very poor in India. Various efforts have been taken in the post independent period to spread education among the masses. But result is not very satisfactory, especially in the context of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities and other backward communities or weaker sections.¹⁹

Table: 2. Rate of Literacy and Illiteracy among the Muslims including Male and Female of West Bengal on the basis of their Place of Residence (In per cent)

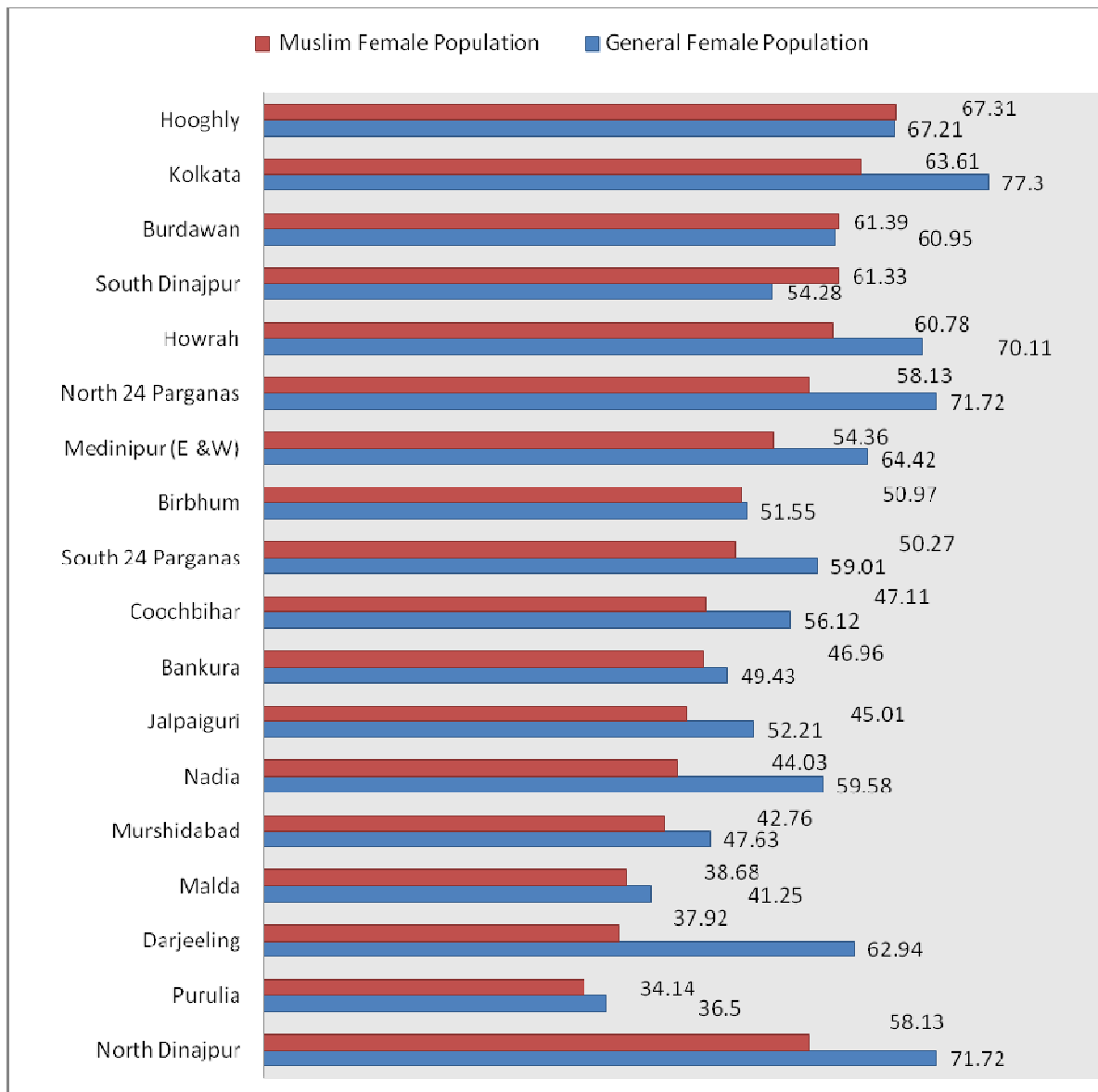
Place of Residence	Literacy Rate		Illiteracy Rate	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Whole State	64.61%	49.75%	35.39%	50.25%
Urban	72.04%	59.23%	27.97%	40.77%
Rural	62.92%	47.87%	37.08%	52.13%

Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001.

Enrolment rates at the primary level have risen considerably, but many of the students who enroll drop out and only a very small number manage to get beyond the primary stage. Gender inequality in education is one important aspect of educational disparity. Inequality and differences between communities is another critical aspect of this broader phenomenon of disparity in India. Though the census reports remain silent on the educational status of Muslims, it is well known that the literacy and educational levels of Muslims is below the national average.

The educational backwardness of Muslim women is a matter of particular concern, especially the high drop-out rate, resulting in subsequently fewer proportions of them managing to complete high school, and even less availing of higher education. Not surprisingly, Muslim women account for the lowest levels of educational attainment.²⁰ This educational disadvantage of women in Muslim communities mandates attention. The Indian government has failed to secure primary and secondary education for most of its citizens and its policies have deprived people of their right to education. It could also be assumed that Muslim girls' schooling is not always encouraged. The female literacy rate is an appalling 28.1 per cent. An improvement in the overall literacy rates for Muslims would not just lead to a corresponding increase in Muslim enrolment in universities and professional courses but also ensure more social opportunity for Muslim women (and men). This initial disadvantage, i.e. Muslim women's poor literacy rates, completely precludes the possibility of their entering institutions of higher education. Due to this reason the Aligarh Muslim University and the Jamia Millia Islamia – minority institutions with the specific aim of furthering education among Muslims (male and female) in India – are unable to have a majority of Muslim students in their professional schools.²¹ The state of education among Muslim women is even the worst. The cultural traditions do not allow Muslim girls to take advantage of co-educational schools, especially if they are far away from their homes. The opening of separate girl schools, appointment of lady teachers, and opening of girls hostel are some important measures if implemented sincerely may give boost to Muslim female education. This would facilitate higher participation of girls in school education. To attract more Muslim girls to education special scholarship schemes for them should be introduced.²²

Figure: 4. District Wise Rate of Literacy on the basis of Sex between General and Muslim Religious Communities of West Bengal (In per cent)



Source: Based on Census Report, 2001, Govt. of India.

Concluding Observations

The foregoing discussions definitely reflect that the situation of Muslim women in comparison to the women in other religious communities in West Bengal. By reviewing the overall situations, it has been observed that the situations are very pitiable almost in every facet of development. In respect of socio-economic, educational and political empowerment women in Muslim society in West Bengal are most marginalized, secluded, deprived and are in a state of impoverishment and backwardness which have retarded in their normal progress in the field of economy, political empowerment, education, knowledge and culture. All these characteristics had kept these people immobilized and slow down from the normal progress in social ladder since long time starving from social change and upward mobility both vertical and horizontal. Moreover in recent past the Sachar Committee Report and the Ranganath Misra Commission Findings have exposed the fact that the Muslims of this nation are socio-economically, educationally, politically and culturally deprived lagging behind the mainstream Indian society. They are more backward community than the *scheduled castes* (SCs) and the *scheduled tribes* (STs) population of the state in many respects of development in the given society and under hurdle due to lack of education, shrinking political space, deprivation and frustration so far various empirical data sources are

concerned.

The all-around strange dilemmas faced by them are attached to anxieties related to identity perception, security question, discrimination, equity and justice. The economic backwardness of the Muslim women is a returning and stable process as it is leading to social and educational backwardness and in turn is resulting in their economic backwardness further. The consequential result of educational backwardness constructs a kind of social and cultural milieu which perpetuates the elements of orthodoxy and traditionboundness among the Muslims of West Bengal retarding the emergence of social transformation and change in the course of modernization and development of the society.

Social scientists like sociologists and social anthropologists, academicians, scholars, researchers, planners and policy makers, social activists and the like have not paid as much attention to study the Muslims in general and the women Muslim society in particular as it deserves from empirical point of view. Even though, in latest past very insignificant and least amount of studies were in print but those are too minute to fill the gap of our awareness and perceptible about the people under study and owing to which we hardly know about their society, social structure, social organization, social problems, culture, social change, process of development, pattern of their subsistence economy, gender studies of the Muslims societies and so on while a good number of studies mostly advocates towards the Islamic theology, Islamic ideology, religious reformatory movements, personal laws, historical perspectives and the like.

The backwardness of the Muslims women like other backward communities in India is a national crisis which should be recognized as a setback of the entire province and so that the nation as a whole must proceed together to get rid of this hazard. Which is necessary for socio-economic and educational development of the Muslim women is their self awareness, impulsive motivation and their participation in diverse developmental programmes implemented and initiated for their progress in the given society.

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Notes: In spite of the fact that the provisional data of the Census report of 2011 conducted by the Government of India, New Delhi, has been accredited on 31st March 2011, however, to avail the religion wise data, it will take about 2-3 years to be made such data in public. Owing to this rationale the discussion is based on the Census data of 2001, Government of India.