

Social Stratification and Muslim Society: Some Empirical Observations on West Bengal

Md. Intekhab Hossain

“The claim of a country’s civilization depends upon the treatment to the minorities”

Mahatma Gandhi.

Introduction

The second major religious group after Hindus and the biggest religious minority population of West Bengal are the Muslims scattering over the length and breadth of the state and they reside in almost every village, town and city. West Bengal is India’s fourth most Muslim populated state in the eastern region of India stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. To the eastern part of this state Bangladesh and Assam are located and to the west, Jharkhand and Bihar are located. In these states mountains, valleys, plains, rivers, sea, stream and forests originated and a complete representation of socio-economic dynamics and multicultural pattern are found. People belonging to various religious faiths, ethnicity, linguistic group, racial variety, tribal affiliation, caste, class, status groups, minority groups and the like co-exist forming a varied cultural panorama found nowhere else in India. Owing to their divergent origin the descendents of various groups of ethno-social milieu of foreign origin or native converts from various caste or social backgrounds and the mixture of both live together. They are both horizontally and vertically divided in to various ethnic, status groups, caste, class, schools of thought, sects, languages and the like.

Islamic Precept

Islam means peace. Muslims are the followers of Islam, the second most practiced religion of India.

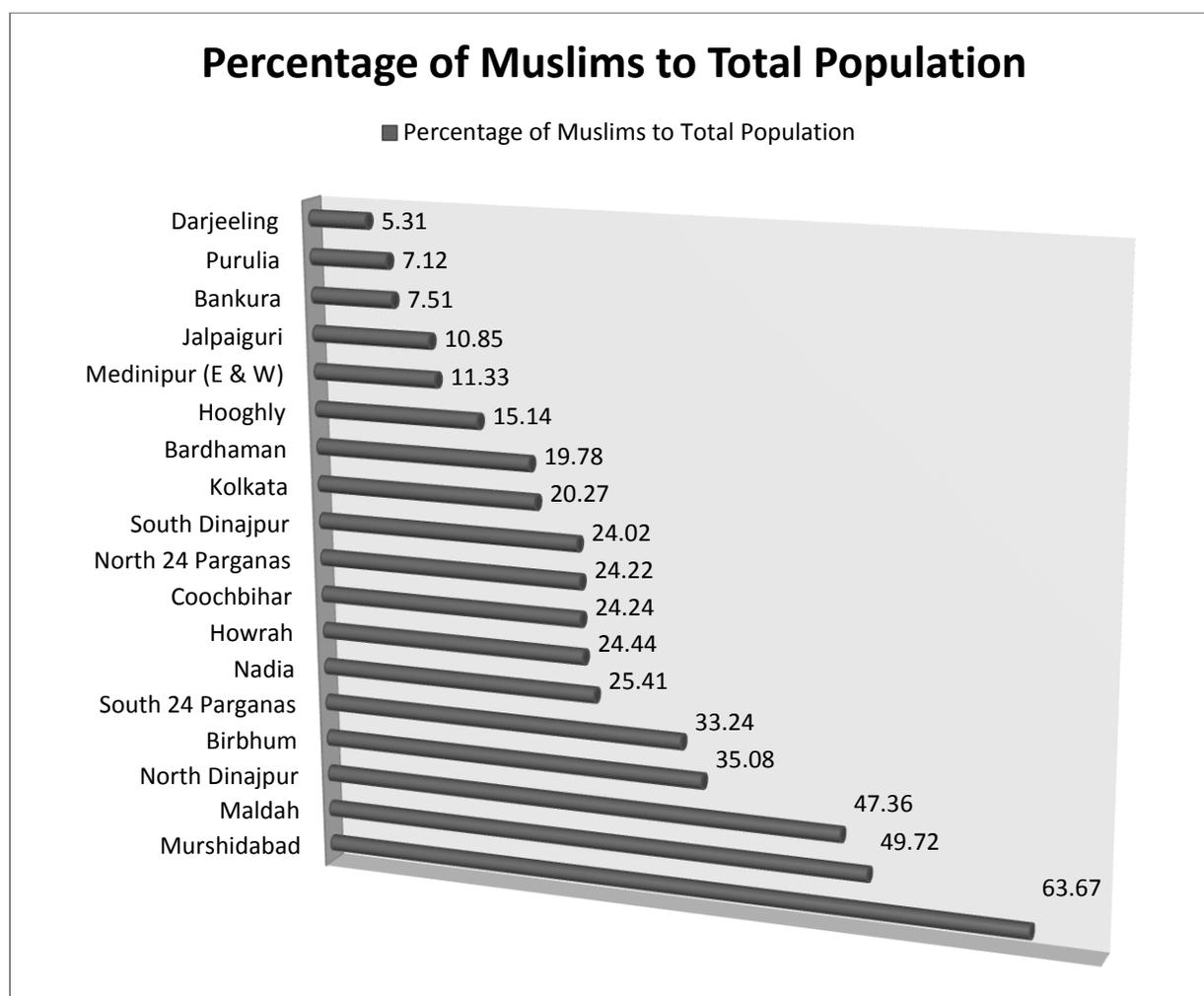
Md. Intekhab Hossain is Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Aliah University, Kolkata.
E-mail: intekhab.soc@aliah.ac.in

The most sacred text (book) is the holy *Quran* and Prophet *Muhammad* (PBUH) is considered as the last and greatest prophet in Islamic ideology. Islam prescribes five essential duties commonly known as the five pillars of Islam: belief in *Allah* (the almighty God), prayers five times a day, giving of alms to the destitute, one month fasting in the month of *Ramzan*, and making a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible (or when one can afford) to the devoted Muslims. Islam advocates for equity and universal brotherhood and strictly opposes and condemns inequality between rich and poor, high and low, superior and inferior, and pure and impure in society. In the Islamic precept there is also no place for discrimination on the ground of language speaking, race, ethnicity, property status and such other criteria in humankind. Domination of one group over other and class or caste conflicts are extra territorial to the sphere of Islam.

Muslim population potency in West Bengal Districts

According to 2001 Census Report over 138 million or 13.4% population of the country is Muslim. The biggest Muslim concentration of about 47% to the India's total Muslim population reside in three states viz. West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar comprising 25%, 18.5% and 16.5% respectively and in the states like Assam (31%), West Bengal (25%) and Kerala (24.7%), high concentrations of Muslims reside. Beside the Muslims, many other religious minorities e.g. Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews, Animists and Others whose religion has not been stated have been living in coincidence in various parts in varied proportion of this sub-continent. Again among those people Muslims are the largest and principal minority group who bears the traits of Islamic great tradition as well as local little tradition playing an important role in the development of Indian society and civilization.

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



Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001

Table: 1. Rate of Literacy among different Religious Communities of West Bengal

Persons	All Religious Communities	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	Others	Religion not
Total	68.64	72.44	57.47	69.72	87.19	74.73	92.81	51.53	-----
Male	77.02	81.12	64.61	77.20	91.37	83.09	96.46	68.63	71.52

Female	51.61	63.09	49.75	62.30	81.98	66.22	88.87	34.24	54.82
--------	-------	-------	--------------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------

Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001

Table: 2. Status of Economy among Different Religious Communities of West Bengal

i) Work Participant Rate (In Percent):

Persons	All Religious Communities	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	Others
Male	54.0	55.3	50.5	48.6	54.8	45.0	56.5	55.7
Female	18.3	19.2	14.0	29.2	7.6	25.8	7.5	50.4

Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001

ii) Various Occupational Pursuits (In Percent):

Occupation	All Religious Communities	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	Others
Cultivators	19.2	18.6	20.3	15.3	2.8	21.1	7.8	32.0
Agricultural Labourer	25.0	24.0	26.6	19.9	4.4	9.2	5.4	52.9
Household Industry	7.4	5.9	12.6	2.1	1.6	2.9	1.0	4.5
Other Workers	48.4	51.4	40.5	62.7	91.2	66.8	85.8	10.6

Source: Govt. of India, Census Report, 2001

Muslims are divided mainly into two major sects, the *Sunni* and *Shi'a*. Both *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Muslims share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith. The difference between these two main sub-groups within Islam initially stemmed not from spiritual differences, but political ones. Over the centuries, however, these political differences have spawned a number of varying practices and positions, which have come to carry a spiritual significance (Rahaman and Bhumali, 2011: 03-04). Muslims have been disaggregated by class and region only, because there is no official recognition of caste among Muslims. Muslims are frequently distinguished in terms of *ashraf* (high-born) and *ajlaf* (low-born) groups, which is not comparable with caste differences among Hindus, but despite these differences in the social character of the two communities, we believe that comparison is worthwhile for two reasons. First, inter-group disparities are politically salient and consequential; second, it makes a difference to our conception of welfare when we choose to treat community as the basic unit of disaggregation (Hasan and Menon 2004: 07). Muslims constitute about 14 per cent of India's total population. But we do not know much about the socio-political dynamics of this theoretically monolithic and empirically diversified communities due to lack of sufficient research studies. There has been a tendency to represent Muslims as a single, monolithic, homogeneous group not only in political arenas, but also in social science discourses. This has been facing a serious challenge in recent times owing to the emergence of the perspective of understanding Muslim society from below (Mondal 2003:4892). A figure of two crores and thirty one lakhs, according to 2001 census, Muslims reside in the state of West Bengal, one of the four high percentage Muslim populous state of India, one-fourth of the entire inhabitants of this state and have been reported as the principal minority of this state constituting about 96% of the entire minority population of West Bengal. They are distributed in each and every district of West Bengal in diverse proportion, there are twelve such districts where the Muslims represents about twenty five percent Muslim population to the respective district total population and concurrently in North Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad their population represents more than fifty percent to the entire population of these districts. It has also been reported that the Muslims of this state are lagged behind the mainstream and have been living in a situation of hardship and impoverishment. They still remain socio-economically and educationally backward minority when modernization is the order of the day.

Social Stratification and the Saliency of Caste-Analogues in Muslim Society

Muslims are the followers of Islam, which advocates for an egalitarian society. In Islamic ideology there is neither a difference of high or low, nor pure and impure. Islam does not admit inequality on the basis of race, language and other ethnic varieties. But the groups that adhere to Islam though commonly designated as 'Muslim Community' are in practice not a homogeneous entity. There are both horizontal and vertical divisions among them on the basis of various social distinctions. One of the most important aspects of this intergroup differentiation among the Muslims is continuing through 'ethnic' and 'caste-like' divisions since historical times. In recent times 'status group' and 'class like' divisions are also conspicuous among the Muslims. There are many occupational groups in Muslim society, which have experienced marginalization and backwardness and their social situation is not much different from OBCs of the country.

The differentiation that emerged among the Muslims at first is between the descendants of the so-called 'foreign ancestors' and the indigenous converts. The former segment is known as *asraf* or *khas*, while the latter segment is called as *ajlaf* or *atraf* or *aam*. Those who called themselves *asraf* are the gentry and considered themselves as aristocrats. They are the landowners, civic and religious leaders and comparatively wealthier. The *asraf* constituted the elite section of the Muslim society. They are further sub-divided on the basis of their ethnicity and place of origin. Among them there are four major ethnic and social categories, viz, *sayyad*, *sheikh*, *mughal* and *pathan*. The *sayyad* and the *shaik* are believed to have descended from Arab ancestors. While the *mughal* and *pathan* are claimed to have descended from *Mughal* (Mongol) and Afghan conquerors. *Ajlaf* are the toiling masses and peasants, therefore, could not lay any such claim of noble ancestry. There are innumerable occupational groups among the *ajlaf*. There are about 170 Muslim groups in India which are considered to be marginalized socially. Actually the social gradation among the *ajlaf* is mostly determined by their past caste characteristics. At the bottom of the social ladder there are those Muslims who do scavenging, sweeping and such other unclean jobs. They are commonly referred as *arzals* or *raizals*. Owing to the impact of the notion of nobility among *asraf* and caste background among *ajlaf* and *arazals* the segments in Muslim society are generally arranged in stratified order. Although Islam does not recognize caste differentiation among its adherents several categories of Muslims belonging to *ajlaf* section have

traditionally been treated as ‘low caste’ in their occupation and in matters of social relations (Mondal 2003:4892-4893).

The Other Backward Class (OBC) Muslims

OBC stands for *Other Backward Classes*. A community is classified as “OBC” if it qualifies as “backward” based on a complex set of social, economic and educational criteria, as specified by the National Commission on Backward Classes (NCBC). OBCs as identified by Mandal Commission (1980) and under the OBC list of Central Government of India have been considered as Other Backward Classes (OBC) for the present study (Kumar 2011:33). In Sacher committee report (GOI 2006:189-190) headed by Justice Rajinder Sacher it is pointed out that there are lacunae in both primary and secondary sources of data on the Muslims of India: “Sociological studies on Muslim social stratification have been drawn upon to comprehend the complexity of *castes* or *biradaris* among Muslims in India. Studies on backward class movements, analysis of Constituent Assembly Debates and the various landmark judgments of the Supreme Court and the High Courts have been of great help in understanding the historicity of the emergence of the category ‘Other Backward Classes’. In the wake of the absence of caste enumeration after Independence, much of the empirical data on Muslim OBCs—their share in population, in education and in public employment, have been drawn from the 61st Round of National Sample Survey (NSS) that includes OBC among Muslims as a category of analysis. For the sake of comparison, data from 55th Round is also used. More importantly, the data on education and public employment that has been made available exclusively to this Committee by various departments and ministries of the central and state governments, universities and institutions and Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) have been studied and analyzed for the purposes of comprehending the relative share of Muslim OBCs.”

In order to understand whether all the backward groups among Muslims have been included in the state and the central lists of OBCs, we have depended largely on the state and central lists and tried to identify the lack of correspondence between them. Further, the list provided by the Mandal Commission has also been consulted. The massive exercise undertaken by the Anthropological Survey of India, under its People of India Project, to profile social groups in

India has been utilized to cull out the various Muslim *castes/biradaris* found in different regions and provinces of the country.” The backward classes in India are large in number and are a mixed category of persons with boundaries that are not always clear. They constitute one-third of the total population of the country. They are usually made up of three principal groups, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes (OBCs). The OBCs are a residual category; their population in society is highly ambiguous and varies from one religious community to another. It is, in fact, impossible for us to give an exact statistical statement of their number (Moinuddin 2003:4905). The Central Government of India classifies some of its citizens based on their social and economic condition as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Class (OBC). The OBC list presented by the commission is dynamic (castes and communities can be added or removed) and will change from time to time depending on Social, Educational and Economic factors. For example, the OBCs are entitled to 27% reservations in public sector employment and higher education. In the constitution, OBCs are described as “socially and educationally backward classes”, and government is enjoined to ensure their social and educational development (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia). Two-thirds or more of the population of India are very backward, being illiterate and living in utter poverty. Their disadvantages derive from the fact that their status is ascribed to them by birth in certain *castes*, creeds and tribal groups. Their problems can be understood only in terms of the basic character of Indian society which consists of a multitude of *closed* status groups with unequal ranks, each with its own privileges and disabilities supported by traditional sanctions.

As already stated there are three broad divisions among the backward classes.. The first two groups are listed in the Constitution while the third group is unlisted and loosely defined; it is least homogeneous. As a result the problem of the other backward classes is very complicated and very difficult to deal with. While it is possible to have an all-India list of the Scheduled Castes on the basis of untouchability and the Scheduled tribes on the basis of their way of life, it is impossible to have any such list for the other backward class.

While the term ‘backward classes’ has not been defined by the Indian Constitution, the characteristics of backwardness are described here and there and also sometimes the categories are mentioned. Article 15 (4) speaks of the socially and educationally backward. Article 16 (4)

uses the term “backward class” and speaks of inadequate representation in services. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. Article 23 mentions forced labour. Article 45 mentions free and compulsory education. Article 46 mentions the weaker sections of the people and includes in that expression the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Article 340 empowers the state to investigate the condition of the backward classes and to help them by grants etc. Thus, the Constitution has accepted the following elements of backwardness; illiteracy and lack of education, poverty, exploitation of labor, non-representation in services and untouchability (Kuppuswamy 1984:192-193). The then Left Front Government. of West Bengal had declared more than one crore and seventy two lakh Muslims would get the privileges of reservation in services and posts due to their backwardness. In the recent declaration the state Govt. has included 86% Muslims to the total Muslim population of the state in to the OBC lists. The then West Bengal Left Govt. had further categorized these OBC Muslim Groups into two broad categories, viz. ‘Category-A’ denoting ‘More Backward’ and ‘Category-B’ implying ‘Backward’ on the basis of their relative backwardness. All total 53 groups of Muslim at present have been declared as OBCs and among those groups forty nine are declared as ‘More Backward’ and the rest four groups are ‘Backward’.

Abdal, Baidya Muslim, Basni or Bosni, Beldar Muslim, Bepari or Byapari Muslim, Bhatia Muslim, Bhatiyara, Chowduli, Chutor Mistri, Dafadar, Dhukre, Dhunia, Fakir or Sain, Gayen, Ghosi, Hajjam, Hawari, Jamadar, Jolah (Ansari-Momin), Kalander, Kan, Kasai, Khotta Muslim, Laskar, Mahaldar, Majhi or Patni Muslim, Mal Muslim, Mallick, Midde, Molla, Muchi or Chamar Muslim, Muslim Barujibi or Barui, Muslim Biswas, Muslim Haldar, Muslim Mali, Muslim Mondal, Muslim Piyada, Muslim Sanpui or Sapui, Nashya-Sekh, Nehariya, Nikari, Patidar, Penchi, Rajmistri, Rayeen or Kunjra, Sardar, Shershabadia, Siuli and Tutia have been placed in ‘Category-A’ or ‘More Backward’ class.

Moreover the rest of the four groups of Muslims viz. *Darji or Ostagar or Idrishi, Dhali, Pahadia-Muslim and Tal-Pakha Benia* fall under ‘Category-B’ or ‘Backward’ class as per the notification (No.6309-BCW/MR-84/10 Dated on 24-09-2010) prepared by the Backward Classes

Welfare Department, The then Government of West Bengal and also as per the data given in *Ananda bazar Patrika* dated 2nd October. 2010.

After the defeat of the then Left Govt. which had already declared some groups of Muslims, residing in West Bengal, as underprivileged and socio-economically backward and also included in the existing OBC list of West Bengal into two categories which have already been mentioned above, again after coming in power the newly formed Trinomool Congress Govt. of West Bengal has further conducted a sample survey to find out the comparative backwardness of the underprivileged sections of the people, belonging to the Muslim community, who had been bypassed from the inclusion into the previous lists, but with the endeavor of the present Chief Minister of this state these deprived sections of the people have been included in the latest list of backward classes on the basis of the report of the investigation, and in addition to Notification No. 6309-BCW, dated on 24th September, 2010, the Governor of this state also approved to group the specified classes into the list of OBC category-A and OBC category-B.

The various groups, among the Muslims of West Bengal, who fall under category-A indicating extreme backwardness are *Bhangi, Dhatri/Dai/Dhaity, Gharami, Goldar/Golder, Halsana, Kayal, Naiya, and Shikari/Sikari*.

Beside the above mentioned class of people *Abdal, Akunji/Akan/Akhan, Bag, Chaprashi, Deptari, Dewan, Dhabak, Gazi, Khan, Kolu Muslim (Shah, Sahaji, Sadhukhan, Mondal, Malita/Malitha/Malitya, Mistri, Paik, Pailan, Purkait, Sana, Sareng, Sarder, Sarkar, Tarafdar, Mouli and Sepai* have been included in Category-B of the comparatively less backward class of Muslims according to the Notification No. 1673-BCW /MR-209/11 dated on 11th May, 2012.

Table: 3. Social Hierarchy of the Muslim Groups

Rank or Stratum	Status in local Society	Name of the Social Groups	Nature of Traditional Occupation	Relative Position in Social Hierarchy	Religious Sects	
Upper	<i>Borojat or Miya</i>	<i>Sayyad</i>	Landowner, Priesthood	Highest	<i>Hanafi</i>	<i>Sunni</i>

	<i>or Mina</i> (Aristocrats)		Religious teaching			
		<i>Mir</i>	Landowner, Priesthood	Comparatively Highest	"	"
		<i>Shah Fakir</i>	Religious mendicants	High	"	"
		<i>Sharif-Shaik</i>	Landowner, Businessmen	High	"	"
		<i>Sharif-Pathan</i>	Ruler, Warrior, Soldier, Landowner	High	"	"
Lower	<i>Nichujat</i> <i>or</i> <i>Garosthi</i>	Common <i>Shaik</i>	Cultivators and workers	Intermediate position between High and Low	"	"
		Common <i>Pathan</i>	" "	" "	"	"
		<i>Bakho</i>	Growers and Vegetable sellers	Low	"	"
		<i>Julaha</i>	Weavers	Low	"	"
		<i>Dhunia</i>	Cotton Crushers	Low	"	"
		<i>Osta or Hajam</i>	Berber (performing circumcision or <i>Khatna</i> rite of the Muslims)	Low	"	"
Lowest	<i>Chhotojat</i> <i>or</i> <i>Katua</i> (Degraded)	<i>Dhai</i>	Scavenging	Lowest	"	"
		<i>Fakir</i>	Begging (Professional beggar)	Lowest	"	"

Note: The group *Badia* Muslims are considered as different category as they belong to *Ahel-e Hadish* sect.

Source: Mondal, 1991: 220

But disappointingly, sociological and anthropological research studies on the Muslim society are inadequate or negligible causing wide gap in our acquaintance about this group of people. The Sacher committee report comments: “Sociological studies on the social structure of Muslims in India have emphasized on the presence of descent based social stratification among them. Features of the Hindu caste system, such as hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation have been found to be amply present among the Indian Muslims as well. The Census of India, 1901 listed 133 social groups wholly or partially Muslim. The present day Muslim Society in India is divided into four major groups: (i) the *Ashrafs* who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan, (ii) the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam, (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes, *Bhangi* (scavenger), *Mehtar* (sweeper), *Chamar* (tanner), *Dom* and so on.”

These four groups are usually placed into two broad categories, namely, ‘*ashraf*’ and ‘*ajlaf*’. The former, meaning noble, includes all Muslims of foreign blood and converts from higher castes while ‘*ajlaf*’ meaning degraded or unholy, embraces the ritually clean occupational groups and low ranking converts. In Bihar, U.P and Bengal, *Sayyads*, *Sheikhs*, *Moghuls* and *Pathans* constitute the ‘*ashrafs*’. The ‘*ajlaf*’, are carpenters, artisans, painters, grazers, tanners, milkmen etc.⁸ According to the Census of 1901, the *ajlaf* category includes ‘the various classes of converts who are known as *Nao* Muslim in Bihar and *Nasya* in North Bengal. It also includes various functional groups such as that of the *Jolaha* or weaver, *Dhunia* or cotton-carder, *Kulu* or oil-presser, *Kunjra* or vegetable-seller, *Hajjam* or barber, *Darzi* or tailor, and the like.’⁹ The 1901 Census also recorded the presence of a third category called *Arzal*: “It consists of the very lowest castes, such as the *Halalkhor*, *Lalbegi*, *Abdal*, and *Bediya*...” Muslims, therefore, are not a single homogenous community in India. According to the Anthropological Survey of India, over 350 regional or ethno-linguistic Muslim groups exist in India. A majority of Indian Muslims are Sunni, existing mainly in northern India while, according to one estimate, approximately 10–15

per cent of Indian Muslims are *Shias*. There are four major Sunni schools of law – *Hanafi*, *Hanbali*, *Maliki* and *Shafi*. *Shias* follow their own codified laws, which differ from Sunni interpretations.

Cultural diversity among Muslims – including attitudes, habits, languages and traditions – and a non-uniform diffusion of Islam over the centuries has resulted in a variety of Muslim laws and customary practices within Muslim communities in India. There is a general notion that the Muslim community is influenced by Muslim law or *Shari'a*. This implies that Muslim families and communities are, in some way, uniquely different from non-Muslims. A closer scrutiny, however, does not bear out this assumption.

With reference to law, a woman's right to family property – pro-women legislation from classical Islamic law – is seldom practiced, due to social prejudice and resistance towards the notion of women's property rights. Yet the Hindu practice of dowry – with its extremely negative implications for women – has been adopted by Muslim communities in Bihar, for example; and by *Moplah* Muslims in Kerala. Assamese Muslims have incorporated Hindu marriage customs where marriage dates are fixed in consultation with an astrologer or *panjika* and the ritual purificatory bath given to both bride and bridegroom derives from Hindu practice; and the *Sakka* community from Uttar Pradesh combines the symbolic fire ritual (a traditionally Hindu custom) with Muslim practices as part of its wedding ceremony.

The wide variety of customary practices indicates that Muslim communities have either discarded strict adherence to the *Shari'a*, or reconciled customary practices with it. By doing so, they have preserved a Muslim identity which is in consonance with and closer to the dominant (i.e. Hindu) culture. Such a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultural practice is a distinctive feature of Indian composite culture and belies the notion that Muslim communities or Muslim women's status in those communities is defined solely by Islam.

Islam, therefore, in practice is rich and diverse, and more eclectic than its orthodox theological dimensions (Kazi 1999:04). Internal differentiation within the Muslim community is a reality. Several studies over the years have distinguished three broad groups within Muslims that roughly correspond to high castes, OBCs, and SCs in the Hindu community. These are *ashraf*, *ajlaf*, and *arzal*. In large data sets used by the Sachar Committee, only the Muslim-general and Muslim-OBCs could be meaningfully distinguished. Broadly, the conditions of

Hindu-OBCs were found to be better than those of the Muslim-general population, who in turn were somewhat better than the Muslim-OBCs. Thus, the ‘socio-economic hierarchy’ among these SRCs is reasonably clear: Hindu-OBCs were at the top, followed by the Muslim-general community, and then Muslim OBCs. Thus, if reservation is seen as the policy option, a ‘most backward’ class (MBC) status for *arzal* would probably make sense.

This is not to suggest that these ‘caste’ identities among Muslims are frozen in time. There is a considerable degree of flux in the way caste, religious, and economic identities interact and mutate (Basant and Shariff 2010: 04-05).

Concluding Observations

The Muslims of India as well as of West Bengal hitherto remains unexplored and for this we have very inadequate and little knowledge about their society because of social scientists, scholars, academicians, planners, researchers and social activists etc. who have not paid as much attention to the Muslims as it deserves.

Although Islam condemns the concept of social stratification among its followers and its philosophy emphasizes on equality and universal brotherhood among its devotee. But in empirical study the system of social stratification is very prominent and is differentiated into various groups and subgroups along ethnic, social and cultural lines and are ordered in a stratified social order.

The segmentation in the Muslim society and the system of social stratification therein is a situational development which is inconsistent with the egalitarian norms of the Islamic social system. It is very unfortunate and disheartening to note that we hardly know about their society, economy, culture, social organization, social structure, social problems, social change and development and gender studies of the Muslims of India. Most of the studies basically advocates towards Islamic theology, ideology, laws, religious reformatory movements, historical perspectives and so on.

Sociological and social anthropological studies on the Indian Muslims in general and particularly the Muslim of West Bengal pertaining to their society, subsistence economy, culture, identity and ethnicity are negligible and inadequate which have caused lacunae in our understanding and perception. Although in recent past a few studies on the said community were published but even

those are meager to fill the gap in our understanding and knowledge about their social structure, and to examine their horizontal and vertical division manifested into different regional, cultural, status and ethnic groups. Some empirical sociological literature suggests that the conception of Muslim society as divided into two big categories, '*ashraf*' and '*ajlaf*', is a gross over-generalization of the existing reality. The '*ashraf-ajlaf*' dichotomy presents a suitable set of values to people, and people do fit themselves into this structure. But the factual units of social stratification are the caste-analogues, and the day-to-day interactions between diverse folks in any local community are determined by their membership of the caste-analogue rather than by the broad categories. It must be said that micro-level empirical quantitative as well as qualitative research work that would have been very helpful to the researchers, scholars, academicians, planners, administrators, policy makers and other interested people to be acquainted about the socio-economic and political dynamics of this theoretically monolithic and empirically diversified communities and also to recognize the Muslim society from the underneath.

In any local region or society the Muslim inhabitants are divided into a numeral of societal groups which are equivalent to castes among Hindus. These caste-analogues are small, and they are named groups of persons characterized by inherited membership, endogamy, and unambiguous way of life, which every now and then includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation which they have been practicing since time immemorial and is generally coupled with a more or less different ceremonial status in a hierarchical structure of social ladder. People belonging to miscellaneous caste-analogues are likely to behave in a different way and to have special, norms, mores, ideals, folkways, customs, ethics, morals and values to some extent. Therefore, the study of social stratification and Muslim society is the caste-analogue which constitutes a more significant logical component of the society. Social stratification among the Muslims in any local area or society presents a greatly composite representation.

Endnotes:

[1] Anandabazar Patrika, 2nd Oct.'2010,(A Bengali Daily, Kolkata.)

[2] Census of India, 2001, Government of India, New Delhi.

[3] Notification no. 6309-BCW/MR-84/10, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal, 24 September 2010.

[4] Notification no. 1673-BCW /MR-209/11, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal, 11th May, 2012.

[5] Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, “Other Backward Class”, Viewed on 20 September 2011. Available online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other_Backward_Class

References:

[6] Besant, Rakesh and Shariff, Abusaleh, (2010) “The State of Muslims in India: An Overview” in *Oxford Handbook of Muslims: Empirical and Policy Perspectives*, eds. R. Besant and A. Shariff, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.04-05.

[7] GOI, 2006, Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India – A Report, Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, New Delhi, pp. 189-190 & 92-93.

[8] Hasan, Zoya and Menon, Ritu, (2004) *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.07

[9] Kazi, Sima, (1991), *Muslim Women in India*, London, UK: Minority Rights Group International, p. 04.

[10] Kumar, Vijay, (2011) *Status of Other Backward Classes in India*, New Delhi: Alfa Publication, p. 33.

[11] Kuppaswamy, B, (1984), *Social Change in India*, Ghaziabad (U.P.): Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., pp. 192-193.

- [12] Moinuddin, S. A. H, “*Problems of Identification of Muslim OBCs in West Bengal*”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, New Delhi, Vol. 38, No. 46, Nov. 15-21, 2003, p.4905.
- [13] Mondal, Sekh.Rahim, “Social Stratification Among the Muslims of North Bengal” in *Social Stratification, Hierarchy and Ethnicity in North-East India*, eds. R.K. Bhadra and S.R. Mondal, Delhi: Daya Publications, 1991, p. 220.
- [14] _____, “Social Structure, OBCs and Muslims’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, New Delhi, Vol. 38, No. 46, Nov. 15-21 2003, pp. 4892-4893.
- [15] Rahaman, Md. Taimur and Bhuimali Anil, (2011), *Indian Muslims and their Economy*, Delhi: Abhijit Publications, p.03-04.