

# Behind Under-representation of Muslims in higher education

## A case study of West Bengal

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### Abstract

The Muslims in West Bengal, like most other states in India, are under-represented in higher education compared to their proportion in population. The present study, undertaken through review of literature including previous studies combined with information collected through interviews of Muslim students, alumni and intellectuals, is intended to examine the reasons behind this prevailing imbalance in a state known for its pursuance of secular culture and politics. Among the special features of West Bengal Muslims, the principal is that they live mostly in backward rural areas that are marked by under-development in almost all aspects, including glaring deficit of educational infrastructure. Economically Muslims in West Bengal are among the most backwards in the state, belonging to the lowest strata of land ownership with nominal access to white collar jobs. Politically they never have proper representation in the corridors of power, and hence lack necessary voice to raise issues related to the lack of basic amenities that are denied to the community since partition that ensued largescale migration of middle class Muslims to the other side of the fence. The ruling elite of the state, irrespective of political colours, are dominated by the upper caste *bhadraloks* who have inherent anti-Muslim bias, which is reflected not only in their indifference to improve upon the basic educational infrastructure in the Muslim-majority blocks, but more so by their adverse attitude towards independent endeavors to improve educational facilities coming from among the community. All these not only severely restrict access to higher education of the Muslims in the state, but also undermine their motivation and initiatives to alter the imbalance.

### Background

The Muslim population in India suffer from under-representation in higher education (college-level and beyond), which is significant as it defines the community's rather low presence in civil and other important services and in the legislative and policy-making bodies, thereby undermining its role in the social, economic and political lives of the country. If we look at the state of affairs in West Bengal, where Muslims constitute 27 percent of the state population, their enrolment in college education counts only 11 percent and it remains so from 2012-13 till

2018-19, data for which is recently available through the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE). The obvious question is why the community's participation is so low in colleges and more so higher institutions beyond that? Why does the most numerous religious minority in India lag behind others, even the SC-STs, in proportional representation in the field of education?

Although a pan-Indian phenomena, the under-representation of Muslims in higher education needs to be seen in the historical backgrounds of the respective states under study. It is necessary particularly in view of the fact that West Bengal was carved out of united Bengal, a Muslim-majority province in the British raj, during the partition of India in 1947 and the impact of partition had been quite deep-rooted in the socio-economic development of different communities of the state. So to get at the root of the problem we need to discuss the impact of partition on the subsequent development of the Muslim community in this part of Bengal.

### **The historical backdrop**

As we know, the western part of the Bengal province being Hindu-majority became part of India, while the eastern part with overwhelming Muslim population went with Pakistan. This division of Bengal on religious line created a number of problems, the principal one being the exodus of religious minorities from both parts, i.e. Hindus from east to west and Muslims from west to east. The large-scale migration, either by force or by choice, affected the growth and development of both the communities in all respects.

As pointed out by an eminent intellectual (Prof. Miratun Nahar), the main flow of Muslims from West Bengal to East Pakistan comprised of middle class erudite people, who were settled in Kolkata during the British raj since the city developed as the first capital of the raj and was the biggest centre of economic, cultural and educational activities of eastern India. Prior to independence, the province had Muslim Prime Ministers and mixed cabinets of Hindu and Muslim ministers. Communal harmony prevailed in the province until the 'Great Calcutta Killings' that took place in the city in 1946 just prior to independence and shattered the confidence of peaceful co-existence of the communities. This provoked a large section of the Muslim population to leave Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal in the wake of partition, while similar exodus of Hindus took place from east to west.

As an immediate impact of partition, the middle class intelligentsia of both communities switched over to the other part of Bengal. So as Bengali Hindu middle class massively migrated to West Bengal, the Muslim middle class opted to leave this part and settle in East Pakistan. In fact, the migration of Hindu middle class from the eastern part resulted into large number of positions lying vacant in East Pakistan opening up huge opportunity for educated Muslims to be absorbed in government and other jobs in the newly created country. While at the same time the influx of a big mass of educated Hindu Bengalis from the eastern part who mainly settled in

Kolkata and surrounding areas considerably squeezed the employment opportunities of educated Muslims in West Bengal. So in both way, it was beneficial for the Muslim middle class to shift to Pakistan, while Muslim peasants and landless rural people remained in West Bengal unperturbed by the communal divide (riots did not have much effect on the rural polity). Consequently, according to one estimate, share of Muslim population in Kolkata dropped considerably, from 32.5% in 1941 to 14.4% in 1951 (Census reports quoted by Chatterjee 2007) and from the whole of West Bengal around 1.5 million Muslims migrated during the period 1947 to 1965 to East Pakistan (Chatterjee 2007). The partition drove out the creamy layer of the Muslim society of West Bengal. Those who stayed on were progressively marginalized in every aspect of life. Most importantly, most of the leading Muslim personalities in different fields, including political and cultural, preferred to settle in East Bengal leaving the largely illiterate rural masses almost leaderless and without a voice.

This historical backdrop seems to be at the root of the perpetual backwardness of the Muslim population in West Bengal, not only in the field of education, but in all other spheres as well. Further, under the impact of partition and consequent communal tensions against the Hindus in East Pakistan, the Hindu population of West Bengal including the upper caste *bhadraloks* nurture biasness against or remain unconcerned to some extent or other to the hugely impoverished Muslim population of the state. The Hindu upper caste intelligentsia who dominated the social and political scene in West Bengal since independence being the leading figures in politics of all hues as well as in academic and administrative fields seem to have never paid adequate attention to the progress of Muslim population in the state particularly in the field of education. This is glaringly reflected in the lack of educational facilities so far existing in the Muslim-majority districts and blocks of the state.

Some studies done on the status of Muslims in West Bengal in recent times carry glaring evidences of lack of infrastructure in Muslim dominated areas, which is the basic requirement for uplift of educational level of the largely rural minority population. One important factor in West Bengal, unlike other parts of India, is that the Muslim population is highly concentrated in the rural areas of some of the backward districts. Hence, special efforts need to be taken to uplift their standards, both economic and educational. Before coming to the present status of education among Muslims in West Bengal, let us have a look at their demographic pattern of living and socio-economic conditions. The present status of the Muslims in Bengal are mainly drawn basing on Census 2011 and SNAP-Pratichi report 2016.

### **Socio-economic status of Muslims in West Bengal**

According to the Census 2011, West Bengal with its Muslim population at 27 percent has two Muslim majority districts— Murshidabad (66.3 percent) and Malda (51.3 percent). Among the 341 blocks in rural Bengal 65 blocks have Muslim majority. The average size of a Muslim family

is found to be 4.8 (SNAP-Pratichi 2016) in rural West Bengal whereas it is 4.5 for general population (Census 2011), and 5.2 in urban Muslim population as against 4.4 for general population. So the size of average Muslim families is not considerably different from general population to have negative impact on their capability to spend on children's education as is assumed by some quarter.

The major factors affecting the standard of education of Muslims in West Bengal seems to be their predominant rural background and socio-economic backwardness. While 32 percent of West Bengal population live in urban areas, only 19 percent of Muslims live in cities and towns. That is 81 percent of the Muslims live in rural areas. Unlike the all India scenario, proportion of Muslims living in rural areas in West Bengal is very high and as a general trend, rural masses have limited scope of representation at the higher stratum of the society, and thus lesser ability to influence the state of affairs in their favour.

Economically, for a large majority of the Muslims of West Bengal, manual and menial work is the only option of livelihood. According to Census 2011 data, among the Muslims in rural West Bengal about 47 per cent of all who work belong to the category of either agricultural worker or 'daily workers' in non-agriculture. They are at the bottom of the economic ladder. Importantly, in this category, the percentage of daily wage workers in non-farm work is uniformly much higher than that of agricultural workers in all the districts.

The SNAP-Pratichi survey (2016) conducted in 97017 households (79913 rural and 17104 urban) seems to have revealed a closer picture on the status of Muslims of West Bengal. The survey shows that about 80 per cent of the Muslim households in rural West Bengal reported their household income as Rs.5000 or less per month, which is close to the cut-off level of income for poverty line for a family of five. What is even more striking is that 38.3 per cent Muslim households in rural West Bengal earn Rs.2500 or less per month, which is far below the level of poverty line. At the other end of the spectrum, only 3.8 per cent households reported to earn Rs.15,000 and above per month. Although 41.5 per cent of the rural Muslim households were found to own some land other than their homestead land, only 23.5 per cent households reported to own crop land besides the homestead land even after benefitting from the land reform measures undertaken during the left regime. The survey shows that only 1.55 per cent Muslim households' main income earner is a school teacher. Another 1.54 per cent households reportedly depend on regular public sector jobs as the main source of income. Regular salaried jobs in the private sector are also a rarity – only one per cent households are fortunate to have such jobs as their main source of income.

According to an academician (Prof. Maidul Islam interview), Muslims in West Bengal benefited from land reforms though its impact was only marginal. After the implementation of the Ranganath Misra Commission Report, a substantial population of Muslims, who are OBCs in

West Bengal, now have greater access to public education and government jobs. According to Prof. Islam, in south India, the socio-economic situation of Muslims is relatively better for three reasons. First, Partition and the flight of the Muslim elite to Pakistan had little effect on the community there. Second, significant sections of Muslims here were classified as OBCs during the colonial and the post-colonial period, and they were able to benefit from reservation in education and jobs alongside the strong OBC movement. Finally, the oil boom of the 1970s encouraged Muslims there to migrate to West Asian countries for better jobs.

### **Status of Muslim education from secondary sources/literatures**

In terms of percentages of population that has completed certain levels of education, Muslims in West Bengal lag behind others, which is revealed by the comparisons between the primary survey (SNAP-Pratichi) and the Census 2011 figures. But there is a contradiction. Among the literate Muslims, only 2.7 per cent hold graduate degree or above. But at the elementary level of education, Muslims in West Bengal are not behind others. According to the NUEPA (National University of Educational Planning and Administration) report, in the three years 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10, respectively 28.13, 28.28 and 32.30 of every 100 primary school children in West Bengal were Muslims, which were more than their share in the State's population. The above figures for Muslim students' enrolment at the primary level in the state are better than the national average of 10.49 per cent (in 2007-08), 11.03 per cent (in 2008-09) and 13.48 per cent (in 2009-10) respectively, while Muslims form 13.43 per cent of India's population (The Hindu, 14.04.2011). But the percentage of Muslims students are declining at the higher levels of school education. According to the NUEPA report, in 2011, out of a total of 10,04,931 Madhyamik (secondary) examinees in West Bengal, 2,53,779 (25.27%) were Muslim students while out of 6,38,240 Higher Secondary examinees, 1,48,777 (19.85%) were Muslims. (Rahaman and Barman 2015) Then happens the biggest drop out: in enrolment at the under-grad level Muslims students are found to be only 11 percent. Nearly half of the Muslim students appearing in HS exams were disappearing in college admissions.

So there seems to be no lack of inspiration among the Muslims in West Bengal to educate their children at the primary level, but the downfall in enrolment starts at the upper levels for various reasons. Till Madhyamik (secondary) level Muslim examinees are equal to or more than their proportion in state population surmounting the infrastructural constraints manifested in existence of lesser numbers of secondary and higher secondary schools in the Muslim-majority areas. While an average 10.6 Secondary and Higher Secondary schools exist for one lac population in the state, it is much lower in Uttar Dinajpur (6.2), Murshidabad (7.2) and Malda (8.5), the three districts where Muslims constitute very high percentage of the population. There is a clear inverse relationship between this indicator of availability of schools and concentration of Muslims in a block. The educational deprivation of the Muslim community is also starkly revealed from the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) that should be 30:1 as per norm, but

remain higher in Muslim majority areas in general. Among the 50 Blocks where PTR is far above the norm, 26 Blocks (52 per cent) are blocks with concentration of Muslim population. The PTRs of the surveyed (SNAP-Pratichi) Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools in Muslim-dominated areas are generally found much on the higher side (on an average 57 for Higher Secondary schools and 46 for Secondary Schools).

As the division of students into specialized streams of study begins at the higher secondary level, it is vital that all higher secondary schools offer the full range of choices to all its students, including the arts, the sciences, commerce, vocational skills, agricultural science, home science, and so on. With the uneven distribution of higher secondary schools at the district and block levels, naturally, the opportunity to explore their natural inclinations is lost to a large section of students coming out of secondary school. It is not surprising to see that the three districts where the number of schools offering science as an option was lowest for per lakh population are Uttar Dinajpur (1), Malda (1.3) and Murshidabad (1.3); two of these have a Muslim majority in their population, and one has almost a 50 per cent population share of Muslims. The figures are close to half of the state average (2.4) and three to four times less than the district with the highest number of schools offering science, e.g. Purba Medinipur (4.1). Similarly, Murshidabad (0.3) suffers the most in terms of lacking the option to study commerce, while the state average is at 1.1 schools for one lac population.

Now coming to the domain of higher education, the All India Survey of Higher Education(AISHE) 2018-19 depicts a gloomy picture in general of West Bengal as it reveals that West Bengal has only 13 colleges per lakh population, while at the all India level 28 colleges exist for 1 lakh population (in the age-group 18-23 years). So the educational infrastructure at the upper level is much poor in general in this state and those are mostly concentrated in the cities and towns. The following table shows the distribution of universities and colleges in the districts of West Bengal in proportion to population aged between 19 to 29 years.

**Table: I Distribution of universities and colleges in the districts of West Bengal**

District name	Universities	Colleges	Population aged between 19 to 29 years	Population per college
Darjeeling	1	16	396874	24805
Jalpaiguri	0	18	833222	46290
Cooch Behar	0	16	577531	36096
Uttar Dinajpur	0	7	534659	76380
Dakshin Dinajpur	0	9	324401	36045
Malda	1	12	762903	63575
Murshidabad	0	28	1415711	50561
Birbhum	1	17	692511	40736
Bardhaman	1	33	1586309	48070

Nadia	2	19	1057557	55661
North 24 Parganas	1	45	2051717	45594
Hooghly	0	32	1087464	33983
Bankura	1	22	694480	31567
Purulia	1	20	540780	27039
Paschim Medinipur	1	31	1185353	38237
Purba Medinipur	0	19	1075694	56615
Howrah	1	17	997841	58697
Kolkata	11	81	880276	10868
South 24 Parganas	1	38	1735877	45681
West Bengal	25	480	18431160	38398

Source: University Grants Commission and Education Directorate, Govt. Of West Bengal and Census, 2011.

It can be seen from the above table that while Kolkata has 11 universities, the Muslim-dominated districts of Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur together have one university which was set up in Malda only in 2008. The population density (of young people aged between 19 to 29 years) per college was more than 50,000 in all the three districts, while the state average is 38,398. The uneven distribution of universities, and the considerable distance between district colleges and the universities they are affiliated to, also hinders attempts to access higher education for many, especially for those who live in districts which do not have a university of their own.

The situation is further complicated for the poor, who cannot afford the extra cost of room and boarding even if they can afford to get admission in colleges, and for women, whose families are unwilling to let them stay far from home. In addition, connections at appropriate level and social capital matter when a college has to cater a large pool of potential applicants as all the candidates aspiring for college education cannot be accommodated in the existing (paucity of) infrastructure. As most of the rural Muslim families in West Bengal are located towards the bottom of the social hierarchy with little opportunity to forge such connections, their children are deemed to be excluded.

It is an established fact that many colleges in the districts are running with poor infrastructure, and even without permanent teachers in many subjects. The subjects in which honours degrees are offered are also limited, particularly in basic sciences. Students who are intellectually capable of higher education but cannot afford to travel to or arrange lodging in the cities (or in districts with better universities) are thus being systematically excluded, to the cumulative loss of society as a whole. Muslims in general and Muslim girls in particular suffer from the lack of access to higher education in such a scenario resulting in high drop outs.

One remarkable aspect of the AISHE report is that in West Bengal Muslim girls have overtaken the boys in enrolling in higher education institutions notwithstanding the socio-economic and cultural constraints the girls face in achieving higher education. In 2012-13, from the Muslim

community 72,290 girls were enrolled in higher education institutions against 93,640 boys; but the gender balance was reversed in 2017-18, when 117,635 girls were enrolled against 113,100 boys. In the latest AISHE 2018-19, the gap in the number Muslim girls enrolled (120,913) further widened than Muslim boys (111,257). Hence, the common notion that Muslim girls are lagging in higher education is not true at least in West Bengal scenario. They seem keener to continue in higher education in spite of facing greater constraints to come forward to undertake higher education.

### **Observations from previous studies**

Not many studies have been done on Muslim higher education in India. And importantly, mostly Muslim scholars had undertaken such studies, while non-Muslim academicians much more numerous in West Bengal have largely ignored the important issue of Muslim education, which is one of the main constraint in mainstreaming the principal minority community in the state, although many of them are avowed leftists and known to be hard-core secular. Another important observation is that the Muslim scholars are highly critical of the community's inner lapses while assessing the reasons behind lack of education in the community.

Scholars studying problems of Muslim education observed that *'Indian Muslims are not having positive attitude towards modern commercial education'*; *'Muslim students do not have access to quality education thus end up with low paid jobs and less remunerative employment'*; *'benefits of mainstreams education are either not available to them or they, themselves, have decided to remain away from them (due to numerous reasons)'* (Shazli and Asma, 2015). They also observed that due to the influence of ancient traditions and practices in Muslim society especially in remote areas women loose courage from the childhood and become dependable on men. Parents also discourage their female children to undertake higher studies. Muslim women suffer more because they are not given enough freedom and hardly have access to higher education. Even the primary level education is not easily accessible to them. There is also lack of schools and colleges in the areas where there is a higher concentration of the Muslim population. Girls are enrolled in nearby schools and are not sent far off to study due to safety reasons (Ibid).

Some researchers found concrete relation between the socio-economic conditions of the overwhelmingly large number of Muslims and the state of their education and marked the community's socio-economic backwardness as *'the darkest and most discouraging aspect of life of the Muslims in the state'* (Rahaman and Barman 2015). Others studying the status of Muslim women observed that their 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 their normal progress in the field of economy, political



empowerment, education, knowledge and culture (Hossain 2013). Researchers also found presence of extreme horizontal inequality in public provisions wherever minority concentration is high in West Bengal (Das, Kar and Kayal, 2011). Musharuddin (2018) inferred that young Muslim females are going through a 'revolutionary change' in educational achievement breaking the age-old barriers, while dropouts among Muslim males at the post-elementary education are a major issue.

Some researchers even observed that Muslim performance in West Bengal was the worst during the period 2004-05 to 2010-11, coinciding with the Left rule in the state and from the point of empowerment of the Muslims, when West Bengal was at the bottom of the list of states (Sattar 2012). The community is steeped into poverty, with low educational level depending largely on self-employment having low-income activities (Fazal and Kumar 2013). It is also observed that feelings of discrimination are evident which may have an impact on the educational mobility of Muslims. 'Less ambitious attitude' of Muslim parents about educating their children, unequal opportunity (quality and quantity of school or in the labour market) (Bhalotra et al. 2010) along with socio-economic, historical and other factors have contributed to unequal educational achievements of Muslims in comparison to Hindus and other backward communities especially Scheduled Castes (SCs). These observations largely corroborate our study in this field.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this study was principally qualitative type interviewing of Muslim students, alumni and scholars. The interviews of students were based on structured questionnaire, while others were interviewed on the basis of some key questions.

1. Student respondents interviewed: total 42

Among them: a) Girls-22,      b) Boys- 20

Courses being pursued by them: a) Graduation- 39,   b) Post-graduation student-3

Annual family income: Below 1 lakh- 20;   1-2.5 lakh- 11; above 2.5 lakhs- 11

2. Alumni interviewed : 22                      a) Girls-6,      b) Boys- 16

Among them, courses completed: a) Graduation- 13

b) Masters- 7

c) PhD- 2

3. Social leaders and academicians- 10

Among them: Academicians (university professors) - 6

Researcher and social activists- 2

Writer and ex-professor-1

Ex-IPS officer, writer and social reformer- 1

The students and alumni respondents are selected randomly from two Muslim-majority areas, the first in Joynagar block of South 24 Parganas and the second in Barrackpore II block in North 24 Parganas, both areas are rural but not remote from Kolkata city. The scholars and experts were selected by their concern, study, research and activities on the issue of Muslim under-representation in higher education. Among them, some had taken active interest not only in identifying the problem, but also promoting education among Muslim community.

## **Inferences**

### **1. Behind Muslim students' lack of access to higher education**

#### **a) Economic factor is the principal constraint**

Our study reveals that the Muslim students lack access to higher education on many counts. The under-grad students interviewed mostly belong to low-income group families. Among the 42 students, 20 belong to families with an annual income below 1 lakh, 11 students within 1 lakh to 2.5 lakh and the rest above 2.5 lakhs. Except two, all have studied in government schools before entering college. All but one have studied in Bengali medium.

As schools are the launching pad for students' career, the recent trend among prosperous families not only in cities and towns, but even in villages is to explore good schools, which are mostly privately-run English medium schools for admitting their children. Parents from middle income and high income groups are ready to spend a lot of money for sending their wards to best schools, located in cities and towns. Often the families shift their residence to towns for this purpose only, or arrange lodging for their sons and daughters to stay in the town for higher studies. It is nonetheless important to note here that the quality of education offered by government schools have not been satisfactory, which we will discuss in the section below.

Significantly, among the 42 students interviewed only 7 opined that they would have preferred to be admitted in good schools, but could not do so for reasons beyond their control. Distance of good schools along with lack of financial ability to bear cost of education were the main reasons cited by them for not attempting to be admitted to good schools. As the problem like distance can easily be overcome if the family can provide necessary financial support, the principal bottleneck comes down to lack of financial ability of the family to support 'good' education, which is unfortunately not available in government schools now-a-days. With annual family income at below 2.5 lakhs for 31 students', it is no wonder that 80 percent of the student respondents do not nurture the ambition to be admitted in good schools that are far more

costly than government schools. If this is the situation for students residing in districts close to Kolkata, one can conceive the situation of students residing in Muslim-majority districts far away from Kolkata.

As the student respondents were asked about possible constraints in attaining higher education and causes blocking their access to higher education, in both cases, financial constraint is cited as the largest disadvantageous factor in attaining higher education. Distance of educational institutions, particularly the good ones, and lack of proper connections at the upper levels are cited as the other important reasons. The following tables shows the results of our survey.

**Table-II: Possible Constraints in Attaining Higher Education**

	Financial	Lack of connections at the upper levels	Access to good institutions	Religious discrimination	Others (specify)
No of students	30	12	6	6	8

**Table-III: What blocks your access to better educational facilities?**

	Financial	Distance;	Lack of family support	Social segregation	Lack of connection	Others
No of students	30	23	4	1	14	2

Among the alumni respondents also, all but two unambiguously mentioned economic backwardness as the principal constraining factor for the Muslims in accessing higher education. This finding from our primary data corresponds with the secondary data that reveals the overall lowly economic conditions of the Muslim population in West Bengal. But lack of infrastructure seems no less important as access to quality education at the initial stage goes a long way to aspire and achieve for higher education.

**b) Lack of infrastructure compounded by apathy of the ruling elite**

In this era of universal elementary education in India, why people are rushing to English medium private schools for building career of their children? The answer is simple. Quality education is not available in the government-aided schools. So when almost the entire new generation is going to schools, those studying at government sponsored schools are not getting proper education to continue and compete at the upper levels. This is true not only for majority of the Muslim children, but also for children of other socially and economically disadvantaged

communities. So the forward caste children are being sent to private schools and they remain far ahead of the mostly first generation learners from these disadvantaged communities.

Hence, the fundamental question (raised by several experts) is if elementary education fails to impart basic knowledge and create interests to learning among the children, how come they be able to reach the higher level. The lack of infrastructure in Muslim majority areas of West Bengal have already been discussed as revealed by earlier studies. Lack of quality education in government schools only multiply the crisis. A survey conducted by Centre of Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (Jalan 2010) took tests of class IV students from 240 government schools across 24 blocks in the state in order to assess the learning capability among them. The tests show extremely poor results as average marks obtained for Mathematics was 27.6 and for Bengali 21.7 percent, when the state mandated passing grade is minimum 34 percent marks. Noticeably, Muslim students performed below average and Murshidabad remain as the worst performer among the districts covered.

In fact, it is widely acknowledged that serious gap exists in the learning process in government schools in West Bengal that have no detention policy till class VIII since 2010 when the Left Front rule abolished the pass-fail system. So children admitted at the primary schools automatically sail through to class VIII and then it is discovered that many of them have not even learnt to read or write. Students from the educationally backward communities, particularly the first generation learners, suffer the most in this system.

So it is no wonder that drop-out rates among the Muslims increase as the students of the community automatically progress from primary to secondary level and a drastic drop out happen after the higher secondary examination. Astonishing is the attitude of the authorities towards initiatives taken by concerned persons from the community who try to improve the situation by their own initiatives.

Dr. Najrul Islam, IPS officer-turned writer, himself a resident of Murshidabad district, narrated the predicament of Muslim students of his district who aspire to join higher education institutes, most of which are located in the district town Baharampur. 90 percent of the town's population being Hindu, Muslim students and their parents coming from the rural areas suffer ignominy as they are denied accommodation or residence in the Hindu localities of the town. So Muslim students are forced either to stay in congested minority areas or drop their plan to continue education. Hence he took initiative to establish schools and educational institutions for higher education, including a university, in the district, but faced extreme apathy from the successive governments of the state. His case may be illuminating to show the attitude of the ruling elite in the state towards Muslim education.

Dr. Islam's case is not the only instance when enlightened Muslims faced government apathy to their endeavors to establish educational institutions by their own initiatives and funding. At

#### **The case of a crusader for Muslim education**

Dr. Nazrul Islam, coming from a poor landless family of a village of Murshidabad, toiled hard to become an IPS officer, and wrote 71 books, both fiction and non-fiction, several of them on the conditions of the Muslims. He earned accolades from different quarters for his literary activities and won the prestigious Ananda Puraskar, but fell from favour of successive governments because of his obstinate pursuance to uplift education of in the Muslim-majority district. He put forward a proposal to set up a University in the district first to the Left Front and then to TMC government, and proposed to collect all the funds required to do the same. Both the governments turned down his proposal to his dismay, while the same governments allowed other private players to establish universities in the state. He also proposed to introduce science stream in High Madrsas in his district and offered to collect necessary funds for creating laboratory facilities. But all his proposals for improving the educational standard were turned down by the concerned authorities. This made him so frustrated that he wrote in a book that both these governments do not want the Muslim community to advance in education. The book published in 2012 immediately drew the wrath of the government who ordered to proscribe the book. The High Court turned down the government order and the case is still continuing. He had retired from his services but his pension was withheld as a punishment. But he did not relent. He founded Basantapur Education Society, which is responsible for setting up several schools and colleges (one of them offering engineering courses) in the rural areas of the district that suffer most from lack of educational infrastructure.

least three more instances came to light when learned and well-established Muslims failed to get government affiliation for institutions established by them for a long time and had struggle for years just to get recognition from the appropriate board of education. In one such case, Abul Qasim Munshi, a public prosecutor of a reputed Kolkata court founded Society for Islamic Education (SIE) in South 24 Parganas in the year 1985 and established Sishu Bikash Academy, a Bengali medium, co-educational school to cater the educational needs of the poor people of the village. Failing to get affiliation from the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, SIE had to invoke Article 30 of the Constitution of India and reminded the government that Minorities, whether based on religion or language, had the right to establish and administer educational institution of their choice. He had to struggle for 15 years to get affiliation for the school from the Board of Secondary Education with a written declaration that the said school would never seek financial help from the government in the future. It is evident from the correspondence between Sishu Bikash Academy and the School Education Directorate that the government even declined scholarship facilities to underprivileged Muslim and SC students of the school. Such instances happening during the period of successive governments probably shows the pervasive indifference among the ruling elites, irrespective of their colours, towards removing the infrastructural backwardness, which is one of the main bottleneck to spread quality education among the Muslim population in the state.

## **2. Lack of motivation**

Lack of motivation seems another important factor restraining the young generation of the Muslim community to strive for higher education. In spite of poor economic condition and lack of infrastructure in Muslim-majority areas, Muslims could have attain better higher education, had they have strong motivation to do so. Although a number of scholarships are available and in West Bengal 90 percent of the Muslims fall under OBC category, and ostensibly eligible for reservation, Muslim youth in general suffer from motivational deficiency so far as higher education is concerned and are not forthcoming in availing the existing facilities. The question is why they lack the motivation for higher education. The problem seems to have several dimensions, the principal being the apparently bleak prospect of getting jobs that would justify their drive for higher education.

- a) The Muslim community in West Bengal, being more concentrated in backward rural areas, are mostly engaged in agriculture and petty business. Their presence in salaried white collar jobs in the state is so negligible and disproportionate that seems to automatically restrict their aspirations for such jobs that requires higher education. While the Sachar Committee report found 4.7 per cent Muslims (Groups A and B) and 2.1 per cent in (Groups C and D) in state government jobs, averaging about 3.4 per cent, the number increased to 5.7 percent in 2016. Although the increase of 2.3 percent in a decade is significant, it falls far behind the proportion of Muslim population in the state.

In the private sectors also the Muslims are rarely found in higher positions. Young Muslims, particularly from rural background, hardly find persons with good jobs in her/his community that might instill some confidence on their scope of entering in the job market.

- b) In the highly competitive job market, average Muslim youth educated in Bengali medium government schools rarely envision a good chance to compete with youths from general categories in the run to build up a career for reasons like: i) inability to get admission in good colleges due to poor performance in the school leaving examinations; ii) lack of fluency in English and a grasp in general knowledge (coming mostly from rural background and not-so-educated families) and ii) proper connections at the higher levels.
- c) Discrimination and anti-Muslim bias also restrain their entry into the highly limited job market, and act as an important deterrent factor to strive for higher education. Several respondents and experts expressed their dismay in the anti-Muslim bias still prevailing among the upper caste Hindu elites of West Bengal who control most of the higher positions in both public and private sectors.

Due to lack of motivation, most of the young boys drop out at certain level of education and opt for manual kind of jobs or enter into petty businesses for a livelihood, while girls are destined for marriage. While this is the general trend entailing high drop out before and after completion of school education, the youths entering colleges seem to have strong desire to continue education beyond graduation. In our survey, almost 80 percent of the young respondents have expressed their aspiration to continue study after graduation, and 17 percent aspired to continue beyond post-graduation, although many of them are not sure whether they would be able to do so.

### **3. Lack of political representation**

The pathetic situation of educational progress among the Muslim community could have probably been reversed to a considerable extent, had the community been politically empowered enabling it to voice long-standing deprivations of the community in different spheres including education. The state's Muslim leaders have never raised the issue of lack of basic infrastructures in education, health and other sectors in Muslim majority areas, although successive governments claimed to have safeguarded the interests of the minorities in the state. Significantly, none of the Muslim leaders has ever been placed in important portfolios in state cabinets unlike in Kerala where education department was headed by Muslim ministers for long. The reason may be that the community in West Bengal has no political party of its own as it has in Kerala. In all the political parties that ruled West Bengal since independence, leadership remains in the hands of upper caste Hindus, so much so that even in the Muslim-majority districts leadership of all major parties

rest with the Hindu upper caste. Gani Khan Chowdhury of the Congress party was probably the only exception, but he remained busy more in national politics, somehow overlooking his own community's problems at the grass root.

But why the Muslim leaders and eminent persons in different fields did not raise the issue of deprivation? The respondents, including the experts, opine that the political leaders being self-seeking persons always side with the upper caste leaders, to whom they owe their power. Other concerned eminent Muslims probably remain silent in the fear to be branded as 'communal' by raising the Muslim boggy. The ultimate result has been the continuing indifference by the ruling elite, which was brought to light for the first time by the Sachar Committee report in 2006. Henceforth the situation has not changed substantially as reflected by the continuing deficit in education-related infrastructure and the predicament faced by eminent Muslims in their efforts to uplift the state of education for the Muslim community.

#### 4. Discrimination

Religious discrimination remains as the crucial factor underlying continuing backwardness of the Muslim community in West Bengal. Among the young respondents, more than 50 percent suggested elimination of discrimination is necessary to alter the present imbalance of Muslim representation in higher education.

**Table IV: Measures necessary to alter Muslim under-representation in higher education**

Preference	What measures you think are necessary to alter the present imbalance of Muslim representation in higher education?				
	Reservation;	Financial assistance	Access to good institutions	Elimination of discrimination	others (specify)
1 <sup>st</sup>	4	8	22	5	3
2 <sup>nd</sup>	9	8	6	7	
3 <sup>rd</sup>	8	9	3	1	
4 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	2	9	

The erudite Muslim respondents are more vocal about the existence of discrimination in West Bengal that affect the educational aspiration and job opportunity of Muslim youths. Religious discrimination in West Bengal is not so explicit, but it exists and works in a more nuanced and subtle way. The problem could only be understood when the Muslims come out of their



community and try to gain foothold in the larger arena of social, economic and political lives. The way even the educated Muslims are denied residence in the *bhadralok* paras of Kolkata and other district towns is a concrete example of the deep-rooted bias against the largest minority community in this so-called progressive and secular state. The blunt refusal by the government authority to recognize and provide affiliations to educational institutions established by eminent Muslims in the Muslim-majority areas is another glaring example of the existence of discriminatory attitude at the highest administrative level of the state. Both these instances not only reveal existence of anti-Muslim bias, but have direct impact on the cause of advancing education among the Muslims.

Most of the young respondents (85 percent) said they never faced discrimination in their lives, but 50 percent felt elimination of discrimination one of the important factors to change the present scenario of Muslim under-representation in higher education. The fact is that the question of religious discrimination is a politically so sensitive in West Bengal that is not openly discussed and never admitted by the rulers and the upper caste *bhadraloks*, who are the social base of the ruling parties. It is easy to deny existence of religious discrimination here as it is not bluntly manifested in the public life, but is certainly felt as someone from the minority community wants to move upward.

#### **5. Cultural and religious constraints**

Cultural and religious constraints also exist to a certain extent in the path of educational advancement of the Muslim community. Early marriage is cited as the main familial custom inhibiting progress of education, particularly in case of girls. But the same is true for Hindu girls as well, particularly in the rural areas. The recent trend as manifested in the enrolment data (previously quoted) is that Muslim girls are entering higher education in greater numbers than their male counterpart, which is not happening in the other social categories. This is important in view of the traditional Muslim culture of keeping girls inside the house. Most of our young and alumni respondents do not find familial, social and religious customs, except early marriage, constraining the Muslim youths' entry into higher education. But many of the experts pointed out that religiosity is still a major factor in the progress of education among Muslims. Some are very critical of the kind of faith the Muslim community is still reposing on religion and the role of religious preachers inhibiting the growth of scientific outlook.

One of them (Writer Miratun Nahar) sharply pointed to the still prevalent religious belief that place prime importance to one's after-life (heaven) than his/her present existence as a big barrier for the advancement of the Muslim community. She quotes from the famous Bengali Muslim poet Nazrul Islam (the rebel poet incarcerated during the British rule) some lines that mean "We the Muslims, the Indian Muslims, spend our days with the consolation that even if we live under the shoes of others, our lives would be fulfilled once we reach the heaven." The

enlightened representatives of the community feel that such foolish ideas are greatly responsible to keep the Muslim population in the darkness of ignorance by killing the urge for new ideas and deterring the new generation from acquiring much needed scientific education and knowledge.

The IPS-turned-writer activist (Dr. Islam) opined that Muslims in West Bengal are powerless people as 'they do not have good schools of their own and many conservative Muslim clerics discourage Muslims to send their children to mainstream schools lest they go away from Islam. The wrong advice of the ultra-conservative clerics together with discrimination of large part of administration has made the Muslims much backward helpless people' (Islam, unpublished). These words might sum up the main factors behind Muslim under-representation in higher education.

### **Conclusion and way forward**

The factors behind Muslim community's under-representation in higher education are varied, but they are intertwined with each other and need to be looked into as a whole. The socio-economic backwardness of the community seems to be the basis of the problem while other factors make the situation more profound and intricate. The rural poor in general are marginalized and a neglected lot in our social fabric and the social segregation of the Muslim seem to have been the additional factor aggravating the situation. While the economic backwardness is easy to study and understand, the underlying social ostracization requires deeper study to grasp, particularly when it is practiced under the garb of secular and progressive jargons. In such a situation it is difficult to suggest certain remedial measures to alter the situation. If the learned and enlightened from the majority community deliberately keep their eyes close to even recognize the disease lest their role is exposed, how come remedial measures be successfully implemented.

Hence, until conscious efforts are undertaken to change the attitude of the upper echelon of the society, including the ruling elite of course, towards recognizing the problem of Muslim under-representation with a strong political will to alter the situation, no basic change in the continuing imbalance can be envisaged. The Sachar Committee was the first eye-opener and since then some more studies were undertaken bringing the issue of Muslim community's deprivation on several counts, including education, to the fore. But the response to the problem is still much inadequate as is evident from the latest AISHE (2018-19) report showing no alteration in the imbalance since 2012-13.

It is true that some positive steps have been taken towards improving Muslim representation in higher education in West Bengal. The establishment of Alia University and its new campus with a strength of 5000 students is a welcoming step. Institutions like Al Amin Mission, build up by private initiative, are imparting specialized courses and training to selected meritorious Muslim

students preparing them for competitive examination to enter courses like medical and engineering. So we are now getting more numbers of doctors and engineers from the Muslim community. A number of scholarships have been initiated by the state and central governments and most of the Muslim community has been covered by reservation. But 36 percent of the students interviewed are unaware of the scholarship facilities and only one third could avail the advantage of it. Reservations to jobs for Muslims within the OBC quota are applicable only for government recruitments, which are insignificant and infrequent. So these steps seem not enough to bring substantial change in the scenario and bring out the Muslim community out of the present impasse. Overall socio-economic development and complete removal of religious bias from the body politic of the state will go a long way to empower the Muslim community and definitely usher in changes enabling greater participation from the Muslim community in higher education.

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## SNAP-Pratichi survey report

With the passing of the Right to Education Act in 2010, it has been legally mandated that educational opportunities are to be created in every corner of the country. Being a democratic country, the deficits in the opportunities created need to be vigilantly tracked and the reasons behind the inconsistent coverage analysed. That is the only way to move forward towards inclusive progress. The National Policy on Education (NPE) also emphasises the need to remove disparities, and make equal access to educational opportunities possible by attending to the specific needs of those who have remained educationally marginalised so far.

2. The present survey reveals that nearly half of the adult Muslim population (47.7 per cent) in West Bengal are either functionally illiterate or could not complete the primary level of schooling, including schooling at Madrasa and Maktabas.

As evident from the school enrolment data, there appeared a substantial gap between growing aspirations among Muslims towards acquiring modern public education and the actual provision to realise such social ambitions. That the rate of enrolment in schools was very high in the areas with Muslim preponderance clearly showed that not only they were not averse to modern education but also that there was a clear lack of educational infrastructure in those areas.