

**COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT:  
THE MAKING OF A NEW MUSLIM IDENTITY IN WEST  
BENGAL SINCE 2006**

*Thesis Submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
for the Award of the Degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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I, Sk Abdul Matin, hereby do declare that the thesis titled "Community, Mobilization and Development: The Making of a New Muslim Identity in West Bengal Since 2006" submitted by me at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

Sk Abdul Matin

### Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled "Community, Mobilization and Development: The Making of a New Muslim Identity in West Bengal Since 2006" submitted by **SK ABDUL MATIN** at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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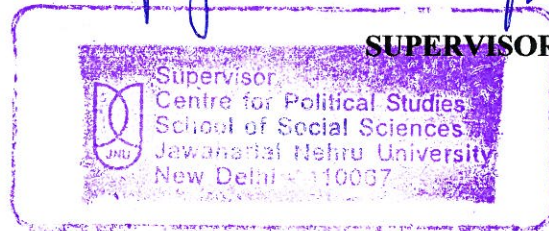
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*Dedicated*

*to*

*Maa, Abba and Nani*

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## A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

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All major translations from Bangla are mine, unless otherwise indicated. In translating primary sources written in Bangla, Arabic and Urdu-Persian terminologies, I have chosen to use popular Bangla pronunciations and not the so-called standard and urban sanskritized version. There are many such concepts, words and terminologies are largely used among particular social groups and religious community in the larger socio-religious, cultural and regional context. There is also the sociology of choosing words and terminology from which we can socio-culturally, economically and religiously locate that particular group and individual. For instances, the usage of Bangla word, *Snan*, people of different regions and community uses this word differently, such as *Ga-dhowa*, *Chan kora*, *Gosolkora*, *laitejawa*, . Here the word 'gosol' is largely and exclusively used by the religious oriented Muslims. Whereas 'Laitejawa' largely used by Dalits and Muslims at the lower social strata, and this also differs with the regions and caste.

The Arabic-Persian terminology like *Waz-Mahfil*, (a popular religious event especially among the Bengali Muslim society in rural Bengal), based on the social location, Islamic sectarian identity and denominations, this *Waz-Mahfil* is also commonly known and identified as *Islamic Jalsa*, *Jolsa*, *Mohfel*, *Milad*, *Isale-Sawab*, *Dhormosobha*, *Sawab-re-Saani* etc. One can categorize the sectarian location, theological orientation, and socio-cultural class location based on the usage of these words. Therefore the literal translation is not sufficient to understand the meaning and its socio-cultural context. Hence I have translated many such colloquial Bangla Muslim improvement texts, *Istehaar*, leaflets, *daabi-potro*, laments, waz-sermon and religious documents and tried my best to contextualize their social, cultural and political meanings which are embedded in the texts.

Needless to say, that all errors are mine.

## ABSTRACT

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The Sachar Committee Report (Prime Minister High Level committee to enquire the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India) has generated huge political debates in the state of West Bengal in India, due to dismal socio-economic marginalization of Bengali Muslims (which constitute roughly 30 percent of the total population of the state) in all walks of lives. Despite the three and a half decades long (1977-2011) 'pro-poor' and 'minority friendly' secular Left Front Government (LFG) led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal, the socio-economic and educational status of Bengali Muslims remains at the margins in every field of social development. In the aftermath of the SCR, the official attestation of the abysmal socio-economic situation of the Bengali Muslims (major traditional social constituency of the Left parties in rural West Bengal) generated anger, agony and a sense of betrayal against the LFG inside the community.

The faith-based community organizations; mainly Furfura Sharif (a popular Sufi religious order and *Pir-Mureedi* network among Bengali Muslims) and Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind, West Bengal Unit (pan-Indian nationalist Deobandi organization) played substantive role in mobilizing Muslims for social justice and community development. I have done an ethnographic study of these two faith-based religious groups and their modes and processes of mobilizations which includes both non-traditional and traditional tools such as public rallies, conventions, *gheraos*, *dharnas*, *Waz-Mahfils*, lamentary songs, vernacular religious tracts, mosques and *madrasah* networks, etc. I argue that in the last one and half decade of the post-Sachar phase along with the dominant secular-communal binary discourse, there has been a tiny growth of the Muslim political community, which is not only challenging the dominant discourse of the secular-communal binary, but is also carving out a new language of politics which is rooted with the concepts of substantive democracy, equity and social justice.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

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AAM	Al Ameen Mission
ABMYF	All Bengal Minority Youth Federation
AIMF	All India Minority Forum
AIMIM	All India Majlis-e-IttehadulMuslimeen
AITMC	All India Trinamool Congress
AIUDF	All India United Democratic Front
AIMPLB	All India Muslim Personal Law Board
AMU	Aligarh Muslim University
BASE	Bengali Academia for Social Empowerment
BJP	BharatiyaJanata Party
BUPC	BhumiUcchedProtirodh Committee
CBI	Criminal Investigation Bureau
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India Marxist
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India Marxist and Leninist
CSSS	Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
CWC	Central Wakf Council
DCI	Delimitation Commission of India
DM	District Magistrate
ECI	Election Commission of India
FB	Forward Bloc
FDSA	Furfura Sharif Development Authority
FSMDO	Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation
FSASJ	Furfura Sharif AhleSunnatwalJamat
GoI	Government of India
Govt. of W.B	Government of West Bengal
HAD	Haldia Development Authority
HDI	Human Development Index

ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
INC	Indian National Congress
ISF	Indian Secular Front
JUB	Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Bangla
JUH	Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind
JIH	Jamaat-e-Islami Hind
LF	Left Front
LFG	Left Front Government
MAF	MojaddediaAnath Foundation
MAME	Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education Department
MCDs	Minority Concentrated Districts
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MNC	Multi-National Companies/ Corporation
MP	Member of Parliament
MPLADS	Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme
MSDP	Multi-Sectoral Development Programme
NBCFDC	National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NMDFC	National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation
OBC	Other Backward Class/Caste
PBASJC	Paschim Bongo Ahle-Sunnat-walJamaat Committee
PDCI	Progressive Democratic Center of India
PDS	Party of Democratic Socialism
RMC	Ranganath Mishra Commission
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SC	Supreme Court
SCR	Sachar Committee Report
SCs	Schedule Castes
SDPI	Socialist Democratic Party of India
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SIO	Student Islamic Organization
SNAP	Social Networking Assistance to People
SP	Superintendent of Police

STs	Schedule Tribes
SUCI	Socialist Unity Center of India
TMC	Trinamool Congress
UBAMSS	Uttar BangaAnagrasar Muslim SangramSamity
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
UF	United Front
WB	West Bengal
WBBow	West Bengal Board of Wakfs
WBBME	West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education
WBMDFC	West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation
WBMSC	West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission
WBMSU	West Bengal Madrasah Students' Union
WPI	Welfare Party of India

# Chapter One

## Introduction

The demise of the world's longest and uninterrupted elected government in 2011 assembly election was a watershed event in the political landscape of West Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The Left-front government led by CPI (M) had ruled the state for around three and a half decades, from 1977 to 2011.<sup>2</sup> The Left parties were successfully able to mobilize the rural peasantry against the *zamindari* oppression and rooted the struggle for land and livelihoods in rural West Bengal. The implementation of major significant land reform policy or *operation barga* and the pro-poor policy initiatives by the Left-front government (LFG) certainly attracted and consolidated large numbers of rural, landless, small and marginal peasantry throughout the Bengal's countryside.

The major social and political base of the Left parties (mainly CPIM) in the countryside were Muslims, Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis). Muslims constitute a sizeable portion of the total population of the state, which is more than 27 percent of the total population. Unlike other states in India, Bengali Muslims are thickly concentrated in the rural areas and highly engaged in the agrarian activities. As the noted historian Richard Eaton had rightly argued, that the Islam in Bengal is the 'religion of the plough'.<sup>3</sup> The growth and emergence of Islam in the region of Bengal is sociologically embedded within the agrarian economy and the syncretic Sufi traditions.

Muslims in the post-partition West Bengal have always remained with the 'mainstream secular' political parties. Initially, in the first three decades after independence till the late seventies, Muslims in Bengal accepted the secular political

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'demise' used by Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya in the context of electoral defeat of the Left-front government in West Bengal; see his chapter on 'Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime' in Sudha Pai (ed.), *Handbook of Politics in Indian State*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2014, pp.211-226.

<sup>2</sup> Left-front government (LFG) mainly comprises of Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party and Forward Bloc.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.

framework of the Indian National Congress by rejecting the politics of the Muslim League. Election results of 1952 demonstrated that large numbers of Muslims did support the Indian National Congress, and as a result, candidates of the Congress party won in most of the Muslim concentrated constituencies in West Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Late seventies onwards till recent 2011, the great majority of the rural Muslims had supported the Left parties which undisputedly played a crucial role in the making of the world's longest elected communist government in West Bengal. As Christophe Jaffrelot has argued, the inconsistent emphasis of Left parties on secular polity, its principled opposition to the wave of far-right Hindu nationalism, chauvinist and anti-Muslim politics that affected large parts of India from 1980s onwards attracted large section of Muslims towards the Left politics.<sup>5</sup>

It is a fact that due to the secular politics of the Left-front government, the state of West Bengal has largely remained free from the communal and targeted violence against Muslim minority as well as the politics of '*Hindutva*'. Therefore, unlike the Northern and Western Indian states the question of 'physical security' of the lives of religious minorities (mainly Muslims) has continued to remain safe and unthreatened. As far as the socio-economic condition and equity are concerned, Muslims in West Bengal are exceptionally low in all the major parameters of social development. The Prime Minister High Level committee on the 'Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community in India' popularly known as Sachar Committee Report (SCR) published in 2006, categorically pointed out the miserable socio-economic and educational backwardness of Muslims in India with state-wise data breakup on various indicators such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, school dropouts, malnutrition and poor civic amenities. According to the Sachar Committee Report (henceforth, SCR), the socio-economic and educational condition of Muslim

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<sup>4</sup> See Abhijit Dasgupta, 'On the Margins: Muslims in West Bengal', in Masahiko Togawa, Abhijit Dasgupta, Abul Barkat (eds.), *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2011, pp.18-38.

<sup>5</sup> See Christophe Jaffrelot, '*The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990*', Penguin Publications, New Delhi, 1999.



community in West Bengal is dismal and abject in comparison to many other states in India.<sup>6</sup>

The SCR has unfolded the debate of development deficit, social justice and economic marginalization in the larger political scene of West Bengal. The post-independent West Bengal has not witnessed the major caste and community based democratic assertions unlike Northern Indian states in the post-Mandal Commission phase in 1980s. The left dominated political discourse of West Bengal was imagined from the prism of class and ignored the very language of social justice and anti-caste imaginations. Hence, both the social questions of caste and religion-based exclusions were neither recognized nor were addressed adequately. The debate of caste and religion has largely remained under-studied as a stereotyped and stigmatized subject in the urban *bhadrolok* dominated political and cultural imagination in West Bengal's public life. The acute lack of meaningful political and academic engagements with the idea of caste, religion and social justice has not only restricted the politics of emancipation but has also been unable to understand the 'silent' social unrest and undercurrents within the marginalized communities, particularly among the Bengali Muslim community. Hence, the SCR has given a new democratic language of protest, mobilization and bargaining among the Muslim community that is rooted in the rubric of social justice and democratic participation.

The post-Sachar scenario West Bengal has witnessed large scale mobilization by different Muslim social and religious organizations; particularly by Furfura Sharif (an important and influential Sufi *silsila*/tradition of Bengal) and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH is one of the largest pan-Indian nationalist *Ulama* organization in India). They have focused primarily on the issues related to the development of the Muslim community such as reservation (positive discrimination) for Muslims in jobs and educational institutions, against the forceful acquisition of agricultural land, better healthcare and educational facilities and also raised the question of political

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<sup>6</sup> See Government of India, 'Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community of India', The Prime Minister's High-Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, New Delhi, 2006, (popularly known as Sachar Committee Report).<https://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/en/document/sachar-committee-report/complete-sachar-committee-reportenglish-2006-6655-kb>

representation, cultural recognition, minority rights, dignity and identity under the larger democratic framework. Kenneth Bo Neilson has rightly pointed out and argued that in order to overcome the ‘development deficit’ of Muslim community, the religious organizations in West Bengal have successfully mobilized large numbers of Muslim electorates and put significant pressure on all political parties in the state. Especially on the eve of the 2011 assembly election, all the political parties were engaged in an intense political competition that culminated with the ouster of the incumbent Left-front government.<sup>7</sup> The catastrophic defeat of the Left parties in 2011 assembly elections has raised a number of questions regarding the erosion of the social base of the Left front, especially among the Muslims in West Bengal.

In order to address these questions and issues of Muslim mobilization, we have taken the case study of the two largest Muslim religious groups and community organizations in West Bengal, one is Furfura Sharif which represents the famous and popular Sufi school of South Asian Sunni Islam which is predominantly found in Bengal; and the other one is Jamiat-e-Ulame-e-Hind (JUH), a more organized Deobandi *Ulama* group having considerable size of network in West Bengal. Both these groups played a potential role in mobilizing thousands of Muslims, particularly in rural Bengal against the incumbent Left-front government. These Muslim organizations have adopted various methods and forms of mobilization (both conventional and non-conventional) by regularly organizing hundreds of protest demonstrations, mass meetings, *dharna*, *gherao*, deputations as well as creating socio-political awareness through traditional *Waz-mahfils* (traditional religious gatherings), distributing leaflets, pamphlets, and low-cost vernacular tracts.

To understand the pattern of mobilization and protest movements, the theoretical framework of Hugo Gorringer in the context of Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu has been taken, where he used concepts like ‘extra institutional mobilization, democratization of democracy, and institutionalization of movements’ to understand

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<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Bo Neilson, ‘In Search of Development: Muslims and Electoral Politics in an Indian State’, In Kenneth Bo Nielsen; Uwe Skoda & Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger (eds.), *Navigating Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Contemporary India and Beyond: Structures, Agents, Practices*, Anthem Press, London, pp.73 – 96.

and theorize the Dalit politics of Tamil Nadu. Hugo Gorringer in his seminal book “Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu” he argued that the high level of popular participation in politics, whether institutional or non-institutional, is essential in the institution of parliamentary democracy to ensure adequate representation of the marginalized groups and communities. He further argued that the Dalit movements do not pose threat to democracy; rather, it contributes in the process of deepening of democracy and democratic practices.<sup>8</sup> This implies that one should go beyond the procedural electoral democracy and engage with the substantive form of democracy, which is rooted in the idea of social justice and substantive equality.

Using the theoretical framework of Hugo Gorringer, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary mobilization and protest movements by socio-economically marginalized Muslim minority community has raised the question of social justice, substantial equality, and inclusive democracy and the aspect of recognition and redistribution. The argument here is that the protest movements and assertions of Muslims for social justice and democratic rights within the constitutional framework would immensely contribute in the larger process of deepening of democracy and strengthening of democratic institutions. This thesis argues that the Sachar Committee Report gave an impetus to the Muslim community to mobilize on the issue of educational and socio-economic backwardness in the post-independent India. In doing so the SCR has transformed the Muslim question from the domain of religio-cultural rights to the issues to socio-economic development and social citizenship.

### **Research Questions**

- a) How did the social, political and economic institutions led by the Muslim community in West Bengal respond to the Sachar Committee Report?
- b) Despite being one of the main support bases for the Left Front in the initial decades, why did the marginalized (both rural and poor) Muslim population become disenchanted with the party?

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<sup>8</sup> See Hugo Gorringer, ‘Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu’, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005.

- c) Since 2006, what led to the emergence of several large-scale Muslim mobilization and assertions against the Left-front government? How did the Sachar Committee Report and the policy of acquisition of agricultural land by the state government shape and influence such mobilizational politics? What are the micro-level impacts of SCR on the social, economic and political processes of the Muslim community in rural West Bengal?
- d) In the post-Sachar period, how did the Bengali Muslims organize and mobilize themselves? Who led this mobilization? What form and language did these mobilizations adopt? What were their demands and strategy? Where do we place this mobilization within the larger discourse of social justice and secular-communal binary?
- e) Since the downfall of the Left -Front Government in 2011, how did TMC engage with numerous Muslim organizations? In the post-Sachar scenario, what are the visible shifts that we find in the TMC's party position with regard to the Muslim question? How are the questions like social justice and cultural recognition for the Muslims addressed by the party before and after coming to power in 2011?

### **Research Gap and the Review of Literature**

The Sachar Committee Report (SCR) of 2006 brought about a radical breakthrough in academic and political discourses on the Muslim question in post-colonial India. It sparked off a new debate on the position of Muslims with respect to development deficit, active social citizenship, caste, social justice, and equity. In doing so, SCR took a major departure from the way the Muslim question was traditionally discussed, such as the Muslim personal law, the religious-cultural language, the Urdu public sphere, Babri Masjid and the Aligarh Muslim University. Several of these aspects have been studied by academic scholarship. However, the impact of SCR on the Muslim community and their organizations remains largely understudied.

The Muslim questions in India have largely been studied from the macro or so-called pan-Indian perspective under the religious cultural framework. Scholars like Paul Brass, Omar Khalidi, Thomas Hansen Blom, Christophe Jaffrelot, Peter van der Veer, Zoya Hasan, Imtiaz Ahmed, Ashutosh Varshey, Irfan Ahmed, Hilal Ahmed, Tanweer

Fazal, Arshad Alam, Abdul Shaban, Gazala Jameel and Iqbal Ansari have written extensively on communal conflicts, riots, violence, political mobilization, madarasas, ghettoization, urbanization, and sociology of Muslim community. These scholars have predominantly studied Muslims situated in the Western and North Indian urban settings. However, the everyday lives and evidences from the micro-level studies of regional rural vernacular Muslim societies especially in the eastern and north eastern regions (Bengali speaking Muslims in West Bengal and Assam) has largely remained understudied. This thesis is an attempt to fill this gap by studying the impacts of SCR on the social, educational, economic and political processes of the Bengali Muslim community in contemporary West Bengal.

The scholars on Bengal studies have understudied the role of caste, community, and vernacular religious identity in the politics of West Bengal, and hence we often fail to understand and recognize the micro-perspectives and political sociology of marginalized communities (Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis) in rural Bengal. In order to understand or map the rural Bengali politics, it is essential to engage with the question of caste, community and religion.

The academic literatures on Muslim questions in post-independent India are basically focused on the macro-questions of identity politics, communalism-secularism debate, personal law and the status of Urdu language. These issues are largely dominates the Muslim question and revolves around the North India centric imagination. In this process the major scholarship on Muslim communities<sup>9</sup> concentrated on the problems and prospects of North Indian *Ashraf* Muslims and which largely bypassed and ignored the ‘vernacular Muslims at the peripheries’<sup>10</sup> such as Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, whose culture, language and political aspirations are quite different from the so-called mainstream ‘*Ashraf*’ Muslim community in India. For example, the politics of Muslim personal law, minority status of Aligarh

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<sup>9</sup> I am consciously using ‘Muslim communities’ because Muslims in India is not a homogenous religious identity. Rather, it is a very heterogeneous and diverse structure based on language, region, class, caste, culture and religious sects.

<sup>10</sup>By ‘Muslim at the peripheries’ here, I mean non-Urdu speaking vernacular Muslims mianly located in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Odisha, etc., who do not come under the ‘power circle’ of North Indian *Ashraf* dominated Muslim elite groups.

Muslim University, and recognition of Urdu language does not necessarily reflect the aspirations of the vernacular Bengali Muslims who constitute more than 90 percent of the total Muslim population of West Bengal, and this population is overwhelmingly rooted in the rural lower castes and agrarian sociology. The SCR has very neatly classified the Muslim community in India into three broad sociological categories, such as the *Ashraf* (noble born), *Ajlaf* (the middle caste or artisan caste) and the *Arjaal* (converted from the former untouchable caste). This sociological categorization by the SCR is very important to understand the layered process of exclusion and social categorization of Muslims of India in general, and the Bengali Muslim community in particular.

The Muslim community in India has always been seen as a homogenous and monolithic religious group. The process of identification of this community is largely imagined from the prism of religious identity by ignoring the sociology and social anthropology of Muslim communities. The concept of diversity, heterogeneity and differences based on language, culture, region, *khandaan* (family/clan) or *biradaris*, caste-based social practices, occupation and religious sects/ *Maslaq* or denomination are deeply embedded with the Muslim communities. Noted sociologist Imtiaz Ahmed has rightly argued about the concept of 'Lived Islam' in South Asia and he has developed a theoretical and methodological framework to understand the diverse Muslim communities from the lens of sociology and social anthropology, going beyond the dominant monolithic imagination about the Muslim (*Ummah*) community.<sup>11</sup>

There has been acute scarcity of scholarly work on Islam and society from the prism of social- anthropology and political economy. It is not sociologically feasible to understand any religious community from the religious texts or theological interpretations. The noted anthropologist, Talal Asad has conceptualized the idea of anthropology of Islam, and further critiqued the textualization of social life while redirecting the analysis away from the interpretation of behaviors and towards enquiry

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<sup>11</sup>See Imtiaz Ahmed (ed), *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims*, AakarBooks, New Delhi, 2018.

into the relation of practices as to what he has termed as ‘discursive traditions’.<sup>12</sup> The scholarship on South Asian Islam has largely been influenced by the colonial and caste-based conceptualization of religion and periodization of history by ignoring the everyday life of Muslims and everyday Islam. In the context of post-partition West Bengal, the dominant political and cultural discourse on class has both conceptually and empirically restricted the academic engagements on sociological understanding of the Bengali Muslim communities, who constitute a substantial portion of population in the state.

In spite of the dearth of scholarship, there are some seminal works on Bengali Muslims done mostly by historians and anthropologists such as Richard Eaton’s *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Rafiuddin Ahmed’s *The Bengal Muslims: 1871-1906, A Quest for Identity*, and *Understanding the Bengali Muslims: Interpretative Essays*, Asim Roy’s *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Joya Chatterji’s ‘The Bengali Muslims: A Contradiction in Terms? An overview of the debate on Bengali Muslim Identity’ in Mushirul Hasan (ed), *Islam: Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, Chandi Prasad Sarkar’s *The Bengali Muslims: The Study on their Politicization 1912-1929*, Sufia Ahmed’s *Muslim Community in Bengal: 1889-1912*, Tazeem M Murshid’s *The sacred and the secular: Bengal Muslim discourses, 1871-1977*, Jayanti Maitra’s *Muslim Politics in Bengal: 1885-1906*, Mustafa Nurul Islam’s *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as Reflected in the Bengali Press: 1901-1930*. Most of these books dealt with the history of Islam and Muslims in undivided Bengal during the pre-colonial and colonial times, and focused on the East Bengal (later, East Pakistan) and presently, Bangladesh. In the post-independent India, there is not a single comprehensive academic book which exclusively deals with the question of Bengali Muslims in the post-partition West Bengal.

Despite the lack of literature on post-independent Bengali Muslims in India, this thesis summarizes and establishes a link between colonial to post-colonial

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<sup>12</sup> See Talal Asad, ‘The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam’, *Qui Parle*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 2009, pp. 1–30.

scholarships on Bengali Muslims by using different research articles, book chapters, etc., which tacitly or indirectly deals with the Muslims of West Bengal.

Kenneth Bo Neilson in his article '*In Search of Development: Muslims and Electoral Politics in Indian State*' argues that the Muslim minority in West Bengal is in many respects excluded from both the developmental and political processes in the state. Muslims score significantly lower on a range of socio-economic indicators as well as political representation compared to other sections of the population. However, various Muslim organizations in the state successfully mobilized Muslim and bargained for inclusion with the political parties by using the strength of Muslim electorates to overcome the 'development deficit' of the Muslim community. In doing so, Muslim organizations have used the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) and succeeded in putting significant pressure on all political parties in the state, who were engaged in an intense political competition that culminated in the ouster of the three decades long incumbent Left front government in the 2011 assembly elections.<sup>13</sup>

Bidyut Chakrabarty argues in both of his articles, '*The Left Front's 2009 Lok Sabha Poll Debacle in West Bengal, India*' and in '*The 2011 Assembly Election in West Bengal: The Left Front Washed Out*' that there are various reasons for the erosion of the social base of the left parties. The first significant issue that severely dented the social base of the left front is undoubtedly the whimsical land acquisition policy of the state government for quick industrialization. There is no doubt that a critical proportion of its traditional supporters (basically poor landless Muslims and Dalits at the countryside) walked away because of the crass insensitivity that the Left -Front Government exhibited on the issue of land acquisition for industrialization under private patronage, for e.g., the Salim Group, HIDCO and other real estate groups in Rajarhat, Newtown and Bhangore areas in the sub-urban region of Kolkata.<sup>14</sup> He further argues by referring to the Sachar Committee Report, that the Muslim minority comprises more than 25 percent of the total population of the state but they have not received equitable social and political support from the state as compared to their

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and Electoral Politics in Indian State', *Forum for Development Studies*, 38:3, pp.345-370.

<sup>14</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'The 2011 Assembly Election in West Bengal: The Left Front Washed Out', *Journal of Asian Development*, Vol.6, No.2(2011), pp. 143-167.



Hindu contemporaries. The most glaring cases of Muslim deprivation in government jobs were found in the Left-ruled West Bengal, where Muslims represented only 4.2 percent in the government employment against their population share of more than 25 percent in the entire state.<sup>15</sup>

Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya in his article '*Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime?*' has argued that the electoral defeat of the Left front cannot be explained without understanding the nature of 'party-society' in rural West Bengal. The preponderance of the social space, the transformation of the party from being a hegemonic force into a violative one and ultimately the ruptures in the 'party-society' have all led to the erosion of the Left Front's support base in West Bengal. The assertion of marginalized civil societies leads to a new kind of oppositional politics, possibly on 'identitarian' lines. He further pointed out about the emergence of religion and ethnicity-based mobilizations in West Bengal such as Gorkhas in Darjeeling, Kamatapuri in Cooch Behar and Muslim mobilization by Jamiet-e-Ulame-e-Hind.<sup>16</sup>

Rajarshi Dasgupta pointed out in his article, after the field survey of two villages in the district of Kochbihar (Cooch Behar) and Malda in the North Bengal region and argued that, although the left parties are to a large extent responsible for the democratic changes that have taken place in rural West Bengal, the power remains concentrated in the ruling elite and modifications are required for democratization to become meaningful. He further pointed out that the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Muslims are clearly emerging as new agents. These sections are challenging the upper caste domination in the rural society and local institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Mahfuz Parvez, in his article on the historical process of marginalization among the Indian Bengali Muslims, has identified multiple historical factors; the colonial land

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<sup>15</sup>Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'The Left Front's 2009 Lok Sabha Poll Debate in West Bengal, India: Prospective Causes and Future Implications', *Asian Survey*, Vol.51, No.2(March/April 2011), pp.290-310.

<sup>16</sup>Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya, 'Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 16, 2010, Vol. XLV, No. 3, pp.51-59.

<sup>17</sup>Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The CPI(M) Machinery in West Bengal: Two Village Narratives from Kochbihar and Malda', *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 28, 2009, Vol. XLIV, No.9, pp.70-81.

policy of (Permanent Settlement Act), caste based exclusionary and stigmatized occupations, decline and alienation of Muslim political power, communal conflicts and the issue of partition etc., which played a critical role in the process of marginalization of Bengali Muslims. In spite of these events and issues, the Bengali Muslims remained an integral part of the larger Bengali society in the countryside of the state. However in the post-colonial West Bengal, some exclusionary state policies have created the gulf between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority. The exclusionary state policies are some of the important factors that led to the marginalization and social exclusion of Muslims in India in general and West Bengal in particular. In the context of West Bengal, the two broad areas that need to be addressed for the empowerment of Muslims are the issue of affirmative action for Dalit and the backward caste Muslims, and the question of political representation. Mahfuz Parvez strongly argued that the social exclusion and political alienation have marginalized the Muslim community in post-independent West Bengal.<sup>18</sup>

Abhijit Dasgupta argued that the marginalization of Dalits and backward caste Muslims in West Bengal has brought the debate of affirmative action for Muslims in the state. Despite indicators pointing towards backwardness, many deserving Dalits and backward caste Muslims have been excluded from the positive discrimination (reservations). As a result, more community centric mobilizations of Muslims have taken place at the local level, which has prevented the continued mainstreaming of the minority (especially Muslim communities) in West Bengal.<sup>19</sup>

This thesis argues that the community centric mobilization does not necessarily prevent the mainstreaming of the community in West Bengal, because due to this community centric mobilization at the local level, the state government and political parties have taken the 'development deficit' of Muslims seriously, otherwise the lackadaisical attitude towards the empowerment of Muslims and the rhetoric of '*dhormoniropekkhota*' (secularism) of the Left Front government could have further

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<sup>18</sup>Mahfuz Pervez, 'The Historical Process of Marginalization: The Case of Indian-Bengali Muslims' in *Historicus* (Quarterly Journal of Pakistan Historical Society) Vol. LIX, No.2, April - June 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, 'On the Margins: Muslims in West Bengal', in Masahiko Togawa, Abhijit Dasgupta, Abul Barkat (eds.) *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2011, pp.18-38.

prevented the mainstreaming of minority community in West Bengal. In spite of more than three long decades of the Left front rule in the state, the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims stand at the lowest margins, as compared to other social and religious groups. The argument here is that, the assertion of backward caste/class Muslims in West Bengal based on secular and material issues such as reservation in public employment and educational institutions, better public health care facilities, and civic amenities etc. led to further democratization of the polity and also helped in the deepening of democratic values in the highly stratified and unequal social system.

Arild Engelsen Ruud, in his book on '*Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal Rural Communism*', argued about the importance of caste and religious identity in the micro and village politics in West Bengal based on the ethnographic studies of two villages in the Burdwan district. He further argued that the political mobilization also takes place based on the caste, sub-caste (Bagdi, Muchi, etc.) and religious identity (*Tableeg jamat*) in the micro level politics in rural West Bengal.<sup>20</sup>

Sumantra Bose, in his book on '*Transforming India: Challenges to the World's Largest Democracy*', pointed out that even after the three continuous decades of CPM- led Left regime with its secularist and pro-poor credentials had done very little for the advancement of West Bengal's Muslims, about half of whom had consistently voted for Left Front since 1977. He further mentioned that the Muslims in rural West Bengal lived in extreme poverty and moreover, Muslims were pitifully under-represented, worse than many other Indian states.<sup>21</sup>

Dolonchampa Chakrabarty in Mukulika Banerjee's edited book on '*Why India Votes?*', rightly figures out the importance of the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) and argues that both Trinamool Congress (TMC) and CPI(M) used the report for their own benefit. The TMC was arguably more successful in mobilizing Muslims against

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<sup>20</sup> See, RuudArildEngelsen, '*Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal Rural Communism*', Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Sumantra Bose, '*Transforming India: Challenges to the World's Largest Democracy*', Picador India, place?, 2013. (See chapter three 'name'? which particularly deals with the Democracy in West Bengal, pp.111-163).

the incumbent Left Front government by using the Sachar Committee Report, citing its assessment of the abysmal condition of Muslims in West Bengal.<sup>22</sup>

Noted economist Prabhat Patnaik also pointed out that the domination of the Brahmin *Boddi* and *Kayastha* castes in the intellectual, social, political and cultural life of the West Bengal. This domination is so complete, and has been so for such a long time, that one almost takes it for granted, without even noticing it, even though the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims constitute 55 percent of the total population of the state. The fact that all these groups that constitute the overwhelming majority of the population have scarcely a presence in the socio-cultural scene in the state (except where it is statutorily mandated) is an extraordinary phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

While mapping the Muslim question in post-colonial India, Maidul Islam observed that the Muslims neither own the major means of production nor they control the policy making decision of the state. Indian Muslims are heterogeneous in terms of language, culture and regional affiliations but are relatively homogenous by the parameters of socio-economic profile (largely concentrated in informal sector workforce) and educational backwardness and common faith in Islam. Maidul Islam argued that in post-colonial India, when the socio-economic issues of Indian Muslims need serious attention, often the Muslim question has been traditionally caught up in and around the debates on secularism and communalism. The articulation of class dimension in addressing the Muslim question in India has been so far missing from the political cum policy debates. Largely the Muslim question in India has been trapped into the question of identity and security and less attention paid on the aspect of equity by the dominant political and governmental discourse in India. Looking at the Sachar Committee Report's finding Maidul Islam further argued that the Left movement in India also needs serious introspection about its attitude towards Muslim minorities, especially in making an in-depth analysis of contemporary Muslim

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<sup>22</sup>Mukulika Banerjee, '*Why India Votes?*', Routledge Publications, New Delhi, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, 'In the Long Run: The Social divide in Bengal', *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2013. [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130716/jsp/opinion/story\\_17110832.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130716/jsp/opinion/story_17110832.jsp). (Accessed on 12th April 2014)

situation and understanding the genesis of Indian Muslims and its peculiar minority psyche.<sup>24</sup>

While analyzing the trajectories of *Pashmanda* movement ( broadly referring to various struggles for recognition, and resistance against elite hegemony being waged by the Muslim middle and low castes in different parts of India) in Bihar and Maharashtra, Tanweer Fazal argued that both state governments have recognized Muslim castes (and not community) as units of social and material deprivation and have gone ahead with bifurcating the OBC as a category into subcategories ostensibly to evenly distribute the benefits of quota. The movement privileges the question of caste differentiation among the Muslims of India, thus shifting from the community-centric theorizations.<sup>25</sup> This shifting from community centric debates has further broadened the discourse of social justice and equity. Whereas in case of West Bengal both the debate of caste and communities were absent in the so-called hegemonic left oriented political debates, as a result the lower caste Bengali Muslim has faced triple marginalization of caste, class and religion.

This thesis explains the reasons, strategies, patterns and forms undertaken by the two major Muslim organizations in West Bengal such as Furfura Sharif and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) in the process of Muslim mobilizations and assertions. The thesis also attempts to understand the response of the political parties and state on the Muslim questions and the Sachar Committee Report in the larger political process in the state. This process can also be defined as the ‘social life’ of a public (sarkari) report and the community discovers new language of socio-political engagements with the state and the agenda of reforms within the community.

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<sup>24</sup>Maidul Islam, ‘Rethinking the Muslim Question in Post-Colonial India’, *Social Scientist*, vol. 40, no. 7/8, 2012, pp. 61–84.

<sup>25</sup>Tanweer Fazal, ‘Caste, Religion and Recognition: Trajectories of Pasmanda Muslim Movements’, in Sobin George et. al eds., *Change and Mobility in Contemporary India: Thinking M.N Srinivas Today*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2020

## **Objectives of the Study**

1. To understand and map the impact assertion, mobilization and articulation of demands by the Muslim organizations with regard to the question of ‘development deficit’ of Muslims in West Bengal.
2. To understand the multiple methods, ideological strands, strategies of mobilization and protest and the forms of social associations by the two Muslim organizations, such as Furfura Sharif and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) in the post-Sachar scenario. (both during the LFG and the present TMC rule)
3. To analyze and map the micro-level impacts of Sachar Committee Report on the social, economic and political processes of the community and religious organizations.
4. To understand the nature of response of the Left Front, particularly by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) on the ‘Muslim question’ in West Bengal.
5. To understand and map the key shifts in the forms of civic engagements among the Muslims, the rise of a new middle class and the productions of new language of protest and bargaining; including the political co-options of Muslim religious institutions and leaderships by the mainstream political parties and its impact on the politics in West Bengal.

## **Methodologies Adopted for the Research**

To examine the processes, forms, and patterns of mobilization by Muslim community organizations in rural West Bengal, this thesis adopts a multi-method approach. This includes in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observations, group discussions, study of wide-ranging texts, pamphlets and vernacular religious tracts.

The socio-cultural and economic histories and politics of a highly agrarian Bengali Muslim society need to be located in the larger context of political economy, social justice, and mobility and vice-versa. As a result, the issues of agrarian distress, agricultural land loss, the neoliberal market economy, labor de-skilling, access to

public education and health care systems in other words, socioeconomic mobility and cultural recognition are intertwined with the Muslim question in West Bengal. Thus, understanding the issues of Bengali Muslims requires a thorough exploration of the Muslim community's sociology, political economy, public policies, and socio-economic aspirations and mobility.

In order to understand the internal dynamics of the Bengali Muslims both primary and secondary sources have been used. This thesis has largely relied upon first-hand primary sources such as local Bengali publications, books, leaflets, handbills, posters, pamphlets, annual reports of various Muslim *anjumans* (associations) and low-cost vernacular religious tracts, as well as popular genres of moral literature produced by the Muslim organizations at different points of time with the aim of mobilizing the Muslim masses in rural West Bengal. The other sources include Government reports, Census reports, Election Commission of India's statistics, unpublished theses, various survey reports of reputed research institutes, party documents, manifestos, government advertisements in newspaper, etc.

As part of the primary sources apart from texts, the researcher has relied on ethnographic study of religious *Waz-Mahfils/Islami Jolsa/ Islae-e-Sawab* in rural West Bengal from 2013 to 2019. The researcher has attended roughly 120 such *Waz-Mahfils* and *Islamic Jolsa* and also used the recorded oral speeches of *Pirs and Pirzadas* of Furfura Sharif, including many itinerant Islamic preachers in many *Waz-Mahfils* (religious gatherings) in different districts of West Bengal. These recorded electronic cassettes are produced by professional audio-visual companies and have huge demand among the disciples or *mureeds* of Furfura Sharif throughout Bengal. However, in the last decade, with the massive penetration of smart mobile phones and access to the internet and other social networking platforms, these speeches in the *Waz-Mahfils* of rural villages are now largely available on YouTube and other social media platforms. There are numerous YouTube professionals who regularly record and upload these speeches on various social media platforms. Interestingly, many Islamic preachers like *Maulanas* and *Pirzadas* across different sects (*maslaqs*) maintain or patronize their own social media platforms, especially the YouTube channels, for their promotions and monetary revenues.

Apart from observing and documenting the performances and community mobilizations of the Muslim masses in the southern districts of West Bengal, the ethnographic research also incorporates fieldwork at different villages in the districts, viz., Hooghly, Howrah, South and North 24 Parganas, and East Medinipur etc. The research was conducted for more than five year, with continuous visits to the sites of the research. In the field, a number of middle-class Muslim residents, over a hundred landless Muslim migrant workers, and many community-level social activists, as well as Furfura Sharif and Jamiat leaders and preachers were interviewed. The samples were collected through a method of snowballing, where interlocutors helped in introducing to the village leaders as well as the Jamiat and Furfura leaders and activists in the villages in different districts in West Bengal. The researcher reached out to all visible public supporters and activists and conducted village-level micro study based on both an open-ended questionnaire and by observing their social, cultural, and religious practices. In order to locate the village level micro study, the higher levels like block, sub-division and district Furfura and Jamait leaders were also compared.

The total numbers of respondents were two hundred, which included the respondent Muslim villagers and Muslim community-affiliated, and/or political party-affiliated officials and activists in the village, block, sub-division, and district levels. The aim was to situate this present work not only within the corpus of Muslims as merely a homogeneous religious identity but also to situate the Muslim question as a social question alongside a religious one. Going beyond literary-textual analyses, the fieldwork helped to understand the relations between the social, economic, and political experiences of the Muslim masses and their leaders in the post-Sachar period. Besides the major field-based sites, the researcher also visited the districts of South twentyfour Parganas, North twentyfour Parganas, Nadia, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, and Malda to understand and study the *Waz-Mahfils* programs and also collected the leaflets and handbills which were distributed by the religious organizations among the Muslim masses in rural West Bengal. This also helped to create a wider network to understand Muslim social mobilization better, and to not merely limit the work within the scope of specific village level fields.



In the thesis secondary sources have also been used such as academic and scholarly books, articles in journals, newspapers reports both vernacular and English newspapers such as *Sangbad Pratidin*, *Anandbazar*, *DainikBartaman*, *EiSamoy*, The Telegraph, The Statesman, Times of India. Apart from mainstream daily newspapers, some local community centric Bengali weekly and daily newspapers or *patrika* such as *PuberKalom*, *Dindarpan*, *Natun Gati*, *Mizan*, *Janatar Adalot*, etc were also referred. .

Due to the dearth of focused secondary literature, the researcher has relied on series of interviews of various community leaders, both political and religious, at different points of time between December 2013 and July 2021. The researcher has also used the official websites of governments, political parties, Muslim organizations, and different news portals.

### **Organization and Chapterization of the Thesis**

The thesis comprises of total six chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. The chapterization is as follows:

#### ***First Chapter***

#### ***From Security to Welfare: The Transformation of Muslim Question in Post-Sachar West Bengal***

In this chapter, the historical evolution of Islam in the socio-cultural landscape of Bengal and how the concept of Islam is deeply embedded within the agrarian practices of cultivation of land and syncretic religio-cultural traditions has been discussed. This chapter explores the multiple meanings, representations, contradictions and process of making or construction of Bengali Muslim identity in the post-partitioned Bengal.

The Sachar Committee Report (SCR) has broadened the horizon of Muslim question going beyond the typical and traditional discourse on Muslim personal law, Urdu and Aligarh Muslim University and engaged with the new debate of development deficit, active social citizenship, social justice and equity. This chapter locates the socio-economic condition and educational profiles of the Muslim community in West

Bengal including their representation in public employment, educational attainments, political representations, poverty, access to health care and other civic amenities. The SCR has not only generated a fresh and inclusive approach of ‘Minority empowerment’ but also produced new democratic language of assertion and mobilizations within the Muslim community.

How did Muslim organizations address the issue of educational and social backwardness within the community? In response to the question this chapter traces the growth of residential Muslim mission schools (such as Al-Ameen Mission group, Maulana Azad Academy, GD Study Circle, Bes Al-Noor Mission etc.). This chapter also studies the rise of new aspirational Muslim middle class in the last two decades (post-Sachar era) and their engagement with the community and the state. The socio-economic mobility and the process of crystallization of new identity among the Bengali Muslims in the contemporary West Bengal has also been discussed in the chapter

## *Second Chapter*

### *From Religio-Cultural Institution to a Political Party: The Changing Role of Furfura Sharif*

The role of the Furfura Sharif, a vernacular influential Sufi tradition (*silsila*) and network is the focus of this chapter. Furfura Sharif was founded by a famous socio-religious reformer Shah Sufi Pir Abu Bakr Siddique in the late nineteenth century Bengal. This network played an important role in mobilizing the Muslim masses in the post-Sachar rural West Bengal. They have a massive influence among the Bengali Muslims; the poor, marginal peasants and informal laborers in the districts of West Bengal in the southern region. Scholars have noted how Furfura Sharif has been historically involved in preaching Sufi Islamic teachings and practices among the Bengali speaking masses. However, the role of Furfura Sharif and their significant political shift in the aftermath of the SCR remains understudied. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by examining to understand Furfura Sharif’s shift from religious - cultural activities to political mobilizations. Based on the ethnographic evidence of Furfura Sharif and its embedded religious networks, their modes, forms and processes of Muslim mobilization in rural West Bengal have been demonstrated.

This chapter examines three major forms of community mobilizations as undertaken by Furfura Sharif that have emerged in rural West Bengal in the aftermath of SCR. Firstly, mobilization through the traditional *Waz-Mahfils* (Islamic sermon gatherings) which are very popular phenomenon in the Islamic religio-cultural cosmology and practices of rural Bengal. *Waz-Mahfils* are a specific genre of supererogatory Islamic sermon gatherings that take place in the late evening in various parts of rural Bengal. The *Pirs* of Furfura Sharif and other itinerant Islamic preachers have used these traditional religious spaces to mobilize and politicize the rural Bengali Muslims. Secondly, using the religious and social identity of Muslims, a section of *Pirs* and *Pirzadas* of Furfura Sharif have mobilized a sizeable section of their followers (*mureeds*) through organizing rallies (*somabesh*), public meetings and deputations on the question of redistribution of educational and economic resources, political representation, and recognition of the Muslim question. Thirdly, wide-ranging sources such as CD cassettes of oral speeches in *Waz-Mahfils*, pamphlets, *istehaar*, leaflets, vernacular religious tracts, and the popular genre of vernacular Muslim improvement texts such as “*Muslim somajer koru nobosta o tar protikar*” (Miserable conditions of the Muslim society and its remedies), “*Sonkoter Mukhomukhi BangaliMusalman*” (Bengali Muslims in the face of crisis), were used. The shifts and transformations in practices and ideas about their engagements with identity, political representation, community development, recognition and social justice in the aftermath of the publication of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006 were traced.

This chapter devotes a major part to the emergence of the Indian Secular Front (henceforth, ISF), a new political party established by *Pirzada* Abbas Siddique of Furfura Sharif in January 2021. ISF contested seats the West Bengal assembly election by forging an electoral alliance with the Left Front and the Indian National Congress under the banner of Sanjukta Morcha (United Front). Notably, *Pirzada* Md. Nawsad Siddique of Furfura Sharif, representing the ISF, managed to win the Bhangore assembly constituency in South 24 Parganas district. The formation of political party under the patronage of Furfura Sharif needs to be studied in the context of political mobilization of the Muslim community which has been taking place in the post-Sachar West Bengal. The chapter concludes by demonstrating a major shift within Furfura Sharif as an organization from a religio-cultural entity to a political formation. It is a matter of further explorations to see how far this shift engages with

the question of enormous internal diversities within the Muslim community in West Bengal.

### ***Third Chapter***

#### ***From Religio-cultural Association to a Political Pressure Group: The Entry of Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind in the Corridors of Power***

Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) is one of the influential nationalist Muslim organizations in India, which was actively involved in the anti-colonial struggle against the British Raj. JUH is ideologically influenced by the largest South Asian Islamic seminary Darul Uloom Deoband. Scholars have noted how JUH has been involved in the preservation and safeguarding of religious rights (*shariyat*) and community institutions such as mosques, *madrasahs*, and *Wakf* properties. In this chapter, the transformation of JUH from a religio-cultural to a political pressure group has been examined. . The active role played by the JUH in West Bengal through hundreds of *madrasahs*, mosques and religious institutions has also been noted. JUH has a considerable support among the Muslim lower middle class and middle-class, including *Imams* and *madrasah* teachers across the state. JUH has been largely examined by the scholars through the prism of religious identity and culture. However, post SCR, a major shift has been observed in the activities of JUH in West Bengal from being a religio-cultural association to a political pressure group. It is this development, which remains understudied, and that is what this chapter attempts to examine.

In the post-Sachar phase, JUH was seen getting actively involved in movements against the acquisition of agricultural land in Bhangore and Nandigram. Unlike other states in India, JUH activities took a political turn by mobilizing large sections of Muslims against the Left Front Government. They make reference to the SCR on the dismal socio-economic condition of the Muslim community in West Bengal. JUH under the leadership of *Maulana* Siddiqullah Chowdhury played a significant role in the politics of West Bengal by mobilizing Muslims peasants against the LFG. They also influenced a sizeable number of rural Muslim electorates.

In this chapter, JUH's organizational networks and mass contact program to mobilize Muslim peasants against the LFG's policy of acquisition of agricultural land for the

private capitals and special economic zones have been examined. This chapter has discussed in detail, the mobilization patterns, nature of mass campaign programs, and the larger community-centric demands for social justice and empowerment such as OBC reservation for Muslims, restoration and utilization of *wakf* properties, and better educational and civic opportunities, including the recommendations of the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra Commission's reports.

In the aftermath of the SCR, the JUH also played a significant role in mobilizing the Muslim masses, citing the development deficit of the Muslims under the Left Front Government. JUH organized numerous public rallies, protest marches, demonstrations, *dharnas*, mass deputations, and conventions to raise the issues of socio-economic marginalization of Muslims and also successfully highlighted the lackadaisical approach of the LFG towards the Muslim question.

JUH's dense network of *madrasahs* in West Bengal have been explored and also their organizational literature, resolution and minutes of meetings, annual reports and role of *Ulema* (religious clergy and *Imams*) in mobilizing the Muslim community, and in shaping the debates of political representations and bargaining has also been studied. Under the patronage of JUH, Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury formed an independent political party called the PDCI (People Democratic Conference of India) in 2007, but subsequently in 2015, JUH state secretary Maulana Chowdhury joined TMC and got a ministerial berth in Mamata Banerjee's cabinet. Hence, JUH indirectly co-opted with the TMC and simultaneously portrayed itself as not only a religio-cultural organization, but also the community's pressure group in the politics of post-Sachar West Bengal.

## ***Forth Chapter***

### ***Political Transformations of the Muslim Question***

In the post-Sachar phase (2006 onwards), West Bengal has witnessed massive state-wide assertions of Muslim community organizations on the questions of socio-economic development and constitutional rights. These mobilizations led by the faith-based traditional community organizations, including Muslim civil society groups, have had a serious impact on both the macro and micro politics in the state. Using ethnographic data, this chapter scrutinizes the impact of SCR on West Bengal's

politics and the transformation of the Muslim question. This chapter charts the transformation of the Muslim question in West Bengal from physical security to social justice and equity, and again the return of dominant narratives of physical security. The issue of physical security refers to an environment that is free of communal or targeted violence against the Muslim minority. The focus on physical security and the secular-communal binary has ignored and jeopardized the questions of well-being, equity, and the everyday political and economic questions of the Muslims.

This chapter is broadly divided into three segments. The first part focuses on examining the LFG's understanding of the 'Muslim' or minority question. It also explores the LFG's policy-shift from concerns of physical security to the questions of equity and resource redistribution following the SCR. Due to widespread mobilization of the Muslim community, the LFG was compelled to introduce OBC reservation for the backward caste Muslims in employment in 2010. A massive increase in the budgetary allocation for the welfare of the minority communities was evident too. Other initiatives included the upgradation of the Calcutta Aliah *Madrasah* into Aliah University in 2007, the formation of the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission in 2008, and the introduction of various scholarships schemes, soft loans for small entrepreneurship development, and the competitive coaching schemes for multiple professional courses and training programs.

The second part engages with the Trinamool Congress's response to the SCR and their engagements with the Muslim organizations and the community. TMC was in opposition from 2006 to 2011, and has been in government since 2011. This chapter shows how TMC used the traditional 'Muslim spaces' and the community's aspirations to project itself as the champion of minority rights. It also demonstrated major strategies and idioms adopted by the TMC as the opposition party to push the agendas of identity, representation, and redistribution. However, after the 2016 state assembly elections, the TMC's divisive policies like *Imam-Bhata* and other forms of religious identity politics have diluted the agenda of social justice and redistribution as propounded by the SCR. In this chapter, this policy shift of the TMC government from social justice to misrecognition or non-recognition of the Muslim minority has

been mapped through the comparison of TMC's election manifestos of 2011, 2016 and 2021, on the question of Muslim engagements and approaches.

The third and final part of this chapter deals with the emergence of a new kind of TMC-BJP binary politics. The rise of BJP in West Bengal saw a massive growth in communal polarized politics with the usual hate campaigns and propaganda against the Muslim minority. TMC government responded by introducing divisive schemes such as *Imam-Bhata* (honorary allowances for *Imams* and *Moazzins* of mosques) and other visible and targeted Muslim identity-based engagements. The chapter argues that this process has resulted in the emergence of a politics of binary between Hindus and Muslims as internally homogeneous entities with religious difference. This shift in political idioms has also resulted in a rapid decline in the debate on social justice, equity, redistribution, and the caste-based social differences within the Muslim community, which came into existence in the aftermath of the SCR.

## Chapter Two

### From Security to Welfare: The Transformation of Muslim Question in Post-Sachar West Bengal

#### Introduction

The Sachar Committee Report (SCR) of 2006 brought about a major shift in academic and political discourses on the Muslim question in the post-independent India. It sparked off a new debate on the position of Muslims with respect to development deficit, active social citizenship, caste, social justice, and equity. In doing so, SCR took a major departure from the way the Muslim question was traditionally discussed, such as the Muslim personal law, the religio-cultural language, the Urdu public sphere, Babri Masjid and the Aligarh Muslim University. Several of these aspects have been studied by academic scholars. However, the impact of SCR on the Muslim community and their organizations remains largely understudied. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by examining the impact of SCR on the aspirations of the Muslim middle class and the mobilization of community resources for economic and educational empowerment. The chapter focuses on the status of educational attainment, access to health care and other civic amenities among Muslims. The political facets are also investigated by analyzing demography, electoral participation, and representation.

The main question of this chapter is how did Muslim organizations address the issue of educational and social backwardness within the community? To answer this question we have studied the growth of Muslim residential mission's schools established by the community organizations through mobilizing funds (including Zakats, and donation) in the last two decades in different districts of West Bengal. Simultaneously community organizations have also played significant role in organizing hundreds of educational awareness camps (*sikkha shibir*) for disseminating the importance of modern education among Muslims in rural West Bengal. The Muslim civil society organizations have published reports, books on the socio-economic and educational conditions of the Muslim community. For instance, Association SNAP in collaboration with Pratichi Trust published empirical report on



“The living reality of Muslims in West Bengal”. In the post-sachar phase the community organizations have also started Bengali daily newspapers such as *Puber Kalom* and *Dindarpan*. This chapter has found that these interventions in the field of education and social development led to the growth of new middle class within the Bengali Muslim community in the last two decades. I argue that the SCR brought to the center, the discourse of social and educational backwardness within the Muslim community going beyond the typical security-centric debate. It further compelled both the religious organizations and state to address the question of social and educational deprivations.

### **Brief Social History of Bengali Muslims**

To understand the politics, culture, education and socio-economic status of Muslims in contemporary West Bengal it is extremely important to know the history of Islam and Muslims in Bengal. Bengali Muslim community is the world’s second largest ethnic Muslim population after Arabs; thickly concentrated in present Bangladesh, and India’s state of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. Bengali Muslims are basically rural centric and highly engaged with the agrarian activities. The history of *Islamization*<sup>26</sup> and conversion in Bengal is quite interesting and unique in nature. The conversion in Bengal had largely taken place with the clearance of forest and growth of the rice (paddy) cultivation. Muslims in rural Bengal considered ‘cultivation’ was the most *halal* (pious in Islamic sense) job from the religious perspective. Thus noted historian Richard Eaton rightly pointed out that the Islam in Bengal is the “religion of plough”.<sup>27</sup>

Herbert Risley, the Imperial Gazetteer of British India in 1907 observed that “the Muslims appeared in Bengal to take less readily to a town life than the Hindus; but elsewhere the reverse is the case, and in the United and Central provinces, in Madras, and in many of the adjoining states the proportion of Muhammadans in towns is double that of Muhammadans in the population at large”.<sup>28</sup> The census of Bengal,

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<sup>26</sup>Islamization here I mean the introduction of basic Islamic practices and belief systems, such as *Namaz*,(prayers), *roja*(fasting), *Haj*,(*annual pilgrimage to Mecca*)*zakat* (alms) or compulsory charity.

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Eaton, ‘*The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*’, OUP, New Delhi, 1997.

<sup>28</sup>Sir Herbert Risley, Imperial Gazetteer, vol. I, p. 455.

1901 mentions that “the very large proportion of Musalmans who subsist by agriculture and the small number engaged in intellectual pursuits,” and adds: it may be said generally, that the occupations other than those connected with agriculture, in which Muhammadans preponderate, are very few.<sup>29</sup>

According to Richard Eaton, deepening of Islam in Bengal had taken place mainly through three important processes, such as *inclusion*, *identification* and *displacement*. By inclusion, he, meant the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies (such as *pir*, *auliya*, Sufis) became accepted in local Bengali cosmologies alongside local divinities already embedded therein. By *identification* is meant the process through which Islamic superhuman agencies ceased merely to co-exist alongside Bengali agencies, but actually merged with the existing agencies for example, Arabic name Allah which means God was used interchangeably with Sanskrit word ‘*Niranjan*’ Finally by *displacement* is meant the process by which the names of Islamic superhuman agencies replaced those of other divinities in local cosmologies.<sup>30</sup>

There have been many theories of mass conversion to Islam in the Indian subcontinent, but as far as Bengal is concerned the early arrival of Sufi saints with the message of liberation and social equality had attracted large numbers of oppressed and lower caste towards Islam to escape the rigid *Brahminical* caste-based oppression. The spread of agricultural, mosque and Sufi shrine also played quite vital role in the process of conversion and Islamization in Bengal.<sup>31</sup>

As noted historian Joya Chatterji argued that the Bengali Muslim identity is thus commonly perceived as being riven by a fault line, with Bengaliness and Muslimness coexisting uneasily on the opposite sides of a deep and fundamental divide. Bengali Muslim culture is almost invariably written about in terms of a series of binary opposites which loosely correspond to the primary Muslim versus Bengali opposition: *ashraf* (Muslim of foreign ancestry) versus *atrap* (Muslim of local or regional origin) orthodox versus heterodox, *sharia* (Muslims who adhere to *sharia*) versus *besharia*

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<sup>29</sup>Gait, Census Report (1901), p. 484.

<sup>30</sup>Eaton, ‘*The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*’, OUP, New Delhi, 1997, pp.268-303.

<sup>31</sup> Eaton, *Ibid*

(Muslims who practices local cultures such as pir worship) Urdu speaking versus Bengali speaking, elite versus popular and so on.<sup>32</sup>

Asim Roy in his seminal book titled as “*The Islamic Syncretic Tradition in Bengal*” where he argued that, Islam in Bengal was not a corruption of the ‘real’ Middle Eastern Islam, as nineteenth-century reformers claimed, but a valid historical religion developed in an area totally different from the Middle East.<sup>33</sup>Roy categorically identified the Islamic syncretism in Bengal which is deeply embedded in the local socio-cultural milieu. The inclusive tradition of *Puthi* literature, different traditions of *Pir* cults (SatyaPir, ManikPir, GaziSaheb, Hajir Pir etc.) and their syncretic imaginaries, institutions (PirAstana, Dagrah, khanqas) and cultural symbols played important role in the making of Bengali Islam.

Rafiuddin Ahmed in his pioneer book ‘*The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*’ where he describes in details about the question of identity, culture, politics, religion and socio-economic status of Muslims in Bengal. Ahmed also describes the Bengali Muslims and their problems in social integration, debates between traditionalist and fundamentalists, education, employment and social mobilization of Bengali Muslims in the colonial Bengal. As Rafiuddin Ahmed argued that the Muslim preachers in their urge to *Islamize* the masses willingly co-operated in the political mobilization of the rural masses. Despite their in-fighting and sectarian divisions they (Muslim reformers and preachers) were in most advantageous position to influence public opinion at the grass roots level and acted as the link between the upper classes and poor peasantry in Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore during the colonial time especially in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century there has been a growth of Muslim separatism and Hindu communalism in colonial Bengal. This separatism and communalism later leads to the double partition of Bengal and which severely affected the present Muslim minority

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<sup>32</sup>See JoyaChatterji, ‘The Bengali Muslims: A Contradiction in Terms? An overview of the debate on Bengali Muslim Identity’ in MushirulHasan (ed), *Islam: Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, Manohar Publication, Delhi, 1998, pp.265-282.

<sup>33</sup> See Asim Roy, ‘*The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*’, Princeton University Press, 1984.

<sup>34</sup> See Rafiuddin Ahmed, ‘*The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*’, OUP, New York, 1981.

in post independent West Bengal. The partition of Bengal has created a huge vacuum of identity and leadership crisis among the Muslims of West Bengal which have an impact of economy, demography, politics, and cultures.

### **Muslims in the Post-partition West Bengal**

Muslims constitute the second largest religious community and single largest minority community in West Bengal, comprising more than quarter of the total population of the state. The Muslim percentage in West Bengal is 27.1 (as per 2021 Census report) which is the third highest state in India after Jammu and Kashmir and Assam. Muslim population is scattered almost all over West Bengal but is mostly concentrated in the districts of Murshidabad, Maldah, Birbhum, South Twentyfour Parganas, North Twentyfour Parganas, Howrah, Coochbehar, Burdwan, East Medinipur, Hooghly, Bankura, Nadia, Uttar Dinajpur etc. (see table 1). Out of then nineteen districts in West Bengal, twelve falls under the list of Minority Concentrated Districts (MCDs) as notified by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India based on the socio-economic backwardness.<sup>35</sup>

Muslims are the most urbanized religious community of a significant size in India (to the exclusion of Jews and Parsee). While Muslims represent 13.4% of the Indian population, they represent 16.9% of the urban population of India, and only 12% of the rural population.<sup>36</sup> However, as far as West Bengal is concerned majority of the Muslims around 80%- are concentrated in rural Bengal and engaged with various agraricultural activities. Therefore to understand the dynamics of politics, culture and economy of Bengali Muslim society it is very important to know the relationship between Muslims and rural agrarian economy.

Bengal has witnessed double partition- one is the partition of Bengal in 1906 and another is in 1947 on the basis of two nation theory. Among all the Indian provinces

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<sup>35</sup> See the list of 90 minority concentrated districts in India published by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India, [www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/moma/.../mcd\\_90districts.pdf](http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/sites/upload_files/moma/.../mcd_90districts.pdf). (accessed on 20th March 2013)

<sup>36</sup> See Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot, ed '*Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories and Marginalisation*', Harper Collins, New Delhi, 2012.

or states in the post-independent era, Bengal and Punjab have suffered more than any other. The catastrophic Partition has created a different history of migration, separation, everyday trauma and hatred. It has not only changed the demography of West Bengal but also the polity, economy and inter-community relations of West Bengal in general and Muslims in particular. Muslims constitute the only religious community in India whose representation in public employment such as the civil services, police, military; etc. has gone down consistently in the post-independent era.

In the post-independent India, Muslims in West Bengal have never supported or formed any Community or religious identity based political parties unlike in other states of India where even Muslims are not there in huge numbers has also created their own political parties, For example Muslim League in Kerala, M.I.M (*Majlis-e-IttehadulMuslimeen*) in Hyderabad. Right from independence onwards, Muslims in West Bengal have been supporting the mainstream secular democratic political parties. First three decades after independence to late seventies, Muslims in Bengal accepted the secular polity of the Congress party by rejecting the politics of Muslims League. Election results of 1952 showed that the large numbers of Bengali Muslims did supported the Indian National Congress. Candidates on the Congress ticket won in most constituencies having large numbers of Muslim population.<sup>37</sup> The assembly elections in 1967 was the turning point as far as Muslim support to non-Congress opposition parties are concerned. In this election opposition parties fielded 30 Muslims candidates out of which 14 have won. The newly formed United Front Government (*Jukto front sarkar*) in the state with its new economic and political agenda appeared as an alternative to two-decade long Congress rule in the state of West Bengal.<sup>38</sup> From the late 1970s onwards the political landscape has changed after the victory of Left parties in the state assemblies. In the 1982 assembly elections in West Bengal, the Left Front candidates won from most of the areas having high concentration of Muslim population, areas where previously Congress had the support base.

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<sup>37</sup>AbhijitDasgupta, On the Margins: Muslims in West Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 18, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> See JoyaChatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.198-199.

Since 1977 to recent 2011 Muslims, Dalits and *Adivasis* in West Bengal have largely supported the left parties because of their pro-poor policies such as land reforms, operation *barga*, and decentralization of powers through *panchayi raj* institutions. Left parties expanded their social and political base through violent class-based movements of the poor peasants as they fought against the domination of the feudal landlords/*zamindars*. These movements combined the material deprivations and symbolic representations as the rural poor, belonging mainly to Dalits, Muslims and Adivasi communities were mobilized for social justice against indignity, humiliation and social segregation.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 1: District-wise Muslim Population in West Bengal.**

Sl.	District Name	Total Population	Total Muslim Population	Percentage of Muslim Population
1	Murshidabad	5866569	3735380	63.67
2	Malda	3290468	1636171	49.72
3	Uttar Dinajpur	2441794	1156503	48.18
4	Birbhum	3015422	1057861	35.18
5	South 24 Parganas	6906689	2295967	34.07
6	DakshinDinajpur	1503178	361046	28.02
7	Nadia	4604827	1170282	25.41
8	Howrah	4273099	1044313	24.44
9	Cooch Behar	2479155	600911	24.24
10	North 24 Parganas	8934286	2164058	24.22
11	Kolkata	4572876	926769	20.27
12	Burdwan	6895514	1364133	19.78
13	Hooghly	5041976	76347	15.14
14	PurbaMedinipur	4098181	540490	13.19
15	Jalpaiguri	3401173	369195	10.85
16	PaschimMedinipur	4086264	443352	09.46
17	Bankura	3192695	239722	07.51
18	Purulia	2536516	180694	07.12
19	Darjeeling	1503178	85378	05.31

Source: Census of India, 2001

<sup>39</sup>Dwaipayana Bhattacharya, Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's longest elected Regime? *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 16, 2010.

The concentration of Muslim population in the rural West Bengal is very high and the level of urbanization is very low compare to other states of India. The overwhelmingly majority of the Bengali Muslims are directly and indirectly engaged with the agricultural activities and majority of them are marginal and landless farmers including sharecroppers (*Bhag-chasi*) and landless agricultural labors (*khet-mojur*). In the last few decades especially after the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms in the 1990s, the large number of Muslims are also migrating to different other states, cities and urban towns in India in search of livelihood especially in the informal and unorganized sector.

### **Socio-economic and Educational Status of Muslims in West Bengal: A brief overview**

The socio-economic and educational condition of Muslims in West Bengal is abysmally low in all walks of life. The publication of Sachar Committee report, and various other baseline surveys conducted by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India through various research institutes such as ICSSR<sup>40</sup>, CSSS<sup>41</sup>, clearly revealed the socio-economic status by using multiple parameters of measuring underdevelopment and backwardness. The rate of poverty (both urban and rural), unemployment, malnutrition, child mortality, illiteracy level, school drop-out rates etc. are extremely high among the Muslims of West Bengal. The representation of Muslims in government employment, education, bureaucracy, judiciary, executive, legislative etc. is very low and grossly out of proportion with the community's population figures in the state.

Mohd Sanjeer Alam argues that in West Bengal the condition of Bengali Muslims is very poor in spite of huge population and sharing the same language, food habit, life style etc. with the non-Muslim majority. But he further mentions that the large size of minority population is linked to underdevelopment. Alam has undertaken a field study

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<sup>40</sup> ICSSR is Indian Council of Social Science Research, based in New Delhi, an autonomous research body of Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. It carries out various researches time to time in collaborating with other public and private agencies.

<sup>41</sup> CSSS is the Centre for the Study of Social Science, located in Kolkata. A reputed research institute, which undertook the baseline survey research of 10 Minority concentrated districts of West Bengal, sponsored by Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India.

of various districts like Birbhum, Twenty four Parganas South and Twenty four pargans North, Hooghly, Nadia etc. where majority of the Muslim-concentrated villages do not have proper schools, post offices, banks, health centers or electricity etc.<sup>42</sup>

Abhijit Dasgupta has elaborated on the marginalization of Dalits and backward Muslims in West Bengal and also argued about the need for affirmative action for deserving Muslims and Dalits. But unfortunately, among the 56 sub-castes mentioned in the OBC list, even the most backward Muslims are not included. There has been a change in the local level politics in West Bengal where the most community-centric mobilization is taking place, further alienating those (Muslims) from mainstream politics.<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson argued that West Bengal minority are in many respects excluded from both the developmental and political process of the state. Muslims score significantly very lower on the range of socio economic indicators compared to other sections of the population and their political representation is also low. However the Muslim organizations are seeking to address and overcome this ‘development deficit’. As part of the mobilization Muslim organizations have used their electoral strength to promote their issues of concern and they put pressure on all the political parties in the states.<sup>44</sup>

### **Educational status of Muslims in West Bengal**

Education is pivotal to the development of any society. The literacy rate is considered one of the most important indicators of social development and it helps in the improvement of the quality of life and well-being. The widespread spread of modern education in society leads to removal of inequalities in asset ownership, socio-economic capabilities, and opportunities which not only empower individuals to aware about their constitutional rights but also promotes social cohesion and

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<sup>42</sup>MohdSanjeerAlam, ‘Is Relative Size of Minority Population linked to Underdevelopment’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 28, 2009, Vol.XLIV No.48, pp.17-21

<sup>43</sup>AvhijitDasgupta ‘On the Margins: Muslims in West Bengal’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 18, 2009, Vol.XLVI, No.16, pp.91-96.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, ‘In Search of Development: Muslims and Electoral Politics in Indian state’, *Forum for Development Studies*, 38:3, pp.345-370.



sustainability.<sup>45</sup> The literacy rate among the Muslims in West Bengal is abysmally low and dropout rate is very high. The state of higher education is much more vulnerable, with the representation of Muslims in higher education, either as students or staff, being almost negligible. As far as literacy rate of female is concern it is absolutely dismal. However in the last one decade after the introduction of OBC reservations for the backward caste Muslims and democratization of higher education (such as establishing new universities and colleges including Aliah University) have opened up new avenues of participation and representations.

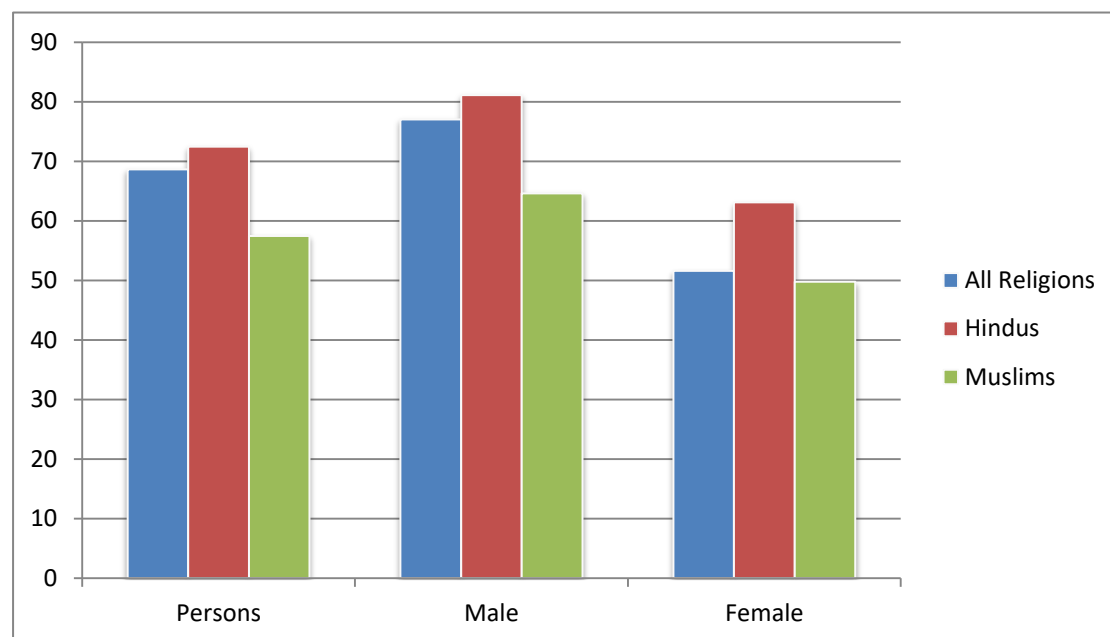
**Table 2: Literacy rates among the various Religious Communities in West Bengal.**

<b>Religious Communities</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
All Religions	68.64	77.02	51.61
Hindus	72.44	81.12	63.09
Muslims	57.47	64.61	49.75
Christians	69.72	77.20	62.30
Sikhs	87.19	91.37	81.98
Buddhists	74.73	83.09	66.22
Jains	92.81	96.46	88.87
Others	51.53	68.63	34.24
Religion not stated	-	71.52	54.84

*Source:* Census of India, 2001, Government of India.

<sup>45</sup>SanjeerAlam, 'Education and Exclusion of Muslims' in ZoyaHasan and MushirulHasan (ed) "Assessing UPA Government's Response to Muslim Deprivation" in *India: Social Development Report 2012; Minorities at the Margins*, Council of Social Development, OUP, New Delhi 2012, pp.242-243.

**Figure 1: Literacy rates among the various Religious Communities in West Bengal.**

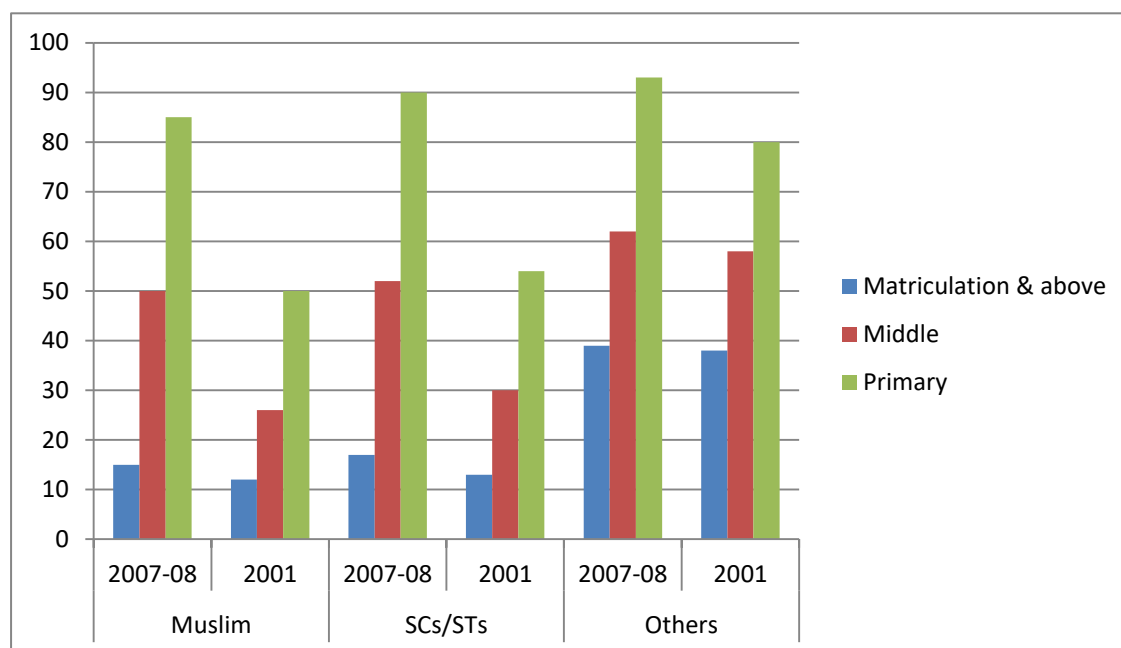


**Table 3: Educational Level Differentials in West Bengal, 2001 and 2007-08**

	Muslim		SCs/STs		Others	
	2007-08	2001	2007-08	2001	2007-08	2001
Matriculation & above	15	12	17	13	39	38
Middle	50	26	52	30	62	58
Primary	85	50	90	54	93	80

*Source:* (i) Estimated by Dr. Abusaleh Shariff from the unit level records of the 64<sup>th</sup> Round NSSO (ii) Census of India 2001.

**Figure 2: Educational Level Differentials in West Bengal, 2001 and 2007-8**



**Table 4: Representation of Muslim Community in Higher Education in West Benga.**

Name of University	Total No. of Faculty Members	Total No. of Muslim Faculty Members	% of Muslim Faculty Members	Total No. of Administrative Officials	No. of Muslim Administrative Officials	% of Muslim administrative officials
University of Calcutta	604	19*	3.15	39	3	7.69
Jadavpur University	632	5	0.79	36	0	0
Kalyani University	216	2	0.46	17	0	0
Rabindrabhadrati University	149	1	0.67	19	0	0
Bengal Eng. and Sc. Univ.	209	4	1.91	16	0	0
Burdwan University	230	8	3.48	48	2	4.16

Vidyasagar University	112	6	5.36	22	1	4.55
North Bengal University	177	3	1.69	36	1	2.78
Bidhan Chandra Agricultural University	265	9	3.4	Not available	Not available	Not available

*Source:* Annual report and website of the concerned Universities of West Bengal till 2010.

N.B: \* It is 19 because of Urdu, Arabic and Islamic History departments at Calcutta University which are traditionally Muslim dominated disciplines.

### **Economic status of Muslims in West Bengal**

The economic condition of Muslims in West Bengal is extremely poor. The poverty rate as well as unemployment and the underemployment rate among the Bengali Muslims are quite alarming. According to the Sachar Committee Report, the rural poverty rate of Muslims in West Bengal is 33%, which is higher than the corresponding rates in Kerala, Assam, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc. Per capita income, consumption and standard of living among Muslims are quite low as compared to other social and religious groups.

The work participation rates among Muslims in West Bengal are lower than the national average. Many people forced to migrate out of the state in search of livelihoods, especially to Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kerala, Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat etc. In terms of sectorial employment, the share of Muslims in wage-earning employment in manufacturing and industrial enterprises is relatively higher than Hindus but the long-term trend shows reduction in total employment due to closure and modernization of industries. Most of the labor force in the state is self-employed. A

staggering 55% of the state’s Muslims fall into this category with almost no links to modern markets.<sup>46</sup>

The situation of Muslims in State government employment is worse, with only 2.1 % of Muslims being State government employees. Rural poverty among the Muslims in West Bengal is very high in comparison to other states as well as the national average.

**Table 5: Share of Muslims in State government Employment**

States	Muslim population (%)	Total Number of Employees	Share of Muslims in State Employment (%)	Education Department	Health Women and Child Welfare Dept.	Home Department	Transport Dept.	Other Dept.
West Bengal	25.2	134972	2.1	-	1.0	7.1	-	2.4
Kerala	24.7	268733	10.4	12.3	10.5	10.7	9.2	10.2
Uttar Pradesh	18.5	134053	5.1	-	5.6	9.8	4.2	5.0
Bihar	16.5	78114	7.6	12.3	2.6	6.9	10.9	7.6
Assam	30.9	81261	11.2	-	10.8	11.3	11.8	11.7
Jharkhand	13.8	15374	6.7	-	3.4	7.4	-	7.0
Karnataka	12.2	528401	8.5	11.9	5.0	4.2	7.5	7.0
Delhi	11.7	135877	3.2	7.2	1.7	2.2	1.1	0.9
Maharashtra	10.6	915643	4.4	4.7	2.8	4.2	-	3.8
Andhra Pradesh*	9.2	876291	8.8	7.9	6.4	14.6	10.0	8.9

<sup>46</sup>Abusaleh Shariff, ‘Bengal’s Minority Report’, *The India Today* | April 11, 2011: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/Story/134062/up-front/minority-report-on-condition-of-muslims-in-west-bengal.html> (accessed on 20th March 2013).

Gujarat	9.1	754533	5.4	4.5	1.5	5.6	16.3	5.3
Tamil Nadu	5.6	529597	3.2	5.5	3.5	2.5	2.4	2.2
Sum of States	15.4	4452851	6.3	6.5	4.4	7.3	6.5	6.0

\*Does not provided for group ABCD employees, only Total Employees and Muslim employees is provided.

Source: Sachar Committee Report pg.370 Government of India.

**Table 6: Rural Poverty among the Indian States.**

State	All	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu	Muslims	Other Minority
		All	SC/STs	OBC	General	Muslims	
India	22.7	22.6	34.8	19.5	9.0	26.9	14.3
West Bengal	25	21	27	16	14	33	N.A
Kerala	9	9	19	7	4	11	4
Uttar Pradesh	28	28	39	26	10	33	40
Bihar	35	34	56	29	13	35	33
Assam	18	12	14	16	7	27	20
Karnataka	14	14	21	14	7	18	N.A
Andhra Pradesh	8	8	16	6	2	7	4
Tamil Nadu	17	17	23	14	14	10	18
Gujarat	14	15	24	14	3	7	6
Madhya Pradesh	30	31	45	22	6	25	2
Punjab	6	4	4	7	3	4	6

Source: Sachar Committee Report, 2006, Government of India

### **Health and Nutritional status:**

Health and nutritional status are the two important and interlinked aspects of human development which also plays crucial role in the economic growth.<sup>47</sup> As far as health and nutritional condition of Muslims are concerned the situation is very alarming both at the all India level as well as at the state level. The Sachar Committee report has observed that the Muslim child experiences a greater risk of being underweight or stunted than a child belonging to other socio-religious communities and the Muslim children's are at a slightly higher risk of child malnutrition than other religious groups.<sup>48</sup> The Human Development Report of the West Bengal Government states that the highest number of Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), malnutrition, underweight, under nutrition, chronic diseases etc. are found mostly among Scheduled Castes followed by Schedule Tribes and Muslims in the state of West Bengal.<sup>49</sup>

### **Political Representations of Muslims in the West Bengal State Assembly**

A democratic system requires meaningful participation and representation that integrates all social groups- religion, ethnic, tribal, political, gender, socio-economic, cultural and other minority groups in to the decision making process. Members of legislative body or Parliament should ideally reflect the diverse communities from which they come; thus minority groups should not be systematically excluded from being represented. Improving the representation in the legislative bodies strengthen its ability to reach out to all sections of society. The Sachar committee report has also pointed out the lack of political representations; 'political voice' of Muslims in India is linked with the question of 'political deficit' and social marginalization of India's largest religious minority community.

The representation of Muslims in the legislative assembly of West Bengal is also not accordance to the proportion of their population. The Sachar committee report also pointed out that the process of delimitation by the Delimitation Commission of India

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<sup>47</sup> Human Development Report 2004 published by the Government of West Bengal, Kolkata. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/west-bengal-human-development-report-2004>. (accessed on 20th May 2013)

<sup>48</sup> See Sachar Committee Report, pg.43-44.

<sup>49</sup> HDI Report, West Bengal, opcit, 2004.

in the election process has reduced the scope of political representation of Muslims by reserving many Muslims concentrated constituencies for the Schedule Castes. Interesting there are many constituencies where Schedule Caste population is in large numbers kept unreserved. The one of the most important noticeable change after the Sachar Committee report with the emergence of different pressure groups among the Muslims by asserting their democratic rights and aspirations lead to the increase of political representations of Muslims in the 2011 assembly elections. The numbers of Muslims members went up to 20 percent i.e.59 compare to all previous assembly elections in the state of West Bengal. This is the highest number of Muslims representation in the West Bengal legislative assembly has witnessed.

**Table 7: Representation of Muslims in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly.**

Year	Total Members	Muslim Members	Percentage	% in Population	Expected Presentation	% of Deprivation
1952	238	22	9.66	19.46	46	50.35
1957	252	25	9.92	19.46	49	49.02
1962	252	27	10.71	20	50	46.45
1967	280	35	12.5	20	56	37.5
1969	280	36	12.86	20	56	35.7
1971	279	29	10.39	20.46	57	49.21
1972	280	35	12.5	20.46	57	38.90
1977	294	37	12.59	20.46	60	38.46
1983	292	36	12.24	21.51	63	43.09
1987	294	35	11.91	21.51	63	44.63
1991	294	42	14.29	23.61	69	39.47
1996	294	40	13.61	23.61	69	42.35



2001	294	39	13.27	23.61	69	43.79
2006	294	46	15.64	25.2	72	37.93
2011	294	59	20.06	25.2	75	20.39
Total average	280.73	36.2	12.81	21.63	60.73	40.79

Source: Iqbal A. Ansari, '*Political Representations of Muslims in India*', Manak Publication, New Delhi, 2006 and Statistical Report on General Elections published by the Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

### **Caste and Diversity among Muslims in West Bengal**

The Muslim community has always been seen as a homogenous and monolithic religious identity. The process of identification of this community is largely imagined from the prism of religion by ignoring the sociology and social anthropology of Muslim communities. The concept of diversity, heterogeneity and differences based on language, culture, region, clan (khandaan) or biradaris, caste-based social practices, occupation and religious sects/ *Maslaq* or denomination are deeply embedded with the Muslim communities. Noted sociologist Imtiaz Ahmed has rightly argued about the concept of "*Lived Islam*" in South Asia and he has developed a theoretical and methodological framework to understand the diverse Muslim communities from the prism of sociology and social anthropology going beyond the dominant monolithic imagination about the Muslim community.<sup>50</sup>

There are certain universalistic features and visible practices in Islamic community which are common; these are; universal sacred text; the Quran, Prophets and Prophetic traditions (*Hadees/Hadith*), five times prayer (*Namaz*) including the *Jumma* or collective Friday prayer with sermon, one month of compulsory fasting during Ramzan/Ramadaan, and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Saudi Arabia) which

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<sup>50</sup>See Imtiaz Ahmed (2018). *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims*, New Delhi: Aakar Books.

is known as Hajj. All these practices are largely collective in nature and the sense of 'shared space' is highly regarded in Islam. In South Asian Society the idea of 'collective' is largely conceptualized through caste and *jatis*. The sense of collective solidarity is largely based on caste based social order and imaginarity. The emergence of Islam in South Asia has not only broadened the sense of "horizontal comradeship" but also generated the idea of collective social and religious space through compulsory religious practices mainly through collective prayer (*jamaat*) in the Mosque. The concept of collective or *Jaamat* has positively created a sense of symbolic religious solidarity in the caste based hierarchical social order in South Asia.

The idea of common universal Islamic greetings in Arabic like "Assalamo-aliakum" (peace be upon you) and in response "Wa'alaykumu s-salāmuwa-rahmatu -llāhiwa-barakātuh" (And upon you be peace, as well as the mercy of God and his blessings) inculcates a sense of universal brotherhood/ sisterhood and also the feelings of recognition and dignity. All these popular imagination and imaginaries of Islam does certainly contribute in the symbolic cosmopolitan cultural solidarity which liberally can be call the concept of *Ummah* (global Muslim community).

Interestingly the sociological and anthropological studies of Islam help us in conceptualizing and contextualizing the social and political concept with Islam and Muslim community. The modern idea of nation, state, nation-state, nationalism, sovereign power, democracy and modern jurisprudence etc. are having largely seen from the western hegemonic perspective. Therefore how to understand religion and religious communities going beyond the colonial categorization itself is methodologically challenging task. Theologically Islam does engage with the philosophy and moral categories and the idea of 'good society' but also have enough conceptual space and human agency to apply reasons through *Ijma* (scholarly consensus), *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *Ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning in Islam) There are multiple methodological and conceptual tools to study Quran and Prophetic traditions (Hadeeth) in contextualizing the contemporary debates on equality, liberty, justice, gender rights and other emancipatory values.

There has been a dearth of scholarly work on Islam and society from the prism of sociology, anthropology and political economy. It is not sociologically feasible to understand any religious community from the religious texts or theology. As noted

anthropologist Talal Asad has conceptualized the idea of anthropology of Islam. He further critiques the textualization of social life and he has redirected the analysis away from the interpretation of behaviors and towards enquiry into the relation of practices to what he has termed as ‘discursive traditions’.<sup>51</sup> The scholarship on South Asian Islam has largely been influenced by the colonial conceptualization of religion and periodization of history by ignoring the everyday life of Muslim and Islam. The production of scholarship on Islam by the major South Asian Islamic seminaries such as Darul Uloom Deoband, Nadwatul Ulama, Jamia Ashrafia Mubarakpur, Al-Jamia-tus-Salafia, Varanasi, Calcutta Madrasah Aliah, Furfura Fathehia Senior Madrasah and different religious denominations have not focused much on the critical aspects of the society such as caste and gender. Islamic scholars and theologians in India have largely ignored the issue of caste or caste-like features among the Muslims. Maulana Sajjad Nomani, a noted Islamic scholar studied from Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama and Darul Uloom Deoband. Later he completed his PhD on Quranic studies from the Islamic University of Madinah. He is also the spokesperson of All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and closely associated with the Bahujan and Ambedkarite movement through BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation). He is one of the rare Islamic scholars in India who are vocal about the issues of Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim’s rights including the plight of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians.

The religious seminaries or *Qaumi* (community/non-government) Madrasah in West Bengal is dominated by the Darul Uloom Deoband-backed syllabus called *Darse-Nijami*. The Madrasah run by Non-Deobandis are also largely follow the similar model of *Nisaab-e-Talim* (syllabus). The scope of understanding Islam sociologically is limited here in these Madrasahs as well as in Universities. There are hardly any university or research institute in West Bengal has the institutional arrangement or mechanism to study or scholarly engage with Islam except the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Calcutta University and Madrasah Aliah, Calcutta later upgraded to Aliah University. It is quite astonishing that there is not a single university in West Bengal which offers any academic programs to scholarly engage

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<sup>51</sup> See Talal Asad . “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 17, no. 2, [Duke University Press, University of Nebraska Press], 2009, pp. 1–30.

with Islam. Therefore there is an acute dearth of academic research on Islam and Muslim community in West Bengal.

### **Caste and the Question of OBC Reservation**

Muslims in West Bengal is highly diverse community based on region, culture, occupational patterns, dialects, caste, religious sects (*maslaq*) or denominations including theological orientations and school of jurisprudence. The Sachar committee report has sociologically classified the Muslim community in India into three broad categories; the *Asharf* (noble born), *Ajlaf* (the middle caste or artisan caste) and the *Arjaal* (converted from the former untouchable caste). The Nashya-sekh community in North Bengal's Cooch Behar district is sociologically different from the Syeds or Kazis of Burdwan district in South Bengal. Rather Nashya-sekh is socially and culturally similar or equivalent to Hindu Rajbongshis in North Bengal. They speak similar language and engage in same occupations but the religious faith is different. The state also categorized them differently, Rajbongshi Hindu community treated as Schedule Caste and Nashya-sekh as other backward class (OBC). This categorization or differences in treatment by the state is sociologically fallacious and goes against the Constitutional provisions of right to equality and equal opportunity. The Presidential order of 1950 restricts Dalit Muslim and Dalit Christian from the entitlement of Schedule Caste reservation in India. Initially Dalit Hindu, then Dalit Sikh or *Mazhabi* Sikhs and later Neo-Buddhist are included in the schedule caste in India. This categorization itself envisages the idea of nation based on Indic and non-Indic religion tacitly endorsing the exclusive Hindu nationalist imagination of India based on the question of *pritti-bhumi* (fatherland) and *punyabhoomi* (land of worship) as propounded by Golwalkar and Savarkar. This theory denies and deprives both the Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslim from the state led entitlement.

The arbitrary policy of caste based Presidential order has been depriving large section of lower caste Bengali Muslims who are sociologically similar to schedule caste and economically equally vulnerable as Hindu Dalits in rural West Bengal. The successive Governments in West Bengal (Indian National Congress, Left front and the Trinamool Congress) have neither acknowledged nor engage with the question of Dalit Muslims or Dalit Christians. Only after the publication of Sachar committee report and Muslim mobilization for reservation and the electoral debacle of Left front government led to

the introduction of 10 percent OBC reservation for backward class/caste Muslims in 2010.

The Backward Class welfare department of the Government of West Bengal has identified nearly 116 caste groups from the Muslim community and included under the OBC category. The state government has categorized OBC into two groups as OBC-A (more backward) and OBC-B (backward). OBC-A is predominately reserved for Muslim caste with 10 percent reservation and OBC-B is predominately reserved for Hindu backward caste with 7 percent reservation. The caste/community comes under the purview of OBC category are; Nasya-sekh, Mondal, Laskar, Baidya, Peada, Hajjam (barber), Fakir (beggar), Muslim Dhobi, (washer man), Muchi/Chamar Muslim (shoemaker or involve in leather work), Jolah- Ansari-Momin, Muslim Haldar, Muslim Bag, Muslim Chaprasi, Gharami (house maker) Khotta Muslim etc. (I have attached the full list of castes in the annexure I).

There is also a separate OBC central list for the state of West Bengal published by the National Commission for Backward Classes (NBCC), a constitutional body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. The both central and state list of OBC is amendable time to time unlike the Schedule caste and schedule tribe's reservation. The NBCC and the state backward class welfare department issues order of inclusion and exclusion of caste in the list depending on the economic mobility of that particular caste group based on data and empirical evidences. There is specified official application format for the inclusion of caste group along with the questionnaire. The NBCC ask to furnish the details data about the caste/community such as population, occupation, literacy rate, nature of employment etc. to know the social and economic status of the particular caste/sub-caste/community. . Some of these frequently asked common questions by NBCC are given below.

- a. If the caste/community generally considered backward by others?
- b. If the caste/community for the livelihood mainly dependent on agriculture or other manual labor?
- c. Are the women and children of the caste in general engaged in the agriculture or other manual labor?

- d. Is the caste identified with occupation considered to be lowly or undignified by others?
- e. Is the caste identified with occupation considered to be unclean or stigmatized by others?
- f. Whether the caste/community practices traditional crafts or hereditary occupations?
- g. Literacy rate, no of graduates, post-graduate.
- h. Number of members of caste/community employed in state and central government services.
- i. Beside government employments, how many members of the caste/community engaged in the professions of doctor, engineers, lawyers, professors, chartered accountants and media professionals?

These above mentions queries are the basic requirement for the application for enlisting the name of caste in the OBC list prepared by the National Commission for Backward Classes. State government, registered NGOs, civil society organizations, political parties can forward or submit the application form with empirical details. Based on the application details, NBCC ask to the concern body to present on the date of public hearings. All these basic formalities require good amount of research and paper work which is quite difficult for a marginalized caste or community to complete the entire process unless they are organized socially, politically and legally.

The inclusion and exclusion of caste group in the OBC list is also often politically motivated and triggers political debate. Therefore the primary task of the concern caste group or community is to take local state government into confidence. The adequate political and social mobilizations are required in order to fulfill the entire process of inclusion. In West Bengal, the large numbers of Muslim caste groups are socially and economically vulnerable and most them were/are not in a position to complete this complex process without the political support. Unlike North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh or Bihar the West Bengal have not witnessed the upsurge of Dalit-Bahujan and backward caste, what YogendraYadav called it second and third

democratic upsurge and Christophe Jaffrelot called it 'silent revolution' in 1980s and 1990s in the context of Mandal commission report. One of the major reasons is the 'absence' of caste as a tool of political mobilization and social justice in West Bengal. Dwaipayan Sen calls this 'silence' as absent-minded casteism in Bengal.<sup>52</sup>

The Uttar Banga Anagrasar Muslim Sangram Samity (UBAMSS) founded in late 1980s by group of social activist, and educationalist committed to the welfare of the backward Muslim castes in the districts of North Bengal comprises of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Dinajpur South, Dinajpur North and Malda. The UBAMSS is the only organization in the state has been continuously working in the field of reservation for backward caste Muslims in North Bengal since 1990s. Community organizations like Sara-Bangla Sonkhaloghu Yubo Federation (All Bengal Minority Youth Federation) and Association SNAP have also played significant role in documenting and participating in the official hearing process for the inclusion of new caste in the OBC list. ABMYF mainly worked in the districts of South twenty-four Parganas, North twenty-four Parganas, Nadia and Howrah. Both these organizations have played substantial role at the micro-level to engage with the official process documenting and enlisting the caste in the list of OBC. This process involves tedious paper works and continuous engagements with the Backward Class Welfare Department of the state government and National Commission for Backward Classes under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.

### **The Sachar Committee Report: A fresh approach towards Minority Question**

The Sachar Committee Report is an important intervention not only in the policy discourse towards Muslim minority but also it breaks the hegemonic myth of the 'Muslim appeasement' as propounded by the right wing groups and political parties in India. The SCR is the most important document in the post-independent India which deals with the real problems of Muslims, whose voices were never represented or heard at the helm of affairs. The important features of SCR are as follows. Firstly; SCR has help to reconstruct Muslims as the 'subject of development' rather than primarily as a cultural and religious community, which marks a decisive shift from the

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<sup>52</sup> See DwaipayanSen(2016). An absent-minded casteism? In Chandra, U., Heiestad, G., Nielsen, K. B. (Eds.), *The Politics of caste in West Bengal* (pp. 103–124). Routledge.

politics of identity to the politics of development.<sup>53</sup> Secondly; SCR deals primarily deals with the issue of equity with relative deprivation of Muslims vis-a-vis other socio-religious communities in various dimensions of development which is very unique study in the post-independent India.<sup>54</sup> Thirdly; SCR has made a state-wise, region wise analysis of Muslim development and suggested the policy perspectives and recommendations fall into two broad categories such as (a) *general policy initiatives/approaches*, which cut across different aspects of socio-economic and educational development (b) *specific policy measures* that deals with particular issues or dimensions of different aspects.<sup>55</sup> Fourthly; SCR has not only identified general or specific problem of Muslims but also suggested different measures for different categories within Muslim community based on their deprivations. Lastly; SCR has put forward the development deficit of Muslim community in the language of deprivation, social exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination instead of looking from the prism of traditional binary debate on Secularism-communalism or majority-minority.

On the recommendations of SCR in 2006, Government of India has initiated different policy measures and welfare schemes/ flagships programme for the development and mainstreaming of minorities in general and Muslim in particular. The major schemes and programme are, The Prime Minister 15 Point Programmes, Scholarships for minority students, Multi-Sectoral Development Programme (MSDP), *Madrasah* modernization and quality improvement schemes, etc.

All these new welfare schemes as per the recommendations of SCR gave a new and fresh perspective or approach towards the development of minorities' especially Muslim minority unlike pre-Sachar scenario when Indian state and governments has always seen Muslims as a homogenous community with distinct behavior which hardly makes much sense. States mainly seems Muslims as a religious community rather than socio-economically backward group. Instead of promoting quality modern education, building schools, colleges, universities, government organizes *Iftar*

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<sup>53</sup> See ZoyaHasan and MushirulHasan (ed), "Accessing UPA Government's Response to Muslim Deprivation" in *India: Social Development Report 2012; Minorities at the Margins*, Council of Social Development, OUP, New Delhi pp.242-249

<sup>54</sup> See Sachar Committee Report, page.237.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*.p.238



*Party, Mushaira, and Haj* subsidy etc. which are not useful for the majority of Muslims populations who are basically poor and struggling for the *Roti-Kapda ,Makan aur Taleem* (food, clothes, housing and education).<sup>56</sup>

Sachar committee report not only posed threat to the conventional Muslim politics in India which is very much north Indian centric based on identity, communalism-secularism debate, Aligarh, Urdu, Babri Masjid and Personal laws but also open up the new dynamics of Muslim politics such as ‘development deficit’ and gone beyond the so-called Hindi heartland.

### **Social and Educational Mobility of Muslims: the Role of Community led Residential Mission Schools**

In the last two decades the state of West Bengal has been witnessing large numbers of Muslims run private residential Mission schools across different districts but largely concentrated in Murshidabad, Malda, Birbhum, North Dinajpur, Howrah, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas ,Burdwan and Hooghly. Though the Al-Ameen Mission (largest private network of Mission schools among the Muslim community in west Bengal) was founded in late 1980s in an extremely rural village in the Howrah district but the idea and concept of Mission schools started flourishing in the late 1990s. At present are roughly more than three hundreds such residential mission schools of different size and capacity functioning in the state. Unlike Christian minority institutions these residential schools are neither affiliated to the state education boards or councils nor registered as Minority Institutions as under the National Commission of Minority Educational Institutions, Government of India.

These types of private community based residential and semi-residential schools (both for male and female) are managed by trustee boards or NGO’s registered under the society and trust registrations acts. Though in formal sense there is a trust or collective ‘advisory’ body on paper but in practice we found one man centric dominance. Majority mission schools do not even follow the basic democratic norms or the division of powers within Institutions. It is the secretary or Chairman literally

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<sup>56</sup> Abdul Matin and Jinju S, ‘Beyond Azad Maidan: A perspectives from Below’, *Café Dissensus* 15<sup>th</sup> February 2013. <https://cafedissensus.com/2013/02/15/beyond-azad-maidan-a-perspective-from-below/> (accessed on 21 June 2019).

controls every aspect of functioning mission schools. I have visited many such mission schools in different districts of West Bengal and done multiple interviews with the office bearers, trustees, teachers, students and parents.

### **Reasons behind the Growth of Residential Muslim Mission Schools**

During the last two decades we see a growth of sizeable section of Muslim lower middle class and tiny middle class with huge socio-economic aspirations. Large numbers of them are government school teachers, small scale entrepreneurs and self-employed business class. The educational aspirations and economic mobility has become the new phenomenon within the Muslim community. Social workers, community leaders, a section of political activists have aggressively argued about the role of education for the empowerment of the community and the publication of Sachar committee report in 2006 report has generated massive public debates about the question of empowerment and well-being both within and outside the community.

In the post-Sachar scenario, we see the massive growth of community based Mission schools in different districts of rural West Bengal. The *paigaam* (message) of education as the key agency of social and economic mobility has reached among the large numbers of population in rural West Bengal and generated unprecedented sense of social and educational aspirations among the Muslim community. Simultaneously in the post-economic liberalization era, we witnessed the declining of public institutions and the growth of private schools in India. Therefore on the one hand the culture of privatization under neo-liberal economic policy and the lack of cultural and religious sensitivity in the mainstream public intuitions. As Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze have argued that the decline of universal public education system and withdrawal of 'middle class' from the education and health leads to the further decline of public education and health care system. The decline public schools have badly affected the rural and under-privileged social groups such as Muslims, Adivasi (schedule tribes) and Dalits (schedule castes) communities.

The privatization of Indian economy and the process of urbanization in the post-1990s in India has generated a massive aspirations among the middle class and lower middle classes in general and in the midst of economic reforms along with apathy towards public education system, a section of 'evolving Muslim middle class' in West Bengal

started to establish private educational mission schools largely inspired by the Ramakrishna Mission and other Christian missionary schools.

The lack of proper educational infrastructures in Muslim concentrated districts and blocks. The recent study of Association SNAP and Pratichi Institute titled as “The Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal” was published in 2014 and the document reveals that the access to public health and education in the Muslim concentrated blocks or districts is limited compared to Upper caste or Non-Muslim concentrated blocks in West Bengal. The report stated “On an average 10.6 Secondary and Higher Secondary schools exist for one lac population in the state. However, 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. Block level data from DISE and SEMIS 2011-12, show that the number of Govt. schools per lac population varies from 1.5 to 21. There is a clear inverse relationship between this indicator of availability of schools and concentration of Muslims in a block”.<sup>57</sup> The report also argued that there is absolute case of opportunity deprivations and other forms of socio-economic exclusions faced by the rural Bengali Muslims. For example, the public higher secondary schools in Muslim concentrated blocks or villages lacks the relevant subjects or discipline like pure or natural sciences, bio-sciences, computer science, economics, etc. These subjects are very essential not only for the preparation for medical sciences and engineering but also important in the research and other educational labor market. It is very difficult to aspire in for doctors or engineers (the most sought after jobs among the Bengali middle class) in these public schools. Therefore a section of upward mobile Muslims started to withdraw their wards from the public schools and looking for the private schools.

The public and private schools (residential and non-residential) run by non-Muslims are also not quite sensitive about the cultural aspects of the Muslim community and identity. The question of dress code for girls, lack of sensitivity about Muslim’s religious and cultural rights (Friday prayer timing, *halaal* meat), also the indirect imposition of hegemonic majoritarian culture plays critical role in the process of

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<sup>57</sup> The Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal, published by Association SNAP, Guidance Guild and Pratichi Institute, Kolkata, 2014.

alienation from these institutions. Multiple interviews with many Muslim guardians, parents, and students have revealed these religious or cultural reasons apart from the question of aspirations. In an interview with Md. AbdurRahman, a school teacher (name changed), parent of a girl child based in Barasat in North twenty-four Pargans district said that

*“I am not a Maulana or Mufti (religious clergy) but I know wearing half-skirt and shirt for adolescent girls in co-ed school is against the Muslim or Islamic values. The hostels are also not sensitive about the Muslim culture, for example, there is no proper arrangement for prayer halls or providing halal foods (chicken or mutton). The school authority do not have any arrangement during the month of Ramzan (fasting). My daughter has studied here (private school run by non-Muslim) for the past eight years but now I think she is growing up and basic sense of values need to be inculcated. I am happy with the quality education and teachers in this school but I feel culture is also important. So I have decided to put my daughter in Al-Ameen Mission for her NEET (medical) residential coaching where quality education and Islamic culture is ensured.”*

This question of Islamic values or culture is not only limited to Mr Rahman alone but also among the large majority of many such guardians echoed the same opinion or concern for both the male and female students. I have spoken with 110 such parents and guardians from different districts of West Bengal but the issues and concerns are more or less similar. The majority of these households are either salaried or small businessmen with massive aspirations to see their wards as doctors and engineers.

The finding of these long in depth interviews with the family members including students are quite interesting. A section of parents wants their sons or daughter in the mixed environment with different social and religious communities simultaneously with Islamic etiquettes and culture. Many of the parents are extremely anxious and fearful about the recent hostile environment against the Minority communities in different parts of India and very concern and insecure about sending daughters in non-Muslim residential schools. As a result, there is massive jump in the enrollment of students in the Muslim run Mission schools in the last one decade. The admission process has become very competitive in these mission schools. Al-Ameen Mission networks (at present 61 educational institutions including 41 residential campuses

with more than 12000 students) conducts their admission test all over West Bengal and receives huge applications from the rural districts of West Bengal.

The example of G.D Study Circle<sup>58</sup> is also important in this context; the GD Study Circle (henceforth GDSC) conducts “Mission Common Admission Test (MCAT)” in the model of Central University Common Entrance Test (CUCET) in India and allocate seats based on the merit of the students and the rank of the intuitions . GDSC is collective of 40 residential Muslim mission schools in all across the state of West Bengal. GDSC conducts its MCAT in different minority concentrated regions or blocks in West Bengal. The students can collect and submit the application form for the entrance exam from various decentralized form distribution centers. Interestingly apart from the Mission school office many book stores, shoe stores, medical shops, garments shops, individual social activist, including Imam of mosques and Madrasah teachers also acts as the centers for distributions and collection of admission forms. This makes the process of form collection and submission smooth and more accessible to the remote rural Muslim students in West Bengal.

For example the GDSC run MCAT advertisement 2021 notice for the admission of students in Class XI both male and female in the Humanities and Science streams clearly mentioned the contacts points for collecting and submitting entrance exam forms in different blocks and districts. The case of Birbhum district (around 180 kilometers far from Kolkata ,one of the most backward districts in West Bengal and Muslim constitute roughly 40 percent of the total population) is quite interesting. The contact points in Birbhum district includes ShikkhaSangha in Bolpur, Modern book stall in Lohapur, AR-Rahman Academy, Kashimnagor, Al-Akram Mission in Dhiguri, Murarai Medical hall in Bhadishar, Begum Rokeya Academy in Purangram, Jogajog

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<sup>58</sup> The GD Study Circle started its journey with a higher secondary school named as G.D Academy with 73 students at Kolkata’s Park Circus and presently housed at A.K. Md. Siddique Lane, Kolkata-16. The GD Study circle is patronized by the Chairman of Pataka Group of Industries Mr. MostakHossain as part of the corporate social responsibility project through the GD Charitable society. The aim of GDSC is to provide better education to the marginalized section of the society. At present GD Study circle has the umbrella network of 34 Mission schools in all cross West Bengal with more than 10000 students enrolled under GDSC. Pataka Group of industries started their traditional business of tobacco and Biri factory in Murshidabad district in late 1950s by the founder Mr. GiasuddinBiswas and later they have diversified their business into beverages, food, textiles, healthcare and real-estate. Mr. MostakHossain is one of the leading industrialists in Eastern India and sponsored hundreds of Mission schools, and student support programs.

book stall in Nalhati, Bookhouse in Rajmarket, Anisha optical in Rampurhat, Aslam Shoe House in Ranipur more, Astha Medical in Suri and Kabir Bastralaya in Sadashibpur. Like this most of the Muslim mission schools conducts and communicate with the community along with advertisement in different community runs newspapers and weeklies such as Kalom, Dindarpan, NotunGati, Aponzone, VorerAlo, etc. The example of Jalpaiguri where the population of Muslims are quite low, there the Moazzin (deputy Imam) of Dhupguri Town Mosque acts as the contact point for that particular region.

This mode of educational linkages and communication can be explained as the subaltern *mode of communication*. One cannot think of Shoe store or garment and medical shops as the mode of educational connectivity. The process of educational linkage among the Bengali Muslim community not only reveals about their educational aspirations but also explain the sociology of economic mobility and the role of community solidarity.

Therefore the micro-decentralization process of educational communication between the Mission schools and the community is sociologically rooted and culturally accessible to the larger rural Bengali Muslims in different remote villages and blocks. This community decentralization model has hugely contributed in the massive growth of Mission schools and also in the enrollment rates.

The another important aspect for the growth and the sustenance of the Muslim residential mission schools is continuous economic support from the community as a form of *Zakat* (compulsory 2.5 percent charity in Islam) and donation. *Zakat* plays crucial role in mobilizing funds from the community. Almost all mission schools receive regular *Zakat* and donation from different categories of businessmen and salaried person. At the initial stage many Muslim local philanthropist even donated their commercial and agricultural land for the establishment of Mission schools. These residential mission schools largely named after Prophet or *Sahabas*(companion of the Prophet Muhammad) or any Muslim religious and community icons which in itself generate a sense of religious solidarity and salvific grace (*sawaab*). On the one hand these mission schools provide modern secular education and on the other hand it's molded into Islamic religious sense of symbolic cultural emancipation. As a result neither the orthodox or traditional section of Muslims theological leaders nor the

modern educated Muslim middle class have opposed this mixed model of educational empowerment with Islamic modernity. These mission schools in their promotional brochure and prospectus clearly mentions about their commitment towards ‘Islamic’ culture and values which includes leaning Arabic language, Quran, and five times *Salah/Namaz*, (prayer) and Islamic cultural programme. The daily time schedule mandatorily includes the Namaz timing and separate arrangement for boys and girls. Therefore these mission schools receive moral support from the large section of guardian and parents including community members.

### **Mission Schools and the New Aspirational Bengali Muslim Middle Class**

The growth of new aspirational middle class among the Muslim community in West Bengal has dominated the debates of education within the community and large numbers of them are the outcome of Mission schools. Al-Ameen Mission itself produced thousands of doctors and engineers. The performance of Al-Ameen Mission is tremendously well in All India Medical and Engineering entrance exams. In the year 2021 National Entrance Eligibility Test (NEET) 510 students from Al-Ameen Mission successfully secured All India Medical Rank within 60000<sup>59</sup>. The district wise students’ breakup among the NEET qualified rank holders are; 139 students from Murshidabad, 89 from Malda, 50 from Birbhum, 50 from South 24 Parganas, 33 from North 24 Parganas, 25 from Burdwan, 24 from Nadia , 31 from North and South Dinajpur districts etc. Apart from Al-Ameen Mission, many students also secured from GD Study Circle affiliated Mission schools. There are thousands of Muslim students passed out from these Missions and secured admission at the Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech) and Master of Technology (M.Tech) courses in prestigious Universities, engineering colleges and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) and National Institute of Technology (NITs) in different parts of India in the last one and half decades. The students of Al-Ameen Mission and other few mission also secured among the top ten and top hundred ranks in the secondary and higher secondary level with the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education and West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education.

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<sup>59</sup> Official advertisement report of Al-Ameen Mission published in Daily Kalom and Dindarpan newspaper on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Also available in the official website of the Al-Ameen Mission <https://alameenmission.org/aam/alameenmissionssl/result/Dindarpan%2005-11-2021.pdf>

There are substantial numbers of research scholars, Assistant Professors working in different field of research in electronics, computer science, Information Technology, Civil and Mechanical Engineering, including the new emerging fields of Nano-science, bio-technology and Artificial Intelligence in different prestigious Universities, colleges' including IITs, NITs, AIIMS, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (ISSER) and National Institute of Science Education and Research (NISER), Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore etc. There has been substantial increase of Muslim student enrollments in the last one and half decades in different premier universities and colleges in the state of West Bengal such as Jadavpur University, Presidency University, University of Calcutta, Institute of Post-Graduate Medical Education and Research, National Medical College, Nil RatanSircar Medical College and Hospital, and Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology (formerly Shibpur BE College at Howrah) etc. Along with the support of Mission schools there is government's minority scholarships programme and the 10 percent OBC reservation for backward Muslims have also boosted and facilitated the higher education and further reduced the rate of drop outs in the realm of higher education. The percentage of first generation learners is quite impressive and their performance in different field is quite remarkable and unprecedented among the Bengali Muslim community in the history of post-independent. Even two decades ago there was hardly any presence of Muslims students, researchers or faculty members in Colleges or Universities in West Bengal. It was kind of a distant dream for the rural Bengali Muslim students from Dinajpur or Cooch Behar district pursuing MBBS in the premier medical colleges in Kolkata or working as post-doctoral research fellow at the universities in USA, UK and Germany.

The continuous efforts of different Mission schools and the professional courses have generously contributed in the in labor market and the social and economic mobility which led to the growth of New Bengali Muslim Middle Class (NBMMC). The economic liberalization and the process of globalization in India have also opened up many avenues for skilled labors and large section of engineers have been absorbed by the Informational Technology industries. This new middle class is largely characterized as the economic middle class not much rooted to the culture neither into literary activities. The production of doctors and engineers has definitely contributed



rapidly in the economic growth of s section of Muslim community but there is not much initiative in the field of social sciences, humanities or literary actives. I have classified this new Bengali Muslim middle class henceforth abbreviated as NMMMC into three broader categories such as *Rajarhat-New Town Middle Class*, *Haj-Umrah Middle Class and the Social Middle Class*. Interestingly these three categories of NBMMC are overlapping with each other.

The Rajarhat-New Town middle class largely symbolize with the neo-middle class in larger Indian context and engaged in private or corporate sector including high income salaried class. This middle class leads highly individualist nuclear family life with 3-4 BHK flats in the apartments in the new urban settlements. This class is basically de-linked from the rural Bengal village roots or '*deshbari*' and became the part of the urban consumerist society with minimum connection with the larger community or cultural activities. There has been growing numbers of this section among the new Bengali Muslim middle class.

The next kind of NBMMC is *Haj-Umrah Middle class*; this is quite interesting and complex category in contemporary West Bengal. This category is the mixture of both urban aspirations and also rooted in the everyday religiosity. A section of them involves in TableegiJamaat, Ahle-e-Hadeeth and also section of Jamat-e-Islami. The phenomenon of performing Haj and Umrah (annual pilgrimage to Mecca and also the essential duty of Muslims to visit that place at least once in a lifetime) is quite remarkable features among this new middle class. The majority of this class involves in small scale business, including doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs and real estate investors. The social commitment, sense of social justice and culture is very negligible but this group has good religious network of influence. This class performs Haj and Umrah multiple times and we see quite number of private Haj-Umrah tours operators function in the city of Kolkata.

The final category of the NBMMC is tiny social middle class. The social middle class people are largely engaged in salaried jobs, school and college teachers, retired public servant, journalist, small businessmen etc. This group of class is highly engaged with the cultural and literary activities and actively debating on the issues of social justice, community empowerment, social reforms and other political and civic activities. This class also envisages social and political imaginaries embedded in the socio-cultural

context of the community and generate a new democratic rights based political consciousness which is transformatory in nature.

In the last one decade in West Bengal, the Muslim civil society organizations such as Association SNAP, Guidance Guild, Amanat Foundation Trust, Bengali Academia for Social Empowerment (BASE), Alia SanskritiSangsad, and many such civil society organizations in different district of West Bengal played positive role in bringing the debate of social justice, debate of recognition and redistribution in the political discourse of West Bengal. For example, Association SNAP regularly disseminates the information related to employment opportunities and admission in different educational institutions. SNAP maintain the robust data and mobile numbers of more than one lakh households. Association SNAP runs state civil service and other competitive coaching centers; regularly organize capacity building workshops on minority rights, Right to Information (RTI) Act, budget analysis etc. The most important contribution of Association SNAP was the socio-economic and educational survey of Muslims in West Bengal titled as ‘The Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal’ in collaboration with Pratichi Institute Trust led by Nobel laureate Professor AmartyaSen and the report was published in 2014. This is the first comprehensive primary survey report on the social, educational and economic status of Muslims in West Bengal published in the post-independence West Bengal. This report has generated quite noise in the state politics on the question of minority rights and social justice in the post-Sachar scenario but due to rise of far right Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the so-called secular-communal binary politics have obliterated the debate of inclusion, affirmative action and social justice of Muslim community.

### **Private Mission Schools, the debate of public education and its impacts on the Muslim community**

The Left-front government (LFG) of West Bengal in 1980s onwards established many primary and secondary schools in the rural districts and later the Sarva Shiksha Aviyan scheme under the Government of India aimed at the universalization of Elementary education in a time bound manner further strengthen the public education system specially in the issues related to infrastructure and enrollments. Subsequently in 2001 with the eighty sixth amendment to the Indian Constitution, enacted the Right

to Education Act came into force making free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 to 14. The economic reforms and later the neo-liberal market economy have made adverse impact on the public education and health care system all across India and West Bengal is also not an exception.

The mushrooming of 'English medium' private schools, the massive rise of educational aspiration among the large section of population, urge for social mobility, lack of financing public education, withdrawal of middle class from the public schools, mismanagement and acute dearth of monitoring, the issue of collective action problem led to the decline of public education system. The destruction of universal education and health care system and introduction of scheme like education for poor and health for poor led to poor education and poor health.

The state of West Bengal is overwhelmingly agrarian in nature mostly small cultivators, sharecroppers and massive number of agricultural labor. However in the past few decades West Bengal has witnessed shift from agriculture to non-farm sectors including petty business and self-employed groups. In the wake of market economy, urbanization and small industrialization and Information technology has produced a sizeable section of aspirational middle class has emerged. A section of rural population in the districts migrated to the district towns and cities for livelihood and education. There has been substantial growth of private English medium schools in different district and block towns. As a result the rural public schools are left with the students from the rural poor households. In the last one decade under the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government there has been significant rise of enrollments at the macro scale due to popular incentive schemes like mid-day meal, Kanyashree and Sabujasathi but the increasing gap of teacher student's ratio, huge corruption in recruitment, and irregular appointments have adversely affected the quality of public education in West Bengal.

Another interesting observation in West Bengal is the decline of male student's enrollment in the secondary and higher secondary schools. The data suggest that the rural districts of Birbhum, Malda, Murshidabad, Purulia performing well in the enrollments of girl child or female students but the boys or male student's enrollments is declining due to early drop outs. The sizeable sections of boys or male

students dropouts schools at the 8<sup>th</sup> standard and migrate to urban center for livelihood.

In this changing context of state and society, one has to understand the location of Muslim community and the decline of public education system. The rural Bengali Muslim community constitutes huge population and they faced multiple marginalization's such of rural-urban gap, lack of opportunity, distance of schools from the village, poor monitoring, acute shortage of teacher and relevant subject compare to the school in non-minority areas, lack of political voice, including the lack of community demand towards the public educations.

The Muslim run community mission schools only cater the needs of roughly 10 percent of the total Muslim students and rest of the Muslim students still goes to public schools but in the media and other public or community forum it has been projected in such a way that the entire community is getting educated though Mission school. The mission schools through the regular advertisement in the community centric newspapers about their achievements and admission, regular invitation to the community leaders in those mission school campus for different religious and cultural programs, participation of the Chairman, secretary or owner of those mission schools in different public platforms including government events and other forums dominate the mind and imagination of the community. A large section of community leaders, government officials including politicians send their own wards in those private mission schools. Lastly a section of bureaucrats, retired civil servants, businessmen, and community leaders including politicians have established their own private Mission schools. Hence they maintain good liaison with the ruling party and the government for different endowments and grants and there is hardly any one left in the Muslim community who would speak or vouch in favor of public education system where the community's overwhelming poor students studies.

Therefore public schools in the Muslim concentrated villages or blocks faced double marginalization both by the apathy or negligence of the state and the community. Hence majority of the public schools in the Muslim concentrated areas are facing chronic deprivation. In spite of this important critical aspect, these residential missions' schools played phenomenal role not only in generating huge aspiration for education but also made significant social changes and mobility within the rural

Bengali Muslim society. This also further led to the growth of upwardly mobile social group and the formation of new Bengali Muslim middle class.

### **Concluding remarks**

To understand the present socio-economic and political profiles of the Bengali Muslims one has trace back the social history and sociology of the community. This would include the historical evolution of Islam and the process of conversion in Bengal, social structure and stratifications, the pattern and nature of land holding and agrarian settlements, linguistic identity and crystallization of syncretic religious culture or *Sahajiya* and Sufi tradition, double burdens of partitions, displacement, trauma and migrations , inter-community relationship, internal diversities, sectarian contestations and class conflicts, the growth of religious consciousness and ‘communal’ solidarity, role of community and religious institutions (Madrasahs, Anjumans, Tanjims, Khanqas, Dargahs etc), oral traditions (punthi-pora, Waz-Mahfils and Milaads), neo-liberalization and pauperization of the community and the nature of political economy and socio-economic and educational mobility etc.

In the case of Bengal, the partition has made long term impacts on social, economic and political fronts. Muslims in the post-independent West Bengal has massively jolt by the trauma of partition and which has affected the all walks of lives. The acute sense of identity crisis and the question of physical security of lives and limbs has been the dominate discourse of politics and policies. Even during the three and half decades long Left Politics in the state of West Bengal the debate of minority question was limited to the old notion of physical security and could not touch the issues of social justice and everyday Muslim lives. It is the Sachar committee report and the process of crystallization of community identity and mobilization led to the emergence of the debate of equity and social development for the Muslim minority.

In the post-Sachar West Bengal, the massive educational and social interventions of the community organizations led to the growth of residential educational institutions and generated huge socio-economic and educational aspirations within the Muslim community. This interventions and urge for social change within the community has compelled both the state and religious organizations to engage with the social question of the Muslim community. In doing so this generated new debates of

community empowerment and the rise of new middle class within the Bengali Muslim community. There has been a rise of socio-economic aspirations and upward social mobility among the sizeable section of Muslims in rural West Bengal. Hence this process of community intervention for social and educational development has transformed the Muslim question from typical security-centric debate to welfare and equity.

## Chapter Three

### Religio-Cultural Institution to a Political Party: Examining the Role of Furfura Sharif

#### Introduction

In the post-Sachar scenario, there has been a significant socio-political mobilization of Muslims in the districts of rural West Bengal. This mobilization took place largely among the impoverished agrarian and working class Bengali Muslims. Furfura *Sharif* has played an important role in mobilizing the Muslim masses. They have a substantial influence among the Bengali speaking Muslims; the poor, marginal peasants and informal laborers in rural districts of West Bengal thickly concentrated in the southern region. There has been very few academic works on this vernacular Sufi network of Bengal; scholars have largely noted how Furfura Sharif has been historically involved in preaching Sufi Islamic teachings and practices among the masses. However, the role of Furfura Sharif and their significant political shift in the aftermath of the SCR remains understudied. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by examining to understand Furfura Sharif's shift from religio-cultural activities to political mobilization.

The main question of this chapter is how did Muslim religious and cultural organization, with strong mass base, interact with the political areas? In order to answer this question I have studied the Furfura Sharif's religious institutions such as *pir-mureedi* relationship, *waz-mahfils*, and shrine cum madrasah networks to mobilize their followers in rural Bengal. They have also extensively used pamphlets, *istehaar*, leaflets, vernacular religious tracts, and the popular genre of vernacular Muslim improvement texts to reach out to the Muslims.

This chapter further explores the major shift of Furfura *Sharif* from a religio-cultural institution to a political entity by forming a political party named as Indian Secular Front (ISF) by *Pirzada* Abbas Siddique in 2021. This chapter has explored the possible socio-political explanations for the formation of ISF in the backdrop of larger political process in the post-Sachar West Bengal. Based on the ethnographic evidence

of Furfura *Sharif* and its forms of mobilization, I argue that the marginalization of Muslims gave the community's religio-cultural institutions new opportunities to enter the political arena and further a sizeable section of the community who expressed their faith in the political party by voting them in large numbers.

### **Brief History of Agrarian Islam in Bengal**

In order to understand Islam and the Muslim societies in the landscape of Bengal, it is essential to realize the geographical and socio-cultural milieu of the Bengali Muslims residing there. Unlike other parts of India (northern, southern and western India), Muslims are largely concentrated in urban *qasba* or towns, but Bengali Muslims mostly inhabit the rural areas, and agrarian activities constitute the major source of their livelihoods. As Richard Eaton rightly pointed out, Islam in Bengal is the “*Religion of the Plough*”<sup>60</sup> The most distinguishing features of Sufism in Bengal are directly linked to the rural agrarian practices of the ‘local’ Muslims. Sufism in Bengal is very diverse and heterogeneous, as described by Asim Roy, who calls it “Islamic syncretism” in Bengal.<sup>61</sup>

Sufism in Bengal had arrived early from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and it basically attracted large numbers of people, mostly from the lower strata of the society - through its message of equality, simplicity and flexibility with traditional customary rituals and practices. Sufism attracted people from different faiths and beliefs, resulting in the development of a culture of pluralism and tolerance.

The appearance of different Sufis or *Pirs* at various points in history had played a significant role in shaping and reshaping the identity, polity and society of the Muslim communities. The prominent and influential Sufis who could win the hearts of millions of people in Bengal emerged at different points of time, such as Shah Jalal of Sylhet (presently in Bangladesh), Khan Jahan Ali of Bagerhat (presently in the

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<sup>60</sup> For details, see Richard M. Eaton, ‘Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India’, in Richard C. Martin (ed.), *Islam and the History of Religions*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1984, pp.106-24. Also, see another of his seminal book, *The Rise of Islam in Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

<sup>61</sup> See, Asim Roy, ‘*The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*’, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983. He has discussed in details about the role of Islam and the development of syncretism in Bengal.



Khulna division of Bangladesh), Baba Adam Shahid of Munshiganj near Dhaka, Shah Mohammad Sultan Rumi of Mymensingh (present Bangladesh), Noor Muhammad Nizampuri of Chittagong (present Bangladesh), Makhdum Shah Ghaznavi of Mangolkot of Burdwan district in West Bengal, Sufi Syed Ekramul Haque of Haldibari in North Bengal, Shah Meheboob, commonly known as *Daata Saheb* based at Patharchapuri in Birbhum district, Mustafa Madani of Medinipur district in West Bengal and Pir Abu Bakr Siddique of Furfura Sharif. Apart from the influential Sufis and *Pirs*, there were hundreds of local and regional subaltern Sufi saints throughout Bengal, such as Manik*Pir*, Fateh Ali, Gora Chand etc., who also played a prominent role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of Bengal. Though there are multiple debates within ‘Sufism’, to understand it simply, it is largely categorized as the doctrine of ‘*Wahadatul-wajud*’ (unity of being) and ‘*Wahadatul-syuhud*’ (unity of witness) and thus the idea ‘*Sharia pir*’ (based on Islamic *shariya*) and ‘*Beshara Pir*’ (going beyond the formal structure and principles of Islamic *sharia*).<sup>62</sup>

### **Islamic Revivalism through Socio-religious Reform in Bengal: The Role of Furfura’s Pir Maulana Abu Bakr Siddique**

*Maulana Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique, widely known as ‘*Dada-huzur*’ among his disciples, was born in the village of Furfura Sharif in Hooghly district in 1946. He lost his father (Haji Abdul Moktader Siddique) and mother (Muhabatenessa Bibi) at his early age. *Pir* Abu Bakr received his institutional education from the Sitapur Endowment Madrasah and Haji Mohasin Madrasah in Hooghly district. Later, he mastered the Quran, *Hadith*, *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Farai*z (Islamic laws of duties, obligations and inheritance) including Islamic philosophy from the noted *Alim* of that period, Allama Jamaluddin Ahmed Mungeri (*Imam* of Nakodha Masjid of Kolkata) and Allama Najr Shah Belayeti, who was also associated with Sayyid Ahmed Bareilvi and fought against the British at the battle of Balakot. In the subsequent period, *Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique went to Medina (the holy Islamic city in Arabia) and further

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<sup>62</sup>There is a deep and comprehensive theological and Quranic debate in Islam about the idea of ‘*Wahadatulwajud*’ and ‘*Wahadatulsyuhud*’. For details, see Peter Adamson, *The Philosophy in the Islamic World*, Volume III, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

developed his Islamic knowledge from the famous Islamic scholar of Medina, Saiyed Muhammad Ameen Ibn Ahmad Ibn Ridwaan Madni.<sup>63</sup>

*Pir* Abu Bakr took the spiritual oath of allegiance (*bayaat*) from the learned Persian poet and Islamic scholar, Sufi Fateh Ali Waisi, whose tomb is situated at Munshi Para Lane of the Maniktala area in North Kolkata. Sufi Fateh Ali Waisi had many *mureeds* and *khalifas* across the subcontinent, including central Asian regions.

In spite of a rich historical tradition, Furfura *Sharif* gained momentum and emerged as an important seat of spiritual and Islamic learning only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century after the birth of Maulana Pir Abu Bakr Siddique (1846-1939). His dynamic intellectual, spiritual and organizational skills made him very influential and an exceptional '*Pir*' in an undivided Bengal. *Pir* Abu Bakr was later known as '*Mujaddid*' (reformer) and popularly regarded as '*Dada-huzur*' (revered grandfather figure) with an utmost respect and deep emotional attachment.<sup>64</sup>

Scholars such as Joya Chatterji, Rafiuddin Ahmed, described *Pir* Abu Bakr of Furfura as '*Sharia Pir*' who played a vital role in shaping the community identity among the Bengali Muslims through the prism of Sufism. The idea of the Bengali Muslim is quite complex and generally falls into the category of binaries such as Bengaliness versus Muslimness, *ashraf* (Muslim of foreign ancestry) versus *atrap* (Muslim of local or regional ancestry), Urdu speaking versus Bengali speaking, urban versus rural, etc. The Bengali Muslim is generally considered as rural, *atrap*, *pir* worshipping low culture people whereas Urdu speaking Muslims attribute themselves as high cultured, urban centered, *Ashraf* Muslims.<sup>65</sup> Alefia Tundanwala rightly argued that *Pir* Abu Bakr of Furfura Sharif had a proper and pragmatic understanding of the changing

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<sup>63</sup>Syed Bahauddin, 'Jugo Sanskarok Shah Abu Bakr Siddique', published from Furfura Sharif, Dist. Hooghly, West Bengal.

<sup>64</sup>For details see his biography, '*Furfura Sharifer Ithihas o Bonger Auliaqul: Shah Sufi Hazrat Pir Maulana Abu Bakr Siddique (Rah) Bistarito Jiboni*' by Allama Maulana Mohammad Ruhul Amin, (In Bengali) published on 15<sup>th</sup> Falgun, 1347 (Bengali Calendar). And also see, Abdus Sattar, '*Imamul Mucchelemin Hazrat Mohammad Abu Bakar Siddique: Pir Keblar Jibon Charit*', Calcutta, 1939. '*Furfurar Peer Hazrat Maulana Abu Bakr Siddiqui*', by Abu Fatema Muhammad Ishaque, Islamic Cultural Centre, Dacca Division, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, June, 1980.

<sup>65</sup>Joya Chatterji, 'The Bengali Muslims: A Contradiction in Terms? An overview of the debate on Bengali Muslim Identity' in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Islam: Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, Manohar Publication, Delhi, pp. 280-281.

circumstances of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. The Furfura *Sharif's* mass appeal is more effective because the *Pirs* of Furfura have made Bengali the vehicle of expression. They have quite successfully attempted to propagate Islam among the masses through their writings and speeches in Bengali, especially in the rural Bengal.<sup>66</sup>

Early nineteenth century onwards in Bengal, the concept of revivalism of Islam in general and Sufism in particular, started taking deep roots among the *Ulemas* and Sufis due to various global and local reasons such as the downfall of Muslim dynasties at the hands of British and Western powers, changing scenario of the global politics, mainly the downfall of the Khilafat in Turkey and the introduction of the Khilafat movement and political instability in undivided India. All these led to the development of a sense of politico-religious identity among the *Ulemas* in the Indian subcontinent.

Therefore, there were many *Ulemas* and *Pirs* during the nineteenth century who were not only active in religious and spiritual domain, but also with the changing contours of social and political issues. Among these Sufis, *Pir* Abu Bakr of Furfura was one of the most popular *Pirs* in Bengal who had a huge influence and following among Bengali Muslims masses throughout Bengal.<sup>67</sup> *Pir* Abu Bakr was the founder of many *ulama* associations such as *Anjuman-Waizin-e-Bangla* (association of Islamic orators in Bengal), *Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Bangla* (association of *ulemas* in Bengal) and founded and patronized multiple weeklies, monthly news magazines such as *Shariat-e-Islam*, *Islam Darpan*, *Mihir-o-Sudhakar*, *The Mussalman*, *Islam Hithashi*, *Banganoor*, etc., which played a crucial role in mobilizing Muslims masses for the *Khilafat* and non-cooperation movement in Bengal called by the Congress and the Muslim league.<sup>68</sup> Chandiprasad Sarkar argues in his book “*The Bengali Muslim: The Study on their Politicization 1912-1929*”, that large majority of the Bengali Muslims

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<sup>66</sup> AlefiaTudanwala, ‘*The Muslim Search for Identity in Contemporary West Bengal*’, Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to University of Calcutta, Kolkata, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> See Chandiprasad Sarkar, ‘*The Bengali Muslims: The Study on their Politicization 1912-1929*’, K.P Bagchi Press, Kolkata, 1991, pp.111-112.

<sup>68</sup> *The Musalman*, February4, 1921, p.4.

were influenced by *ulemas* who were either the products of the *Deoband School* or the followers of *Pir Saheb* of Furfura Sharif.<sup>69</sup>

Furfura Sharif still has significant influence in the contemporary Muslim mobilizational politics, particularly in rural West Bengal. As part of the mobilization, *Pirs* of Furfura Sharif did organize hundreds of public rallies, conventions as well as extensively used the platforms of conventional and popular *Waz-Mahfils* (religious gathering) as the tools to mobilize and sensitize the Muslims of West Bengal. Therefore, to understand the nitty-gritty of and contemporary patterns of their mobilizations and networking at the grass-roots or village level, it is essential to study the sociology and ethnography of Furfura Sharif, which has a great impact among the Bengali Muslims in rural Bengal.

### **Furfura Sharif and its Theological Orientation**

Furfura Sharif is not only a Sufi pilgrimage center in its traditional sense, but also an important sub-school/*Silsila*, broadly under the '*Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat*'<sup>70</sup> and follow the *Hanafi*<sup>71</sup> school of jurisprudence based on Quran, *Hadith* (saying of Prophets), *Ijma* (consensus) and *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning).<sup>72</sup> The other few important and distinct features of Furfura Sharif is to believe in *Tasauuf* (spirituality), *Tajkiya-e-Nafs* (purification of self) though *Zikr* (recital of the praise and names of God) *Milad*, *Maulud* (celebration of the birthday of the Prophet), *Qiyam* (offering Salam to Prophet by standing), organize *Isale-e-Sawab* or *Waz-Mhafil* (Islamic conglomeration) and *Ziyarat* (visiting tomb or *mazar*). Interestingly, unlike many Sufi groups, Furfura Sharif is strictly against the concept of *Pir-Sujood*

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Chandiprasad Sarkar, '*The Bengali Muslims: The Study on their Politicization 1912-1929*', K.P Bagchi Press, Calcutta, 1991, p.111.

<sup>70</sup> *Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamat* is basically the group which adheres to the *Sunnats* (deeds and sayings) of the Prophet, as distinguished from the Quaranic principles. Interestingly, a majority of the Sunni Islamic sects and groups claimed themselves as *Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamat*.

<sup>71</sup> Followers of Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767 AD), an influential Sunni Muslim jurist, theologian and also founder of one of the four schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in Sunni Islam. Hanafi school largely dominates South Asia, mostly in the Indian subcontinent. The others schools are Shafi, Hambali and Maliki.

<sup>72</sup> As quoted in '*Washiatnama*' (in Bengali) of Pir Abu Bakr Siddique, compiled and published by Syed Ajmat Hussain, on behalf of Kanayat Library at Furfura Sharif, Date and year not mentioned, pp. 1-12.

(prostrating at *Pir's* feet), using *Chaddar* (pieces of cloths offer at the grave) at *Mazar* or Tomb, *Qawalli* (musical festival in the Sufi shrine), *Urs*(celebration of a *Pir's* death anniversary), and participating in the festivals of singing, dancing and smoking etc., are strictly prohibited.<sup>73</sup> Amalgamating all these features, Furfura Sharif successfully created a 'sect-like' distinct group called the '*Silsila-e-Furfura Sharif*' or Furfura Sufi order.

The feature of Furfura *Silsila* is *Khidmat-e-Khalq* (serving the creatures of God) and *Tahfooz-e-Deen* (preservation of Islam). Though in the post-colonial Bengal, Furfura Sharif never participated directly in the electoral politics, until the formation of Indian Secular Front (ISF) it reacted or responded multiples times in the realm of politics on the questions of community centric issues, including personal laws, *madrasahs* and other community rights-based initiatives. Right from the colonial times to present post-colonial Bengal, Furfura Sharif has acted as a communitarian pressure group at different points of times, as the 'custodian' and 'guardian' of a sizeable section of the Bengali Muslims.

### **Furfura Sharif: Organization, Networks and Mass Appeal**

Furfura Sharif's networks are not only limited to West Bengal alone but also spread out in Assam, Tripura and East Bengal (presently Bangladesh). Late Maulana Pir Mohammad Abu Bakr Siddique (1846-1939) is popularly known as *Dadahuzur* (reverent grandfather) and his five sons; Maulana Mohammad Abdul Hai Siddique (*boro huzur*), Maulana Mohammad Abu Zafar Siddique (*mejo huzur*), Maulana Mohammad Abdul Qader Siddique (*sejo huzur*), Maulana Mohammad Najmus Sahadat Siddique (*nawa huzur*), Maulana Mohammad Zulfikar Ali Siddique (*choto huzur*) are popularly known as *panch Pir or panch huzur* (five *Pirs*) among their *mureeds* (disciples) in Bengal.<sup>74</sup>

*Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique and his five sons have established more than one thousand *madrasahs*, *maktabs*, and hundreds of mosques in different parts of West Bengal,

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<sup>73</sup> See '*Washi-atnama*' (in Bengali) of Pir Abu Bakr Siddique, compiled by Syed Ajmat Hussain, Kanayat Library, Furfura Sharif, Hooghly, pp.13-14.

<sup>74</sup> Arindam Sarkar, 'Pilgrim's Progress', *The Hindustan Times*, Kolkata, 7<sup>th</sup> July, 2013. Also quoted in *Furfura Sharifer Paanch Pir* by A.T.M Rafiqul Hasan, Kolkata.

including Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. Most of the *madrasahs* were established by the *Pirs* of Furfura are located in the district of Hooghly, Howrah, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Medinipur, Nadia, Bankura, Malda, Burdwan districts of West Bengal and the rest of the *madrasahs* are in Assam and Bangladesh. These include both *Khareji madrasah* (non-government communitymanaged) and senior and high *madrasahs*, later aided and recognized by the government.

At present thirty grandsons and roughly 100 great-grandsons of Pir Abu Bakr have been engaged with the religious activities mainly through *Waz-Mahfil*, building madrasah and mosque. Among the contemporaries, Allama Pir Saifuddin Siddique (died in 2018), Pir Qutubuddin Siddique, Pir Kalimullah Siddique (died in 2021), Pir Ibrahim Siddique, Pir Abdullahil Maruf Siddique, Pir Omar Siddique, Pirzada Toha Siddique, Pirzada Abbas Siddique, Pirzada Toyeb Siddique, Pirzada Kasem Siddique, Pirzada Imran Siddique, Pirzada Mehrab Siddique, Pirzada Sahinuddin Siddique, Pirzada Sawban Siddique, Pirzada Ammar Siddique, Pirzada Junayed Siddique, Pirzada Minhaj Siddique, Pirzada Sanauallah Siddique, Pirzada Shafery Siddique are popular amongst their *mureeds*(disciples).<sup>75</sup>

### **Muslim Mobilizations and the Sachar Committee Report**

In the post-Sachar Bengal, many organizations emerged within Furfura *Sharif* and campaigned for the socio-economic empowerment of Muslim minority by putting pressure on the government and different political parties. These organizations are Mojaddedia Anath Foundation, Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organization, Jamaiet-e-Ulama-e-Bangla, Furfura Sharif AhleSunnat-al-Jamat, etc.

The Sachar Committee Report, with the dismal socio-economic conditions of Muslims in the state, along with the issue of ‘forceful’ acquisition of agricultural land for industrialization by the Left-front government (LFG), has already generated a heated outburst among the Muslim electorates in rural West Bengal. The quick *Shilpayon* (Industrialization) agenda of the LFG, particularly in Singur in the Hooghly

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<sup>75</sup> Based on the field visit to different parts of rural Bengal, mainly in South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Medinipur, Nadia, Malda and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal, one of the easy ways to understand the popularity is the number of invitations (*daawat*) they receive for the *waz-mahfil* programme.

district and Nandigram in East Medinipur district of West Bengal for the giant private industries such as Tata Motors and the Indonesian based Salim Group added additional fuel in the fire.<sup>76</sup> There were feelings and a strong perception among the Muslims that the government is selectively acquiring the land of the Muslims for the industrialization. The initial *Jomi-BachaoAndolan* (Movement for saving land) was started from the Muslim concentrated Bhangore constituency in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal in 2005, by the South 24 Parganas Zilla Committee, Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Bangla of Furfura Sharif.<sup>77</sup> Maulana Sirajul Islam (the district secretary of Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Bangla, Furfura Sharif) said in the public protest meeting in the presence of thousands of people (overwhelmingly Muslims)

“We are not against development; we also want that there should be industrialization but it should not be on the cost of poor farmers. In the name of industrialization, thousands of acres of land has been acquired but instead of building industries, sky touching housing apartments are being constructed”<sup>78</sup>

In the aftermath of the Sachar CommitteeReport, there has been large scale mobilization of Muslims led by community organizations against the incumbent Left-front government who had been ruling the state for more than three decades. Kenneth Bo Neilson has rightly put forward his argument that in the past five years (2007-2011), West Bengal has witnessed an increasing mobilization of Muslim organizations and groups seeking to address and overcome the ‘development deficit’. As part of this mobilization in search of development, these organizations have used the Muslim electorates, whose vote determines the outcome of somewhere around 80 of the state’s 294 assembly constituencies.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Bidyut Chackrabarty, ‘The Left Front’s 2009 Lok Sabha Poll Debacle in West Bengal, India’ *Asian Survey*, Vol.51, No.2 (March/April 2011), pp.290-310.

<sup>77</sup> ‘*Bhangore e JomiBachaoAndoloneNamlenKoek Hazar Manush*’, (Thousands of people participated in the save- land campaign in Bhangore constituency of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal) in *DainikBartaman*, Kolkata, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2005.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, ‘In Search of Development: Muslims and electoral Politics in an Indian State’, *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol.38, No. 3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

In the entire process of mobilization and campaigning for the inclusion and development of the Muslim community, Furfura *Sharif* has played the key role in West Bengal particularly in the district of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Purba and Pashim Medinipur and Nadia districts of West Bengal. Muslim organizations have adopted different mechanisms and methods to put pressure not only on the incumbent Left-front government but also on various political parties, specially *Trinamool* Congress (the main opposition party in West Bengal then) and the Indian National Congress.

The organizations under the patronage of Furfura *Sharif's Pirs* and *Pirzadas* have extensively used the traditional method of *Waz-Mahfil* (religious gathering) in different remote villages as well as published and distributed numerous cheap or low-cost vernacular tracts, leaflets, handbills amongst the Muslims on different issues related to socio-economic deprivations and poor representations. Apart from these, *Pir Sahebs* of Furfura Sharif have also organized hundreds of *Prokashho Somabesh* (open rallies and meetings), conventions, press conferences, symposium etc, both in city of Kolkata as well as different parts of West Bengal on the issue of '*Sonhkaloghu Unnoyon*' (minority development) and thus attracted large numbers of Muslims cutting across political affiliations. The leaders of different political parties, mainly Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee, and the Indian National Congress used to attend and confirm their solidarity with the *Pir Sahebs* of Furfura Sharif. The daily Bengali newspapers such as *Sangbad Pratidin*, *Bartaman* as well as community centric newspaper mainly *Kalom*,<sup>80</sup> *NotunGati*, *Akhbar-e-Mashriq*<sup>81</sup> used to give wide coverage regarding these rallies and meetings. These mobilizations, demonstrations, newspaper coverage, symposiums not only helped in the creation of public awareness among the Muslims but also forced different political parties (both ruling and oppositions) in the state to consider the issue of the 'development deficit' of Muslims

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<sup>80</sup> *Kalom* has been a leading Muslim weekly newspaper paper in Bengali, running for more than several years. Recently, in 2012, it converted to a Bengali daily, and the editor of this paper is Mr. Ahmad Hasan Imran who has also served as the Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Trinamool Congress. It is community based daily but with an extreme pro-TMC orientation.

<sup>81</sup> *Akhbar-e-Mashriq* is one of the leading Muslim Urdu dailies based in Kolkata. The editor of *Akhbar-e-Mashriq*, Mr. Nadimul Haque, is also a Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from the Trinamool Congress. This newspaper largely attracts Urdu speaking Muslims, which is around 4-5 percent of the total population in West Bengal.



with seriousness. The close analysis of the Election Manifesto of the 2011 Assembly election of West Bengal, both the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxists) and the main opposition Trinamool Congress have given enough importance to Muslims in the Manifesto by promising reservations in jobs and employments, proper welfare packages, development of Furfura *Sharif* into a national pilgrimage center, opening of new Muslim universities, more *madrassahs*, and so on and so forth.<sup>82</sup> (For details, see the last chapter of the thesis; ‘Transformation of Muslim Question in Post-Sachar West Bengal’)

### **Multiple Methods of Mobilizations**

Let me now focus on the multiple strategies or methods adopted by the Furfura *Sharif* in order to mobilize and create socio-political awareness among the Muslims in rural West Bengal. These methods are; firstly, the role of *waz-mahfil* (religious gatherings) by the *Pirs* and *Pirzadas* of Furfura Sharif and its impact on Bengali Muslim community. Secondly, the role and importance of *Somabesh* (public rallies) centered on the socio-economic marginalization of Muslim minority in the state; and thirdly, the significance of moral vernacular tracts, pamphlets and handbills on the Muslim marginalization discourse in Bengal.

#### ***Waz-Mahfil (religious gatherings): Mass Engagement and the Making of the Subaltern Muslim Space***

*Waz-Mahfils*, *Isale-e-Sawab*, *Islamic Jalsa*, *Milad Mahfils* etc are very popular phenomena in the Islamic religio-cultural landscape of rural Bengal. As Max Stille pointed out, these *Waz-Mahfils* are Islamic sermon gatherings, which take place outside the ritual time and space, as opposed to a formal weekly Friday sermon (*Khutba*) inside the mosque. *Waz-Mahfils* are a specific genre of supererogatory Islamic sermon gatherings, taking place in late evenings in various parts of

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<sup>82</sup> For details, see Election of All India Trinamool Congress for West Bengal Assembly election 2011 [www.aitmc.org/manifesto\\_english\\_2011.pdf](http://www.aitmc.org/manifesto_english_2011.pdf) (accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014) and West Bengal 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly Election Manifesto, Left-front Committee, West Bengal 2011, [www.cpim.org/documents/2011-WB-manifestol.pdf](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2011-WB-manifestol.pdf) (accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

Bangladesh. This genre has overlapped with storytelling tradition ever since its inception.<sup>83</sup> Stille further cited that:

‘Friday sermons are related to the Friday ritual prayer (*Salat/Namaz*), as compared to the *Waz-Mahfils*, which are featured by the supplicatory prayer (*dua*). The supererogatory in nature (surpassing the pure obligatory) and the individual supplication and intimate communication with God. The prayer at the sermon’s end and the narratives jointly work towards eliciting an emotional response on the side of the listeners, a climax which could even lead to perceiving the whole sermon as an extended prayer, which promises salvific gains (*sawabs*) to the listeners.’<sup>84</sup>

Ali Reyaz and Abu Naser define *Waz-Mahfils* as public performances of scriptural commentaries, organized both in urban and rural areas as a means of preaching Islam among the ‘believers’. Although traditionally this has been an expression of piety in rural Bengal, in the context of Bangladesh, it has taken a different form since the 1980s. These gatherings have become a form of commentary on current affairs and thus more centered on ideology rather than on theology. These *Waz-Mahfils* have also become a popular medium of communication with a population which either lacks the literacy to access the original Islamic texts or are too busy in their everyday lives.<sup>85</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed calls these *Waz-Mahfils* as propagatory meetings, largely peaceful assemblages designed to educate the masses in the basic tenets of Islam; but apart from the Muslim sectarian debates (*bahas*), the *Waz-Mahfils* were often used by the *Ulemas* in the nineteenth century to mobilize Muslims and also for socio-religious reforms in rural Bengal.<sup>86</sup> Pradip Kumar Dutta has also briefly discussed about the

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<sup>83</sup>Max Stille, ‘Sufism in Bengali Waz-Mafils’, in Deepra Dandekar and TorstenTschacher (eds.) *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belongingness in South Asia*, Routledge, New York, 2016, pp.294-313.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Ali Riaz and Md. Abu Naser, ‘Islamist Politics and Popular Culture’, in Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (eds.) *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp.136-152.

<sup>86</sup>Rafiuddin Ahmed, ‘Muslim-Christian Polemics and Religious Reform in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Munshi Meher’Ullah of Jessore’, in Kenneth W. Jons (ed.) *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1992, p.191.

role of *Pirs* and *Maulanas* through *Waz-Mahfils* mobilizing Muslim masses in the early twentieth century Bengal.<sup>87</sup>

There are global evidences of the role of Islamic sermons/ cassette sermons, and the formation of 'Islamic political networks' and mobilizations in Egypt, Iran, Bangladesh, etc. How these cassettes sermons (earlier tape castes later CD cassettes) and with the access to internet and smart phones, the contemporary digital space using YouTube videos plays significant role in shaping/re-shaping the 'religio-political' identities and debates within the diverse Muslim societies. Charles Hirschkind argues that the popular Islamic media form (cassette sermons), has had a profound effect on the configuration of religion, politics and community in the context of the Egyptian capital city of Cairo. Hirschkind illustrates how the sermon of the well-known orators spill in the street from the loudspeaker in cafes, the butchers' and tailors' shops, mechanic workshops, private transports, which women and men listen to while doing household chores. This practice of listening to sermons is the recognition of the ethical and therapeutic virtue of the ear. These cassette sermons also frequently articulate a fierce critique of the dominant nationalist project, with its attendant lack of democracy and accountability among the ruling classes.<sup>88</sup>

### ***Locating Waz-Mahfils in Rural Bengal***

We have seen multiple evidences of Islamic sermons in various Muslim societies going beyond the formal weekly Friday sermon (*khutba*) in the mosque. The works of Max Stille, Ali Riaz, Rafiuddin Ahmed, Sufia M. Uddin are largely in the context of eastern Bengal or present Bangladesh. The work on *Waz-Mahfils* by Max Stille is seminal; even though it exclusively dealt with the multiple aspects of *Waz-Mahfils* in the context of Bangladesh; it definitely helps us to use those conceptual categories to understand the Bengali Muslim community in the Indian state of West Bengal. Stille argues that these *Waz-Mahfils* are the participatory practice of laboring classes in which religious, political and poetic consensus overlaps. He also suggested a fresh

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<sup>87</sup>See, Pradip Kumar Dutta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp.86-89.

<sup>88</sup>See, Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic CounterPublics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006.

approach to interpret the *Waz-Mahfils* in the changing and expanding notion of civil participation and the larger public discourse.<sup>89</sup>

In the post-colonial West Bengal, there is extreme dearth of academic work on Bengali Muslims. Whatever few academic literatures are available, most are written from the perspective of ‘official statistics’ or pure ‘developmental’ point of view, ignoring the everyday lives of Bengali Muslims. In order to understand or map the diversity within the Bengali Muslim community, one has to use different methodological tools, going beyond the dominant categories of global Islam or even South Asian Islam. For example, until recently, (with popularization of internet) academia, media or urban Bengali *bhadralok* civil society hardly have any idea about ‘*Waz-Mahfils*’ or ‘*Furfura Sharif*’, and what role it played among the Bengali Muslims in the rural space. The recent ethnographic studies by Aditya Ranjan Kapoor on *Furfura Sharif* briefly discussed the religious reformation and the public sphere in the post-Sachar West Bengal and he contextualizes the role of *Furfura’s Pir* and the importance of *Waz-Mahfils*.<sup>90</sup>

Based on the observations of more than one hundred *Waz-Mahfils* between 2013-2019, in various regions of West Bengal including the districts of South twenty-four Parganas, North twenty-four parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, Nadia, Malda, Purba Medinipur, and Cooch Behar. These *Waz-Mahfils* took place largely between the Bengali months of *falgun* to *jaistha* (roughly February to late May before the arrival of regular monsoon) and were organized by multiple stakeholders including Muslim youth organizations or clubs (*jubosongho*), *Khariji Madrasah* (non-government *madrasah*), *masjid* committee, local market association (*bazaar samity*), and influential individuals of the villages in memory for their deceased parents or grandparents which generally called *Sawab-re-Saani* or *Isale-e-Sawab* (to reach salvific gains). Interestingly, these *Waz-Mahfils* are not one-time initiatives, rather, they became regular annual events. Different religious institutions, specially *khariji/qaumi madrasahs* (ranges from local *Qurania/ hafezia madrasah* with 25

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<sup>89</sup>See Max Stille, ‘Islamic Sermons and Public Piety in Bangladesh: The Poetics of Popular Preaching’, Bloomsbury, New York 2020.

<sup>90</sup>Aditya Ranjan Kapoor, ‘Reforming the ‘Muslim’: Piety, State and Islamic Reform Movement in Bengal’, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, Vol. 3, No.2, 2017, pp.157-174.

students within the village to massive *Kharejia* residential *madrasah* with 500 students) annually organizes Islamic *waz cum Dartar bandi jalsa* (kind of annual convocation) not only to confer the religious degrees like *Hafiz, Qari, Maulana*, but also collect donations (*daan*) from the well-wishers and villagers to run and expand these institutions, because they are not entitled to receive government funds. These *Khariji madrasahs* or *Qaumi madrasahs* run largely in this annual *jolsa* model including few regular sources of income. These institutions earn emotional respect and soft corners from the rural Bengali Muslim community because they cater to the needs of extremely poor Muslim students, including orphans, by recruiting them and extending free boarding and lodging facilities to them.

Interestingly, different intra religious Islamic sects, groups, or ideological schools of thoughts have their own exclusive *madrasah* and *Waz-Mahfil* networks which are absolutely under their supervision and control. In West Bengal alone, Furfura *Sharif* patronizes or supervises roughly five hundreds such *madrasahs* apart from thousands of *Waz-Mahfils* regularly being organized under the direction of Furfura's *Pir* family. Furfura *Sharif's Pir* family is perhaps one of the largest deep rooted living Sufi networks in South Asia with more than hundreds living *Pirs* and *Pirzadas* actively engaged in the regular 'Waz-Mahfils'. Unlike Ajmer *Dargah* in Rajasthan or Nijamuddin *Dargah* in Delhi, which are only 'shrine based', Furfura *Sharif* is neatly connected with their *mureeds* through regular *Waz-Mahfils* and various others religious activities including *anjumans* or *tanjims* (associations) in remote countryside of West Bengal including present Bangladesh. Many Furfura's *Pirs* regularly visit Bangladesh not only to participate in the *Waz-Mahfils*, but also to sustain their deeply embedded religious *pir-mureedi* networks. It is also the matter of sustaining their 'hegemony' and connections, including 'economic benefits' through *waz-mahfils*, *khanqas*, and *madrasahs*. This 'pir network' is not a new phenomenon; it is rather a continuation of its nineteenth century tradition established by *Pir Abu Bakr Siddique*.

This chapter is based on extensive fieldwork<sup>91</sup> in rural Bengal not only to understand the *Waz-Mahfils* network but also to map the changing trends of discussion in *Waz-Mahfils* and how these ‘religious space’ in rural West Bengal is generating or engaging with contemporary debates on socio-economic marginalization, political representations, and Constitutional rights and community identity among the Bengali Muslims. The Sachar Committee Report itself has become a major entry point of discussion on ‘Muslim marginalization’ in their own colloquial vernacular language in the *Waz-Mahfils* and simultaneously these ‘spaces’ are becoming more ‘socio-political conscious spaces’ rather than purely restricted to theological or religious ones. We called this phenomenon as the ‘Bengali Muslim subaltern space’.

In order to understand and map the immediate response in various *Waz-Mahfils* between 2006 and 2011 on the Sachar Committee Report including the issues of forceful acquisition of agricultural land by the state government and MNCs, This chapter has relied on the recorded tape cassettes and CDs of sermons delivered by *Pirs* of Furfura Sharif including many *Ulemas* of Furfura Silsila.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, we

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<sup>91</sup>This fieldwork in rural Bengal itself is very fascinating and was an interesting way to explore multiple other socio-cultural and religious aspects of the Bengali Muslim community, by attending or participating in the *Waz-Mahfil* which takes place in the late evening and ends with collective *dua* after the early morning prayer (*Fazr* namaz) and then distribute *Tabarruk/ Tabarok* or *Shirni*, mostly *dal-chaler khichuri* (mixed rice and pulse with potato) or local potato Biryani occasionally with beef or buffalo meat depending upon the financial capacity and local demography with mixed religious population. Many Hindus (mostly schedule castes) also participate in the *Waz-Mahfils* and also take ‘*sunni*’ which they also think as ‘pious’. These mixed traditions of religious engagements are also seen in the *Waz-Mahfils* of the rural Bengali landscape. In order to participate in a *Waz-Mahfil* (which is literally a whole night event), I had to sometime travel hundreds of kilometres from Kolkata to make sure that I reach before *themagreeb namaz* (prayer immediately after the sunset). I was lucky enough to get access with *Pirs* of Furfura and occasionally travel with them by private cars in various remote villages in Bengal. I remember many such journeys where in the extreme rural narrow mud or *kuccha* roads where four-wheelers car won’t enter, we got down and parked the car and the organizers arranged cycle vans to reach the *Waz-Mahfil* premises. The organisers and villages welcome their *Pir* by chanting ‘Nara-e-Takbir and Allahu-Akbar’. This chanting has nothing to do with political Islam or religious mobilization. This fieldwork was largely done in the rural Bengal villages’ ranging from the Sunderbans region of South twenty-four parganas district to the border areas of Bongaon (North 24 Parganas) and Sitalkuchi of Cooch Behar district or Kaliachak of Malda district in West Bengal.

<sup>92</sup>The tape cassettes and CD cassettes used to have their own market and demand in rural Bengal; these *Waz-Mahfils* are recorded by few professional small companies who sell cassettes in the market. With access to smart phones and internet now, large numbers of these *wazs* are available on YouTube. Many Muslims listen to *wazs* in their leisure time and also while working in the tailoring shops, book stalls, in the middle of their household work, etc. Many Muslim shopkeepers also play the cassettes during their ‘*Haalkhata*’ (celebration of the annual financial year). There are many popular *wazs* available on YouTube by the *Pirs* and *Maulanas* of Furfura Silsila with more than millions of viewers. The popular videos on YouTube include *Pir Omar Siddique*, *Pirzada Toha Siddique*, *Pirzada Abbas Siddique*, *Pirzada Mehrab Siddique*, *Maulana Azirur Rahman* of Basirhat, *Maulana Jamat Ali* of Canning, *Maulana Younus* of Deganga, *Maulana Muhajid*, and many such orators.

could compare the recorded *Waz-Mahfils* between 2006 and 2011 and also corroborated with the fieldwork from 2013 to 2019. These two phased comparisons helped us in understanding the pattern, trends and historical linkages of *Waz-Mahfils* in the contemporary West Bengal.

*Pirzada* Toha Siddique, was one the prominent members of the Furfura *Pir* family who directly spoke about the political and socio-economic marginalization of Muslims in different *Waz-Mahfils* in rural West Bengal. He aggressively spoke about the socio-economic and political marginalization of Muslims and fiercely criticized the left-front government and CPIM for the dismal condition of the community. There were many such popular cassettes of *Pirzada* Toha Siddique and other *Ulemas* titled, ‘*Mosolman keno Maar Khacche?*’, ‘*Marche Mosolman morche Mosolman*’, ‘*Pichiyepora noi Pichiyerakha*’, ‘*Ghumeaotho*’, ‘*Aar kotomaar khabe?*’ etc. The content of both these recorded tape cassettes and CDs dealt with a wide range of issues, including the basic Islamic practices and ethical concerns of do’s and don’ts for the believers; such as five-time regular *namaz* or prayer, compulsory one month Ramzan fasting, paying compulsory *zakat*, not to consume liquor and other ‘*haraam*’ or prohibited stuffs mainly, *Riba* (interests), rights of *baba-maa* (parents), the question of caring aged parents is quite common in majority of the *waz* sermons. Large parts of these *waz* sermons focused on current affairs and contemporary socio-political situations and went beyond the nation or state, to the misdeeds of the US President George Bush, the Iraq war, to the unjust hanging of Saddam Hussain, bombing on Afghanistan by America, Israel-Palestinian conflicts, Babri Masjid, Gujarat pogrom against Muslims in 2002, etc.

### ***Combining ‘Deen’ (religious) with ‘Duniya’ (material world): Changing Discourse of Waz-Mahfils in Rural West Bengal***

There are interesting shifts which have been observed in the *Waz-Mahfils* discourse in the aftermath of the Sachar Committee Report and the Singur Nandigram movements in West Bengal; the question of acquisition of agricultural land, socio-economic marginalization and political under-representation of Muslims, political violence within Muslim villages, the government’s target on *Khariji madrasah* system, issues of identity and dignity etc. are integral part of the *Waz-Mahfil* debate. For the first time in the political history of Left-ruled West Bengal, these *waz*-

discourse became political and went against the ruling CPIM. These *Waz-Mahfils* also directly linked the ‘Muslim vulnerability’ with the ‘Left-front government’. Let us discuss a few *waz*-narratives on the socio-economic marginalization of Muslims in West Bengal.

*Pirzada*Toha Siddique, while speaking at the *Waz-Mahfilin* 2009 at Mollikpara at Amta in the Howrah district, said:

*“For the sake of argument, I accept that Muslims do not have proper skill-oriented high degree or education; that is the reason that they do not get employment as doctors, engineers and teachers. Okay, but can’t they do the job of clerk, peon, security guard, sweeper in government office where high educational degrees are not required? Can’t they sweep or clean offices, schools? Can’t they prepare tea and serve it to the babu (officers)? This government (Left-front government) is biased against Muslims, which is properly highlighted by the Sachar Committee Report. It is true that in spite of many highly educated Muslim youths, they do not get government employment simply because of their religious identity.”*<sup>93</sup>

Once we minutely and sociologically analyze the above-mentioned quote of *Pirzada* Toha Siddique in the context of acute under representation of Muslims in public employment, one can understand the sociological aspirations of the rural Bengali Muslims; who are aspiring to get the so-called lower grade jobs, including the ‘stigmatized’ occupation of sweeping in a hierarchical Indian society. This shows the social structure of rural Bengali Muslims, a large majority of which is sociologically linked to Dalits or lower caste origins. One of the major reasons of the lack of Muslims in ‘lower grade public employment’ is because there is no reservation or affirmative action policy for the lower caste Muslims in West Bengal, unlike in many other Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, under the scheme of Other Backward Castes/Classes (OBC) reservation, where a section of lower caste Muslims are included in the OBC list. The overt ‘absence’ of caste and the politics of recognition in the Left ruled state of West Bengal further limited Muslim employment

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<sup>93</sup> CD cassette of *Pirzada* Alhaj Maulana Toha Siddique, *Furfura Darbar Sharif*, recorded and produced by E.R Sound, *Furfura Sharif*, Hooghly. This *Waz-Mahfil* took place at Mollikpara within Udang Gram Panchayat under Amta Police Station, District: Howrah. The exact date of the programme is not mentioned but the year is. I bought this CD from the book stall at *Furfura Sharif* during my field work.



in the public sector. As the SCR categorically pointed out, 2.1 percent of Muslims are in public employment in West Bengal, in spite of the huge population in the state.<sup>94</sup>

Another interesting quote of *Pirzada Toha Siddique* was in a *Waz-Mahfil* at Jhinkirhat village in the South twenty-four district of West Bengal in 2014, in a large gathering of five thousand people. *Pirzada Toha Siddique*, with his colloquial Bangla pronunciation, lucidly said:

*“Most of our Waz-Mahfilstake places at night, including mid and late nights in remote villages of Bengal. Generally, me and my car driver know the routes because of our frequent travelling. But in spite of having my ‘dewaterkhata’<sup>95</sup> (programme dairy with all details), we often get confused with the gramerrasta (village roads), I mean which road do I need to take to reach the Waz-Mahfil’s destination. During midnight or late night, we hardly find people in the bazaar or tea-stall to enquire about routes. Instead of calling the organizer (host of Waz-Mahfils), I take a little risk (in lighter note); what do I do, you know? Between the two rasta (roads), I see the conditions of the roads for a few minutes; if the road is beautiful, which means (pucca road, properly pitched, cemented or well-bricked broad road with light at the entry point), I don’t take that route because the public road that leads to Muslim concentrated villages cannot be so well-maintained. In that case, without any confusion (chokbondho kore), I take the other road which is exactly opposite to the previous one and I reach my destination perfectly”.*<sup>96</sup>

This satirical quote of *Pirzada Toha Siddique* about the state of *gramerrasta* (village roads) help us to understand the presence and absence of the state and the idea of

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<sup>94</sup>The Sachar Committee Report classified the Muslim communities in India into three larger sociological categories; the *Ashrafs* (so called high born or noble origins), *Ajlafs* (middle castes or artisan castes) and *Arzals* (former untouchables castes converted to Islam).

<sup>95</sup>*Dawaterkhata* is basically the annual programme calendar dairy of the *Pir/ Pirzadawith* full details; of the organiser, including name, phone numbers, route directions, specified time allocation of *waz* sermons, and many of them even note down the amount of honorarium (*najrana*). *Dawaterkhata* is the most precious document for them as it contains all the invitations details and they professionally maintain it. When there was no mobile phone or hardly any landline phone in rural Bengal, this *dewaterkhata*, with full route directions was absolutely necessary to navigate and maintain the system of *Waz-Mahfils*.

<sup>96</sup>*Pirzada Toha Siddique’s* speech in the *Waz-Mahfilat* Jhinkirhat village under Usthi PS in South Twenty-four Parganas district of West Bengal, organised by Jhinkirhat Mojaddedia Yuba Committee.

practicing citizenship in the Muslim populated regions, *mohallas* and villages. There has been a few academic works that have discussed about the lack of public infrastructure in the Muslim concentrated districts and blocks in India. The Sachar Committee Report, ICSSR Base line survey in the Minority Concentrated Districts,<sup>97</sup> with various official and research data suggests that the Muslim concentrated blocks in India lack proper public health care facilities, educational institutions, *pucca* roads, clean drinking water facilities, postal service, banks, and other civic amenities are quite disproportionate. In the case of West Bengal, there are empirical evidences such as “The Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal” published in 2014, (also known as SNAP report)<sup>98</sup> which suggests the appalling economic, educational and civic amenities in the Muslim concentrated districts and blocks as compared to other socio-religious categories.

Let us look at another *Waz-Mahfil* by *Maulana* Azizur Rahman, who identified himself as the *khadim* and *mureed* of Furfura’s *Pir*, and hails from Itinda under the Bashirhat subdivision of North Twenty-four Parganas district. During his *waz* sermon in the rural Hooghly district in 2008, he was very critical of the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led Left-front government. In his *waz*, he vehemently criticized the left government’s land acquisition policy in Bhangore-Rajarhat,<sup>99</sup> Singoor and Nandigram, and also their ‘secular’ credentials, citing the Sachar Committee Report and the

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<sup>97</sup>ICSSR is Indian Council of Social Science Research, a public funded social science research institute affiliated to Ministry of Human Resource Development (now Ministry of Education) under the Government of India.

<sup>98</sup>*The Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal* is the first comprehensive empirical study on Muslim lives in post-independent West Bengal; in the field of health, education, gender and civic amenities. This report was published in 2014, and was jointly prepared by Association SNAP, a Muslim civil society organisation, in collaboration with Pratichi Institute, a research organisation founded by Nobel lauret Professor Amartya Sen.

<sup>99</sup>Bhangore and Rajarhat are suburbs of Kolkata situated within 20-30 kilometres from the city. These areas technically fall under both South and North Twenty-four parganas districts of West Bengal with a thick concentration of Muslim population. Majority of the Muslims and the Scheduled caste population in these areas are engaged in agriculture and fishing; but due to expansion of Kolkata metropolitan areas and neo-liberal economic reforms, large amount of agricultural lands were somewhat forcefully acquired by both the government agencies and the private MNCs for the real estates, IT parks, malls, amusement parks and other offices. At present, Rajarhat and New Town have become part of greater Kolkata with high rising apartments, IT firms, hotels, resorts, and MNC offices with no traces of agricultural land or villages. The entire process of neoliberal urbanisation even expanded through Bhangore, KLC, Polerhat, Machibanga, Pakapole, Tona, Gazipur and so on. Thousands of acres of agricultural land (mostly Muslim villages) were taken away by the state and private corporations with the help of politicians and land *mafia* with negligible compensations.

remarks of then Chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, on linking *madrasahs* with terrorism. In his own local and typical North 24 parganas's *bangla* accent and tone, *Maulana* Azizur Rahman stated:

“This Buddhodebsorkar (left front government led by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya) in Bengal has started a *notun-khela*(new ploy) of grabbing agricultural land, and they are consciously selecting the land of Muslims. Bhagore, Rajarhat, Singoor, Nandigram and many more...long back they have taken the land of Muslims in Bhangore and Rajarhat, no one really cares for them (neither media nor political parties) with Nandigram, now *tupi-walarakhepegeche*. (skull cap wearers, read Muslims got angry)..., Muslims are ready to give up their *jibon* (life) but not *jomi* (land). It is the time for Muslims to teach lesson to this *jalimsorkar* (oppressive government).My comrade friends (CPIM party members), please don't be angry with me, I am narrating the truths.”<sup>100</sup>

*Maulana* Azizur Rahman further states that:

“CPM government claim themselves as *dhormoniropekkho* (secular), *gorib o sonkhaloghu dorodi*(sympathetic towards poor and minorities) but go to any *sarkari* (public) offices, courts, police stations, you don't see a single Muslim there. Whenever there is any appointment panel in public employment with the name Molla, Mohamammad, (typically Muslim prefix) etc.,it is struck off without any reasons... on top of that, Buddha *babu* is maligning the image of Muslim community by linking *madrasahs* in Bengal as the breeding ground of *ugropontha*(extremism)”<sup>101</sup>

*Pirzada* Maulana Md. Toyeb Siddique, another *Pirzada* of Furfura and founder of Furfura *Sharif* Minority Development Organisation (FSMDO) participated in hundreds of *Waz-Mahfils*, mainly in the districts of South and North Twenty-four Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Purba Mednipur, and Cooch Behar. *Pirzada* Toyeb Siddique, while speaking to many such *Waz-Mahfils* and also in a personal interview said:

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<sup>100</sup>CD cassette of *Maulana*Azizur Rahman, Bashirhat, recorded and produced by ER Sound, Furfura Darbar.*Sharif*, Dist: Hooghly 2009.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid

“Our *Waz-Mahfil* sare basically to impart religious knowledge mainly among the poor illiterate masses regarding the day to day religious affairs such as *Namaz* (five-time prayer in a day for Muslims), *Roza*(one month compulsory fasting in a year), *Zakat* (Islamic mandatory alms), *Kalma* (Muslim attestation of faith) etc. Another important feature of our *waz-mahfil* is to make Muslim masses aware of their rights and socio-economic status of the community. The Sachar Committee Report and Ranganath Mishra Commission have clearly pointed out the discrimination of Muslims in India and the situation of Bengali Muslims is extremely dismal in every aspect of their life. Therefore, it is our moral responsibility to look after the pain and sorrow of our people in the state. It is our duty to make the community conscious about their real conditions and unmask the political parties. All the political parties have played with us without giving the ‘*najjo-odhikar*’ (justified rights). The case is worst with CPM government whom Bengal’s Muslims trusted the most. ”<sup>102</sup>

*Pirs* and *Ulemas* of Furfura *Sharif* attend thousands of such *Waz-Mahfils* being organized regularly throughout the year in various districts of West Bengal, mainly in South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, Purba and Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Malda, etc. The large numbers of Muslims in rural Bengal participate in these *Waz-Mahfils*, though it is overwhelmingly dominated by males but recently, in many *Waz-Mahfils*, we have seen separate *mohila pandals* (female exclusive sections). Earlier, there were many such *Waz-Mahfils* where the organizers categorically mentioned the prohibition of female participation in the posters and leaflets. The standard line in the poster was ‘*Mohila o Monohari dokan kothor vave nisiddho*’(Women and cosmetic shops are strictly restricted).

Based on a rough calculation, the district of South 24 Parganas alone, in the year 2009-2010 witnessed approximately five thousand such *Waz-Mahfils* in various places within the district, such as Bhangore, Kashipur, Rajarhat, Canning, Jibontala, Amtala, Baruipur, Namkhana, Basanti, Mograhat, Sangrampur, Usthi, Bishnupur,

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<sup>102</sup>Based on the series of interviews with *Pirzada* MaulanaMd. Toyeb Siddique between January-March 2014, at Furfura *Sharif*, *Pirzada* Toyeb Siddique is the founder Secretary of the Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation, an organization established in the aftermath of the Sachar Committee Report to voice the demand of Muslim reservations and other constitutional rights in West Bengal.

Diamond Harbour, Falta, Kulpi, Gosaba, Raichak, PathorProtima.<sup>103</sup> There were hundreds of *Waz-Mahfils* organized in different minority concentrated areas of North 24 Parganas, districts such as Bashirhat, Barasat, Amdanga, Baduria, Deganga, Bongaon, Guma, Habra, Asokenagor, Titagarh, Barrackpur, Sandeshkhali, etc, where *Pirs of Furfura Sharif* visited and addressed the gatherings.<sup>104</sup>

In the Howrah district, major places of *Waz-Mahfils* include Uluberia, Amta, Bagnan, Andul, Sankrail, Panchla, Ranihati, Gabberia, Jagatballabpur, Munshirhat, Bargacheia, Domjur, Shayampur, Khajutty, etc. The large numbers of *Waz-Mahfils* were also organized in the various remote places in Hooghly district which includes Arambagh, Khanakul, Goghat, Jangipara, Dankuni, Haripal, Nababpur, Harinkhola, etc and the *Pirs of Furfura Sharif* play important roles in mobilizing Muslims through the *Waz-Mahfils*.<sup>105</sup>

*Pir Sahebs* of Furfura Sharif also had large networks in the district of Nadia and they addressed more than hundreds of gatherings in extremely rural areas in Haringhata, Tehatta, Karimpur, Dhubulia, Chapra, Krishnanagor, Taherpur, etc. Many *Waz-Mahfils* were organized in different remote rural areas such as Gorobeta, Keshpur, Nandigram, Panskura, Chamkaitala, etc. in the districts of Purba and Paschim Medinipur. Significant numbers of *Waz-Mahfils* also took place in the districts of Bankura and Malda.<sup>106</sup>

Humayun Kabir rightly observed in the context of Bangladesh, which to a certain extent could also be applicable in the Muslim society of West Bengal,

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<sup>103</sup> Information based on *dewater khata* (annual Programme dairy) of *Pir sahebs* of Furfura Sharif. This information is also based on local newspapers as well as handbills and posters of respective places, as collected by me.

<sup>104</sup> Based on the field visit in different minority concentrated areas in the district of North 24 Parganas in the month of January 2014 to collect the leaflets and poster of *Waz-Mahfils*.

<sup>105</sup> Based on the field visits to different minority concentrated areas in the district of Hooghly during the month of February 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Based on the programme diaries of *Pirzada Toha Siddique*, *Pirzada Toyeb Siddique* of Furfura Sharif and field visit in the district of Nadia and Medinipur districts of West Bengal to collect the leaflets and handbills of *Waz-Mahfils*.

“In the contemporary Muslim societies in Bengal, networking has significant implications, especially in the realm of electoral politics. Through networking of *Ulema* and *Pir*, social as well as religious space is created, which plays a crucial role in electoral politics.”<sup>107</sup>

*Pirs* of Furfura *Sharif* have extensively used the traditional *Waz-Mahfils* as the vehicles to reach out to the rural Bengali Muslims and express the concern regarding the dismal picture of the community in West Bengal citing the Sachar Committee Report as the major reference point. They used languages of representation, social justice, identity and equity and articulated in a very lucid and layman language, which has not only attracted large numbers of Muslim masses, but also created an anti-CPIM attitude among the rural Muslims who traditionally supported the left parties for more than three long decades.

***Mobilization for Songkaloghu Unnoyon (minority development) through Somabesh (rallies), Demonstrations and Conventions***

In the post-Sachar scenario, West Bengal has witnessed large scale mobilization of Muslim organizations seeking to address and overcome the issue of ‘development deficit’ of Muslims. Furfura *Sharif* has played a key role in the entire process of Muslim mobilizations to address and overcome the ‘development deficit’ of the minority community. *Pirs* of Furfura organized more than hundreds of *prokassho somabesh* (open rallies) in different towns, districts headquarters, as well as in the state capital, Kolkata, in the aftermath of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006. There had been a series of rallies after the Sachar Committee Report till 2011 assembly elections in different minority concentrated areas in West Bengal.

Unlike *Waz-Mahfils* (religious gatherings), *somabesh* (rallies) are more open and targeted meetings with clear demands and agendas before the government and political parties. *Somabesh* is also attended by the representatives of different political parties (both ruling and opposition). The then opposition parties Trinamool Congress and National Congress frequently used the non-political platforms of Furfura *Sharif* to

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<sup>107</sup> See Humayun Kabir, ‘Contested notions of being ‘Muslims’: Madrasas, Ulama and the authenticity of Islamic schooling in Bangladesh’, in Keiko Sakurai, Farida Abdelkhah (eds.) *The Moral Economy of the Madrasah: Islam and Education Today*, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp.59-84.

reach out to the Muslims. These parties not only highlighted the ‘misdeeds’ of the CPM led Left-front government, but also promised to fulfill the various pertinent demands of the Muslim community such as reservation in employment and education, restoration of *waqf* properties, and overall development of the community.

*Pirzada*Toha Siddique of Furfura*Sharif* called a *bishal jonosomabesh* (huge mass meeting) in Dharmotala Metro Channel (popular sites for political rallies in Kolkata) on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010. The chief speaker of the rally was the then Union Finance minister, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee and former Indian cricket team captain and Member of Parliament, Mohammad Azharuddin and other leaders from Trinamool congress and National Congress. The rally was attended by more than one lakh Muslims from different corners of West Bengal. The major demands of the rally included proportional reservation for Muslims in employment and education, restoration of *waqf* properties for the development of the Muslims and honorarium to *Imams* and *Moazzins* (Muslim clergy who leads prayer and call for prayer in the Mosque), overall development in the minority concentrated area in the fields of education, health, roads, electricity and drinking water, stop false and fabricated implications of Muslim youth in the name of terrorism, development of Furfura *Sharif* as an international pilgrimage center, scholarships for Muslims students without any harassments, provide Minority status to all minority institutions, etc.<sup>108</sup>

While speaking at the rally of Furfura *Sharif* in Kolkata, cricketer Mohammad Azharuddin said:

“I have raised the issue of reservation in the Parliament. Reservation is a must for Muslims. I hope the central government will go for reservation. For the last 32 years you have voted for CPM, but got nothing from them. There is no education and employment here. Moreover, CPM government has forcibly snatched the land of farmers and twenty five percent of Muslims in Bengal are farmers. What will they do

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<sup>108</sup> Leaflet and poster published and distributed by *Pirzada*Toha Siddique under the banner of Mujaddeia Anath Foundation, Furfura Darbar Sharif regarding the rally of Kolkata on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010. (In Bengali) ‘*Pichiyerakha Muslimder Adhikar bujhenewardabite, Furfura Darbar Sharifer daake bishal jonosomabesh*’, published from Furfura Sharif, Hooghly.

if their land is taken away? It is time to bring change in West Bengal by defeating the CPM”.<sup>109</sup>

*Pirzada* Maulana Toha Siddique, the organizer of the rally, expressed his gratitude to the Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee for the help extended to the community and said, “If political parties don’t work for us, be it Left or Right, we will kick them out. Time has come for all Muslims to rise up. We demand reservation. The party that looks after us will look after them. This time only words will not do, show us what you can do”<sup>110</sup>

In April 2010, *Pir Saheb* of Furfura *Sharif* welcomed and received the then Union Railway minister and Chief of Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee, at Furfura *Sharif* in a meeting to mark the foundation stone-laying ceremony of a proposed 20 km railway link between Dankuni and Furfura *Sharif*. Throughout the meeting, *Pirzada* Toha Siddique criticized the CPM led Left-front government for neglecting the Muslim community and pledged to support for Mamata Banerjee. In front of several thousand people, *Pirzada* Toha Siddique went on to vividly describe how the Muslim community had been mistreated and overlooked by CPM led Left-front government for decades. *Pirzada* Toha Siddique said:

“When it came to putting up flags and banners, you needed us. When you wanted bombs made and hurled, you needed us. When it came to brandishing pistols and shooting people, our help was required. When you needed to fill up the Shahid Minar or Brigade Parade Ground (popular sites for political rallies in Kolkata), you wooed us. Later, you sat on high pedestals and enjoyed while we suffered. It is time we ‘kick’ you down. For 33 years, you have played football with us. Now it is time for us to play football. . . I can only assure Mamata that of the 30 million Muslims in the state, at least 25 million are on her side. Just because we are not directly involved in politics does not mean that we do not understand politics. We have had enough of ‘*dekchhi, hochchhe, hobey*’ [lit. ‘I see, it is happening, it shall be done’; implying empty or false promises]. We don’t want any more of that. Jyoti Basu Chief Minister

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<sup>109</sup>Ravik Bhattacharya, ‘On debut in Kolkata, AzharBats for Reservation’, *The Indian Express*, Kolkata, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2010.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid



of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000] had finished us off and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee followed his footsteps. Don't use us any longer!"<sup>111</sup>

Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation (a government registered non-profit organization committed to work for the deprived minority community) led by *Pirzada Toyeb Siddique* has organized a series of Minority conventions in different district headquarters in West Bengal, on the issues of Muslim reservation and an all-round development of the community. These minority conventions have not only attracted a sizeable section of Muslim intellectuals, youth, and students of West Bengal, but also the secular intellectuals cutting across political and religious spectrums.

*Pirzada Toyeb Siddique* of *Furfura Sharif* has organized a Muslim Reservation Convention at Maulali Youth Center in Kolkata on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2010. The main objective and demand of this convention was proportional reservation for Muslim minority as per the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission. The invited guest of the convention was Mr. Partha Chatterjee (the then opposition leader of West Bengal Legislative Assembly and key Trinamool Congress leader), Dr. Debi Chatterjee, (professor of political science at Jadavpur University, Kolkata), Advocate Idris Ali (later Lok Sabha MP and presently MLA from Trinamool congress) Mr. Ahmad Hasan Imran (editor of Bengali Muslim daily *Puber Kalom* and former Rajya Sabha MP from Trinamool Congress) and many others dignitaries.<sup>112</sup> While speaking at the convention, the then sitting opposition leader of West Bengal, Mr. Partha Chatterjee vehemently criticized the LFG government in front of a packed audience inside the hall for not doing anything for minority community and said:

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<sup>111</sup>Quoted in Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and the Electoral Politics in an Indian State', *Forum For Development Studies*, Vol.38, No. 3, November 2011, pp.345-370. Also see, Jayanta Gupta and Falguni Banerjee 'Muslim Cleric Vow support to Didi', *Times of India*, Kolkata, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010. Available at <http://lite.epaper.timesofindia.com/getpage.aspx?articles=yes&pageid=5&max=true&articleid=Ar00501&sectid=2&edid=&edlabel=TOIKM&mydateHid=14-04-2010&pubname=Times+of+India+-+Kolkata+-+Times+City&title=Muslim+clerics+vow+support+to+Didi&edname=&publabel=TOI> (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2013).

<sup>112</sup>'Sonkhaloghu Sommelon', *Sangbad Pratidin*, 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2010, Kolkata

“Once Trinamool Congress gets the opportunity to serve the people (to form the government), we will certainly do many things for our Muslim brothers and sisters and the implementation of reservation would be our first priority.”<sup>113</sup>

Professor Debi Chatterjee, Advocate Idris Ali, Ex-government officer Kazi Nazmul Islam unanimously agreed the importance of reservation for Muslim in the state. *Pirzada* Toyeb Siddique strongly criticized the CPM government for neglecting the large Muslim masses from the fruits of development, and urged the people to be aware about their democratic and constitutional rights.<sup>114</sup>

In the month of September 2009, *Pirzada* Toha Siddique arranged an important meeting at Furfura *Sharif*, which was attended by the then Union Finance Minister Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, Mr. Sultan Ahmed (former Union Minister of Tourism and Trinamool congress M.P from Uluberia Lok Sabha Constituency) and important TMC leader Mr. Partha Chatterjee.

While speaking at the meeting, the Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee claimed that the central government is working hard for the development of the minorities as well as implementing the recommendations of the Sachar committee report for the wellbeing of the minorities. Trinamool congress MP Sultan Ahmed spoke about their efforts to develop the Furfura *Sharif* as an important tourist pilgrimage centre. Opposition leader Partha Chatterjee assured the Muslim community that his party (TMC) would do everything to ensure the proper implementation of the Sachar Committee recommendations.<sup>115</sup>

In February 2011, *Pirzada* Toha Siddique organized another massive public meeting in Kolkata, just a few months before the 2011 assembly elections. More than two lakh Muslims gathered from different districts of West Bengal. The main objective of the rally was to push for the demands of the minority community before the political

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<sup>113</sup>‘Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisationer Muslim Sonrokhon Bisoyok Convention’, *Saptahik Kalom*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2010, Kolkata

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>The Indian Express, ‘Centre working hard to implement Sachar recommendations’, *The Indian Express*, Kolkata 14<sup>th</sup> September 2009. Available at <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/-centre-working-hard-to-implement-sachar-recommendations-/516710/>. (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2014).

parties in the eve of assembly elections. Apart from proportional reservations for Muslims in employment and education, restoration of *Waqf* properties, adding the word '*Madrasah*' in the historical Aliah University in Kolkata and the overall development for Muslims. Another new demand was to ask all political parties to field Muslim candidates as per the proportion of population, that is, 71 seats out of 294 in the upcoming 2011 assembly elections of West Bengal.<sup>116</sup>

This huge public rally was one of the most successful and historic meetings where the TMC chief Mamata Banerjee, Union Minister and Member of Parliament Sultan Ahmed, Congress State Chief Pradip Bhattacharya and many others politicians were present in that rally. Mamata Banerjee assured *Pirzada* Toha Siddique in front of a huge gathering that she will do every possible thing for the socio-economic development of the Minority community such as reservations for Muslims, special package and implementations of all recommendations of the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra Commission report.<sup>117</sup> While addressing the rally, *Pirzada* Toha Siddique requested Mamata Banerjee and other Congress leaders to give 71 assembly tickets to Muslim candidates in the upcoming assembly elections.<sup>118</sup>

There were hundreds of public rallies being organized by the *Pir Sahebs* of Furfura *Sharif* on the eve of the state assembly elections in 2011 in different locations of West Bengal to put pressure on all political parties to consider the demands of Muslim community with utmost priority. The major opposition party Trinamool Congress was successfully able to capture the imagination of the Muslims by frequently attending and addressing the rallies of the Furfura *Sharif*. Important leaders from Trinamool Congress such as Mukul Roy (Rajya Sabha MP, presently with BJP), Subhendu Adhikary (Lok Sabha MP, presently with the BJP), late Sultan Ahmed (former Lok Sabha MP), Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar (Lok Sabha MP), Sudip Bandhopadhyaya (Lok Sabha MP), Partha Chatterjee (the then opposition leader) and many other leaders frequently attended the rallies organized by the Furfura *Sharif*. Indian National

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<sup>116</sup> Leaflet published by *Pirzada* Toha Siddique on behalf of Mujaddedia Anath Foundation, Furfura Sharif.

<sup>117</sup> *Sangbad Pratidin*, 'Sonkhaloghu Convention', Kolkata, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Indian Express, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

Congress leaders including Pranab Mukherjee (former Union Finance Minister and former President of India), Dr. Pradip Bhattacharya (then Congress state chief), Manas Bhunia (Congress floor leader, now in TMC), Abdul Mannan (Lok Sabha MP), and many other MLAs have shared the dais of Furfura *Sharif* to reach out to the Muslims.<sup>119</sup> In doing so, the Furfura *Sharif* has played a key role in mobilizing the Muslim masses by organizing such rallies which had culminated in an anti-left attitude among the Muslims in the state during that point of time.

### **Mobilization through Pamphlets, Leaflets and Vernacular Tracts**

The mobilization of Muslims through pamphlets and vernacular tracts is not new to Bengal, it basically started from the colonial period but the language of articulation was different at that point of time. There has been a large scale anti-exploitation campaign led by Muslim peasants and *Ulama* against the upper caste Hindu *zamindar and mahajans* in the nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>120</sup> Historians such as Sugata Bose, Suranjan Das, Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, Andrew Sartori, Rafiuddin Ahmed, have documented those exploitations on peasants or *krishaks* (largely Muslims) by the upper caste Hindu *zamindars* (landlords) and money lenders in the eastern part of undivided Bengal.

Historically and traditionally, the ‘*puthi culture*’ and later during the late colonial period, the role vernacular religious tracts, pamphlets of Muslim *anjumans* (associations), played critical roles not only to mobilize Muslim peasants, but also create a sense of consolidation of the religious identity in rural Bengal. Ananya Dasgupta maps the ideological strands, Muslim forms of civil associations, social movements, political representations and the religious and cultural production of the self and the *jati* or community. In doing so, she has relied heavily upon vernacular

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<sup>119</sup> Information collected from various local Bengali newspapers and annual report of Mujaddedia Anath Foundation of Furfura *Sharif* published in September, 2013 and the website of Furfura Darbar *Sharif* at [www.furruadarbarsharif.com](http://www.furruadarbarsharif.com) (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

<sup>120</sup> See Tajul-Islam Hashmi, ‘The Communalisation of Class Struggle: East Bengal peasantry, 1923-29’, *Indian Economic Social History Review*, Vol. 25, 1988, pp.171-204. For details, see his book, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal: 1920-1947*, Routledge, London, 2019.

religious tracts, popular genres of Muslim improvement texts and tracts, and put emphasis on the idea of cultivation, labor and *riba* (interest) in the making of a religious community while being rooted in a regional identity.<sup>121</sup>

Pradip Kumar Datta, Ananya Dasgupta and Andrew Sartori have extensively analyzed the role and impacts of vernacular religious tracts and pamphlets on Muslim peasant improvements while understanding the process and production of religious identity and the idea of labor in late colonial Bengal. Some of these early twentieth century tracts and pamphlets mostly published from Eastern Bengal are; *Krisokher Unnati* (Improvement of the peasant) by *Maulana* Khademul Islam, *Adarsha Krishak* (ideal peasant) by Abdul Hai, *Go-korbani* (cow sacrifice) by Fazlur Rahman, *Duniya o Akherat Do Jahaner Najat* (prosperity in this world and beyond this world) by Abdul Aziz etc.<sup>122</sup>

Historically, *Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique of Furfura and his *Ulema* networks have played an influential role in mobilizing Muslim masses during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Apart from organizing hundreds of *Waz-Mahfils*, they took heavy interest in publishing pamphlets, leaflets, low-cost books, religious tracts and periodicals. *Pir* Abu Bakr used to patronize more than a dozen of journals and dailies in Bengali, such as *Mihir-o-Sudhakar* group, *Islam Pracharok*, *Eslam Tattva*, *Islam Darshan*, *Moslem Bharat*, *Al Eslam*, *Banganur*, *Shariyet-e-Islam*, *Soltan*, *Rowshan Hedayat*, *Hanafi*, etc., which played crucial roles in shaping both the religious and political discourse of Muslim community in Bengal.<sup>123</sup> Tajul-Islam Hasmi argues that in many cases, *Ulema* and influential *Pirs* played a leading role in influencing the voters in favor of the electoral candidates. *Maulana Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique of Furfura *Sharif* and *Maulana* Ruhul Amin of Bashirhat, for instance, issued *fatwas* (religious

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<sup>121</sup> See Ananya Dasgupta, 'Labors of Representation: Cultivating Land, Self and Community among Muslims in late Colonial Bengal', unpublished PhD dissertation at University of Pennsylvania, 2013.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

<sup>123</sup> See Chandiprasad Sarkar, *The Bengali Muslims: The Study on their Politicization 1912-1929*, K.P Bagchi Press, Calcutta, 1991.

decrees) in favor of many candidates belonging to the Muslim League and Krishak Praja party in the nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>124</sup>

There has been a paradigm shift in articulating the problems and issues of Muslims in contemporary West Bengal, especially in the aftermath of the Sachar report. The report generated public debates on Muslim minority not only among the academics and political parties, but also within the community. The report has made a dominant impact on Muslim organizations regarding the forms and processes of engagement with the state institutions by envisaging the larger democratic and constitutional aspirations of the community.

*Furfura Sharif* has published large numbers of pamphlets, leaflets, including small booklets in lucid Bengali and through *Waz-Mahfils*, distributed in numerous Muslim concentrated villages (religious gathering) and rallies in West Bengal. These pamphlets and cheap vernacular tracts not only highlighted the plight and backwardness of the Muslim community in multiple spheres of life, be it economic, social, educational and political but also have clear *daabi* (demands) to the government and the political parties. For instance, *Pirzada Toha Siddique* issued an *Istehar* (pamphlet) on behalf of Mojaddedia Anath Foundation of *Furfura Sharif* before the 2011 assembly elections in West Bengal. More than one million copies of this pamphlet were distributed in different parts of West Bengal. The list of demands is follows:

At the top of the pamphlet, *Pirzada Toha Siddique* posed a question in Bangla, which goes as:

“*Protyek Dol Jodi tadernijershaartherkothabhaaben, taholeami Toha Siddique amar jatir shaartha dekhbo na keno? Ta bole onnojatike obogya kore noy*” (If all parties think about their own interests, why shouldn't I (Toha Siddique), think about my own community, but not by neglecting/ demeaning others')<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>Tajul-Islam Hashmi, 'The Communalisation of Class Struggle: East Bengal Peasantry, 1923-29', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, Vol. 25, 1988, pp.171-204.

<sup>125</sup> Pamphlet issued by *Pirzada Toha Siddique* in Bengali from *Furfura Darbar Sharif*, PS: Jangipara, Dist: Hooghly

There were around fourteen demands; the major ones are listed below:

- a) Every political party talks about ‘minority’, but we would like to see their real intention. Therefore, in the forthcoming 2011 assembly elections, all parties should give tickets to Muslim candidates as per the proportion of the population, that is, 71 out of 294 assembly seats.
- b) Instead of flawed OBC reservation for Muslims, the government should provide proportional reservation for Muslims in employments and education.
- c) Restore *Waqf* properties of Muslims and provide monthly salary to *Imams* (one who leads the prayers at Mosques) and *Moazzins* (one who calls for the prayer in mosque, more like deputy *Imams*) of the mosques in West Bengal.
- d) The word ‘*Madrasah*’ has to be added in the name of Aliah University (formerly Calcutta Aliah Madrasah)<sup>126</sup>
- e) Muslim concentrated areas are extremely underdeveloped in terms of education, healthcare, roads, drinking water, electricity etc.; therefore, without any neglect, there should be an all-round development in the Muslim concentrated areas.
- f) Harassing the Muslims in the name of terrorism and false charges should be stopped.
- g) Stop forceful acquisition of land from the poor farmers in the name of development and return back the land to the farmers.

Apart from these, there were other demands, which include infrastructural development of the Furfura *Sharif* as an important pilgrimage center, proving minority status to all *madrasahs* and minority run institutions, etc.

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<sup>126</sup>Aliah University is formerly known as Calcutta *Aliah Madrasah* established in 1780 by Warren Hastings, This is one of the oldest Islamic seminaries in South Asia and a center of Muslim aristocracy in colonial Bengal. There was huge opposition from the traditionalist section of the Muslim community, when the CPM led Left-front government removed the word ‘*madrasah*’, while upgrading it to a University in 2007.

Another pamphlet was issued by *Pirzada* Toyeb Siddique on behalf of the Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation in 2008, which was again re-published in 2009 and 2010 after adding a few more demands. This pamphlet was also circulated in different remote villages in West Bengal. During the annual three-days historic *Isale-e-Sawabat Furfura Sharif* held in the Bengali month of 21-23 *falgun* (early March), nearly 25-30 lakh disciples gather from different districts of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, including the neighboring country of Bangladesh.<sup>127</sup> As a result, whatever pamphlet or *Istehar* was published from *Furfura Sharif*, it easily reached out to different corners of Bengal through their religious networks. *Pirzada* Toyeb Siddique has printed and distributed 10 lakh copies of this pamphlet.<sup>128</sup>

The title of this pamphlet is “*Banglar hotodoridro o bonchito Muslamder jonno Furfura Darbar Sharifer churanto daabisomuho*” (Ultimate demands from Furfura Darbar Sharif for the poor and excluded Muslims of Bengal). The pamphlet starts with an emotional appeal to Muslims as a ‘brother of Islam’ and narrates the socio-economic status of Muslims by invoking the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Mishra Commission’s reports. The pamphlet also emphasized on the unity of Muslims and the formation of a larger ‘*gonoandolon*’ (mass movement) for mainstreaming the Muslim minority.<sup>129</sup>

Most of the demands overlap with the previous pamphlet, but there were few more demands included in this pamphlet, such as:

- A) Implementation of recommendations of the Sachar Committee and the Ranganath Mishra Commission immediately.
- B) Providing scholarships to all Muslim students without any administrative hurdles.

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<sup>127</sup> Arindam Sarkar ‘Pilgrim Progress’, *The Hindustan Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> July, 2013, Kolkata. Also, based on my own field work at *Furfura Sharif*, I have covered the annual three-days historic *Furfura’s Isale-e-Sawab* every year between 2013 and 2020.

<sup>128</sup> Personal Interview with *Pirzada* Md. Toyeb Siddique (founder secretary of Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation) on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014 at *Furfura Sharif*, Dist: Hooghly.

<sup>129</sup> Pamphlet issued by *Pirzada* Md. Toyeb Siddique on behalf of Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation, Hooghly, West Bengal. First released in 2008, and later re-printed in 2009, 2010 and 2011, after adding few more demands.



- C) Even after the introduction of West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission (government body to recruit teachers in all government aided *madrasahs* in West Bengal), there have been large numbers of non-minority teachers being recruited in the *madrasahs*, which basically shrink the employment opportunity of Muslims. Therefore, the state should recruit Muslim teachers in *madrasahs*.
- D) Building a separate campus of Aliah Madrasah University for women and introduce various courses.

These demands and issues not only attracted the traditionalist section of the Muslims, but was also able to convince the aspirational Muslim youths.

Furfura *Sharif* has played an important role in mobilizing Bengali Muslims through the writing of different vernacular tracts highlighting the plight and discrimination of Muslim community. It also appeals to the Muslims to unite for their rights and not get divided on the lines of sects and political affiliations. Here, I would like to discuss the two powerful and widely circulated Muslim improvement texts or vernacular tracts published from Furfura *Sharif* in the post-Sachar scenario regarding the contemporary socio-economic and political situation of Bengali Muslims and the way forward to overcome and address those issues.

The title of the first text is '*Muslim somajer korun obosta o tar protikar*' (Miserable situation of Muslim society and its remedies). It is basically a ten-paged thin booklet published in 2009, from Furfura *Sharif*. Several thousandsof copies have been circulated in different parts of West Bengal.<sup>130</sup> The tract very briefly narrated the extreme socio-economic, educational and political deprivation of the Muslim community in West Bengal, keeping the Sachar Committee Report in mind.

The author has addressed the reader as 'Muslim community' and states that:

“In the past, Muslims used to rule this country, now after six decades of India’s independence, Muslims have become the '*golam*' (slave). The Sachar Committee

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with *Pirzada Toyeb Siddique* at Furfura *Sharif* on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

Report rightly pointed out the socio-economic backwardness of Muslim community which can be summarized as ‘*Azad bharotergolamMuslaman*’ (Slave Muslim of independent India). Be it left or right, no political parties have taken any initiative for the empowerment of the community. This is need of the hour to raise the voice and secure your rights from the government”.<sup>131</sup>

The author goes on and briefly discusses the discrimination, social exclusion, and backwardness faced by the Muslim community in post-independent India in general and West Bengal in particular.

Another vernacular tract titled as ‘*Sonkoter Mukhomukhi Bangali Musalman*’ (Bengali Muslims and their crisis) authored by Manirul Sekh published by Pirzada Md. Toyeb Siddique on behalf of Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation, Hooghly district in January, 2011, This vernacular tract has categorically raised multiples issues related to the under-representation of Muslims in public employment, dismal socio-economic conditions including poor educational infrastructure, civic amenities and healthcare facilities in Muslim concentrated areas in West Bengal. This tract includes a full section on political marginalization of Bengali Muslims with empirical data on political representation of various communities based on caste and religion in post-partition West Bengal. The author has argued that all the so-called ‘secular’ political parties in West Bengal (CPIM, INC and TMC) have been using Muslims and Dalits electorates merely as vote bank as a *moi* (ladder) to reach their political goals to gain power, but never paid proper attention on the representation, dignity and empowerment of these marginalized communities, especially Bengali Muslims.

This tract further illustrates how different political parties have not given proportional representations to Minorities and Dalits, especially in the ‘highest decision-making bodies’, both within the party structures and also in the executive or government. The representation of Muslims in the Polit Bureau and the State Committee of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), National Working committee or core

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<sup>131</sup> ‘*Muslim somajer korunobostha o tar protikar*’ (In Bengali), published by Pirzada Toyeb Siddique on behalf of Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation, Hooghly, 2009.

committee of Trinamool Congress (TMC) and All India Congress committee of Indian National Congress (INC) is negligible.

“The political power is restricted within the few Brahmins and upper castes, irrespective of the political parties, whether left or right. They do not distribute power among Muslims and Dalits. During the bloodiest struggles in the seventies, people from backward communities like Bhikari Paswan {a Dalit jute mill worker of Bhadreswar, Hooghly allegedly killed by police in 1993} and Nurul Islam (a young school student of Swarupnagar in North twenty-four Parganas district died due to police firing during the *khaddo andolon* (food movement) in 1966} had laid their lives in deepening the movement. Later, the CPIM led Left-front (*Bam-front*) came to power, and after coming to state power, all the important ministerial portfolios and party portfolios were limited to the Brahmins; *thus converting Bamfront* (Left-front) into *Brahmonfront* (Brahmins front).”<sup>132</sup>

The author described in details, with data, regarding the dismal condition of Muslims in West Bengal, both during the tenure of Congress and the CPM led Left-front government. The author argues that the percentage of Muslims in the government jobs is less than two percent; and the rate of illiteracy, unemployment, poverty are very high among Muslims. The number of Muslim ministers in the cabinet is negligible. The author provided details of lists of ministers in the state government and the percentage of Muslim members is around 6 percent, whereas the population is more than a quarter of the total population of the state.<sup>133</sup> In the conclusion, the author, on behalf of the Furfura Darbar *Sharif*, appeals to the community to come *ek chatartolai* (under the umbrella of single platform), and *kandhekandhrekhe* (collectively) struggle for justice, equality and dignity.

A significant contribution of Furfura *Sharif's Pirzada Toha Siddique* is the introduction of a Bengali daily newspaper named '*Dindarpan*'. This newspaper

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<sup>132</sup>ManirulSk., '*Sonkotermukhomukhi Bangali Musalman*' (In Bengali) published by *Pirzada Toyeb Siddique* on behalf of Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation, Hooghly, West Bengal, January, 2011.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.28-29.

played a good role in shaping of the Bengali Muslim's public opinion in contemporary West Bengal.

### **Furfura Sharif Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamat and the rise of Pirzada Abbas Siddique**

Furfura Sharif Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamat (henceforth FSASJ) is a government registered NGO, functioning as a faith based charitable organization found by Pirzada Abbas Siddique in 2016. The fundamental objective of this organization is *Deshprem*(patriotism), *Manabprem* (human love) and *Dhormoprem*(love for religion). The organization is actively engaging with the rural poor through multiple social welfare activities such as distribution of clothes among the needy, organizing blood donation camps, providing scholarships for the underprivileged meritorious students aspiring for higher education, established and patronized local educational institutions including *madrasahs*, and recently during the COVID 19 lockdown and the devastating post-Amphun cyclone, FSASJ extended the logistical support and distributed food-kits to around half million households in the remote villages in the district of South Twenty-four Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly East and West Medinipur, Murshidabad and Malda, etc.<sup>134</sup>

More recently, on 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 Pirzada Abbas Siddique laid the stone-laying foundation of a proposed massive educational project called 'Pir Abu Bakar Siddique Knowledge City' in the close vicinity of Furfura under the Jangipara block in Hooghly district. This educational project aims to include Maternity hospital, English medium school, library and professional degree and Law College. The proposed 'knowledge city' has not only generated huge aspirational values among the poor *mureeds* (disciples) of Furfura Sharif, but also gave a sense of communitarian dignity because it is named after their revered Pir Abu Bakar Siddique (*Dadahuzur*). Pirzada Abbas Siddique is great-grandson of Pir Abu Bakr Siddique and one of the popular young Pirzada of Furfura Sharif. Along with various social and educational activities through FSASJ he regularly attends *waz-mahfils* and organise public meetings in different corners of Bengal. On an average, he attends roughly five hundred such *waz-*

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<sup>134</sup> Pamphlet of Furfura Sharif-Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamat, published in 2021.

*mahfils* programs throughout the year<sup>135</sup>. Apart from discussing religious affairs in the *waz-mahfils*, he talks about socio-economic, educational and political marginalization of Muslims in their everyday lives. Hence, a sizeable section of rural Muslim masses could connect with his speeches in *waz-mahfils*. FSASJ, through its religious and social interventions, has been playing a crucial role in creating a political space for the growth of the Indian Secular Front, mainly in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, Medinipur, and Malda. Though officially FSASJ has no connection with ISF, there is an organic and overlapping relationship with these two entities: one is religious, and another one is political. Therefore, to understand the rise of ISF, one has to understand the role and contribution of FSASJ in the contemporary West Bengal.

### **Transition from Social to Political: The Emergence of the Indian Secular Front**

The Indian Secular Front (henceforth ISF) was officially launched at the Kolkata Press Club on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2021. The Chairman of this party is Md. Nawsad Siddique (younger brother of Abbas Siddique) and the President is Mr. Simul Soren (an Adivasi activist and school teacher based at Haripal in the Hooghly district). The major themes of ISF, which are boldly written on all the party documents including the inaugural poster, are ‘Constitutional Democracy’, ‘Social Justice’ and ‘Dignity’. The issues of social justice and dignity have never been considered such important aspects for political parties in post-independent politics of West Bengal. The *Bhadrolok* political discourse of West Bengal has neither recognized the caste and religion question nor did it witness the Mandal politics or politics of social justice. However, there were a few attempts and experiments in the past one and a half decade, particularly in the post-Sachar phase by different Muslim groups such as People’s Democratic Consolidation of India (PDCI) led by Jamiet Ulama-e-Hind’s West Bengal State chief Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury, presently TMC MLA and Minister, Bharatiya Nyay-Bichar Party (BNP) led by veteran CPIM leader and ex-Minister Mr. Abdur Rezzak Molla, presently with the Trinamool Congress.

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<sup>135</sup>Personal Interview with Pirzada Abbas Siddique on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021 at Furfura Sharif, Hooghly.

All these political parties could neither sustain their politics of social justice nor could they win a single assembly seat in West Bengal; subsequently, these parties and party leaders had been co-opted mainly by the TMC. Both Siddiqullah Chowdhury and Abdur Rezaak Molla joined the TMC and got ministerial berths in Mamata Banerjee's cabinet.

ISF, in its first political document, categorically stated the larger political visions of the party, and also engaged with the citizenship debates, socio-economic inequality, neo-liberal market capitalism, agrarian distress, constitutional rights, and composite cultures. The document further points out the limitations of so-called secular-communal binary in Bengal politics and argued in favor of democratic assertions of *Dalit*, *Adivasi*, OBCs and Muslims, beyond the practice of 'captive vote bank' politics. Interestingly, the party recognizes the nature of political economy and argued that the unholy nexus of jobless growth mode with hierarchical social order is not only weakening the Constitutional principles and public intuitions, but also pushing the marginalized communities into acute crisis. It further states that "*ISF is principally committed to Constitutional values of democracy, secularism, social justice, substantive equality and fraternity. All these transformative and emancipatory values will guide us towards the path of egalitarian civic life with social justice, dignity and pluralism*".<sup>136</sup>

ISF's booklet titled, "*ISF Party Gothontontro o Kormosuchi*" (Party Structure and Programs), was jointly published by Mr. Simul Soren and Md. Nawshad Siddique on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2021. This booklet contained the party's ideology and policies (*niti*) on education, public health, agriculture, industries and labor laws, reservation policy, child and women empowerment, and lastly the climate change and ecology.

The education policy of the ISF suggests that the party believes in the responsibility of the state to provide quality education to all citizens and the state should allocate one-fifth of its budget towards the field of education. ISF condemned the process of saffronization of education through the National Education Policy 2020, and also

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<sup>136</sup> Indian Secular Front's Concept note, published by the Party's President Simul Soren, and the Chairman of ISF *Pirzada* Nawshad Siddique, and others at *Furfura Sharif* in 2021.

demanded for the inclusion of the Indian Constitution in the curriculum. The party demanded a comprehensive state health policy for all citizens and argued for a quality public health care system, which also includes government control over the life saving drugs from the clutches of private drug companies.

ISF, in its booklet, clearly laid down their agricultural policies by recognizing the chronic problems in Indian agriculture, land character and the issues of debt, loan and legal crisis for the farmers. The party also recognizes the problem related to agricultural landless labor (*khetmojur*) and sharecroppers. The party is vehemently opposed to the idea of unplanned acquisition of agrarian land and vouched for agro-based industries and proper compensations for the displaced farmers.

ISF acknowledged the importance of industries (*shilpo*) for a robust economy. Keeping the changing demands and experience of job-less growth models in mind, the party encouraged the labor driven and manufacturing industries, rather than being dependent on capital (*Punji*), so that one can mitigate the severe crisis of unemployment.

The question of SC/ST/OBC reservation policy has come up quite radically in the booklet of the ISF. The party is strongly against the lackadaisical attitude towards the implementation of reservation norms. Apart from public sector, the party pushed for reservations in the private sector as well in accordance with the proportion of the population. In this regard, the party argued for the revocation of fifty percent ceiling on reservation by the Supreme Court judgment on Indira Sawhney vs. Union of India case in 1992. Along with proper implementation of reservations norms, the ISF further demanded that the reservation related provisions should be included under the Ninth Schedule of the Indian constitution, so that it can be preserved and cannot be challenged before the court of law. This approach to reservation is not only progressively radical in a hierarchical social system, but also new to the Bengal politics.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> ISF Booklet, 2021, published in Bengali from Furfura Sharif, Dist. Hooghly, West Bengal. A little more details please. This party's booklet contains its ideological orientations and the perspective on various aspects of society, state and governance.

The ISF argued in their booklet consistently for the constitutional rights, equal opportunities, social justice and dignity for all citizens going beyond the religious affiliations and identity; citing the Oxfam report on the acute socio-economic inequality, where India ranks 100<sup>th</sup> out of 119 countries in the global hunger index. In this neo-liberal corporate economic model, the marginalized communities like Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims are major victims. ISF believes in Dr. B.R Ambedkar's vision of nation-building process where the power would be distributed among all the sections of the society and equal representations in the power structures and state institutions would be ensured. Interestingly, ISF used the term '*Bahujan*' and also proclaimed and committed to build a collective '*Bahujan andolan*' in Bengal.

There are few political slogans printed on the booklet and also used during the electoral campaigns in West Bengal. Apart from the common slogans like *Inquilab Zindabad/ Jai Hind/ Bharatbarsha Zindabaad*, there are a few slogans which forge *Bahujan* solidarity or politics of social justice such as '*Moolnibasi Zindabaad*' (aboriginals long live). *Jar Jemon Sonkha Bhari tar TemonBhagidari* (representation according to the population), *Sammo-Mukti Konkhane, SangbidanerMaajkhane* (where dove find equality and liberty; it's within the Constitution), *Amara Bhaaratiya, Amara Gorbito: BhikkaNoi, Adikar Chai* (We are proud as Indians, we want our rights, not charity), *Babasaheb Ambedkar Zindabaad* (Babasaheb Ambedkar long live).

Mr. Simul Soren, the President of ISF and Adivasi activist and school teacher, argues that "Our politics is not merely based on contesting election only, yes, it is an important aspect of modern polity but our major goal is to establish equality and social justice in the all spheres of public lives. The democratic assertion of Dalit, Adivasi and Muslims (DAM) communities would bring real social change in the society based on respect and equal opportunities".<sup>138</sup>

*Pirzada Abbas Siddique* in his historic Kolkata's Brigade parade ground speech, firmly said that "*I have come here and joined this alliance not to appease any political party, but to get our bhagidaari (share) and constitutional rights for*

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<sup>138</sup> Personal Interview with Mr. Simul Soren, President of Indian Secular Front at Furfura Sharif on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021.



*deprived communities; Dalit, Adivasi Muslims and OBCs. On this principle, if someone thinks of joining hands for friendship with us, we are ready to do that.*” His brigade speech ended with the slogan, which he popularized in Bengal politics - *Amara Bhaaratiya, Amara Gorbito: BhikkaNoi, Adhikar Chai* (We are proud Indians; we demand our rights not charity).<sup>139</sup> Abbas Siddique repeatedly echoed Kanshi Ram’s famous quote ‘*Hume majbootnehi, majboorSarkar chahiye*’ (we want dependent government not strong government). It is *amajboor-sarkar* who would recognize the power of marginalized communities, *amajboot-sarkar*(strong government) will never acknowledge the role of the poor and deprived people.<sup>140</sup>

### **Divisions within the Muslim Community: *Maslaki* (sectarian) Enmity and the Electoral Limitations**

Muslims comprise of a roughly population of 30 million in the state of West Bengal. The Muslim community do not constitute a homogenous and monolith religious group; rather, it is a very heterogeneous and a complex social system based on class, caste (*jaat/biradari/khandan*), occupations, region, language, culture, theological orientations and religious practices. The simple minority-majority religious binary-based political discourse not only limits the sociological aspects of the community, but also ignores the question of diversity and internal social hierarchy within Muslims. The SCR has broadly used three social categories such as *Ashraf* (Muslims with ‘noble’ and foreign origins), *Ajlaf* (backward Muslims) and *Arjal*(Dalit Muslim) to understand the socio-economic status of the Muslim community in India.

The Muslims of West Bengal are linguistically divided into two larger groups; the Bengali speaking Muslims, who are overwhelmingly concentrated in rural Bengal, and constitutes around 95 per cent of the total Muslim population; and the rest 5 per cent belonging to Urdu-Hindi- speaking population largely located in urban centres of West Bengal. The Bengali Muslims are again fragmented in numerous occupational and regional caste-based socio-cultural groups such as *Shersabadia, Khotta* Muslim in

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<sup>139</sup> Historic Kolkata’s Brigade rally Speech by *Pirzada* Abbas Siddique on 28 February, 2021. Full speech available at PABS YouTube Channel at <https://youtu.be/c0Mu5z1eJWg>

<sup>140</sup>PrasunChaudhuri, ‘Who is this man?’, *The Telegraph*, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/west-bengal-assembly-elections-2021who-is-this-man/cid/1809418>

Malda-Murshidabad region, *Nasya-sekh/ Rajbongshi* Muslims in North Bengal. In southern Bengal, there are large numbers of lower caste occupational Muslim groups, such as *Mondal, Naskar/Laskar, Molla, Baidya, Bagani, Shikari, Bhangi, Fakir, Gayen, Ghorami, Hajjam, Jolah (Ansari-Momin) Kayal, Dafadar* etc. The Backward Class Welfare Department of the Government of West Bengal has recognised more than hundred such castes as OBCs.<sup>141</sup>

Muslims in West Bengal have multiple religious sects, theological orientations and religious denominations and groups. Theologically and philosophically, Islam does believe in cosmopolitan and egalitarian values based on the principles of Quran and *Hadeeth* (prophetic traditions), but due to some symbolic communitarian religious practices and rituals (mainly collective *Namaaz*, fasting, funeralrites, attires, etc.), the Muslim community is viewed as a homogenous, unified and monolithic community in the popular imagination. This process has ignored the sociological and anthropological aspects of the community or “lived Islam” as theorized by noted sociologist Imtiaz Ahmed. As a result, the monolithic communitarian image (the project of elite Muslim and Brahmanical political discourse) has not only deprived the community from caste-based redistributive justice, but has also weakened the *Bahujan* movement in India.

The religious and theological sects or groups prevailing among the Muslims in West Bengal are broadly divided into two groups: the *Hanafi* and *Ahle-Hadeeth/ Salafis*. The *Hanafi* school of jurisprudence is further divided into groups like the *Deobandi, Furfura Silsila, Tableegi Jamat, Barelvis*, including numerous cults and sects such as *Azangachi, Maizbhandari, Sureshsari, Marefati*, etc., which are embedded within the sociological and cultural traditions of Bengal. There is also a tiny section of Shia Muslims present in West Bengal, mainly in Hooghly, Kolkata and Murshidabad districts.

Though there are multiple theological similarities and overlapping practices among these above mentioned groups within the *Hanafi* school of thought, there are certain distinctions as well. Each group maintains their unique practices and builds their own

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<sup>141</sup>Sekh Rahim Mondal, ‘Social Structure, OBCs and Muslims’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 46, November 16, 2003.

networks of *Madrasahs*, institutions and literary productions. Looking at the attires, *madrasahs*' names and curriculums, *Imams* of mosques, organization of *Waz-Mahfils*; it is not that difficult to identify the sects or groups.

On one hand, a sizeable section of mainstream political, media and liberal discourse stigmatized the ISF as either a “communal” religious party; on the other hand, the Muslims who do not belong to the Furfura *silsila* also categorizes the ISF as Furfura exclusive sectarian party. The decline of Furfura’s collective social and educational interventions in the last few decades has heavily dented the imagination of the aspiring Muslim upward mobile class. The Furfura centric image has also damaged electoral alliances with other Muslim sects or *maslaks* like the *TableegJamat*, *Deobandi*, *Barelvīs* and *Ahle-Hadees*, etc. It is also true that without the Furfura’s historic image, it is quite difficult to capture the imagination of a large section of rural Bengali Muslims in South Bengal. Ironically, within the *Pir* family of Furfura, there is huge internal family rivalries and antagonisms. The majority of Furfura’s *Pirs* are against the concept of the ISF. The internal opposition and rifts within the family is an open secret now. Abbas Siddique’s uncle Md.Toha Siddique fiercely opposed the ISF and alleged as it to be ‘BJP’s B team’ and also mocked Abbas Siddique as a “comrade” instead of a “*Pirzada*” due to his political alliance with the Left parties. Muajaddid Mission, a charitable organisation led by another *Pir* of Furfura, Maulana Qutubuddin Siddique, even published an undated leaflet titled as ‘*NRC, NPR and CAA Fatwa*’.The leaflet claimed that it is the Islamic cum Quranic duty of all Muslims to support the TMC in Bengal. This kind of absurd so-called *fatwa* have also played a role in the micro level religious mobilization.<sup>142</sup>

### **Stigma and Political Exclusion**

Right from the inception of the ISF, the ‘mainstream’ political parties, politicians, upper caste civil society members (far left to far right), liberal *Bhadraloks*, not only stereotyped ISF as “*BJP r dalaal*” (agent of BJP), but also stigmatized it as a “communal” party. Even the senior “secular” Congress and TMC leaders publicly branded the ISF as a communal outfit. This process of stigmatization of Dalit-Adivasi

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<sup>142</sup>*NRC, NPR and CAA Fatwa*an undated leaflet published before 2021 West Bengal assembly election by Pir Qutubuddin Siddique, Mujaadid Mission, Furfura Sharif, Dist. Hooghly.

and Muslims is nothing new; rather it is deeply rooted in the hegemonic history of caste-based political imaginations. Pritam Singh appropriately argued that the discourse and politics of equidistance from majority and minority communalism is flawed, because it equates two unequal concepts. He further illustrates the theoretical limitations of three major perspectives such as Indian nationalist perspective, secular fundamentalist and institutionalised Hindu communalism perspective, on the question of majority-minority communalism framework. Singh argued that the discourse of communalism can only be defeated from an egalitarian perspective by recognising the social, cultural and political power of religion.<sup>143</sup>

Kolkata based journalist Najib Anwar has argued that “the mainstream media and for that matter the middle class jargon will never understand the narrative of subaltern resistance. The middle class speaks of a language which borders on sophistry and can be dubbed as *bhadrolokerbhasa* (the language of a gentleman). On social media platforms, Abbas Siddique has been depicted merely as an artless ruffian. Of late, Abbas has risen to a rank where his socio-political narrative, unsophisticated it might be, is rooted in the Dalit-Adivasi-Muslim narratives. It is a significant departure from the so-called urban suave narrative”.<sup>144</sup> Columnist and documentary film maker Soumitra Dastidar argued that the emergence of the ISF in Bengal is out rightly challenging the *Babu-Bhadrokok* dominated political culture and equally articulating Bengali *Bahujan* narratives that are embedded in the subaltern sociology.<sup>145</sup>

Kolkata based Bengali poet and teacher Moumita Alam asserted that “By branding Abbas solely as a Muslim leader and his newly formed ISF as a Muslim organisation, the *Bhadralok* has brought out the inherent prejudiced Islamophobia, hitherto hidden behind the sheen of so-called liberalism and secularism. They are, unfortunately, and unfortunately not unconsciously, toeing the lines of the Hindutva fascist BJP’s

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<sup>143</sup>Pritam Singh, ‘Electoral Alliances and Majority versus Minority Communalism’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, Issue No. 17, 24 Apr, 2021, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/electoral-alliances-and-majority-versus-minority>

<sup>144</sup>Najib Anwar, ‘The Emergence of Bengal Subaltern Resistance: Who is Afraid of it?’, *The Backgroundd*, Aug 12, 2020. (<http://www.thebackgroundd.in/opinion/the-emergence-of-bengal-subaltern-resistance-who-is-afraid-of-it/>)

<sup>145</sup>Soumitra Dastidar, *Banglai Bahujan Rajnitir Vovissot o ISF*, *4numberplatform*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2021, <https://www.4numberplatform.com/?p=26271>

narrative regarding Abbas Siddique as a Muslim leader for the sake of Hindu-Muslim polarization”.<sup>146</sup>

In spite of all these criticisms and limitations, the newly formed ISF managed to get quite a sizeable section of votes in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, and Howrah. ISF candidate Md.Nawsad Siddique won a seat from the Bhangar assembly constituency in South 24 Parganas and received 45.1 per cent of the vote share. The ISF has received quite a decent percentage of vote shares from the assembly constituencies (ACs) like Amdanga (24.04%), Ashoknagar (21.13%), Deganga (31.52%), Basirhat Uttar (20.08%), Haroa (21.73%), Canning Purba (29.77%), Magrahat Paschim (20.94%), Kulpi (15.51%), Uluberia Purba (15.78%), Panchla (16.39%), etc., situated in the districts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Howrah. Large numbers of ISF candidates belong to OBC Muslims, followed by Dalits, Adivasis and upper caste Hindus.<sup>147</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

It is quite explicit from the ethnographic evidence- that Furfura Sharif has played a substantial role in mobilizing Muslims for the socio-economic rights and political representation in West Bengal. They have used their traditional religious networks and multiple other forms of mobilizations in order to articulate the issues of the Muslim community. While analyzing the role of Furfura Sharif, one has to be careful about the complexity and pluralities within the contemporary *Pirs* of Furfura. Unlike the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, where the sole authority of the Furfura Sharif was with *Pir* Abu Bakr Siddique, at present there are roughly more than hundreds of his grandsons and great-grandsons (*Pirs* and *Pirzadas*) with multiple *anjumans* or *tanjims* (associations)<sup>148</sup> and intra-family division with no single controlling authority.

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<sup>146</sup>Moumita Alam, 'Bengali Bhadrlok's "secular" Islamophobia manifested in anti-Abbas Siddique Slurs', *People's Review*, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

(<https://www.peoplesreview.in/minorities/2021/03/bengali-bhadraloks-secular-islamophobia-manifested-in-anti-abbas-siddique-slurs/>)

<sup>147</sup> Election Result of 2021 West Bengal Assembly Election, provided by the official website of the Election Commission of India, New Delhi and compiled by me.

<sup>148</sup> Apart from Jamiet-e-Ulma-e-Bangla, which was founded by *Pir* Abu Bakr himself in 1919; and Mujaddid Mission by *Pir* Allama Qutubuddin Siddique in early seventies, presently, there are more than dozens of *tanjims* or associations that emerged in the last two decades from Furfura Sharif. These

Furfura Sharif as a religious institution or network is not a homogenous entity; rather, it is full heterogeneity in political orientations and approaches.

In spite of these critical aspects, Furfura Sharif has gone through a radical shift from religio-cultural institutions to a center of political debates in West Bengal, especially after the formation of the Indian Secular Front. In this process of transformation, the traditional religious *pir-mureedi* relationship, *waz-mahfils*, public meetings and publication of vernacular religious tracts have played significant roles in shaping the new debate of political empowerment, representations, and the Muslim question in present West Bengal. The SCR and the political marginalization of Bengali Muslims have played crucial roles as catalysts in transforming the religio-cultural institutions into political entity.

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associations are Mojaddedia Anath Foundation led by *Pirzada Toha Siddique*, Mojaddedia Sahadat Mission by *Pir Sebgatullah Siddique*, Furfura Sharif Minority Development Organisation by *Pirzada Toyeb Siddique*, Furfura Sharif Anjuman-e-Jamiet-e-Ulama by few *Pirzadas*, Jamiet-e-Zakereen by *Pirzada Jabiullah Siddique*, Furfura Sharif Seba Foundation by *Pirzada Kasem Siddique*, Mojaddedia Zulfikaria Welfare Trust by *Pir Ibrahim Siddique*, Mojaddedia Ittehadia Foundation by *Pirzada Shafery Siddique*, Furfura Sharif Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat by *Pirzada Abbas Siddique*, etc. These associations have overlapping memberships and mostly centred on a single individual *Pir* or *Pirzada* but all these organisations are not equally active in the public domain. For instance, the organisation of *Pirzada Toha Siddique* and *Pirzada Abbas Siddique* are very active in the public domain in the context of electoral politics. *Pirzada Abbas Siddique* is aggressively engaging with the socio-political discourse within the state and trying to form Dalit Adivasi Muslim solidarity. Therefore, Furfura Sharif is no longer a monolithic group, unlike at the time of *Pir Abu Bakr*; they are now divided on the basis of political orientation, individual interest, intra-family rifts and rivalries. Many *Pirs* or *Pirzadas* are not consistent in their political narratives and many of them maintained good relations with the state government and political parties for their own benefits, banking on the vulnerability of *mureeds* of rural Bengal. Interestingly, their *mureeds* or disciples largely treat them with huge respect because of the charismatic and dynamic influence of the late *Pir Abu Bakr Siddique* whom they call '*Dada-huzur*', with reverence and deep emotional attachments.

## Chapter Four

### From Religio-cultural Association to a Political Pressure Group: The Entry of Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind in the Corridors of Power

#### Introduction:

Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) is one of the influential nationalist Muslim cleric's organizations in India, which was actively involved in the anti-colonial struggle against the British Raj. JUH is ideologically influenced by the largest South Asian Islamic seminary Darul Uloom Deoband. Scholars have noted how JUH has been involved in the preservation and safeguarding of religious rights (*shariyat*), Muslim personal laws, and community institutions such as mosques, *madrasahs*, and *Wakf* properties. In the post-Sachar West Bengal, JUH played a significant role in mobilizing Muslims against the Left Front Government. JUH largely mobilized rural Muslims in different districts of West Bengal against the CPIM led Left Front Government. JUH has cited the dismal socio-economic and educational condition of Muslims as pointed out by the Sachar Committee Report in 2006. They have also mobilized a sizeable section of Muslim peasantry against the LFG's policy of acquisition of agricultural land for the so-called industrialization and Special Economic Zones. There has been a massive shift in the JUH's engagement towards Muslim question. This chapter examines the transformation of JUH from a religio-cultural organization to a political pressure group. The major questions of this chapter are how did Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind interact with the political arena? What are the forms, patterns and processes that JUH adopted to mobilize Muslim masses in West Bengal? What are the social and political outcomes of this mobilization?

In order to address these questions, this chapter has studied the JUH's organizational networks, religious institutions and its social constituencies. The active role played by the JUH in West Bengal through its hundreds of *madrasahs*, mosques and religious institutions, has been analysed. JUH has considerable support among the Muslim lower middle class and middle-class including *Imams of Mosques* and *madrasah* teachers across the state. JUH has been largely examined by scholars through the prism of religious identity and culture. However, in the aftermath of SCR, a major

shift is seen in the activities of JUH in West Bengal from being a religious-cultural association to a political pressure group. It is this development and transformation which remains understudied, and that is what this chapter attempts to examine.

### **Introducing Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH)**

*Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind* (Association of Islamic scholars in India) is one of the most important and significant Muslim organizations in India. *Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind* (JUH) which was officially formed in the year 1919 under the leadership of *Shaikhul Hind* Maulana Mahmood Hasan on the occasion of the Khilafat conference held at Delhi, resolved to constitute a new organization for carrying on non-violent freedom struggle as well as anti-colonial and anti-imperial movement in cooperation with fellow countrymen.<sup>149</sup> JUH is the product of anti-colonial and anti-imperial *ulema* struggle in the nineteenth century India. This organization played a very important role in the India's freedom struggle and was actively involved in various movements such as Non-cooperation movement, Khilafat movement, *reshmi rumal ki tehreek*<sup>150</sup> (the silk letter movement), Civil Disobedience movement, Quit-India movement etc.<sup>151</sup> In India, JUH has been actively involved in preserving the values of secularism, minority rights, communitarian identity, personal laws, and different welfare activities in the field of social, educational and economic development of the community in general.

The major objectives and aims of JUH as per its constitution include protection of Islamic beliefs, community identity, heritage and place of worship, securing and safeguarding the civil, religious, cultural and educational rights of Muslims, socio-

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<sup>149</sup> See Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Jamiet Ulama—Hind er Songram*' Rashidiya Prakashani, published from Memari, Dist. Burdwan, West Bengal, 2007

<sup>150</sup> Tehreek e reshmirumaal or silk letter movement refers to one of the important anti-colonial struggles led by Deobandi Ulemas from 1913 to 1920 aimed at freeing India from the British raj by joining hands with the Ottoman Turkey, Imperial Germany and Afghanistan. The plot was uncovered by Punjab CID with the captures of letters communication between Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Maulana Mahmud-ul-Hasan Deobandi leaders then based on Afghanistan and Persia (Iran). The letters were written in silk cloth hence the name is silk letter movement. For details see, Maulana Muhammad Miyan Deobandi, *Silk Letter Movement: Accounts of 'Silken Handkerchief Letters conspiracy case'* from British Records, originally in Urdu, translated into English by Muhammadullah Qasmi, published by Shaikhul Hind Academy, DarulUloom Doband, Uttar Pradesh and Manak Publications, Delhi 2012.

<sup>151</sup> See official website of Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind, [www.jamiatulamahind.org](http://www.jamiatulamahind.org) (here, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014).



religious and educational reforms, fostering the stabilizing amicable relations among the different communities in India as per the teaching of Islam. Management and protection of Islamic *waqf* properties, Islamic institutions (Madrasah, Masjids, Khanqas etc) are also major objectives of the JUH.<sup>152</sup>

### ***JUH's Ideological orientation***

Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) is basically a *sunni* Islamic organization adhering to the *Hanafi* School of jurisprudence and follows the four basic sources, namely Quran, Hadith (prophetic traditions), *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *Ijma*( consensus of the learned or Islamic scholars).<sup>153</sup> The ideology of JUH is directly linked with the institution of Darul Uloom at Deoband (the most influential and well known Islamic seminary in South Asia) and the followers of this *madrasahs* are generally known as *Deobandis*.

JUH believed in the principle of composite nationalism as propounded by Maulana Saiyyad Hussain Ahmed Madani in his seminal book '*Muttahida qawmiyat aur Islam*' (Composite Nationalism and Islam).<sup>154</sup> Madani argued that while Muslims of India is a distinct religious entity among the religious communities inhabiting the subcontinent, they are also the part of same "nation" (*qaum*) as their Hindu compatriots. A nation was not constituted by ties of faith or religious or theological belief; such beliefs were the foundation of *millat* (community), which denotes a religion, religious law, and faith-based path.<sup>155</sup>

Madani further says, "The view that Islam is an inflexible religion is beyond my comprehension. To the extent that I can understand its laws, (Islam) can live together

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, extracts from the constitution of the JUH (accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2014)

<sup>153</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, 'Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900', Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982, p.141.

<sup>154</sup> Maulana Saiyyad Hussain Ahmed Madni (1879-1957) was one of the most influential Sunni Islamic scholars, and played phenomenal role in the anti-colonial struggle in India and propounded inclusive idea of nationalism based on the values of pluralism and religious diversity. He was also the founder of the pan Indian nationalist Ulama organization that is Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind. For details see, Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Hussain Ahmed Madani: The Jihad for Islam and India's Freedom', Oneworld Academic; London, 2008.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodian of Change' Princeton University Press, 2002, p.33.

with non-Muslims in the same country; it can be at peace with them; it can enter into treaties with them, as well as in commercial transactions, partnership, tenancy, the exchange of gifts, loans, trusts, etc. Muslims can interact with them, participate in the matter of joy and grief, and dine with them".<sup>156</sup>

JUH is a nationalist Muslim organization right from the time of independent struggle. JUH was against the idea of so-called separate homeland for Muslims emerged during the time of partition. JUH has been following the principle of composite nationalism where people belonging to all caste, creed, religion, sex and color can co-exist without compromising their own religious identity and culture.

### ***Organization, network and activities of JUH***

Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) is one of the largest Muslim organizations in India having more than 10 million primary memberships throughout the country. JUH has countrywide network of branches, offices in almost all state capitals and metropolitan cities. The head office of the JUH is located at Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg in New Delhi. JUH has widespread networks throughout country especially through the madrasah networks affiliated to the Darul-Uloom of Deoband in Uttar Pradesh.

There are thousands of madrasahs have been functioning in India under the guidance of Deoband which both directly and indirectly help JUH to spread its activities. For instance, West Bengal alone has 937 non-government madrasahs (known *Qaumi madrasah or Khariji madrasah*) spread around 20 districts of the state which are associated with the Darul-Uloom, Deoband and JUH provides the necessary educational and structural support. The system functions practically like a board of education parallel to the official recognized state boards. As a result, JUH has deep rooted network among most of the madrasahs which are directly or indirectly affiliated with the Darul-Uloom, Deoband.<sup>157</sup>

JUH is quite well -organized Muslim association of *Ulama* in India. JUH has been actively involved in wide range of activities such as education, social reforms, human

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p.34

<sup>157</sup> Nilanjana Gupta, 'Reading with Allah: Madrasahs in West Bengal', Routledge, New Delhi, 2009, pp.90-91.

rights issue<sup>158</sup>, cultural heritage, relief works, financial aid, communal harmony, building Islamic institutions, helping destitute women and children, publications of books, providing free legal assistance, propagating Islamic teaching and values etc.<sup>159</sup>

JUH has been playing an important role in mobilizing Muslims from time to time regarding various issues related to the Muslim community. Specially in the aftermath of the Sachar Committee Report and Ranganath Mishra Commission report, JUH played a leading role in highlighting the issue of social justice such as reservation for Muslims, socio-economic empowerment, restoration of waqf properties and various other civil rights.

### **Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) in the context of West Bengal**

JUH West Bengal state branch is one of the most important and dominant Muslim organizations in the state. Historically the Bengal Unit of JUH has always been very active due to its vast networks among the *Ulama* (Islamic scholars) in different parts of Bengal. A large number of students from West Bengal graduate from Darul-Uloom Deoband and many of them later build madrasah in their respective village or town and also join JUH.

According to the annual report of JUH W.B state committee 2010-12, JUH has more than 14 lakhs primary members, 19 district committees and 650 branch committees. JUH has been working under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury (General Secretary of JUH, W.B) and Maulana Husamuddin (president of JUH, W.B,

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<sup>158</sup>JUH quite active in providing the necessary legal support to many citizens who are allegedly booked under so called 'terror' charges under various oppressive and stringent laws both at the national and the state level. These laws are; Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA), later Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), Arms Force Special Powers Act (AFSPA) Maharashtra Organised Crime Control Act (MCOCA) etc. There are sufficient legal and academic research which proves that these laws often applied against the religious minorities, Dalits and tribal communities based on prejudice and social stigma. For details see, Nandita Haskar and Mohammad Aamir Khan (ed) 'Framed as a Terrorist: My 14-years Struggle to Prove my Innocence', Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Private Ltd, 2016, also see Manisha Sethi, 'Kafkaland: Prejudice, Law and Counterterrorism in India', Haryana: Three Essays Collective, 2014.

<sup>159</sup>Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind er Songram*' Rashidiya Prokashoni, Memari, Burdwan, 2013.

recently passed away). The state head office of JUH is located at 81, RabindraSarani, old city of north Kolkata.<sup>160</sup>

JUH in West Bengal has been quite active since the day when Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led Left-Front Government's quick neo-liberal move to acquire agricultural land for *Shilpayon* (industrialization) by displacing poor farmers in rural West Bengal. The issue of agricultural land and Sachar Committee Report (SCR) were the two major weapons of JUH's Muslim mobilization in West Bengal. Muslims in West Bengal are rural agrarian community as well as socio-economically poor which helped JUH to mobilize at the ground on the question of land and livelihood issue. JUH has played an important role in the *jomi-bachao andolon* (Save land movement) throughout West Bengal and it is the first organization which was involved in the movement in different parts of the state especially in Bhangore, Singoor and later in Nandigram movement.<sup>161</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has argued that in the recent past West Bengal has witnessed huge assertion of identity, ethnicity and religious based mobilization and JUH has played an important role in mobilizing Muslim minority in different rural districts of West Bengal.<sup>162</sup>

Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind: Its role and mobilization through '*JomiBachaoAndolon*' (Save land movement) in West Bengal

*Jomi* (land) plays a significant role in major agrarian societies of the world. Land provides the most fundamental source of livelihood and wide ranges of agricultural activities in India and more particularly in the rural Bengal. Historically the entire ecosystem of rural cosmology is thickly embedded and centered on land. It is not only limited to the economy alone, rather it is deeply rooted in the rural culture, faith, emotions, dignity, history and memories of many societies and communities. One could also find hierarchy, oppression, exclusion, contestations, struggles and many

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<sup>160</sup> Annual Report of West Bengal State committee of Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, '*PoschimbongoRajjoJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind erSonkhiptoKarjoBiboroni2007-2010*' published from 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata-73.

<sup>161</sup> Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: Jomi-juddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*' published from JUH West Bengal state office 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata, pp.1-2.

<sup>162</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, '*Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's longest Elected Regime*' in SudhaPai (ed) *Handbook of Politics in Indian State*, Routledge, New Delhi 2014, p.226.

more centered on land in agrarian communities and rural societies.<sup>163</sup> Right from the colonial policy of Permanent settlement (*Chirosthaibondobosto*) to post-colonial nation state there are many such literatures on emotional attachment with the land and the oppression based on land in rural Bengal. The examples of ‘*Dui Bigha Jomi*’ by Rabindranth Tagore, ‘*Mohesh*’ by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, ‘*Naksikathar math*’ (the field of Embroidered Quilt) and *Kobor* (graves) by Pollikabi Jasimuddin, to name a few, rightly encapsulates the rural Bengali life and society.

In the post-partitioned West Bengal, the ideas of *vite-maati* (home land), *jibika* (livelihood), and *andaabeg* (emotion) are deeply rooted around *jomi* (land) among the rural communities (large majority of them are Bengali Muslims). Bengali Muslims are highly embedded with the agrarian social imaginaries through *langol* (plough), *kobor* (graveyard), *jomichas-abad* (cultivating land) along with the growth and expansion of agrarian Islam. They considered cultivation as the *halaal* (pious) activities liked with the prophet Adam.<sup>164</sup> Hence all these imaginaries are closely linked with the sociological and anthropological journey of Islam from desert of Middle East to the soil-mudded agrarian landscape of Bengal and helped in shaping the emotional attachment with the faith and land. This strong sense of attachment with the land is often absent among the Muslims in north or western India due to multiple socio-economic reasons.

In West Bengal, the horrible impacts and trauma of partitions have made the situation worse along with the question of land, livelihoods, and shelters. The fear of losing livelihoods and *vite-mati* (home land) has become the major concern for many poor and underprivileged communities. Over the years with the onslaught of neo-liberal economic reforms have made massive impacts on the agricultural land and farming sector as a whole in India. West Bengal is largely an agrarian state, with huge rural populations depending on cultivating land and agrarian activities. Hence the rush for the acquisition of land for ‘*Shilpayon*’ or industrialization projects for various private

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<sup>163</sup>It is important to note that, land is one of the major issues and bone of contestations and litigation in rural Bengal. Quite huge numbers of rural conflicts including intra-family disputes and political conflicts are based on land. These conflicts often lead to violent physical confrontation and deaths.

<sup>164</sup>See Richard M Eaton, ‘The Rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760’, University of California Press, 1996

corporations under the patronage of the LFG (roughly in 2004-2009) to cater the giant capitalist class and the need of aspiring urban middle class have angered the large number of rural populations. The anger further disenchanting the large rural electorates who traditionally voted for the Left parties. This process led to the breakdown of what Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya called it 'party-society'.<sup>165</sup>

Therefore, with the breakdown of party-society along with the feeling of deprivation and exclusion particularly among the Bengali Muslim community with the official attestation of Sachar committee's finding helped the faith-based organizations to strengthen their narratives by mobilizing Muslims on broader issues like land, livelihoods and socio-economic inequalities. Jamiet-e-Ulema-Hind (JUH) has mobilized sizeable section of Muslims in rural Bengal banking on the issue of land acquisition and linking with the larger question of their material deprivations and marginalization.

JUH is one of the few leading non-political organizations in West Bengal which was actively involved in the '*Jomi bachao andolon*' (save land movement) between 2005 and 2010; the last phase of three-decade long CPM led Left Front Government. West Bengal is basically an agrarian state and majority of the people in the state are directly and indirectly dependent on the agricultural activities. Large numbers of Muslims in West Bengal are engaged in agriculture, overwhelmingly as small cultivators, share-croppers, marginal and landless peasants. The LFG ruled the state of West Bengal for more than three decades and their major support base was poor landless and marginal agricultural workers. The majority of them are poor Muslims and Schedule caste (SCs) who even got benefited from the celebrated land reforms program of the LFG popularly known as operation *barga*.<sup>166</sup> The strong electoral support base of the Left-front was basically in the rural Bengal and with the support of the medium and marginal farmer; share-croppers and agricultural laborers.

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<sup>165</sup>By Party-society Dwaipayana refers to popular disputes take on a partisan character with the effect that there is larger acceptance of the political parties as moral guardian of the society. Details see Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya, 'Government as Practice: Democratic Left in Transforming India', Cambridge University Press, 2016.

<sup>166</sup>Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'The 2011 State Assembly Election in West Bengal: The Left Front Washed Out!' in *Journal of South Asian Development*, 6, 2 (2011): pp.143-167

Left-front government under the Chief Minister-ship of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya started a new slogan of ‘*Shilpayon*’ or industrialization. *Shilpayon* became the buzz word in the political discourse of West Bengal. The major slogan of the LFG was “*Krishi amader bhitti o Shilpo amader bhobishyot*’ (Agriculture is our base and Industry is our future).<sup>167</sup>

In the context of ‘*Shilpayon*’ (industrialization process) by the LFG and the forcible acquisition of agricultural land created huge panic among the rural and agrarian people and particularly among the Muslims. As Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury stated in an interview that the panic among Muslim peasants basically arises due to the recent acquisition of land by different industrialist with the help of state government in the New-Town Rajarhat and Bhangore areas (outskirts of Kolkata) for housing and commercial purpose. He argued that the majority of the losers in the so-called urbanization and development projects are the poor Muslims.<sup>168</sup>

### **Land, Livelihoods and Muslims: JUH’s Mobilizations in South and North 24 Parganas**

South and North 24 Parganas are the two important districts close to Kolkata metropolis. Both these districts were the strong base of the Left parties’ right from the time of *Tebhaga* movement. There is also sizeable presence of Muslims in these two districts. According to the 2001 census the percentage of Muslim population in the district of South 24 Parganas is 34.7 and in North 24 Parganas is around 25 percent. Muslims are thickly concentrated in Deganga, Amdanga, Haroa, Basirhat, Barasat etc. in North 24 Parganas and Diamond Harbor, Canning, Minakhan, Baruipur, Bhangore, Falta, Kulpi etc. in South 24 Parganas district.

The first anti-land acquisition movement started at Bhangore, in South 24 Parganas around 25 kilometers from Kolkata (a thickly Muslim concentrated area) under the banner of JUH in 2005 when the Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya principally agreed to transfer 5100 acres of land to the Salem group (an Indonesian based Multi-

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<sup>167</sup> The official advertisement by the Government of West Bengal for industrialization

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury, State secretary of JUH, in Kolkata on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

national group) under the Special Economic Zone<sup>169</sup> (SEZ). The Salem group was interested to build motorcycle manufacture plant, health city, highway, special economic zone, and townships etc. which required huge amount of land.<sup>170</sup> The news of the acquisition of 2500 acres of land for construction of 100 kilometers long Eastern Link highway project from Barasat (the headquarter of North 24 Parganas) to Raichak (South 24 Parganas, the gateway to Haldia and the opposite bank of the Hooghly) by Salem group has created huge panic among the poor farmers specially among the Muslims simply because the area which has been identified for highway lanes covering areas such as Bhangore, Baruipur, Moghrahat, Canning etc. which have substantial numbers of Muslim populations highly depended on agriculture for their livelihood.<sup>171</sup>

JUH played a substantive role in mobilizing Muslims against the CPM led Left-front government in those minority concentrated areas in both the districts of North and South 24 Parganas based on the issue of acquisition of fertile agricultural lands for the so called '*unnoyon o shilpayon*' (development and industrialization). JUH called its first Anti-S.E.Z public meeting at Ghatakpur, (a Muslim concentrated area in the district of South 24 Parganas) on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2005 where around hundreds of people gathered and registered their protest against the S.E.Z and acquisition of agricultural land. Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury, (the General Secretary of state JUH) vehemently opposed and criticized the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led Left-front Government for the anti-farmer anti-people policies. He further said in the meeting in presence of hundreds of people (mostly Muslims) that " CPM government wants to give 5100 acres of land to Indonesian based Salem group for the construction of Sky touching tower, eight lanes highways, shopping malls, townships, swimming pools etc. at the cost of our blood and soil. This so-called anti-people development will not only snatch our fertile agricultural land and jobs but also perish our ancestral home,

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<sup>169</sup> Special Economic Zone means a specially delineated duty free enclave and shall be deemed to be foreign territory for the purpose of trade operation, duties and tariffs. This act was passed by the Parliament of India in 2005.

<sup>170</sup> See Dia Da Costa, 'Tensions of neo-liberal development: State discourse and dramatic oppositions in West Bengal' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41, 3, 2007, pp.287-320.

<sup>171</sup> Devadeep Purohit, 'Land versus highway in battle of two S's Suman against takeover, Sujana waits for 'mandate' *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2009.



mosque, temple, burial grounds, madrasahs, schools and many more. Therefore it is our duty to stop this *gorib-birodhi unnoyon*(anti-poor development) at any cost. *Unnoyoner name sorkarkinotun Palestine korte chai?* (Does the government want to create Palestine in the name of development?)”<sup>172</sup>

The Anti-SEZ meeting was attended by Maulana Husamuddin, (then state president, JUH), Advocate Idris Ali representing All India Minority Forum (presently with the Trinamool congress) and many other state levels JUH leaders and workers.<sup>173</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> September 2005, JUH organized a convention at Maulali youth center ( a public seminar hall) in Kolkata on the issue of SEZ and LFG’s land acquisition policy. Many Intellectuals, academics, social activist, politicians, student organizations, and workers union leaders attended the convention and JUH took a resolution that the organization would initiate larger people’s movement against the policy of SEZ and acquisition of 5100 acres of land at Bhangore in South 24 Parganas.

In the month of September to December 2005 JUH had organized series of public rallies in different parts of South and North 24 Parganas districts including state’s capital Kolkata against the SEZ and the allegedly anti-peasants land policy of the LFG in West Bengal. JUH had organized its second anti-SEZ public meeting at Rani Rashmoni Road (popular sites of political rally) in Kolkata on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2005 under the leadership of Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury. The main theme and slogan of the rally was “*Salem gosthike eak inchio jomi noi*” (No to single inch land to Salim group).

The rally attracted large numbers of Muslim peasants from the districts of South and North 24 Parganas. Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury declared in front of five thousand people that “*Amara Mathai kafonbedhejomirokkharandolon e nemeporichi, eek inchiojomi Salem gosthikenitedebona. Amara unnoyon o shilpayonerbiruddhenoikintu ta bole urborkrishijomiodhigrohon kore unnoyon chai*

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<sup>172</sup>Maulana Md. Muslim, ‘*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*’, published from 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid..pp.6-9.

na.” (We have already started our save land movement by wearing *Kafan* (cloth in which a dead person is wrapped for burial) in our head. We will not give single inch of our land to Salem group. We are not against development or industrialization but there cannot be any development with the acquisition of fertile agricultural land).<sup>174</sup>

Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury further said:

*“During the tenure of three decades Left-front government around 52,000 small and medium industries were shut down and more than a million people are unemployed. Previously people from different state used to come to West Bengal for employment but now people of Bengal leaving their own state in search of employment. Instead of creating job by re-opening all those closed industries, Government is further creating the problem by giving away fertile agricultural land to the big MNCs (Salem group). Where would the poor people go and what would be their livelihoods? There is not even proper rehabilitation plan of the government”*<sup>175</sup>

JUH organized *Jail bhorandolon* (fill the prison movement) on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2005 at Dharmatala metro channel (Kolkata) regarding the same issue of SEZ and forceful acquisition of land. Around one lakh JUH members, workers, farmers gathered in the city of Kolkata from different districts in West Bengal to participate in this rally. Approximately five thousands *Jamiat*'s members have been arrested by the Kolkata Police.<sup>176</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> October in 2005, when Salim group's chief Benny Santoso arrived in Kolkata to meet Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya regarding the prospects of the deal (Memorandum of Understanding ) between the Govt. of West Bengal and Salem Group. Under the leadership of JUH, along with few other mass organizations, held a protest demonstration in several major locations of Kolkata and black flags were showed to Benny Santoso (head of Salem group) by chanting the slogan of '*Go Back Beni Santoso*'. Intellectuals, activists, marginal politicians, several right based

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<sup>174</sup>Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: Jomijuddhe Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*', published from 81, Rabindra Sarani, Kolkata and also reported at *Dainik Bartaman*, Kolkata 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2005.

<sup>175</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.10-11

<sup>176</sup>*Sangbad Pratidin*, Kolkata 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005.

groups played active role in the protest demonstration against the visit of Benny Santoso.<sup>177</sup>

To create further awareness regarding the issue of SEZ as well as acquisition of agricultural land and larger unity amongst the various mass and peoples organizations, JUH called '*Krishok-Khetmojurucchedbirodhisommelon*' (convention against the eviction of farmers and farm-labor) at Calcutta University Institute Hall on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2005. More than a dozen of mass organizations and small political parties, public intellectuals, activists were present in the convention. Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury (general secretary of state JUH) chaired the convention. The demands of the convention were as follows<sup>178</sup>:

- a) Government should immediately stop acquiring agricultural land from the farmer in the name of development. For industrialization, government should use the abandoned or unused land of 55,000 small and medium scale industries which has been closed down over the years. Government should go for the agro-based industries in agricultural land and big industries in non-fertile land available in many districts of West Bengal.
- b) Those who will be affected due to this land acquisition, government should provide alternative livelihood, profitable compensations and suitable rehabilitations to them.
- c) Government should amend the land acquisition act so that no one could arbitrarily acquire the agricultural land as well as ensure proper safeguards for the poor and landless peasants.
- d) There should not be any anti-people development policy in the name of investment (*biniyog*) and technology.
- e) Government should maintain transparency and declare proper action plan of development in the public domain.

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<sup>177</sup> *Dainik Bartaman*, Kolkata, 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2005.

<sup>178</sup> The official press release of the West Bengal State Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2005.

- f) Government should adopt inclusive development model which would not only create employment but also cater the needs of the different marginalized communities including labors and peasants.

This convention also resulted in the formation of a new inclusive umbrella forum called '*Gono Unnoyon o JonoAdhikarSongram Samity*' (Struggle committee for people's development and people's rights). Under the leadership of JUH, this committee is the coalition of more two dozen of organizations and political parties from different fields such as CPI(Marxist-Leninist), All India Minority Forum, Dalit Mohajot, Janabadi Forward Bloc, Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), *AnagrasarJatiAdhikar Manch*, Hawker Sangram Samity, *BharatiyaMoolNibasi Manch*, SramjibiMahila Samity, People's Committee against Imperialism, Madrasah Students Union and many others activists.<sup>179</sup>

Under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury of JUH, Struggle committee for people's development and people's rights have declared common minimum programme to fight against the policy of SEZ and acquisition of agricultural lands. They also hold hundreds of public rallies in Bagnan, Panchla, Bamungachi, Kharibari, Belegkata, Bashirhat, Malancho, Sarberia, Baruipur, Magrahat, Jaynagar, Notunhat, Katwa, Kusumgram, Nadonghat, Burdwan town (Curzon gate), Dubrajdighi, Sonamukhi, Jamalpur, Memari, Krishnanagar, Islampur, Baharampur, Islambazar, Fulbari, South Dinajpur, Balurghat, Coochbehar, Arambagh, Jangipara, Singoor, Kolkata and many places in different districts and corners in West Bengal.<sup>180</sup> JUH have played key role in mobilizing Muslim masses in the South and North 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal banking the issue of acquisition of agricultural land by the government and the MNCs for industrialization.

### **Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind: Its movement and mobilization in Nandigram**

Nandigram has become a name of resistance not only in West Bengal but also against the anti- land acquisitions movements across India. The magnitude of the political

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<sup>179</sup>Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Bhango, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*', published from JUH's West Bengal state committee, 81, Rabindra Sarani, Kolkata.

<sup>180</sup> Annual Report of West Bengal State committee of Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, 2005-2006 and an interview with Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury, state secretary of JUH on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014 at Kolkata.

fight in Nandigram was far more enormous than the Singur agitation because the scale of land acquisition and the stake of industrialization were far greater.<sup>181</sup> Nandigram is situated in the district of East Mednipur around 125 kilometers from Kolkata. Nandigram is also the assembly constituency with two administrative blocks. The sizeable section of the population of Nandigram belongs to Muslims and Schedule castes and engaged with the agricultural activities. As per the 2001 census Muslim constitute around 32 percent of the total population of Nandigram.<sup>182</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> June, 2006, The Salim Group chief Benny Santoso had announced “*We require 27000 acres of land at Haldia for developing ‘special economic zone. I will discuss with the Chief Minister (Buddhadeb Bhattacharya)*”.<sup>183</sup> On 12<sup>th</sup> September 2006, Chief Executive Officer of Haldia Development Authority informed the Director of Industries, Department of Commerce and Industries, Govt. of West Bengal to identify 51,000 acres of land for construction of Chemical hub and port under the special economic zone.<sup>184</sup>

This notification triggered massive panic among the villagers and poor farmers who had nothing to lose other than their land. Under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury, the seven members team of *Gono Unnoyon o Jonadhikar sangramsamity* (Struggle committee for people’s development and people’s rights) reached Nandigram to enquire the ground reality and carried out survey of 600 households regarding the people’s opinion about the acquisition of land and out of 600 households, 588 households refused to give their land. The large majority of villagers and households said that “*Jibondebotobujomidebona*” (we are ready to sacrifice our life but not our land).<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> See Uday Basu, ‘Left Out in Bengal: Mamata Mahout on Congress Elephant’ Atlantic Publisher, New Delhi, 2012, pp.32-33.

<sup>182</sup> Census of India, 2001, Government of India.

<sup>183</sup> Uday Basu, opcit, p.33

<sup>184</sup> Photocopy of the government memo availed from the JUHstate office in Kolkata.

<sup>185</sup> Maulana Md. Muslim, ‘*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*’, published by JUH’s West Bengal state committee, 81, Rabindra Sarani, Kolkata, pp.40-41.

On 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2006, JUH had organized public meeting in three different locations in Nandigram such as Hazrakata Bazar, Kurighata and Garchakraberia. The meetings were organized by the local members of JUH's East Medinipur district committee. Maulana Siddiquillah Chowdhury, Maulana Abdus Samad, Sardar Amzad Ali and other members of JUH were also present in the meetings.

Again on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2006, JUH and *Gono Unnoyon o Jonoadhikarsangramsamity* (Struggle committee for people's development and people's rights) jointly organized a press conference at Calcutta Press Club and warned the state government not to move with this project at Nandigram which will not only displace thousands of people but also destroy the fertile agricultural lands, mosque, temples, schools, and environment. The joint press conference appealed to the people of West Bengal to participate in the movement and announced '*Nandigram chaloavijan*' (March to Nandigram) on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2006.<sup>186</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> December 2006 Nandigram branch committee of JUH had organized a huge mass rally at Nandigram bus stand to mobilize and aware people against the acquisition of agricultural land for the construction of chemical hub. Trinammol Congress's leader SubhenduAdhikary (former TMC leader and present BJP's opposition leader in the state assembly), Congress's leader Manik Bhowmik, Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) leader ManabBerawere also present in the rally. The rally presided by Maulana Siddiquillah Chowdhury. All of them spoke against the anti-people policy of the CPM government and appealed for people's unity to further intensify and consolidate the movement (*andolan*).<sup>187</sup>

JUH organized series of rallies, protest demonstrations, dharmas at different locations in Nandigram to mobilize common people. On 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2007, when hundreds of people returning from the Gokulnagor panchayat office after attending the protest demonstration, police openly fired and shot dead three villagers and many got injured. This incidence of Police firing on villagers triggered huge protest against the government and the police administration. Next day on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2007 the

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<sup>186</sup>Copy of Press release by JUH on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2006 at Kolkata Press Club and Sangbad Pratidin, Kolkata, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

<sup>187</sup>*Sangbad Pratidin*, Kolkata, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2006.

Garchakraberia village (the center of Nandigram), became tensed. The mob blocked the roads, at Kalicharanpur gram panchayat area and dug up the all the main entry points to Nandigram to prevent entry of police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnels.<sup>188</sup>

Subsequently to intensify the struggle against the land acquisition and police atrocities in Nandigram, on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2007, JUH under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury ,and leaders from various political parties including affected local villagers came together to formed an umbrella body called *Bhumi UcchedProtirodh Committee* (BUPC), the committee to Resist Eviction from the Land.<sup>189</sup>Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury of JUH was unanimously chosen as the chairperson of the BUPC. The members and composition of the BUPC is as follows:<sup>190</sup>

Chairperson: MaulanaSiddiqullahChowdhury (Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind/JUH)

- 1) Maulana Syed AbdusSamad (GonoUnnoyon O JonoadhikarSangramSamity)
- 2) Sumit Sinha (do)
- 3) Debi Shankar Panda (do)
- 4) Maidul Hossain (JUH)
- 5) Maulana Sheikh Shahjahan Ali (JUH)
- 6) Maulana Md. MojammelHossian (P.D.C.I)
- 7) Meghnad Pal (Trinamool Congress)
- 8) Abu Taher (Trinamool Congress)
- 9) SeikhSufiyan (Trinamool Congress)

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<sup>188</sup>UdayBasu, 'Left Out in Bengal: Mamata Mahout on Congress Elephant' Altantic Publisher, New Delhi, 2012, pp.34-35.

<sup>189</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and the electoral Politics in an Indian State' in *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol.38, No.3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

<sup>190</sup>Maulana Md. Muslim, '*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*', published from 81, Rabindra Sarani, Kolkata, pp.56-57.

10) Bhabani Das (Socialist Unity Center of India/SUCI)

11) Ansar Hossain (SUCI)

12) Nandalal Pal (SUCI)

13) Ujjwal Maity (Indian National Congress)

14) Ashraf Tullah (Indian National Congress)

15) Sobuj Pradhan (Indian National Congress)

BUPC under the leadership of Maulana Sidiqullah Chowdhury had played a crucial role in the Nandigram movement. The most of the internal meeting used to take place inside the Madrasah at Nandigram and facilitated by the JUH. On the same day after the formation of BUPC called a public rally where around one lakh people gathered and also attended by significant numbers of women. The BUPC had warned the government and district administration and laid down three main conditions put forwarded before the government, first; stop acquisition of land, secondly; Punish policemen who “attacked” villagers and opened fire on them, thirdly; pay compensation to the victims. In the public meeting Sheikh Abdus Samad of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind said that the land has to be protected at any cost. He further said “*Our land is like our Quran. We will do anything to protect it,*”<sup>191</sup>

When JUH was mobilizing against the government and leading the role as torch bearer of the land movement, then the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya tagged ‘JUH’ as ‘*Samprodayik*’ or communal. The remarks of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya against JUH triggered huge outrage and added fuel to the fire not only amongst the Muslims but also among all secular forces in the state. Almost all the political parties (including the allies of CPM, such as Forward Bloc, C.P.I, and R.S.P) even condemned the remarks of the chief minister against the JUH.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> ‘Opposition does a somersault’ in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata 7<sup>th</sup> January 2007.

<sup>192</sup> Sangbad Pratidin, Kolkata, ‘*Jamiat Samprodayik? Mantenarazsoriksohobirodhirao*’



JUH received huge moral support from different segments of the society such as politicians, intellectuals, artists, activist students groups and moreover from the major opposition parties such as Trinamool congress and Indian national congress. On 27<sup>th</sup> January BUPC under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury called a huge mass rally and warned the government not to move with this anti-farmer project. JUH's popularity increased manifold after the remarks of chief minister. In the said meeting JUH's secretary Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury said "*CPM government got scared because of our movement against the eviction and large numbers of people started actively participating in our rallies*".<sup>193</sup>

The common villagers and the BUPC activists drove out both the police and many CPM supporters (cadres) from the villages and took over the local control of the area. They dug trenches and destroyed all roads, paths, bridges in the villages to prevent the police and administration from going ahead with their agenda of land acquisition. The stand-off between villagers and the administration lasted for around two months, after which the CPM decided to break the barricade of BUPC at Nandigram. A massive operation (involving thousands of policemen) was launched on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2007 which killed 14 protestors and injured many civilians.<sup>194</sup>

According to the local sources and reports in the newspaper allegedly more than 50 people were killed and dead bodies being thrown into the nearest Haldi river, some with the head cut off to avoid identification. Majority of the victims were Dalits (SCs) and Muslims including women and teenagers.<sup>195</sup> There were many reports of rape, looting, burning of houses in Nandigram allegedly by the CPM cadres. People across the state responded to the police and cadre atrocities with shock and anger.

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<sup>193</sup> Sangbad Pratidin, Kolkata , '*BuddadheberbiruddhejuddhghosonakorloJamietulama*' 28<sup>th</sup> January 2007

<sup>194</sup> See Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and electoral politics in an Indian state' in *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol.38, No.3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

<sup>195</sup> See Ranabir Samaddar, 'Prescribed, tolerated and forbidden forms of claim making' in Pradip Kumar Bose and Samir Kumar Das, (eds.), *State of Justice in India, Volume 1: Social Justice and Enlightenment: West Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage, pp.153-179.

Reacting to the incident Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury of JUH said “what is happening in Nandigram is a reflection of the real character and outlook of ‘Leftists’ and their insensitivity towards the poor in general and Muslims in particular”.<sup>196</sup>

JUH organized ‘*Mohakaronabhijan*’ (march to writers building, the state secretariat) on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2007 to protest against the mass killing in Nandigram. Approximately sixty to seventy thousand people assembled at Dharmatala in central Kolkata and started their march towards Writer’s buildings (state secretariat and Chief Minister’s Office). Police used teargas shells and *lathi-charge* to stop the march, many JUH’s members injured later they admitted to nearby hospitals. While speaking at the rally, Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury said :

*“I don’t have any words to condemn the brutal killing of innocent people. We promise today that we will not let the blood of martyrs go waste, we will spread this movement to each and every village in Bengal that the state is being run by the beast”*<sup>197</sup>

On behalf of JUH, Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury read out the demands to the government which are given below:<sup>198</sup>

- a) JUH demands immediate resignation of Chief Minister Buddhadheb Bhattacharya.
- b) Immediate arrest of present CPM’s Lok Sabha M.P, Laxhman Seth and CPM leader Binoy Kongar for their involvement in Nandigram massacre.
- c) Ex-gratia of Rupees five lakhs to next to the kin who lost their lives in Nandigram.
- d) Proper medical treatment to all the injured people and compensation of Rupees one Lakh each.

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<sup>196</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Bo Neilson, op.cit p.351.

<sup>197</sup> Maulana Md. Muslim, ‘*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*’, published from 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata, pp.56-57. op.cit pp.82-83.

<sup>198</sup> Maulana Md. Muslim, ‘*Bhangore, Singoor, Nandigram: JomijuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*’, published from 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata, pp.56-57. op.cit pp.82-83.

- e) Immediate arrest of the culprits who are involved in the atrocities against women.
- f) Removal of police camp from the villages in Nandigram.
- g) Scrap the Special Economic Zone Act immediately.
- h) Acquire barren land for industries with proper compensation packages.
- i) Stop acquiring of agricultural land in the name of industrialization and development.
- j) Punishment of Superintendent of District Police, District Magistrate and other officials for their involvement in the violence and killing.

JUH under the leadership of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury had mobilized thousands of Muslim farmers by organizing hundreds of meetings, rallies, and protest demonstration in different parts of West Bengal. After the anti-land acquisition movement of Bhangore and Nandigram, the name of Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury has become very common and popular not only among the Muslim community but also in the political spectrum in the state.<sup>199</sup>

There have been multiple lament songs on Nandigram and Muslim marginalization produced by various professionals including madrasah teachers, students and Maulanas. These laments often capture the imaginations, political emotions and create imaginaries on the question of oppression, violence and resistance. One such lament is titled as '*Shoke-Kator Nandigram*' (Mourning Nandigram) produced by Molla Abdus Samad<sup>200</sup>. These songs are played in various religious and political events, waz-mahfils, workplaces etc.

### ***Shoke-kator Nandigram***

*Shilpayoner Naa'me ..keno e agoonjalaaale?*

*Manush mere Jomikere; kemoneiUnnoyon?*

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<sup>199</sup> See Nilanjana Gupta, '*Reading with Allah: Madrasas in West Bengal*', Routledge, New Delhi, 2009, pp.160-161.

<sup>200</sup> Available at YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_gC1SbeXWxFw0cWtHXmHXw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_gC1SbeXWxFw0cWtHXmHXw)

*Manush Jodi sob jai more  
Ki hobeishilpo kore?  
Shilper name manush Jodi dao mere  
Tomar payer tolermatijabe sore  
Keno?  
Tai tohbolenSiddiqullah  
Eibhulernaikhoma  
Cadre diye police diyejominewajaabena.. (contt)*

English translation goes like this

### **Mourning Nandigram**

Nandigram mourns, out of fear, out of despair.  
What is this flame of hatred?  
That you have ignited in the name of Industrialization?  
What is this development?  
That thrives on the corpses of humans,  
That snatches land from poor farmers?  
  
What good does it do to you?  
If it is built on the blood and flesh of the poor?  
If you stain your hands with blood  
The soil beneath your feet shall also fleet away.

And so cries Siddiqullah  
This sin not to be redeemed!  
This land must not be stanchd by any police or cadre!

The second segment of this chapter discusses about the mobilization of Muslims by JUH based on the socio-economic and educational backwardness as per the Sachar Committee report's findings (SCR). According to the Sachar Committee report the socio-economic condition of Muslims are absolutely dismal and so far as West Bengal is concerned the situation is worse with the Bengali Muslim in all walks of lives. The findings of SCR about West Bengal 25.2(as per 2001 census) Muslim population, that

27 percent of the state's urban Muslims and 33 percent of the state's rural Muslim lived in extreme poverty. Moreover, Muslims were pitifully underrepresented, worse than many other states, in the state government employment in West Bengal, holding just 2.1 percent job.<sup>201</sup> It appeared that after three continuous decades in power, the CPM-led regime with its secularist and pro-poor credentials had done very little for the advancement of West Bengal's Muslims, majority of them had consistently voted for the Left-front since 1977.<sup>202</sup>

### **Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind in the Post-Sachar Phase**

Sachar committee report played a very crucial role in changing the debates on Muslims in post-independent India. Zoya Hasan and Mushirul Hasan have rightly argued that one of the biggest gains of Sachar Committee was its reconstruction of the Muslim community as 'developmental subjects' of the state rather than primarily as a cultural and religious community.<sup>203</sup> The Muslim organizations in West Bengal have taken the issue of 'development deficit' of Muslim minority seriously and put enormous pressure on the government and different political parties to overcome this deficit.<sup>204</sup>

As part of this mobilization for inclusion and development of Muslims in West Bengal, JUH played a vital role by organizing hundreds of rallies, meetings, demonstrations and conventions in different parts of West Bengal regarding the socio-economic and educational backwardness of Muslims. JUH being one of the well-connected Muslim organizations with large rural networks among the Muslims in West Bengal used their support base and mobilized Muslim masses to fight for their democratic rights.

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<sup>201</sup> See Prime Minister's High Level Committee, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India*, popularly known as Sachar committee report, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, New Delhi 2006.

<sup>202</sup> Sumantra Bose, '*Transforming India: Challenges to the World's Largest Democracy*', Picador, London, 2013. pp.161-162.

<sup>203</sup> See Zoya Hasan and Mushirul Hasan (eds.), "Assessing UPA Government's Response to Muslim Deprivation" in '*India: Social Development Report 2012; Minorities at the Margins*', Council of Social Development, OUP, New Delhi, 2012, pp.242-243.

<sup>204</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and the electoral Politics in an Indian State' in *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol.38, No.3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

JUH had shown concern about the issue related to Muslim minority from time to time but after the Sachar committee report the activities of JUH has increased manifold, especially in West Bengal where generally the issue of community, caste, religious identity largely kept outside the formal realm of politics because of so called dominant hegemonic 'class consciousness'. Therefore, debating the issue of Muslims, caste, community considered to be taboo in the *Bhadrolok* dominated cultural politics of West Bengal. Thanks to the SCR and the assertions and mobilization by multiple community organizations that have contributed in the creation of an ambience in West Bengal where political parties cannot simply afford to ignore the issues and concerns of marginalized communities specially the Muslim minority.

JUH and the movement of *Songrokkhon* (reservation) for the Muslims in West Bengal

The issue of the reservation for Muslims has been the century old demand of Muslim religious groups since colonial time, but the old 'quota politics' is different from present day politics of social justice, affirmative action and redistributions for socio-economically marginalized Muslims. JUH has been consistently fighting for the reservation (positive discrimination) of Muslims but after SCR (2006) and Ranganath Mishra commission (2007) report, the struggle for reservation got political legitimacy and attention. There have been many conferences, symposiums and conventions organized by the JUH in various parts of the country but as far as West Bengal is concerned there were no such large-scale mass movements before the SCR regarding the issue of reservation for OBC Muslims.

The issue of reservations for Muslims has been the long pending demand but it has never taken the shape of larger public debate. It was only after the Sachar and Ranganath Mishra commission's reports, the demands of reservation for the Muslims became wider and being debated in the public forums and political discourse. The state of West Bengal has hardly witnessed any kind of radical anti-caste and community specific debates on social justice and the politics of recognition and redistributions unlike the other Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Kerala in the post-Mandal phase. This remains one of the major academic enquiries that, in spite of huge Dalit and OBC Muslim population why we have not witnessed caste or community-based mobilizations in West Bengal.? One historical reason could be the impact of partition which immensely affected both the Dalit and Muslim community.

The political reason is the presence of Left parties (particularly CPIM) and their language of politics which essentially tried to cater the immediate need without directly acknowledging the sociology of caste and community-based oppression and exclusions. That does not mean that caste and religion does not play any role in polity, as Rudd ErdEngelsen in his ethnographic study, quite categorically has pointed out the role of caste, jatis and religion in everyday politics in the making of rural communism in West Bengal in the context of Burdhaman district.<sup>205</sup>

Therefore, the biggest gain of SCR is that the creation of new language of substantial equality, equal opportunity, equity and social justice concerning Muslim minority is being debated not only in the public discourse but has also even gone beyond the legal-constitutional debates such as the issue of amendment of Article 341 of the constitution of India which deals with the reservation of Schedule caste. Through the Presidential order of 1950, the Government of India included Buddhist Dalits and Sikhs Dalits (as known as Mazhabi Sikhs) under the ambit of Schedule caste reservation. Hence Dalits belonging to Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism are entitled to the benefits of SC reservation except Dalits belonging to Christianity and Islam. The SCR has acknowledged the social category of Arzals (former untouchable caste converted to Islam) and the Ranganath Mishra Commission report of 2007 has categorically recognized this problem of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians and suggested few legal policy framework to include these two socially vulnerable groups under the ambit of Schedule caste reservation. As a result in the aftermath of the SCR, the struggle and mobilization for reservation of Muslims had become widespread in West Bengal.

JUH organized its first large mass rally in Kolkata on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2010 demanding 20 percent reservation for Muslims. The rally attracted thousands of Muslims from different districts of West Bengal. JUH loudly demanded reservation for Muslims by repeatedly citing the reference of the Sachar Committee and the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission. While speaking at the huge rally Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury said:

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<sup>205</sup>See, Rudd ErdEngelsen, *Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal's rural communism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2003.

*“10% reservation will not be enough to solve the problems of Muslims in West Bengal. Therefore, we demand 20 percent reservation because currently only 2.5 percent Muslims are in government job while they comprise around 30 percent of the total population of the state. We gave ultimatum to the government to take the decision on the matter at the earliest because we cannot wait any more. We have been fed up of promises since last 30 years now government has to step in practically”.*<sup>206</sup>

JUH’s demand for reservation has received huge support not only from the Muslim community but also from different political parties, social activists, and many other right-based organizations. Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury requested different Muslim organizations, political parties to form larger unity to carry forward the struggle of social justice and democratic rights.<sup>207</sup>

Responding to the growing demands of reservation for Muslims, on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010, Chief Minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharya announced 10 percent reservation in the field of job for the socio-economically backward Muslims under the OBC (other backward class) quota.<sup>208</sup> This reservation includes only twelve (12) Muslim backward castes which are not covering the vast Muslim populations and different castes.

Most of the Muslim organizations in West Bengal were not satisfied with the 10 percent reservation for Muslim (only in employment) within OBC which does not cover the majority of the Muslims in the state. The reasons behind the lack of West Bengal’s Muslim castes in the Central OBC (prepared by National Commission for Backward Classes, New Delhi) list is due to the reason that both the state and community elite used to look Muslim from the prism of simple ‘class’ and ‘homogenous religious community’ perspectives which necessarily limits the idea of

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<sup>206</sup>Manzar Bilal, ‘Demand grows for reservation for West Bengal Muslims’ Two Circle.net, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010\_ TwoCircles.net.htm#.U4jFNigm-I (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

<sup>207</sup> See Maulana Md. Muslim, ‘*SonrokkhonjuddheJamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*’, published from the office of West Bengal State Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, Kolkata, May 2010.

<sup>208</sup> For details please see, ‘On the Reservation for Backward Muslims in West Bengal’ a pamphlet issued by the Government of West Bengal on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Available at [http://www.cpimwb.org.in/upload\\_all\\_docs/pdf/lf\\_govt/On\\_the\\_Reservation\\_for\\_Backward\\_Muslims\\_in\\_W.B..pdf](http://www.cpimwb.org.in/upload_all_docs/pdf/lf_govt/On_the_Reservation_for_Backward_Muslims_in_W.B..pdf). (Accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2014)



‘social justice’. The Government of West Bengal neither has any comprehensive empirical data on ‘OBC castes in Bengal’ nor conducted any survey which is essential criterion to include the ‘caste’ in the OBC list.

Again on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2010, JUH called ‘*Jail bhoru andolon*’ (fill the prison movement) in Kolkata demanding 20 percent reservation for Muslim in every sphere, not only in job but also in education, legislature, and other fields. The chief guest of the meeting was Maulana Qari Usman (the national president of JUH). More than fifty thousand people from different corners of West Bengal gathered in the massive rally. In front of huge crowd JUH’s state leader Maulana Siddiquallah Chowdhury strongly demanded 20 percent reservation for Muslims in every spheres. While speaking at the rally Maulana Chowdhury criticized the Left Front government for declaring 10% reservation for Muslims in OBC as only two percent of the Muslims in the state come under the OBC category. He alleged that the state government has not yet published the details of the Muslims coming under the OBC in the state. The announcement of reservation for Muslims by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is an attempt to mislead people.<sup>209</sup> He further said that:

*“JUH would take to strong measures of protest if the West Bengal government does not declare 20% reservation for Muslims in the state within two or three weeks. The Jamiat would stage road blocks for four hours throughout the state and demonstrations will be held in at least 100 places in different districts of West Bengal at the same time”.*<sup>210</sup>

Maulana Qari Usman (JUH’s national president) demanded both the central and the state government to implement the recommendations of Ranganath Mishra

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<sup>209</sup> ‘Jamiat-e-Ulema Hind rallies with reservations demand’, *The Indian Express*, Kolkata, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2010

<sup>210</sup>ZahidulHaque, ‘*Jail BharoAndolan: JamiatUlema-e-Hind demands 20% reservation in WB*’ in Two circle.net, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2010. Available at [http://twocircles.net/2010may03/jail\\_bharo\\_andolan\\_jamiat\\_ulema\\_e\\_hind\\_demands\\_20\\_reservation\\_wb.html](http://twocircles.net/2010may03/jail_bharo_andolan_jamiat_ulema_e_hind_demands_20_reservation_wb.html). (accessed on 20th March 2014).

Commission and urged secular people to support the reservation for socio-economic backward Muslims.<sup>211</sup>

In the first week of February 2010, to materialize the demand of 20 percent reservation for Muslim JUH also undertook the ‘vehicle-rallies’ to visit all Muslim concentrated districts to create awareness and mobilize Muslims regarding the issue of reservation. The vehicle rallies passed through the Muslim concentrated districts like Howrah, Hooghly, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Nadia, Birbhum, Dinajpur, Malda and ended in Murshidabad. The vehicle rally produced great enthusiasm and awareness about the issue of reservations among the Muslims in rural Bengal. JUH played an important role regarding the issue of reservation and mobilized thousands of Muslims throughout the state.

### **Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind and *Wakf Bachao andolon* (save *wakf* land movement) in West Bengal**

‘*Wakfs*’ is an important concept in Islam which has potential to change the socio-economic status of Muslim community. ‘*Wakfs*’ or Auqaf means the permanent dedication of the person professing Islam, of any moveable and immovable properties for any purpose recognized by the Muslim law as pious, religious or charitable.<sup>212</sup> The objective of wakfs as recognized in Islam as charitable, religious and pious, though not limited to, the following:<sup>213</sup>

- a) Establishing, maintaining and fostering the educational institutions, hostels, libraries etc. Awarding of scholarships among poor to promote education.
- b) Providing health care, relief, and financial aid to all poor, including the victims of communal riots (targeted violence) and natural disasters.

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<sup>211</sup> Annual report of West Bengal Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, ‘*Paschim Bongo Rajjo Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind er Sonkhipto Karjaboli*’ 2007-2010, published by State JUH.

<sup>212</sup> See, The Wakf Act, published in The Gazette of India, Extraordinary, Part: II, Section: I, No. 65, November 22, 1995.

<sup>213</sup> See Government of India, ‘*Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community of India*’, The Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, New Delhi, 2006, (popularly known as Sachar Committee report). Chapter eleven of the Sachar Committee Report exclusively deals with the issue of wakfs. Pp.217-235.

- c) Constructions of *mushafirkhanas* (guest houses) and community marriage halls for the charitable purposes.
- d) Maintenance of mosques, dargahs, graveyards, and preservation of wakf properties.
- e) Financial support to poor widows, indigent and physically handicapped persons; arranging the marriage of indigent girls and maintenance of divorced women.
- f) Payment of salary to Imam and Muazzins as ordered by Supreme Court of India.

There are more than 4.9 Lakh registered Wakf properties spread over different states and union territories in India. Largest concentration of the Wakf found in the state of West Bengal comprising 59090 acres of land. The total number of Wakf properties found in West Bengal is 148200 and the book value is Rs.16000 lakhs.<sup>214</sup>

The observation and findings of the Sachar Committee report regarding Wakfs are as follows<sup>215</sup>:

- a. The mismanagement of the Wakf Boards is unsatisfactory due to inadequate empowerment of the State Wakf Boards and Central Wakf Council
- b. Encroachments by the State who is the custodian of the Wakf interests is common
- c. The attitude of the state governments and their agencies has resulted in large scale abrogation of the cherished and charitable objectives of the Wakfs.

Therefore, the issue of Wakf has always been the bone of contestations between the government and the community. But after the Sachar committee report the issue of wakf has gained momentum among the community organizations of India in general

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<sup>214</sup>Ibid.,p.220.

<sup>215</sup>Ibid, pp.224-225.

and West Bengal in particular. Most of the Muslim organizations in West Bengal took up the issue of Wakfs into their agenda.

JUH has played a significant role in voicing against the issue of mismanagement and misuses of Wakf properties in India. In the post-Sachar scenario West Bengal has witnessed large scale Muslim mobilization based on the different issues related to Muslim community and the question of Wakf is one among the most important issues. JUH has extensively campaigned for the constitutional rights and socio-economic development of the Muslim community in West Bengal and JUH has been vocal against the misuse of wakf properties.

West Bengal has the highest numbers of Wakf properties in the country and also has the higher record of property encroachment. There are over few hundred mosques in Calcutta and other adjoining districts where Wakf lands have been encroached upon unlawfully. The level of scams was so high that the Government of West Bengal under the Chief-Minister ship of Jyoti Basu in 1997 appointed a one-man judicial commission headed by Justice Gitesh Ranjan Bhattacharya to look into the affairs of wakf properties. The commission also found that many politicians are involved in the wakf scams in West Bengal.<sup>216</sup>

JUH organized hundreds of rallies, protest demonstrations throughout the state of West Bengal and submitted the memorandum and deputations to Chief Minister, Chairperson of West Bengal Wakf Board, and the District Administration demanding the restoration of thousands of Wakf properties from illegal encroachments in the state. JUH believes that Wakf properties have huge potentials to uplift the socio-economic condition of Muslim community.<sup>217</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> July 2002, JUH organized a convention at Muslim Institute Hall in central Kolkata demanding the restoration of Wakf properties from illegal encroachment. The main slogan of the convention was “*Allah r Sompotti Bachao- Wakf Bachao*” (Save

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<sup>216</sup> Aziz A. Mubarak, ‘The loot of waqf properties in India’, in *Two Circle.net*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2012. Available at [http://twocircles.net/2012apr26/loot\\_waqf\\_properties\\_india.html](http://twocircles.net/2012apr26/loot_waqf_properties_india.html) (accessed on 25th March 2014).

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Maulana Md. Muslim, office-secretary of West Bengal Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2014 at Kolkata.

the Allah's properties by saving Wakf properties). Hundreds of JUH representatives and members from different districts of West Bengal had participated in the convention. There are hundreds of evidences where the Wakf properties are being misused by the government, political leaders and officials are involved in the scams. JUH asked the government to come out with white paper regarding the encroachments of Wakf properties. JUH accused the Left-front government, Wakf board, and government officials for being involved in the different scams related to Wakf properties.<sup>218</sup>

JUH appealed to all secular political parties, and the people of West Bengal to take up the movement against corruption, illegal encroachments, and misuse of thousands of Wakf properties. JUH further appealed to all the Muslims of West Bengal to come forward and make the 'Wakf Bachao' (save Wakfs) movement a grand success by putting constant pressure to the government and also creating awareness among the people regarding the restoration of Wakf properties.<sup>219</sup>

The convention on Wakf made seven demands to the state government and these demands are follows<sup>220</sup>:

- 1) There is no possibility of free and transparent investigation by West Bengal Police, C.I.D of the state government in the Wakf related scams. Therefore, we strongly demand for CBI inquiry for investigations.
- 2) Keep 'Wakf properties' separate from Land acquisition act and Tikha Tenancy act.
- 3) We demand immediate arrest and punishment of all the culprits involved in Wakf scams.
- 4) Restore Wakf properties and use those resources for the development of Muslim community.

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<sup>218</sup> A leaflet issued on Wakf by the West Bengal State Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind regarding the convention on Wakf properties in West Bengal. Published from 81 Rabindra Sarani, Kolkata-700071

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

- 5) After completing the survey, publish the total numbers of enrolled Wakf properties.
- 6) Dissolve the present committee of Wakf board and appoint honest and transparent members in the board.
- 7) We appeal to the people of West Bengal specially Muslims to observe ‘*Wakf Bachaodibas*’ (Save Wakf Day) on 26<sup>th</sup> July and organize rallies, meeting, demonstrations in all villages, towns and districts of West Bengal to create awareness among the common people regarding the Wakf scams.

JUH has made huge campaign against the Left-front government in various Muslim concentrated areas in West Bengal as part of ‘*Wakf Bachaoandolon*’ (movement for save Wakfs) and distributed thousands of pamphlets, leaflets demanding the restoration of Wakf properties. The leaflet was written in lucid Bengali language with Islamic terminology. The title of the leaflet was ‘*Allah r SompottiBachao –Wakf Bachao*’(save Wakfs as it is Allah’s properties). The leaflet demands are as follows<sup>221</sup>:

- a) Stand against the various Wakfs scams because it is our religious duty to restore our ‘Wakf’.
- b) Wakf is the property of Allah, and property of Muslim community, therefore be vocal about its restoration and maintenance.
- c) Punish the culprits involved in the Wakf scams.
- d) We demand C.B.I inquiry regarding the Wakf scams.
- e) Wakf is our (Muslims) national resource and government should be transparent about the income and expenditure of Wakfs.
- f) We won’t tolerate the misuse of Wakf properties of our mosque, madrasahs, dargah, khanqah and burial grounds.

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<sup>221</sup> Leaflet issued by the Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind’s West Bengal State committee,(In Bengali) published from 81, RabindraSarani, Kolkata. (undated)

- g) Use the resource of our Wakf in proving education and welfare of the poor Muslims.
- h) Wakf property is protected by India's constitution therefore we will not tolerate any kind of encroachments, selling and illegal occupation.

In the post-Sachar scenario JUH along with other Muslim organizations mobilized thousands of Muslims against the incumbent Left-front government especially in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, East Medinipur, Bankura, Malda and Murshidabad.

### **Jamiet-e-Ulema-e-Hind beyond Religious-Cultural Association and Its Engagements with Electoral Politics**

In the post-Nandigram and post-Sachar phase under the leadership of JUH's state secretary Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury launched a political party called PDCI (People Democratic Conference of India) in 2008. The main objective of the party was to create political space and social empowerment for the deprived Muslims, Dalit and Adivasi communities in West Bengal. PDCI contested in rural and urban local elections including the 2011 Assembly election but could not make much difference. Siddiqullah Chowdhury himself contested election from Domkol constituency in Murshidabad but failed to make any electoral impact. PDCI could manage to win few seats in rural Panchayat elections in different regions of rural West Bengal and was able to generate new debate of political empowerment within the Muslim community. The experiment did not last long, few years later Maulana Siddiquallh Chowdhury dissolved PDCI and joined Assam based All India United Democratic Front (AIDUF) led by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal (AIDUF Chief and Lok Sabha MP from Barpeta parliamentary constituency in Assam, he is also the head of Assam state Jamiat-e-Ulema) . Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury was made state chief of West Bengal branch of AIDUF and contested 2014 Lok Sabha election from Bashirhat parliamentary constituency in North 24 Parganas district and received less than 2 percent of the total vote. Later in 2015, a year before West Bengal assembly election Siddiqullah Chowdhury left AIDUF and joined Trinamool Congress. In 2016 assembly election he got elected from Mamgolkot assembly constituency from TMC ticket and in 2021 again got elected from the Manteshwar assembly constituency in

the same district. He has been serving as Minister in Mamata Banerjee's cabinet with the charge of Library services and mass education.

In the aftermath of the Sachar mobilization, there has been major shift in within the Muslim community organizations and its engagement with the larger political process in the state. We have noticed how these Muslim organizations have played a significant role not only in mobilizing Muslim for the welfare and development but also compelled the political parties to engage with the Muslim questions and community organizations. As a result, we see both the Left front and the TMC have started engaging with the Muslim organizations and community affairs in the post-Sachar scene. In doing so, the TMC and JUH have come together for the larger electoral understanding. Independently JUH does not have that capacity to win election in the competitive electoral democracy but it can certainly influence the electoral outcome through its community mobilization and religious networks. Therefore in order to utilize the JUH's religious network and community support, TMC nominated JUH's state secretary Maulana Siddiquillah Chowdhury in 2016 and 2021 assembly elections and inducted into the council of minister in the West Bengal government.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the post-Sachar and post-Nandigram phase JUH played a crucial role not only mobilizing the Muslim community on the issues of land, livelihood, identity and social justice but also generated a new discourse on 'Muslim question' going beyond the traditional and dominant of notion of physical security. JUH had used their religious and organizational networks such as (Madrasahs, Imams of mosques, and the local religious leaders) to reach out to the community banking on the issues of representation, reservations, affirmative action and development. JUH organized hundreds of public rallies and protest demonstrations against the forceful acquisition of agricultural land by the LFG for industrialization and urbanization in different parts of West Bengal. They also mobilized large section of peasants in the countryside against the LFG's neo-liberal policy of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the model of urban development by dispossessing farmers. JUH organized mass contact programs such as public meetings, vehicles rallies, signature campaigns and demonstrations in different parts of West Bengal for the implementation of SCR and



Ranganath Mishra commission's recommendations. In addition, JUH also mobilized for the Muslim OBC reservation, educational scholarships, restoration of wakf properties for the community welfare etc. JUH utilized their religious madrasah and community networks to mobilize Muslims and published multiple printed materials to raise awareness among the community about their social, economic and political deprivations. JUH also engaged with the political parties for the representations and could generate new language of Muslim empowerment beyond the traditional security-centric debate.

However, JUH backed political parties (PDCI, AIDUF) could not sustain their so-called 'community politics' in the post-Left West Bengal after 2011 but they could engage and bargain with the ruling TMC party. Subsequently JUH state Chief Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury joined TMC in 2015 and could manage to win in the 2016 and 2021 Assembly elections and got a ministerial berth in the cabinet of TMC government. The powerful mobilization by Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind compelled the ruling Trinamool Congress government to induct religio-cultural organization into political power structure.

## Chapter Five

### Political Transformations of the Muslim Question

#### Introduction

Following the publication of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006, West Bengal witnessed massive state-wide assertions by Muslim community organizations on issues of socio-economic development and constitutional rights. These Muslim mobilizations, led by faith-based traditional community organizations, including Muslim civil society groups, have had a significant impact on the state's macro and micro politics. This chapter investigates how the government and mainstream political parties responded to the Muslim community and organization mobilizations. To answer this question, this chapter examines the impact of SCR on West Bengal politics and the transformation of the Muslim question. This chapter also charts the transformation of the Muslim question in West Bengal from physical security to social justice or equity, and again the return of dominant narratives of physical security.<sup>222</sup>

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the LFG and CPIM's understanding of and engagement with the 'Muslim' or minority question. It also investigates the LFG's policy shift from physical security concerns to equity and resource redistribution in the aftermath of the SCR. Because of widespread Muslim community mobilisation, the LFG was forced to implement OBC reservation for backward caste Muslims in employment in 2010. A massive increase in the budgetary allocation for the welfare of the minority communities was also evident. Other initiatives include the modernization and up-gradation of the historic *Aliah Madrasah* into Aliah University in 2007, the formation of the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission in 2008 to recruit teaching and non-teaching employees in the public madrasahs, and the introduction of various scholarships schemes, soft loans for small

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<sup>222</sup>The issue of physical security refers to an environment that is free of communal or targeted violence against the Muslim minority. The focus on physical security and the secular-communal binary has also ignored the questions of well-being, equity, and the everyday political and economic issues of the Muslims.

entrepreneurship development, and the competitive coaching schemes for multiple professional courses along with various training programs.

The second section of this chapter discusses the Trinamool Congress' response to the SCR, as well as their interactions with the Muslim community and organisations. TMC was in opposition from 2006 to 2011, and has been in power since 2011. This chapter demonstrates how TMC positioned itself as a champion of minority rights by utilizing traditional "Muslim spaces" and the community's aspirations. It also demonstrated major strategies and idioms used by the TMC as the opposition party to advance the agendas of identity, representation, and redistribution. During the first phase of Mamata Banerjee's TMC government, from 2011 to 2016, the TMC government took numerous initiatives and interventions for the welfare of the Muslim community, including the inclusion of more backward caste Muslims under the ambit of OBC reservation, the completion of Aliah University campuses in Rajarhat Newtown and Park Circus, an increase in budgetary allocation for the Minority Affairs department, and the construction of minority affairs-related administrative buildings in various districts, multiple student hostels through the West Bengal Wakf Boards, construction of new Haj houses in Kaikhali (near Kolkata airport) and Rajarhat, and the establishment of the Furfura Sharif Development Authority.

The third and final section of this chapter discusses the rise of a new type of TMC-BJP binary politics. With the rise of the BJP in West Bengal, there was a massive increase in communally polarized politics, complete with hate campaigns and propaganda against the Muslim community. TMC government interventions such as *Imam-Bhata* (honorary allowances for mosque Imams and Moazzins) and other visible and targeted Muslim identity-based engagements exacerbated religious polarization. Between 2016 and 2021, the second phase of the TMC government saw a significant shift in the political discourse of the Muslim question from socioeconomic welfare to religious identity. There are more religious-focused programmes, such as the state and political parties organising Iftar parties, Mushairas, public displays of religious symbols, and engagements with religious leaders and Imams. Following the rise of the BJP in Bengal politics, the TMC began to distance itself from issues of minority welfare and the debate over a security-centric approach to the Muslim question.

Following the 2016 state assembly elections, the TMC's divisive policies like Imam-Bhata and other forms of religious identity-centric politics diluted the SCR's agenda of social justice and redistribution. This chapter mapped the TMC government's policy shift from social justice to misrecognition or non-recognition of the Muslim question by comparing TMC election manifestos from 2011, 2016, and 2021 on the issue of Muslim engagements and approaches. Based on ethnographic data and evidence of policy shifts toward Muslim issues, this chapter contends that Muslim community mobilisation citing the SCR has compelled the LFG to admit their government's failure to address the situation. This chapter also contends that the emergence of a politics of TMC-BJP binary and religious polarization has resulted in a rapid decline in the debate on social justice, equity, redistribution, and the caste-class based social differences within the Muslim community that emerged following the publication of SCR.

### **LFG and CPIM's Response to the Muslim Question**

One of the most organized political parties in India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has a history of uninterruptedly running the state of West Bengal for three and half decades (1977–2011) through the coalition of Left Front which comprises of the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and a few other smaller allies. The Left-parties have successfully developed a model of easy coalition governance under the framework of parliamentary democracy.

There are multiple socio-economic and political factors that led to the growth of the LFG and also could retain the power in the state for long time. Due to the well-known and groundbreaking land reform policies, committed to non-communal political behavior, and numerous mass movements, the Left Front was able to expand their networks all across the countryside, primarily among West Bengal's rural populations. The Schedule castes (Dalits), Muslims, and Schedule Tribes (Adivasis) population concentrated in rural West Bengal constitute the CPM's major social base. After the multiple incidence of the forcible acquisition of agricultural land for the so-called *Shilpayon* (industrialization) and the grim socioeconomic and educational condition of Muslims as portrayed by the Sachar committee report, resulted into the disenchantment of traditional rural Muslim support from the CPIM. According to the

review of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in 2009 the central committee of CPIM identified and observed that:

“The party and the Left-front government have to rework the industrialization strategy. The apprehension about the land acquisition which affected section of the peasantry should be removed. Steps should be taken to connect with the poor peasants who have been alienated. The alienation among the sections of Muslim minorities stem from various factors including their feeling of being deprived of access to education, jobs and opportunities for advancement. The party (CPIM) and the Left-front government must be able to address these issues effectively”,<sup>223</sup>.

Although the CPI-(M) and the Left-Front Government have mostly welcomed the Sachar Committee report's findings and suggestions, there was no official policy prescription of the CPM for the empowerment of the Muslim minority community until the submission of the Sachar Committee Report. Four months after the report was submitted, in March 2007, the CPI(M) drafted and proposed "CPI(M)'s Charter for Advancement of the Muslim Community," a charter for the development and welfare of Muslims. The requirements, strategies, and methods for the development of Muslims in India were briefly mentioned in the charter. The charter states that “In the light of Sachar committee report, the central government must frame a concrete programme backed with adequate financial allocations to address the discrimination faced by the minority communities, particularly the Muslims, in the economic, social and educational sphere. It is essential to immediately identify Muslim concentrated areas and conduct concrete surveys, so that the assistance can be concretized”,<sup>224</sup>.

It is somewhat paradoxical that the state government in West Bengal has never conducted a single scientific study or empirical survey to identify areas of state intervention for the advancement of the Muslim minority during the three and a half

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<sup>223</sup> See Review of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections by the Central committee of the Communist Party of India Marxist in New Delhi on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June 2009. Pp.14-15. Available at [www.cpim.org/documents/2009-15%20ls%20election%20review.pdf](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2009-15%20ls%20election%20review.pdf) (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

<sup>224</sup> See the ‘CPI(M)'s Charter for Advancement of Muslim Community’ on the light of Justice Sachar Committee Report findings, March 5<sup>th</sup> 2007. Available at [www.cpim.org/content/charter-advancement-muslim-community-0](http://www.cpim.org/content/charter-advancement-muslim-community-0)

(Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

decades of CPM rule. The CPIM Central Committee framed a charter for the advancement of the Muslim community in India only after the Sachar Committee Report was submitted in 2006.

The CPIM charter on Muslim empowerment covered four major key areas of intervention such as security, education, employment cum income generation, and the overall development. The charter discusses and proposed number of policy-initiatives for the empowerment of Muslim minority such as; the sub-plan for the Muslim community along the lines of a tribal sub-plan, a specific budgetary allocation, a special component plan, the implementation of minority welfare programs, the extension of Schedule Caste reservations to Dalit Muslims, inclusion of sizeable share of Muslims in the OBC quota, adequate representation of Muslims in state and central security forces, women self-help groups, modern education for Muslims with special attention to education of the girl child and subsequently higher studies for women, vocational training institutes, polytechnics and colleges in Muslim-concentrated areas, and other safety and security related issues of Muslims etc.<sup>225</sup>

Prior to the publication of the Sachar committee report, the CPM's election manifesto barely mentioned the above-mentioned affirmative action's for Muslim development, as recommended by both the SCR (2006) and the Ranganath Commission's Report (2007). Only widespread mobilisation by various Muslim organisations, as well as the erosion of Muslim votes in the State Panchayat elections in 2008, and the subsequent electoral debacle in the 15th Lok Sabha elections in 2009, compelled the CPIM-led Left-front government to engage with the issue of Muslims and their community organisations.

In the post-Sachar scenario, the CPM-led Left-front government launched a series of schemes and initiatives for the development of Muslim minorities in West Bengal, particularly following Muslim mobilizations and the Left-Front's electoral failure. The CPI (M) led LFG also started to engage, for a change, with a few Muslim organizations in order to restore the faith of the community who have deserted the party in the elections. In March 2007, the Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Bangla of Furfura Sharif

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

organized a minority convention at Rabindra Sadan in Kolkata, and for the first time, then Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya attended the convention of Muslim organization alongside Biman Bose (chairman of the Left-front state committee), Abdus Sattar (minister of state for Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education), and Manas Bhuniya (Congress leader). The convention was chaired by senior Pir of Furfura Sharif Allama Saifuddin Siddique. The main objective of the minority convention was the socio-economic and educational development of Muslim community as recommended by the Sachar Committee report.<sup>226</sup>

Speaking at the minority convention, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya spoke about the healthy development of the Muslim community and promised to implement various schemes and initiatives for the community's socioeconomic and educational advancement. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya stated:

“It is not enough to have communal harmony which already exists in our state, now we would really focus on the speedy development of socio-economic and educational status of the Muslim minority community of West Bengal. Restoration of wakf properties, proper representation of Muslims in employments, development of madrasah education, construction of hostels, educational institutions and overall development would be in our agenda. The foundation of any democratic government is to preserve the rights and life of minority population’.<sup>227</sup> He (Buddhadeb Bhattacharya) further said that:

“If the socio-economic condition of Muslim community in West Bengal is worse than other states we cannot simply sit idle...we (the Left-front government) is moving forward and ready to listen our criticism”<sup>228</sup>.

As a result, in the post-Sachar scene, the CPI(M)-led LFG formally acknowledged their failure in regard to the poor socio-economic of Muslims in West Bengal and also started engaging with the issues related to the community centric affairs.

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<sup>226</sup> ‘*Furfurar Monch e Ebar Eksonge Buddhobiman*’, *Sangbad Pratidin*, Kolkata, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007.

<sup>227</sup> ‘*Sonkhaloghuder Unnoyone Rajjo Diroprotiggo: Bollen Mukkho Montri*’, *Ganashakti*, Kolkata, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

Subsequently CPIM has also identified the reasons for the electoral debacle and disenchantment of the Muslim support in rural West Bengal. In the 2004 Parliamentary elections the CPIM including the Left-front won 26 parliamentary seats but in 2009 CPM could retain only 9 out of the 42 seats.<sup>229</sup> The CPIM did not win a single parliamentary seat in the Muslim-majority constituencies in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Nadia, Malda, and Murshidabad. The CPIM managed to win only two parliamentary seats in the 16th Lok Sabha election in May 2014. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the 2021 Assembly elections for the first time in history of 50 years of parliamentary democracy the CPIM failed to elect a single member in the houses.

In the post-Sachar scenario, West Bengal has witnessed large scale Muslim mobilization by different Muslim organizations demanding equal rights and opportunities (specially the issue of reservations in jobs and employments, construction of schools and madrasahs, infrastructural development in the minority concentrated areas, etc.). As Kenneth Bo Neilson rightly pointed out that, in the quest of development, inclusion and to overcome the ‘development deficit’ of Muslims, many Muslim organizations in West Bengal have successfully put significant pressure on the incumbent government and the opposition parties in the state before the 2011 assembly elections banking on the electoral strength of the Muslim community which constitute more than quarter of the total population of the state.<sup>230</sup>

Following the large-scale mobilizations throughout West Bengal by various Muslim organizations (particularly JUH and Furfura Sharif) for Muslim minority reservation and overall community development based on the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission and the Sachar Committee report. These Muslim mobilizations also aided the opposition Trinamool Congress in its campaign against the incumbent CPM-led Left-front government in minority-dominated areas, resulting in a loss of traditional Muslim support for the Left parties. As a result, the CPM performed poorly

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<sup>229</sup> ‘Statistical Report on General Election, 2004 to the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha’, the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha and 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections. Published by Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

<sup>230</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, ‘Campaigning for Inclusion: Muslims and Social Exclusion in Contemporary West Bengal’, In V. Rama Krishna; R. Shashidhar & M. Muniraju (eds.), *Social Exclusion – Inclusion Continuum: A Paradigm Shift*. Niruta Publications, 2012, pp.119-135



in the Panchayat elections in 2008 and the 15th Parliamentary election in 2009, and it got nearly wiped out in many districts. The total number of parliamentary seats of Left parties in 2004 was 35 which reduced to 15 in 2009 Lok Sabha elections. On the other hand, Trinamool Congress performed extremely well in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary election in 2004, Trinamool Congress managed only one seat (only Mamata Banerjee could able to retain her seat from her South Kolkata constituency) but in the 15<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary elections in 2009 Trinamool Congress able to garnered huge percentage of votes by winning 19 seats.<sup>231</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty has rightly pointed out that the Left-front had traditionally sustained the image of being pro-Muslim, and its candidates usually won in constituencies with large Muslim populations, mainly in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Nadia, Howrah, and East Medinipur. This pro-minority image got severely dented after the Sachar Committee Report which showed that despite 'the rhetoric of secularism' the socio-economic status of Muslims in West Bengal was amongst the worst in the country.<sup>232</sup>

### **LFG, Muslims and the Issue of OBC Reservation**

In post-colonial India, the Union Government attempted to define the category and concept of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) through the Kaka Kalelkar Commission or First Backward Classes Commission in 1953. While rejecting the Kaka Kalelkar Commission's main recommendations, the Union Government has directed state governments to independently prepare their respective lists of backward classes based on their own criteria and methodology. Furthermore, the state government is empowered to take appropriate action to address the "development deficit" and under-representation of backward classes/castes communities. In the post-Kalelkar commission era, many state governments established their own commissions and committees to not only understand or define the criteria for backwardness, but also to recommend appropriate measures to eliminate it. Between 1953 and 1980, fifteen

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<sup>231</sup> See Election Commission of India, New Delhi, 'Statistical Report on General Elections, 2004 to the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha', Volume.1, pp.160-61; for 2009 figures see [www.eci.nic.in/eci.../archiveofge2009/.../25\\_ConstituencyWiseDetailedResult](http://www.eci.nic.in/eci.../archiveofge2009/.../25_ConstituencyWiseDetailedResult) (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2014)

<sup>232</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'The Left Front's 2009 Lok Sabha Poll Debacle in West Bengal, India', *Asian Survey*, Vol.51, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp.290-310

commissions and committees were formed in various states including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. As a result, eight additional states and Union Territories (UT) have notified their list of OBCs in order to provide various educational, employments, and other benefits. Among the states and union territories are Assam, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Odisha, Pondicherry, and Rajasthan. It is surprising that during the entire inclusive process, the state of West Bengal did not figure out how to ensure adequate representation for backward classes/castes through reservation. Despite claiming to be a 'progressive' and 'secular' polity, the West Bengal government was unable to ensure social justice and substantial equality for the backward classes/castes population.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh notified 112 communities belonging to the other backward classes (OBC) in 1966 and ordered that seats in public services, professional colleges, and educational institutions be reserved for them. Several writ petitions were filed against this government order, and it was overturned by the Andhra Pradesh High Court due to a lack of empirical evidence regarding the socio-educational backwardness of the listed communities. Following that, the Supreme Court upheld the Andhra Pradesh High Court's decision for the same reasons. In response to this Court decision, the Government of Andhra Pradesh established the Manohar Pershad Commission in April 1968, chaired by Justice Manohar Pershad (former Chief Justice of the AP High Court), and submitted its report in June 1970. The commission identified a number of backward classes and classified them into four different OBC categories, recommending seat reservations in government services as well as professional colleges. The neighboring state of Bihar established the Backward Classes Commission in 1971, chaired by Mr. Mungeri Lal, and submitted its report in 1976. The commission identified 128 communities as "backward," with 98 being labelled as "most backward." In response to the MungeriLal commission's recommendation, the Bihar government implemented reservation for the backward classes. The Bihar government, led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, recently implemented reservation for a new class of people known as Extremely Backward Classes (EBC).

The Mandal Commission in its report categorically stated that “the States and Union Territories which have never prepared a list of OBCs or taken any separate action for their upliftment are: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa, Daman and Dui, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal”<sup>233</sup>

Instead of preparing the list of OBCs or acknowledging the problem of caste, the LFG of West Bengal set up a committee on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1980 to study whether it was necessary to invoke the powers vested in the State Governments under Articles 15(4), 16(4) and 29(2) of the Indian Constitution. The Committee submitted its report within a month and recommended that “poverty and the low level of living standards rather than caste should be the most important criteria for identifying backwardness”. The committee was against the reservation for backward classes in the public services and the Left front Government of West Bengal accepted the recommendations of the committee in total.<sup>234</sup>

In the aftermath of Sachar committee report and the massive political mobilization of Muslim for social justice, The LFG of West Bengal has identified nearly 116 caste groups from the Muslim community and included under the OBC category. In the month of February 2010 after the huge pressure and mobilizations by Muslim organizations, based on the recommendations of the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission<sup>235</sup>, the CPM led Left-front government has announced 10 percent reservation in government jobs for socio-economically and educationally backward Muslims.<sup>236</sup> Reservation for Muslims was one of the most important and pressing

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<sup>233</sup> Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Government of India, 1980, Volume I & II, New Delhi (popularly called Mandal Commission headed by B.P Mandal) pg.11

<sup>234</sup> Ibid pg.11

<sup>235</sup> Report on the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities constituted by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India and published its report in 2007. The commission was headed by Justice Ranganath Mishra hence it is popularly referred as Ranganath Mishra Commission. This commission recommended for the multiple frameworks reservation of including the reservation for Dalit Muslim and Dalit Christians.

<sup>236</sup> For details please refer, ‘On the reservation of backward Muslims in West Bengal’ published by CPI(M)’s West Bengal state committee. Available at [http://www.cpimwb.org.in/upload\\_all\\_docs/pdf/lf\\_govt/On\\_the\\_Reservation\\_for\\_Backward\\_Muslims\\_in\\_W.B..pdf](http://www.cpimwb.org.in/upload_all_docs/pdf/lf_govt/On_the_Reservation_for_Backward_Muslims_in_W.B..pdf). (Accessed on 16th March 2014)

demand of the Muslim organizations in the state because of gross under-representations of Muslims in public employments and educational institutions.

Prior to the Left-Front government's announcement of 10% reservation for backward Muslims under the OBC category, there was only 7% reservation for OBC and only 2% Muslims benefited from reservation. For example, in Kerala, a stronghold of the same Communist party, 12% of government jobs are currently reserved for Muslims under the OBC category, despite the fact that Muslims account for 22% of the state's population. In Tamil Nadu, Muslims are entitled to reservation under the 30 percent category earmarked for OBCs. Way back in 1994, much before the Sachar Committee report, Karnataka also brought in 4 percent reservation for socio-economically backward Muslims.<sup>237</sup>

Even after three decades of LFG in West Bengal, there was no such reservation for Muslims in the state, which has more than 27 percent of the total population, and the representation in government jobs is only 2.1 percent, the lowest representation of any state. The Left-front government was compelled to announce a 10% reservation for Muslims in employment and educational institutions as a result of the Sachar committee, the Ranganath Mishra commission report, and large-scale grass-roots mobilizations.

According to the LFG, the 10% reservation for Muslims from 53 backward communities in government jobs under the OBC quota would cover 1.72 crore Muslims out of the state's total Muslim population of 2.02 crores. In the Election manifesto of 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly election of 2011, Left-front committee proudly mentioned:

“Only this state (West Bengal) for the first time in accordance with the Ranganath Mishra Commission’s recommendations, reservation for economically backward

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<sup>237</sup>ZoyaHasan, ‘Reservation for Muslims’ in *Seminar* May 2005. Available at [www.india-seminar.com/2005/549/549%20zoya%20hassan.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/549/549%20zoya%20hassan.htm) (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014)

classes has been put into effect. Among two crore twenty lakhs Muslim populace in this state, one crore seventy two lakhs have been covered by this reservation”<sup>238</sup>.

The response of the Muslim community to the announcement of 10 percent reservation by the Left-front government before the state assembly election was quite complex and mixed. Many Muslims welcomed this reservation while major Muslim organizations criticized the Left-front government branding the step as an electoral gimmick. Maulana Siddiqullah Chowdhury of Jamiat-e-Ulama-Hind criticized the CPM government and said:

“We have demanded at least 20 percent reservation for Muslims because the Muslims constitute around 30 percent of the total population of the state and the representation of Muslims in government jobs is around 2 percent. Therefore this so called ‘reservation’ by the Left-front government is not going to make any impact on the lives of Muslims in the state”.<sup>239</sup>

Before the elections, PirzadaTohaSiddique of Furfura Sharif referred to the CPM's 10% 'Bhuo' (hollow) reservation for Muslims as "*KumirerKanna*" (crocodile tears) and stated –

“This 10 percent ‘*Bhuo*’ (hollow) reservation for Muslims by the CPM government is good for nothing because this reservation does not cover large numbers of Muslims in the state and moreover this reservation is applicable only in government jobs but not in education which is totally misleading and electoral gimmick. Muslims are not going to get any benefit out of this reservation because the most important element (education) is missing from this reservation.”<sup>240</sup>

Many West Bengal Muslim intellectuals and activists have praised the move on backward Muslim reservation, calling it the first step toward ensuring social justice

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<sup>238</sup> See, Election Manifesto of 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly Election-2011 by Left Front Committee, West Bengal. Available at [www.cpim.org/documents/2011-WB-manifestol.pdf](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2011-WB-manifestol.pdf). (accessed on 16th March 2014)

<sup>239</sup> Interview with MaulanaSiddiqullahChowdhury, state president of Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, in Kolkata on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

<sup>240</sup> Interview with PirzadaTohaSiddique (Pir of Furfura Sharif) at Furfura Sharif on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

and equal opportunities. Trinamool Congress, on the other hand, vehemently opposed so-called Muslim reservation and promised to provide reservation for all Muslims in all sectors, including educational institutions, as stated by Sultan Ahmed, M.P from Uluberia parliamentary constituency, while speaking at the Muslim convention in Kolkata.

“There is no division amongst Muslims of West Bengal. All are backward. The Left Front government tried to divide the community over OBC Muslim issue saying most of the Muslims do not come under OBC category, but our TMC government of Mamata Banerjee thinks that reservation should be given in a straight way to the whole Muslim community”<sup>241</sup>.

While addressing at the rally organized by Furfura Sharif in Kolkata, Mamata Banerjee said “This reservation for OBC Muslims is a hoax of the Left Front government. It is just one of the several lies that they speak every day”<sup>242</sup>.

Despite all of the criticism and accusations leveled at the Left-front government for being too late and too little, the 10 percent OBC reservation has contributed significantly in the share of government employments. The OBC reservation in West Bengal before 2010 was just 7 percent therefore after adding 10 percent reservation for backward Muslims it has become 17 percent. Since the inception of the OBC reservation in 1994 until 2006 in West Bengal, the total number of castes was 64 and out of that only 10 Muslim castes were listed as per the central OBC list. After 2010 to the present, around more than 100 different backward Muslim castes were added to the OBC list in the state which certainly benefitted large numbers of poor and deprived Muslims in West Bengal.

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<sup>241</sup>ZahidulHaque, ‘Mamata Govt. wants to give reservation to all Muslims: Sultan Ahmed’ at *Two Circle.net*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2012. Available at [http://twocircles.net/2012may14/mamata\\_govt\\_wants\\_give\\_reservation\\_all\\_muslims\\_sultan\\_ahmed.html](http://twocircles.net/2012may14/mamata_govt_wants_give_reservation_all_muslims_sultan_ahmed.html). (accessed on 16th December 2013)

<sup>242</sup>*Reservation for Muslims by Left Front Govt. a Hoax: Mamata*, *The Hindu*, 4th February 2010, available at [www.hindu.com/2011/02/04/stories/2011020459520300.htm](http://www.hindu.com/2011/02/04/stories/2011020459520300.htm)(accessed on 12th December 2013)

**Table 8, Issued of OBC certificates in West Bengal**

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
44944	44369	51296	49488	76810	127655	273963	334401	466269	503345

Source: Department of Backward classes welfare, Govt. of W.B

**Table 9, District wise released of OBC certificates in West Bengal**

Sl No	District Name	Percentage of Muslim Population	Number of OBC certificates issued (year-wise)				
			2003 2011	2006 2013	2009		
1	Murshidabad	63.67	1305	2122	9008	51639	71582
2	Malda	49.72	812	1987	1714	11367	54933
3	Uttar Dinajpur	48.18	1088	2267	1572	5311	8961
4	Birbhum	35.18	870	1987	1714	11367	54933
5	South Parganas	24 34.07	1240	4038	3213	33214	35141
6	DakshinDinajpur	28.02	376	481	1480	6016	
7	Nadia	25.41	1497	2781	6359	15204	18663
8	North Parganas	24 24.22	3140	3440	5657	38649	42899
9	Jalpaiguri	10.85	1524	2433	2955	5350	9614
10	Darjeeling	5.31	1112	1197	1205	1320	3621

Source: Backward Classes Welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal.

The figures in Table 8 clearly show that there is a strong desire for OBC enrollment in West Bengal. The total number of OBC certificates issued by the West Bengal government in 2005 was 44944. Even before the implementation of 10% reservation

for backward caste Muslims in 2009, the total number of OBC certificates issued was 76810, which was less than double the number issued in 2005. Interestingly, since the implementation of 10% OBC reservation for Muslims in 2010, there has been a massive year-on-year increase in the enrollment of OBC certificates in the state of West Bengal. According to the data from the West Bengal government's state backward class's welfare department, the government issued 503345 OBC certificates in 2014 alone, which was seven times more than in 2009 before the implementation of 10% OBC reservation for backward caste Muslims.

Table 9 also shows a district-by-district breakdown of OBC certificates issued by the District Backward Class Welfare Department. This data clearly shows the district-by-district increase in OBC certificate enrollment. Data from before and after 2010 provide a clear picture of trends in the application for OBC certificates. Murshidabad, Malda, Birbhum, Uttar Dinajpur, North and South 24 Parganas, and other heavily Muslim-populated districts in West Bengal have seen a significant increase in the enrollment of OBC certificates. Murshidabad, a Muslim majority district, issued 9008 OBC certificates in 2009 and 71582 certificates in 2013. Enrollment increased by an order of magnitude in only four years. In the case of Malda district, another Muslim majority district, enrollment in OBC certificates increased dramatically from 1714 in 2009 to 54933 in 2013. Similar patterns can be found in other Muslim-concentrated districts of West Bengal. As a result, there has been a significant increase in OBC enrollment throughout West Bengal since the implementation of OBC reservation for backward caste Muslims in 2010.

Policy Initiatives by the Left Front Government and the issue of minority development

To reclaim lost ground among the state's Muslim electorate, West Bengal's CPM-led Left-front government has implemented additional developmental measures, particularly for the underserved Muslim minority. Aside from employment reservations for Muslims, the Left-Front government has implemented a number of other policy measures and welfare schemes, such as increased budgetary allocation for minority development, scholarships for Muslim students, the construction of girls' hostels, the Madrasah Sikkha Kendra (MSK), loan disbursement to poor minorities,



the formation of a Madrasah service commission, infrastructure development in minority-concentrated areas, and so on.

The Left-front government for the first time increased the budgetary allocation for the Minority development in different sectors by many folds. Dr. Asim Dasgupta (then Finance minister of West Bengal) while presenting the annual budget for 2010-11, emphasized on the welfare of the minority, specifically providing them with vocational and technical education, construction of schools in the minority concentrated areas, housings, increasing the targets of scholarships, girls hostels, and creation of jobs.<sup>243</sup>

The Left-front government has allotted 300 acres of land for the construction of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) regional campus in the minority concentrated district of Murshidabad. This is the first university in the district of Murshidabad where Muslims constitute 63.67 percent (as per 2001 census) of the district's population. The Left-front government has also upgraded the historic Calcutta Aliah Madrasah to Aliah University in 2007, (which was one of the long pending demands of Muslim organizations in West Bengal). The state Government has created 297 teaching and 30 non-teaching posts for the development of Aliah University, apart from creating posts; Left-front government has allocated money for the construction of the city campus at Park circus, Kolkata and proposed another campus at Bhangore in South 24 Parganas.<sup>244</sup>

The Left-front government has also created two new universities in the minority concentrated districts of West Bengal, namely Gour Banga University in Malda and West Bengal State University at Barasat in North 24 Parganas which has seen Muslim

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<sup>243</sup>Indrani Dutta, 'West Bengal Budget focuses on minority welfare, job creation' *The Hindu*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2010, Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/west-bengal-budget-focuses-on-minority-welfare-job-creation/article733687.ece> (accessed on 13th December 2013)

<sup>244</sup> For further details see, ' *Status Report on Different Projects taken up by Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education Department*, Government of West Bengal', Published by the Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Govt. of West Bengal, October 2010. Available at [http://www.westbengal.gov.in/BanglarMukh/Download?FilePath=/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/0a3e61d5-ca9f-4e0a-9160-643b1dac84f0/Status\\_report\\_STATE.pdf](http://www.westbengal.gov.in/BanglarMukh/Download?FilePath=/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/0a3e61d5-ca9f-4e0a-9160-643b1dac84f0/Status_report_STATE.pdf). (accessed on 18th April 2014)

students enrolment of more than 20 percent.<sup>245</sup> For the development and expansion of madrasah education, the LFG has significantly increased the budgetary allocation from Rs.5.6 lakh in 1976-77 to Rs. 574.0 crores in the 2010-11 financial years. The number of public madrasahs and enrolment in madrasahs has also increased significantly.<sup>246</sup>

In 2008, the Left-front government established the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission for the smooth recruitment of teachers and non-teaching employees in government madrasahs. The West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission (WBMSC) has recruited 4072 teachers in different madrasahs in West Bengal until 2010 and out of whom 89 percent belong to the minority community. The current figure of total madrasah teachers in West Bengal till 2010 is 19,992.<sup>247</sup> Apart from the recruitment of teachers, the LFG proposed to establish 10 new English medium madrasah in different districts of West Bengal.

Stipends and scholarships for minority students have increased significantly at both the national and state level. The number and amount of government scholarships awarded to Muslim students was greatly increased; over the course of two fiscal years, the allocation of scholarships and stipends more than doubled and reached Rs. 200 crores. The LFG also provided Rs.11 Crore for graduation and post-graduation allowances for female students. The government also allocated Rs.14.1 Crore for the construction of 19 girls' hostels and Rs.5Crore for five boys' hostels (till 30.6.2010) in different locations of West Bengal.<sup>248</sup>

In addition, the Left front government also drastically increased the total allocated funds to the West Bengal Minorities Development and Financial Corporation

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<sup>245</sup> The figures provided in the CPI(M) Campaign Material for West Bengal Assembly Election, 2011, titled as 'Left Front government and the Development of Muslim Minorities in West Bengal'. Available at [www.cpi\(m\).org/documents/2011-minority.development\\_wb.pdf](http://www.cpi(m).org/documents/2011-minority.development_wb.pdf) (accessed on 15th March 2014)

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> See, 'Your West Bengal is Ahead in Minority Development' an information report published by Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Govt. of West Bengal, November 2010. Available at [http://www.westbengal.gov.in/BanglarMukh/Download?AlfrescoPath=Documents/WhatsNew&FileName=AHEAD\\_IN\\_MINORITY\\_DEVELOPMENT.pdf](http://www.westbengal.gov.in/BanglarMukh/Download?AlfrescoPath=Documents/WhatsNew&FileName=AHEAD_IN_MINORITY_DEVELOPMENT.pdf). (accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

(WBMDFC)<sup>249</sup>. In 1998, the WBMDFC was allocated Rs.7 Crore; and in 2010 it received Rs. 425Crores, due to massive post-Sachar mobilization. Rs. 422Crore worth of credit had been disbursed by the WBMDFC till January 2011 and around 182646 individuals have benefited from the disbursement of cluster and term loans including micro-credit.<sup>250</sup>

The implementation of Multi-Sectoral Development Programme (MSDP)<sup>251</sup> in 12 minority concentrated districts of West Bengal is somewhat better when compared to other states. The government of West Bengal could only manage to utilize Rs. 264.24 Crore which is 56.75 percent of the total sanctioned amount. This percentage of the utilization of the MSDP is the highest in the country.<sup>252</sup> Although, a study conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies to look into the implementation of government's flagship programme under the leadership of eminent social activist Mr. Harsh Mander in 2011 entitled '*Promises to Keep: Investigating Government's Responses to Sachar Committee Recommendations*'. The case study was conducted in three minority concentrated districts such as South 24 Parganas in West Bengal, Mewat in Haryana and Darbhanga in Bihar. The report identified major flaws both at the level of planning as well as implementation. The major findings of this study are: first; the total allocated money was never utilized fully as per the guidelines of central

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<sup>249</sup> WBMDFC was established in 1996 by the Left-front government as per West Bengal Act XVIII of 1995, i.e. The West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation Act, 1995. The functions of the Corporation are to take generally the task of economic welfare of the minorities through Industrial, Commercial and Cultural activities. It acts as a State Channelizing Agency of National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) and National Backward Classes Finance & Development Corporation (NBCFDC) and implements its various economic welfare programs including loans and scholarship schemes.

<sup>250</sup> The figures provided in the CPI(M) Campaign Material for West Bengal Assembly Election, 2011, titled as 'Left Front government and the Development of Muslim Minorities in West Bengal'. Available at [www.cpim.org/documents/2011-minority.development\\_wb.pdf](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2011-minority.development_wb.pdf) (accessed on 15th March 2014)

<sup>251</sup> Multi-sectoral Development Programme (MSDP) is an important initiative of the follow up action on the Sachar committee recommendations (SCR). It is the centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) started in the year 2008-09 under the 11<sup>th</sup> five year plan in 90 minority concentrated districts (MCDs) in India. It is basically an area development initiative to address the development deficits of the minority concentrated areas by creating socio-economic infrastructure and providing basic amenities. In West Bengal 12 districts out of total 19 districts come under the purview of MCDs.

For further details please see, <http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/msdp>.

<sup>252</sup> See the implementation report of MSDP of the final progress report for period ending 31.12.2010, available at [www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/msdp](http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/msdp).

government, Secondly; whatever money has been utilized for various developmental works such as building health centers, roads, tube wells etc.; in many places it appeared in areas where the presence of minority population was negligible, making its usage of those infrastructure development.<sup>253</sup>

The issues of restoration and proper usage of *Wakf* properties were also key demands of the Muslim organizations. The Sachar committee report has also emphasized on the misuses and mishandling of *wakf* properties in India. According to the report, West Bengal has the highest number of registered wakf properties compared to any other state in India. Both the influential Muslim organizations; namely Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind and Furfura Sharif have been very vocal regarding the restoration and misuses of wakf properties in the state and mobilized thousands of Muslims banking on the sensitive issue of 'wakf'. As a result, the Left-front government of West Bengal has allocated Rs. 70 lakhs for the survey of wakf properties and 25,675 wakf estates surveyed and computerized for the development and preservation of the wakf properties in West Bengal.<sup>254</sup> The Left-front government further created 56 posts for the smooth functioning of the Wakf board and a corpus fund of Rs.1 crore was constituted for the scholarships/ stipends for the children of Imam and Muazzins of the mosques affiliated to the Wakf board. The Wakf board also runs many Muslim hostels for boys and girls as well as working hostel for Muslim women.<sup>255</sup>

### **Political representation of Muslims and the response of Left Front**

One of the most contentious political issues in post-independence India is the political representation of Muslims. In the post-Sachar era, the issue of political underrepresentation of Muslims entered in the public discourse. Although the Sachar committee report was not asked to collect information on 'political backwardness,' the report's findings and various recommendations establish a clear link between the Muslim community's 'political under-representation' and 'development deficit.' Equal

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<sup>253</sup> See the report 'Promises to Keep: Investigating Government's response to Sachar Committee Recommendations' Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi, 2011.

<sup>254</sup> For further details see, ' *Status Report on Different Projects taken up by Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education Department*, Government of West Bengal', Published by the Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Government of West Bengal, October 2010.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

representation for minorities, women, and other marginalized groups is important in the functioning of healthy parliamentary democracy.

As Hilal Ahmed rightly pointed out the three important theses on Muslim representation in contemporary India such as; (a) the legal-constitutional thesis; (b) the socio-equality thesis and (c) the secular-participation thesis.<sup>256</sup>

After the six decades of India's independence, Muslims have been consistently under-represented in all parameters of development even including the Parliament, legislative assemblies of the states, and other decision making bodies. What Anne Phillips has described as 'the politics of presence'<sup>257</sup> has not translated into effective representation. As Niraja Gopal Jayal rightly argues that the representation and promotion of diversities in various institutions, particularly legislature and political parties play an important role not only for a healthy democracy but also in governance and protection of the vulnerable sections of the society.<sup>258</sup>

The political representation of Muslims in West Bengal has never been in accordance with the proportion of the population. In the post-independence era the Muslims of West Bengal have always chosen to vote for the mainstream political parties, whether it was the Congress in the early 1950s and late 1960s or the Communist Party of India from the late seventies onwards till 2011 and presently the majority of Muslims are with the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee.

Muslim constitute more than 25.2 percent (as per 2001 census) of the total population of the state of West Bengal but the representation of Muslims in the state legislative assembly from 1952 – 2006 lies approximately between 10-15 percent. In the aftermath of the Sachar committee report and an extensive Muslim mobilization based on 'inclusion' and 'development' lead to the increase of Muslim representation in the

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Anne Phillips distinguishes between a politics of presence- in which women, ethnic minorities and other excluded groups are guaranteed fair representation- and a politics of ideas, which represents a political choice between the policies and programmes of political parties, rather than on the basis of group interests.

<sup>258</sup> See NirajaGopalJayal, 'Representing India: Ethnic Diversity and the Governance of Public Institutions' Palgrave Macmillan and UNRISD, New York, 2006.

state legislative assembly till 20.6 percent (the total number of Muslim member in the present legislative assembly is 59 out of 294 which was the highest in post-independence West Bengal).<sup>259</sup>

The political inclusion of Muslims was one of the key demands of Muslim organizations before the state assembly elections in 2011. Pirzada Toha Siddique of Furfura Sharif had asked all the secular political parties to put up Muslim candidates for contesting the assembly elections based on the proportion of the population. The Left-front fielded 56 Muslim candidates for contesting the assembly elections in 2011 which is the highest in the electoral history of the Left-front in West Bengal. In the assembly elections of 2006, the Left-front had fielded 44 Muslim candidates and the total numbers of MLAs in the assembly was 46 (15.46 percent).<sup>260</sup>

To win back the support of their eroded social base among Muslims, the Left-front government initiated numerous policy measures to overcome the ‘development deficit’ among Muslims. But in spite of all these positive responses, the Left-front has failed to regain the confidence of the Muslim community in West Bengal. Many Muslim organizations flatly dismissed the Left-front promises as too little too late or last minute electoral tricks to attract the Muslim electorates. As Pirzada Toyeb Siddique of Furfura Sharif stated regarding the LFG, that “*Morarsomoy Hori naam*” (Remembering God at the time of death).<sup>261</sup>

## **Trinamool Congress (TMC): It engagement and response to the Muslim question**

### **Brief background and setting the context:-**

Trinamool Congress (TMC) was founded by Mamata Banerjee on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January in 1998 after she left the Indian National Congress. One of the founding principles of the

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<sup>259</sup> For details please see, Iqbal A, Ansari, ‘Political Representation of Muslims in India: 1952-2004’ Manak Publication, New Delhi 2006. And the statistical reports of general election published by Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

<sup>260</sup> Election Commission of India, New Delhi, ‘Statistical Report on General Election, 2006 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal’, available at [www.eci.nic.in/eci\\_main/statisticalreports/SE\\_2006/StatReport\\_WB\\_2006.pdf](http://www.eci.nic.in/eci_main/statisticalreports/SE_2006/StatReport_WB_2006.pdf) (accessed on 25th April 2014).

<sup>261</sup> Interview with Pirzada Toyeb Siddique of Furfura Sharif on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

party as described by Mamata Banerjee is 'secularism'. The philosophical meaning of 'secularism' based on the couplets of prominent revolutionary Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Hindu-Musalman'. The line goes as "*Mora ek e brintedutikusum, Hindu Musalman, ekjon tar noyonmonionnoti tar pran*" (two buds on the tree, Hindu and Muslim. If one of them is the eye then the other is life).<sup>262</sup>

TMC kick started its political journey with 8 parliamentary seats in 1998 and subsequently joined National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2000 and Mamata Banerjee was the Cabinet minister in the Atal Behari Bajpayee government in New Delhi. After joining hands with BJP, the TMC was a mute-spectator during the Gujarat-massacre against Muslims in 2002, Muslims in West Bengal deserted the camp of TMC, as a result the parliamentary seats of the party reduced from eight to one. Only Mamata Banerjee managed to retain her seat from the South Kolkata constituency.<sup>263</sup> TMC left the NDA in 2004, and has since successfully distanced itself from the BJP and the NDA. Prior to the 2009 Lok Sabha election, Mamata Banerjee joined the Indian National Congress led United Progressive Alliances (UPA), which won 26 seats (19 of TMC and 7 of INC), and Mamata Banerjee joined Dr. Manmohan Singh's cabinet.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election, TMC managed to secure 19 parliamentary seats out of 42 and particularly won majority of the seats from minority concentrated constituencies by defeating CPM candidates. In the historic state assembly election in 2011, TMC won with a thumping majority by securing 187 seats out of 294 and put an end to the 34 years long Left-front government. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election TMC performed remarkably well again by securing 34 seats.<sup>264</sup> Almost all the minority concentrated constituencies in West Bengal particularly in the district of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Nadia, Howrah, East Medinipur, Murshidabad and Malda were won by TMC and a few by the Indian National Congress.

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<sup>262</sup> Taken from the official website of All India Trinamool Congress, available at <https://aitmc.org/abouttheparty.php> (accessed on 15th May 2014)

<sup>263</sup> "Mamata, the street-fighting politician and left nemesis", *India Today*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2011

<sup>264</sup> See the Results of 2014 Lok Sabha elections, available at [www.eci.in](http://www.eci.in)

Trinamool Congress, Sachar Committee Report and Muslims electorates in West Bengal

Mamata Banerjee, the chief of TMC had realized the importance of numerical strength of Muslim electorates in West Bengal where Muslim constitute more than quarter of the total populations of the state. Therefore, for electoral success of any political party in West Bengal, it is essential to have Muslim support which did not strike home with Mamata Banerjee before joining the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).<sup>265</sup> TMC had paid a heavy price of being an ally for the BJP led NDA in the Lok Sabha election of 2004 where the TMC's parliamentary seats as well as voting percentage reduced drastically.

Following the Sachar Committee report, which found that the socioeconomic and educational status of Muslims in India is pitiful, the situation in West Bengal is extremely miserable for Bengali Muslims from all walks of life. Muslims make up 2.1 percent of the government employees, and the rural poverty rate among Muslims is 33 percent. According to the SCR the social, economic and educational status of Muslims in West Bengal is worse than other backward socio-religious groups and communities.<sup>266</sup>

In the post-Sachar and post-Nandigram era West Bengal has witnessed wide-reaching Muslim mobilization by various Muslim organizations (particularly JUH and Furfura Sharif) throughout West Bengal, targeting against the Left-front government for neglecting the socio-economic and educational rights of the Muslim minority. The Muslim organizations have also asked all the political parties to provide reservation for Muslims and implement the recommendations of Sachar committee report. In this scenario Mamata Banerjee has successfully able to grasp the aspirations of Muslims of West Bengal and she positively responded and engaged with the activities and demands of Muslim organizations. TMC has developed a clear understanding that without the support of Muslims, it is very difficult to get electoral success in West

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<sup>265</sup>Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, 'Making and Unmaking of Trinamool Congress', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 3-10, 2004, pp.1529-37.

<sup>266</sup> See Government of India, '*Social, Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Community of India*', The Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, New Delhi, 2006, (popularly known as Sachar Committee report).



Bengal and the party was successfully able to reach out to the Muslims banking on their miserable socio-economic backwardness under 33 years of CPM rule.<sup>267</sup>

### **Trinamool Congress: promises, development and engagement with the Muslims**

Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee left no stone unturned to engage with the Muslims; particularly with the Muslim organizations in West Bengal which certainly helped her party not only to erase the memory of their days with BJP from the mind of Muslims but also got platforms to reached out to the Muslim community. Mamata Banerjee was able to engage with the Muslims at the right juncture when Muslims (who traditionally voted for CPM) alienated the Left parties while searching for a political alternative.

In the post-Sachar scenario, West Bengal witnessed wide-reaching Muslim mobilization against the incumbent Left-front government and the then opposition party TMC played a leading role in connecting and negotiation with the Muslim organizations. Until the Lok Sabha election in 2009, TMC was not in a position to offer anything in concrete other than promises and solidarity because TMC held power neither in the central government nor at the state. Only after 2009 Parliamentary elections did TMC win 19 seats and being an important ally of UPA-II, TMC got important portfolios like Railways, Tourism, Urban development, Health and Shipping in the cabinet of Dr. Manmohan Singh.

TMC chief Mamata Banerjee served as Union Railways Minister from 2009 until she resigned to become West Bengal Chief Minister in 2011. TMC Members of Parliament such as Sultan Ahmed, Dinesh Trivedi, Sudip Bandhopadhyay, Mukul Roy, and Saugata Roy served as ministers of states in the central government in ministries such as tourism, health, urban development, and shipping until the TMC withdrew its support from the UPA. Trinamool Congress successfully utilized the platforms of railways and other ministries in the central government by undertaking various developmental activities and projects in West Bengal, such as the introduction of new railway links, special trains, ticket reservation counters, low-cost railway ticket

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<sup>267</sup> Based on the political speech of Mamata Banerjee (2006-2011) appeared in different Bengali newspapers.

schemes for economically weaker sections, and the construction of hospitals and nursing colleges.

As Kenneth Bo Neilson rightly argued that the TMC used its strength in the Lok Sabha as well as the Railway Ministry to display its commitment to addressing the issues and grievances of Muslim voters in West Bengal. Neilson further pointed out that; these displays of dedication included a range of development and infrastructural projects undertaken by the Indian Railways, as well as hosting symbolic campaigns and initiatives aimed at portraying the TMC as a credible alternative in the eye of Muslim voters.<sup>268</sup> Apart from endorsing the cause of reservations for Muslims in jobs and education, TMC members introduced various developmental projects undertaken by the ministries, particularly railways as well as utilized the MPLADS<sup>269</sup> funds of 19 TMC's M.P in different constituencies of West Bengal specially in the minority concentrated areas. TMC used the funds of MPLAD in different developmental schemes such as constructions of *pucca* roads, additional classrooms in madrasahs, provided computers to madrasahs, building the walls of Muslim graveyards, provided grants to Muslim NGOs etc.<sup>270</sup> For Instances Sultan Ahmed, member of Parliament and former minister of state for tourism in UPA-II spend huge amount of MPLAD funds for the development projects in the minority concentrated blocks and villages in his Uluberia parliamentary constituency in the district of Howrah.<sup>271</sup>

Mamata Banerjee introduced numerous specials train services and sanctioned many new railway links in different locations of West Bengal including Muslim concentrated areas as well. According to a newspaper source Mamata Banerjee, within a period of seven months in 2010 she inaugurated or laid foundation stones

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<sup>268</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and the Electoral Politics in an Indian State', *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

<sup>269</sup> MPLADS is Member of Parliament Local Area Development schemes where each M.P gets around Rs.5 crores per annum from the Union government for undertaking the range of development projects in the respective constituency.

<sup>270</sup> See Utilization certificates of MPLAD schemes, available in the official website of Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, Govt. of India.

<sup>271</sup> Interview with Sultan Ahmed, (Lok Sabha M.P from Uluberia, West Bengal) in New Delhi on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

around 120 railway projects in the state of West Bengal.<sup>272</sup> In addition to these activities, Mamata Banerjee ensured that the use of Urdu language in the official notification and advertisement of the Ministry of Railways, allowed candidates to write railway recruitment exams in Urdu, major Urdu dailies from Kolkata gave huge publicity of these new moves of the Railway Ministry which certainly helped TMC to gain the positive attention among the Urdu speaking Muslims in Kolkata.<sup>273</sup> The few other important initiatives of Mamata Banerjee during her tenure from 2009 until she resigned to become the chief minister of West Bengal in 2011, such as the exemption of Railway recruitment board's examination fee for the applicants belonging to minority community and extended the students' travel concessions to all *madrasahs*,<sup>274</sup> these initiatives of Mamata Banerjee played a vital role in attracting in attracting Muslim youth in West Bengal. One of the office bearer of West Bengal *Madrasah* Students' Union (the largest madrasah students' body in West Bengal, played an important role in mobilizing madrasah students against the Left-front government) welcomed the decision of Mamata Banerjee as Railway minister and said

“It is an important decision of *Didi* (Mamata Banerjee) and for the first time madrasahs got national recognition from the Ministry of Railways. I would like to give a revolutionary thanks to Mamata Di on behalf of WBMSU”.<sup>275</sup>

### **Mamata Banerjee and the Politics of Religious Symbolism**

Symbolism and emotions play quite a popular role in the politics of India and TMC is no exception to this. Mamata Banerjee on the occasion of a Muslim festival especially during Ramadan/Ramzan and Eid-ul-Fitre, the Railway ministry issued advertisements in all the major newspapers in the state. The advertisement carried the message of Eid-Mubarak wishes to all Muslims on behalf of Railway minister Mamata Banerjee and also carried a picture of Mamata wearing Islamic scarf, and

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<sup>272</sup> SrinandJha, 'Promises at dead-end', *Hindustan Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

<sup>273</sup> Frequently reported in Urdu dailies from Kolkata such as *Akhbar-e-Mashriq*, *Sahara*, *Azad Hind*.

<sup>274</sup>, 'Trinamul to access the impact of Rahul tour', *The Telegraph* 18<sup>th</sup> September 2010

<sup>275</sup> Interview with Ahsanul Bari president of West Bengal Madrasah Students' Union in Kolkata on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014

posed like a devoted Muslim by closing her eyes and asking for *Dua* (prayer). The background of the advertisements carried the outline of mosque, picture of crescent moon and stars.<sup>276</sup> The Railway advertisement also promoted different railway projects undertaken or inaugurated in West Bengal. For instance in the eve of *Eid*, Mamata Banerjee inaugurated a Nursing College at Garden Reach (a minority concentrated assembly constituency in Kolkata), an advertisement in the newspaper carried a slogan saying 'Joy comes alive on Eid- A real development indeed' and 'Nursing College in Garden Reach- Railway's Gift on Eid'. As Kenneth Bo Neilson pointed out that the railway projects undertaken by the ministry were projected and portrayed as more or less personal gifts of the Mamata Banerjee to the Muslims of West Bengal.<sup>277</sup> In a similar manner Eastern Railways issued an advertisement in the newspapers, both in English and Bangla when Mamata Banerjee paid visit to Furfura Sharif to lay the foundation stone of a new railway link between Dankuni and Furfura Sharif. The advertisement contained the names of *Pir Sahebs* of Furfura Sharif and a picture of 'Mazar' (Tomb) of Pir Maulana Abu Bakr Siddique (an influential and popular religious reformer of nineteenth century Bengal).<sup>278</sup> This kind of advertisement certainly created emotional attachments among the millions of followers of Furfura Sharif in Bengal.

Furfura Sharif is one of the most popular religious pilgrimage sites as along with being one of the most influential religious groups and sects in West Bengal. Almost all the political parties in West Bengal try to maintain good association with Furfura Sharif by engaging with the *Pir Sahebs* of Furfura Sharif because they enjoy huge devotion from the millions of Muslims throughout the state and they historically have sustained very good networks and relationship among their millions of *mureeds* or disciples.

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<sup>276</sup> Official advertisement issued by Ministry of Railways, in occasion of Eid, at *Sangbad Pratidin*, Kolkata.

<sup>277</sup> Kenneth Bo Neilson, 'In Search of Development: Muslims and the Electoral Politics in an Indian State', *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, November 2011, pp.345-370.

<sup>278</sup> Advertisement issued by Eastern Railway in the occasion of foundation stone laying ceremony of new railway link. Published at *Sangbad Pratidin*, *The Telegraph and Times of India*, Kolkata on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010

Mamata Banerjee has been visiting Furfura Sharif since 1998 after the formation of Trinamool Congress. Late Akbar Ali Khandoker<sup>279</sup> (former Lok Sabha M.P from Sreerampur constituency and important leader of TMC) was instrumental behind the Mamata's association with Furfura Sharif.<sup>280</sup> Since then Mamata Banerjee has been maintaining good relationship with the Pirs of Furfura Sharif, but the frequency of Mamata's visits increased in the post-Sachar scenario when Furfura Sharif started wide-spread protests in the state and started asking the political parties; particularly to the incumbent Left-front government to overcome the 'development deficit' of Muslims. Mamata Banerjee and her party showed considerable moral support to Furfura Sharif and its demands.

In the 2009-10 Union Railway budget speech at the Parliament, Mamata Banerjee presented a gift to Furfura Sharif by announcing a new 20 km railway track between Dankuni to Furfura Sharif which would attract millions of pilgrims throughout the nation and the neighboring nation of Bangladesh.<sup>281</sup> As the well circulated Bengali daily '*Sangbad Pratidin*' reported, the announcement itself created an atmosphere of joy and trust not only among the PirSaheb of Furfura Sharif but also among their millions of disciples throughout Bengal.<sup>282</sup>

To fulfill the promise of then Union Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee, on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010 the Eastern Railway organized a foundation stone laying ceremony of new railway link and station at Furfura Sharif. According to the programme, Mamata Banerjee was the chief guest and senior PirSahebs of Furfura Sharif were the guest of honor. In front of Mamata Banerjee, Pirzada Toha Siddique said:

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<sup>279</sup> Akbar Ali Khandoker was the first TMC Muslim Member of Parliament elected twice from Sreerampur Lok Sabha constituency in twelfth and thirteenth Parliamentary elections. Furfura Sharif is located under the Sreerampur Parliamentary constituency and he had very intimate relations with PirSaheb of Furfura Sharif. He was one of the most important minority leaders of early phase of TMC in West Bengal, and people remembered him as '*unnoyon-erprotik*' (face of development). His sudden death created vacuum in the TMC leadership in Hooghly and Howrah districts of West Bengal.

<sup>280</sup> Interview with AlhajMaulana Md. Abdullahil Maruf Siddique, one of the senior Pirs of Furfura Sharif on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014

<sup>281</sup> See Mamata Banerjee's Union Railway Budget speech of 2009-10, available at [http://www.indianrail.gov.in/doc/Speech\\_English\\_2009-10.pdf](http://www.indianrail.gov.in/doc/Speech_English_2009-10.pdf) (accessed on 20th March 2014)

<sup>282</sup> DibenduMajumdar, '*Rail porisebarawtaiFurfura Sharif keniyesarporullasemisthimukh*' Sangbad Pratidin, Kolkata, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009

“For 32 years, Muslims in Bengal have been used by the CPM for their profit but no benefit has come to them. It’s time for change. It time for kicking out the CPM from Bengal. I am not a political person but I am sure that Muslims in Bengal are for Mamata Banerjee”.<sup>283</sup>

Pirzada Toha Siddique urged Mamata Banerjee to provide jobs for Muslims even if they are menial ones because the Muslims of Bengal are fed up with the CPM and wanted a change for a better tomorrow. Mamata Banerjee wondered why there had been no development at Furfura Sharif (such an important pilgrimage center) and she said:

“May be, people are still thinking of ways to develop the place. We shall name the station at Furfura Sharif after the famous Sufi Saint Maulana Md Abu Bakr Siddique, whose tomb is in Furfura Sharif. The state has never pressed for completion of the development project that I started 10 years ago. I would have connected Furfura Sharif to many locations. I shall develop Furfura Sharif into what it deserves to be”.<sup>284</sup>

Trinamool Congress further mentioned in their 2011 West Bengal’s assembly election manifesto regarding Furfura Sharif and promised to develop Furfura Sharif into an important pilgrimage and tourist centre.<sup>285</sup> Apart from all these activities, Mamata Banerjee and other TMC leaders regularly visited Furfura Sharif and attended many rallies and meetings organized by Pirs of Furfura Sharif in different corners of West Bengal.

On the occasion of Minority Rights Day on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2015, Mojaddedia Anath Foundation led by Pirzada Toha Siddique organized a public meeting at Furfura Sharif and the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was invited as the chief guest. Ms. Mamata Banerjee while addressing the large audience at Furfura Sharif she said that State government budget for Minority affairs department has increased many folds

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<sup>283</sup>*The Indian Express*, Kolkata ‘It’s time for change in Bengal, Say Muslim leaders’ 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>284</sup>Jayanta Gupta and Falguni Banerjee, ‘Muslim clerics vow support to Didi’ ,*The Times of India*, Kolkata 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>285</sup> See the Election Manifesto cum vision document entitled ‘*West Bengal: A Change for Better and Brighter Tomorrow*’ published by All India Trinamool Congress regarding West Bengal State Assembly Election, 2011.

and she has also announced the formation of Furfura Sharif Development Authority headed by Urban Development Minister Mr. Firhad Hakim and allotted ten crore rupees for the overall infrastructural development of Furfura Sharif.

### **Trinamool Congress: 2011 Assembly election manifesto and the Muslim question**

The manifesto plays an important role in the election and democracy where people generally get to know about the stand of various political parties on different issues. A manifesto usually comprises of a previously published opinion or public consensus and/or promotes a new idea with prescriptive notions for carrying out changes in future. According to the definition of the Oxford dictionary, a manifesto is the public declaration of the policy and aims of a group such as a political party. Thus an election manifesto is a published document containing declaration of the ideology, intentions, views, policies and programmes of the political party. The Election manifestos are generally drafted by the Political Parties keeping an eye on forthcoming elections and are generally published and well publicized.<sup>286</sup>

Trinamool Congress in its election manifesto cum vision document of 2011's assembly election of West Bengal has dealt with the 'Muslim question' with seriousness and devoted quite a space particularly to address the problems of Muslims in West Bengal which hardly used to get any space in the manifesto of political parties in the state in the pre-Sachar era.

In the preface of the election manifesto of TMC, Mamata Banerjee appealed to the people of Bengal and clearly stated that her party would work for the inclusive Bengal with special emphasis on SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, women and other disadvantages groups. She further said that the guiding lights for her party and government would be the thoughts and philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and KaziNazrul Islam.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> See the guidelines of election manifesto by the Election Commission of India, New Delhi. Available at [http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main1/elec\\_manisesto.aspx](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/elec_manisesto.aspx). (accessed on 25th May 2014)

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, pp.4-5

The election manifesto of TMC promised to implement the recommendations of Sachar committee and Justice Ranganath Mishra commission. The promises for the development of the Muslims are as follows:<sup>288</sup>

- Setting aside a portion for the state's budget for plans intended for the economic and educational upliftment of the Muslims.
- Special Budgetary provision should be made for imparting technical education to madrasas.
- More Muslim universities and colleges based on the model of Aligarh Muslim University.
- More madrasas as well as Urdu medium schools.
- Recognition of Urdu as the second official language wherever the percentage of urdu speakers is more than 10.
- Proper pay scale for the madrasa teachers.
- Reservation for Muslim minority and special priority in their employment.
- Establishment of a special department for the development of minorities.
- Special package for Imams as well as construction of their house.
- Scholarships and hostels for minority students with emphasis on girl students.
- Comprehensive development plans for the backward regions which include the Minority concentrated districts.
- Setting up of KaziNazrul Islam Research Centre and University.
- Special action-plan for the all-round socio-economic and educational development of the Muslim community.

Therefore the wide-spread Muslim mobilizations after the post-Sachar scenario by the Muslim organizations have not only successfully put pressure on the government and political parties but also have been able to bargain and compelled the government and

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<sup>288</sup> Election manifesto of All India Trinamool Congress (In Bengali) for West Bengal Assembly Election, 2011. The Bengali version of Manifesto contains the details programme on minority development.



mainstream political parties to engage in transforming the Muslim question from security to welfare.

### Mamata, Muslims and Hindutva: The Changing political discourse of Social Justice to Security

The contemporary rise of Hindutva politics in West Bengal has aggressively pushed the campaign of 'Muslim appeasement' (*Muslim toshon*) against the Mamata Banerjee government. The Bharatiya Janata Party along with the multiple Hindu nationalist outfits including Hindu Samhati started mobilizing Hindu community in rural West Bengal. The blatant hate campaign against Muslims and Christian communities has become the daily routine of the Hindutva groups. The organized hate campaigns against Muslims both in the public and private domains have escalated in high volume through different social media (Face-book pages, WhatsApp groups, and YouTube channels) including local newspaper and leaflets. The Hindu Samhati (Hindu Solidarity) a far-right Hindu nationalist organization founded in 2008 by Mr. Tapan Ghosh<sup>289</sup>. The aim and objective of this organization is to build unity and solidarity among the Bengali Hindus. The Hindu Samhati has been actively working amongst the rural poor Hindu community and quite successfully led the hate campaign against the Muslims. Kolkata based journalist Snigdhendru Bhattacharya in his recent book titled as *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment* exclusively dealt with the process, growth and rise of BJP and RSS in West Bengal. He argued that being a fringe

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<sup>289</sup> Mr. Tapan Ghosh born in rural Murshidabad district in West Bengal, he graduated from University of Calcutta in Physics. He joined Rastriya Sayam Sevak Sangha (RSS) in his teenage and later he widely travelled in different parts of India as RSS Pracharak. Later he founded an organization called Hindu Samhati in 2008 to unite Bengali Hindu in West Bengal. The Hindu Samhati started aggressive hate campaign against Muslims and Christian communities alleging that Bengali Hindus in danger. The Hindu Samhati has developed deep rooted networks among Hindu (specially Schedule caste, OBC Hindu and Adivasi) through different social welfare programs in different remote rural areas of South Bengal districts. I have seen many posters, flex and wall wrings in different remote villages of Canning, Basanti, Kakdeep, and Diamond Harbor in South 24 Parganas district and also I have seen their posters in other rural districts including Uluberia, Amta, Ranihati, Munshirhat, Maju, Bargachia, Jangipara, Haripal and Arambagh areas of Howrah and Hooghly districts. The Hindu Samhati also organized massive rallies in Kolkata and also conducted open Ghar-wapsi programs. This organization used to run monthly magazine named as Samhati Sangbad, recently they stopped the hardcopy publication and presently shifted to online news portal called <https://hindusamhatibangla.in/> and also developed digital mobile application for smooth communication. These magazine and news portal are filled with hate campaign materials and literatures against Muslims and Christians. Mr. Tapan Ghosh passed away in 2020 and at present Mr. Debanu Bhattachaya is acting as the President of Hindu Samhati.

political party in 2013 to sweeping nearly half of the state's forty-two Lok Sabha seats in 2019, the BJP has gained ground in West Bengal, aided partly by the RSS's exponential growth during Mamata Banerjee's chief ministerial tenure (2011 onwards).<sup>290</sup>

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly Election of West Bengal in 2021, Trinamool Congress's mammoth victory with more than 221 seats out of 294 assembly constituencies and BJP for the first time became the main opposition party with 70 MLAs and 38.14 percentage of vote share in the state. For the first time in the history of West Bengal the Left front (CPIM, CPI, RSP and FB) and Indian National Congress failed to elect single member in the state legislative assembly. Indian Secular Front (ISF) with an electoral alliance with the Left-Front and Indian National Congress under the banner of Sanjukta Morcha managed to win Bhangore Assembly constituency in South 24 Parganas district. Md. Nawsad Siddique is the younger brother of Pirzada Abbas Siddique of Furfura Sharif and also the Chairman of ISF. The rise of Hindutva politics of religious polarization and the so-called secular-communal binary have obliterated the debate of equity, social justice and representation of the marginalized Muslim community in West Bengal. This binary politics has substantially contributed to the growth of TMC and BJP in the state. There has been massive setback in the politics of inclusion, social justice and question of recognition and redistribution introduced in the aftermath of Sachar committee report for the empowerment of Muslims. In the span of half a decade, the entire political discourse shifted from social justice to the classical discourse of 'security'. The comparative study of the Trinamool Congress's election manifesto between 2011 and 2021 clearly indicates the changing debate on the Muslim question.

The 2011 Assembly election manifesto of TMC devoted substantial space in the document for the welfare and empowerment of the Muslim minority community recognizing economic, educational, social and cultural empowerment as recommended by the Sachar committee report. The issues of budgetary allocation for education, special allocation for providing technical skills in madrasahs, reservation for backward Muslims, recognition of Urdu as the second official language, setting up

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<sup>290</sup> See Snignendhu Bhattacharya, *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment*, HarperCollins 2020.

of universities, colleges and more schools and madrasah in the minority concentrated districts, scholarships and hostels for minority girls and many more social security packages for the minority community based on the recommendation of the Sachar committee and the Ranganath Mishra commission.<sup>291</sup>

The 2016 Assembly election manifesto of TMC largely echoed the same and even went further and promised all round development of the Muslim minority; the manifesto states that:

“We, the Trinamool Congress government will continue work with the same vigor for the benefit of our minority brothers and sisters. We will work tirelessly to ensure their safety and well-being. Some work, which will be done definitely, is worth mentioning and our plans go further than this”.<sup>292</sup>

There was a separate chapter titled as Minority welfare consisting of eight pages in the manifesto and its promises for the empowerment and development of the Minority community but largely targeting the Muslim community in West Bengal. The issues related to the minority community mentioned in the manifesto are given below;

There are roughly 20 points were made about the achievement and success of the last TMC government between 2011-2016 which include the five time increment of budgetary allocation for the minority affairs department from Rs. 472 crores in 2011 to Rs. 2383 crores in financial year 2015-2016. Mammoth rise in the numbers of minority loans and scholarships in West Bengal, implementation of Multi Sectorial Development Programs (MSDP), central government sponsored schemes for the minority community, construction of Aliah University’s Newtown campus spread around 20 acres of land costing around Rs.257 crore. Madrasah development grants, erection of walls in 2000 burial grounds, hostel for minority women and vocational training center for minority students. Additionally TMC built a 5 acre Haj House in Newtown and providing honorarium to Imam and Muazzen and 56000 of Imams-Muazzin are helping the TMC government in polio vaccination, preservation of

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<sup>291</sup> See West Bengal Assembly Election Manifesto of All India Trinamool Congress 2011 <https://aitcofficial.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Manifesto-WB-Assembly-2011-Eng.pdf>

<sup>292</sup> Election Manifesto of All India Trinamool Congress in 2016 Assembly election in West Bengal, <https://aitcofficial.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Manifesto-English-for-web.pdf>

communal harmony and other social works. The rest of the chapter on Minority welfare in the manifesto further laid down the comprehensive future plans of the TMC government for the well-being and socio-economic empowerment of minority community. The chapter on Minority welfare starts with the promise of providing security to the lives and religious beliefs and practices of the minorities. Then there are 30 bullet points covering educations, scholarships, research and skill trainings, hostels, employment generations, building colleges and universities in minority concentrated areas, housing for minority, implementation of 17 percent OBC reservation and ensuring employment opportunities for the minority community, wakf development plans, English medium madrasahs, loan for self-employments, and inclusion of more Imams and Muezzin for the allowances. The manifesto promised to build more madrasahs, higher secondary schools, colleges, hostels in the minority concentrated blocks including English medium madrasahs in minority concentrated districts.

A New campus of Aliah University is to be opened in the minority inhabited areas of North Bengal and Government aided degree colleges and medical colleges to be established in the Muslim concentrated areas under Aliah University. The manifesto further promised to provide financial assistance to the students' belongings to minority community for the UPSC coaching in Delhi. Training centers would be opened to impart technical skills and provide employments for the backward classes and minority women.

The question of affordable housing in urban areas has been a major issue and concern for the Minority Muslim in all over India barring a few cities in Southern India. The Sachar committee report has also identified this problem of accessing housing in urban India. In the metropolitan and big cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata; there are plenty of cases of discrimination against Muslims in the housing markets. The TMC manifesto has recognized the problem of housing for minority community and promised to address this problem by constructing affordable housing projects and providing loans at the minimal rates. The manifesto promised "Under the home-for-all principle, housing projects for the minority community would be taken up by the Kolkata Improvement Trust (KIT), Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), The West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development

Corporation or WBHIDCO and other government institutions would construct houses for the minority community and housing loans at minimal rates would be given”.<sup>293</sup>

The issue related to the recognition of Urdu language has been reflected in TMC’s manifesto in 2016 and it promised to give special attention to minority languages in minority inhabited areas with more than 10 percent of the minority population. Places where Urdu has been established as a state language, cadres of language assistants would be employed similar to the ones employed in the finance and treasury departments. Further, Urdu Academies to be established in Urdu speaking regions like Asansol in West Burdwan, Islampur in North Dinajpur, Hooghly and North 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal. The final part of the chapter of Minority welfare deals with the most ‘controversial’ scheme called *Imam-Bhata* and the manifesto promised to ensure and include more Imams and Muazzins within the ambit of this scheme. The manifesto also assured to prevent unauthorized infringement of Wakf estates/properties (huge numbers in all across west Bengal) and the smooth management of those wakf estates.<sup>294</sup>

### **The Case of *Imam-Bhata* and its Political Ramifications**

From the above mentioned promises made in the official party manifesto it is quite evident that the TMC government’s approach towards the question of Minority empowerment. It is also true that some of these so-called welfare scheme specially the monthly honorarium/allowance for the Imam and Muazzin of the mosques which is commonly known as *Imam-Bhata* has adversely affected the secular image of TMC government. Technically this *Imam-Bhata* is managed by the West Bengal Board of Wakf. This scheme for paying monthly allowances/honorarium of Rs 2500 to Imam and Rs1000 to Muzazzen (who leads the prayer in the mosque) was arbitrarily introduced by the TMC government in 2012 without proper survey and discussion in the assembly or other forums. The Department of Minority Affairs and Madarsah Education (MA&ME), Government of West Bengal issued a memorandum dated 9<sup>th</sup> April 2012 regarding the honorarium of Imams of Mosques and also formed a ‘task

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<sup>293</sup> See All India Trinamool Congress’s 2021 West Bengal Assembly Election Manifesto. Available at <https://aitcofficial.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/tmc-manifesto-eng-1.pdf>

<sup>294</sup> See, 2021 West Bengal Assembly Election Manifesto of TMC

force' for the welfare of Imams. The task force was headed by the Chairman, West Bengal Board of Wakf-Justice (Retd) Md. Abdul Ghani. The members of the 'task force' comprised of Maunala Qari Fazlur Rahman (who leads Eid prayers in Red Road, Kolkata), Maulana Syed Nurur Rahman Barkati (Imam of Tipu Sultan Masjid), Peerzada Maulana Md. Toha Siddique (Pirzada of Furfura Sharif, Hooghly), Maulana Shafique Qasmi (Imam of Kolkata's Nakhoda Masjid), Maulana Qari Md Noor Alam, Maulana Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi (cleric representing Shia community) and the ex-officio members are Chief Executive Officer of Wakf board and the Joint Secretary of the MA &ME Department, Govt. of West Bengal.<sup>295</sup> The concern memorandum stated that:

“Imams of Mosques hold a very respectable position in the Muslim Community. They play a leading role in mobilization of the community for good purposes including health, hygiene and education and for the promotion of various Government Schemes. However, many Imams in respect of West Bengal are living in a very pitiable condition without proper income and educational opportunities for their children due to lack of any welfare and developmental initiative. The Government has been considering for some time to initiate a package including payment of suitable honorarium to Imams of West Bengal”.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May the Special Secretary of MA&ME Department issued a note that the Government in the cabinet meeting has decided to pay honorariums to Imam and Muazzin of the Mosques and therefore the proposal would go the Finance Department for the approval. This notice has generated huge controversy in the political domain. The Bharatiya Janata Party, along with few others filed multiple Writ Petitions and Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Calcutta High Court challenging the constitutional validity of this scheme by the state government.<sup>296</sup> After hearing the petitions and arguments of the parties The Calcutta High Court observed that:

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<sup>295</sup> All the member of the Task-Force is loyal to the Trinamool Congress and they neither have any knowledge about the constitutional law nor about the functioning of the democratic state and almost of them belong to Ashraf group.

<sup>296</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party vs State of West Bengal & others, W.P No 358 of 2012, Ganesh Chandra Chakraborty

“The impugned memorandum dated 9 April, 2012 issued by the State Government providing monthly honorarium to the Imams through Wakf Board cannot be sustained in the eye of law for the reasons discussed hereinabove. Therefore, the impugned memorandum dated 9 April, 2012 issued by the Government of West Bengal providing monthly honorarium to the Imams is quashed.”

Later the state government approached the Court and legally reframed the scheme accordingly and started this scheme through the West Bengal Board of Wakf. Legally the state government has managed to get it done by technically changing the nomenclature of the scheme by using the words like welfare, awareness, wellbeing but it has done considerable damage and caused repercussions in the political discourse. The entire allegation of ‘*Muslim Toshon*’ or Muslim appeasement against the TMC government started from this *Imam-Bhata scheme* and after that political discourse has taken a different turn. This scheme of Imam-Bhata has adversely affected the social justice discourse of the Muslim community. This myopic decision of the TMC government along with the support of a section of opportunist and unimaginative Muslim ‘leaders’ have further de-railed the community from the discourse of social justice.

The TMC government has penetrated into the religious circles and network of the Muslim community all across West Bengal through the scheme of Imam-Bhata. As per the data provided by the West Bengal Board of Auqaf (Wakf), 38,446 Imams and 25,486 Muezzins have been the beneficiaries of this scheme. This scheme has strengthened and cemented the relationship with the religious clergy and the TMC party and hence the large numbers of Imam-Muezzins acted as the ‘mouth-piece’ or well-wishers of the TMC government who have been everyday engaging with the community through institution (mosques) and address different religious conglomerations and gatherings. The local Panchayat officials and the block development offices also engage these Imams and Muezzins to popularize campaigns for different government schemes among the community. Hence this process has not only given a sense of recognition to Imams-Muezzins in the public domain but also

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Versus State of West Bengal &Ors, W.P No 8662 of 2012, AcharyaJogeshShastri Versus State of West Bengal &Ors, W.P. No. 9163 (W) of 2012; Abhijit Kumar Chowdhury Versus State of West Bengal &Ors, W.P. No. 11118 (W) of 2012.

allowed the TMC to enter into the inner domain of the religious spheres which directly and indirectly helped in the process of electoral-political mobilizations within the Muslim community.

The situation further worsened with the rise of BJP in 2019 Lok Sabha in West Bengal. BJP, for the first time in West Bengal won 18 out of 42 Parliamentary seats. The political landscape of West Bengal has been rapidly shifting towards the right and simultaneously anti-incumbency factors against the TMC government were at the peak due to routine corruptions and rising unemployment. In order to get rid of the stigma of pro-minority image (Muslim appeasement) the labeled against the TMC, the party consciously maintained 'safe-distance' from the Muslim community. In the last few years Ms. Mamata Banerjee has not met a single Muslim delegation neither attended such meetings, otherwise she often use to attend many such meetings and programs concerning Muslim community.

On the other hand Mamata has started re-positioning or re-creating her image of a devoted Hindu Brahmin lady and who is rooted to the religious and cultural values of Hinduism. As a result TMC government in 2020 initiated a scheme for providing honorarium to the priest of the Hindu temples in all across the state. While responding to the media, the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said "The Brahmin priests of the Sanatan Dharma, who for years carry out prayers in temples, have never received any help. There is a section among them who are very poor... I had meetings with representatives of the Sanatan Dharma and they had asked for a plot of land, and we gave them land in Kolaghat where a pilgrimage site will come up".<sup>297</sup>

The TMC government has also provided financial assistance of Rs 50000 to each club organizing Durga Puja in the state. Along with the financial assistance to the Puja committees the state government has waived off the electricity charge and given other free services.<sup>298</sup> The TMC government has provided regular financial support for

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<sup>297</sup> Shiv Sahay Singh, Mamata announces honorarium for Hindu priests in West Bengal, *The Hindu*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/mamata-announces-honorarium-for-hindu-priests-in-west-bengal/article32604192.ece>

<sup>298</sup> See the official notification about the guideline of organizing DurgaPuja2020 by the Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal, Nabanna, Howrah memo no: 319/CS/2020 dated 28/09/2020. [http://bidhannagarcitypolice.gov.in/docs/Guideline\\_Durgapuja\\_2020.pdf](http://bidhannagarcitypolice.gov.in/docs/Guideline_Durgapuja_2020.pdf)



renovation and has run beautification drives in different Hindu temples, burning ghats and religious festivals such as Gangesagar Mela, Kopal Munir temple at Sagar Island in South 24 Parganas, built a skywalk at Dakshineswar temple, renovation of Kalighat, Tarapith and Kankalitala temple in Birbhum, Tarkeshwar temple in Hooghly and Devi Chaudhurani temple in Jalpaiguri district to name a few. From 2011 to 2019 the TMC government has spent over Rs 350 crores for the renovation of temples in just eight years.<sup>299</sup>

### **TMC, Muslim and the 2021 Assembly election manifesto**

The Hindutva politics, media discourse, and the silence of the ‘secular’ parties have projected the Muslim question in such a way that a large section of the Hindu majority somehow has tacitly convinced about the TMC government’s Muslim appeasement’ allegations as propounded by the BJP. In the consequence of which, the Trinamool Congress have adopted the ‘soft-vernacular-Hindutva’ mode of politics to electorally compete with the BJP and also to get rid of the stigma of Muslim appeasement. The 2021 Assembly election’s manifesto reflected the policy and politics of Soft-Hindu majoritarianism.

The 66 page election manifesto of the TMC can be classified into 10 chapters dedicated to economy, healthcare, social justice & security, food, youth, farming and agriculture, education, housing, electricity, road and water. Surprisingly the chapter on Minority welfare has been missing from this document, which was present in detail in the 2011 and 2016 manifestos. Further to be noted that literally not a single word has been devoted to development or welfare of the Muslim minority not even the question of physical security of the community which has been seriously facing threat, intimidation and violence in everyday life. Under the heading of social justice and security in the manifesto not a single word has been mentioned about the minority community. TMC manifesto documented about the achievements of the government concerning different sub-caste groups within schedule caste and tribes and Hindu OBC. For example the state government has formed multiple cultural and

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<sup>299</sup>Bangla Govt spent Rs 350 crore for renovation of temples in 8 years, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2019. This news uploaded in the official website of All India Trinamool Congress. Available at <https://aitcofficial.org/aitc/bangla-govt-spent-rs-350-crore-for-renovation-of-temples-in-8-years/>

development boards based on the sub- caste and community such as Tamang, Sherpa, Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Adivasi communities, for focused development of specific communities, development boards have been set up for Bauri, Matua, Rajbonshi, Namashudra, Kurmi, Kami and Bagdi communities.

The Nasya-sekh and Shersabadia communities in North Bengal region qualify for the criterion of forming boards and also have been demanding for the cultural and welfare board for the past one decade but there is no acknowledgement or recognition about these communities in the manifesto. The manifesto does not even talk about educational empowerment of minority let alone the question of minority rights and culture including madrasah development, recognizing the long pending demand of extending three days public or sectional holiday during Eid-ul-Zoha and Eid-ul-fitr (two major religious festivals of Muslim community) In spite of multiple application requests to the state government by different Muslim organizations (Furfura Shairf, West Bengal Minority Youth Federation, Bhumiputro etc.) but nothing has happened, even official acknowledgement of the letter has not taken place.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter traces the engagements and responses of the CPIM-led LFG and the Mamata Banerjee led TMC governments to the Muslim question in both the pre-Sachar and post-Sachar eras. During the three-and-a-half-decade-long LFG, the Muslim question was largely perceived through the lens of dominant narratives of physical security, without seriously engaging with debates about everyday Muslim lives and the issue of socioeconomic marginalization. As a result, even during the post-Mandal period of social justice in Indian politics, the LFG ignored the issue of reservation and affirmative action for backward caste Muslims. The LFG rejected the Mandal Commission's recommendations and within the constitutional framework they did not come up with an alternative approach to engage in the debate over affirmative action for backward caste and communities in West Bengal. The Sachar committee report in 2006, and subsequent massive mobilization against the LFG on the issue of Muslim's dismal socioeconomic situations and forceful acquisition of agricultural land, compelled them to engage with issues of inclusion and social justice for Muslims. The LFG's insensitivity and lackadaisical approach to the Muslim question has not only eroded the community's social and political trust, but has also

disenchanted the LFG's traditional electoral support base in West Bengal's rural districts. Although, in the post-Sachar period, the LFG made an effort to redefine the Muslim question by moving beyond the dominant discourse of physical security and engaging with the Muslim question through the lenses of social citizenship rights, equity, and social justice.

From 2011 onwards, the Mamata Banerjee-led TMC government in post-left West Bengal has taken a positive stance on the Muslim question. The expansion and inclusion of various backward caste Muslims, as well as educational initiatives such as the establishment of an Aliah University campus in Rajarhat-Newtown, the opening of additional hostels, initiations of scholarship programmes and so on.

The TMC government's religious identity-centric activities not only created political space in the state for the BJP to mobilize the Hindu majority against Muslims using the old hegemonic myth of 'Muslim appeasement' (*Muslim toshon*), but have also harmed the discourse of social justice and equity. Following that, the debate over social inclusion, equity, and redistribution in West Bengal's contemporary politics was replaced by politics of fear, religious polarization, and the return of the traditional discourse of physical security under the dominant narratives of so-called secular-communal binaries (TMC-BJP). As a result, this chapter concludes that during the early years following the publication of the SRC, strong mobilization by Muslim community organizations forced the LFG to admit their failure and engage with the Muslim question. Following that, the TMC was compelled to continue developmental and welfare activities for Muslims, but the lack of adequate pressure and voices from community organizations, as well as the rise of the TMC-BJP (secular-communal) binary, further obliterates the issues of Muslim empowerment and politically transforms the Muslim question from equity to security.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

The publication of the Sachar Committee Report along with the movement against the acquisition of agricultural land (especially in Bhangore, Singoor and Nandigram) by the Left-Front government (LFG) for the multinational corporations triggered massive statewide people's protests. These movements against the LFG have occurred mostly in the rural West Bengal which was the bastion of the Left Front since the early seventies. Interestingly, overwhelming majority of these people are Muslims, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes who were the core social constituencies of the LFG. The year 2006 is very important, the state of West Bengal has witnessed 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly election and the Left Front's landslide victory with 235 seats out of 294 constituencies and at the same time Sachar Committee Report was also published in 2006. Within the span of two years, 2008 onwards, with the rural Panchayat election, the Left Front (LF) started to decline rapidly. The performance of the Left Front in 2009 Parliamentary Election was very poor in comparison to previous Lok Sabha in 2004. LF won 35 out of 42 Parliamentary constituencies in 2004; and in 2009 Lok Sabha election, LF managed to win only 15 out of 42 seats. Finally, in 2011 Assembly constituency, LF lost the election drastically and reduced to 62 seats from 235 out of 294 assembly constituencies. Since 2008, the LF has been continuously losing all the elections in West Bengal. Astonishingly, LF even failed to win a single seat in the 2021 state assembly election. This is the first time in the political history of West Bengal state assembly where both Left Front and Indian National Congress could not win a single seat.

This massive electoral decline of the LF requires serious retrospections and multiple explanations rooted in the sociology and the changing nature of political economy and social aspirations in the competitive electoral politics. The gigantic rise of Hindutva and the politics of communal polarizations have also made the task of a social scientist more complicated. This thesis discussed in details about the Muslim question in West Bengal and the role of faith-based community organizations in the process of Muslim mobilization; which led to the emergence of layered multiple identity formations. We have also discussed the approach of LFG towards the Muslim

question in Bengal and how this approach itself is methodologically weak to capture the sociological reality and everyday Muslim lives. The whole discussion on Muslim question in India by the mainstream secular discourse used to revolve around the question of physical security of the Muslim, which is an important aspect in the communally charged atmosphere with routine institutional forms of riots against religious minorities. LFG in West Bengal played an exemplary role by not allowing any political space to the growth of religious fundamentalism and firmly governed the state and police administration in the context of riots and communal violence. Even at the peak time of Hindutva mobilization in the nineties during the destruction of Babri Masjid and Lal Krishna Advani's Rath Yatra, the state of West Bengal remained safe for the religious minorities. Apart from the state administration, the role of LF's part machinery played a crucial role in maintaining peace and inter-community harmony through multiple and everyday form of civic engagements, although these interventions often restrict the individual rights and liberal democracy.

However, in the last few decades, with the decline of LF's, mainly CPIM's party-machinery and the breakdown of what Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya called it 'party-society' led to a new form of challenges and concerns. The socio-economic mobility, inter-state migrations, urbanizations, massive expansion of public education (producing huge first generation learners), urban-rural connectivity and the rise of market economy led to the growth of identity conscious aspirational middle class in Bengal in general and a tiny section of Bengali Muslim Middle class-community in particular. The traditional understanding of the LF's 'Class mobilization' by ignoring the embedded social and cultural question is methodologically flawed. During the early days of Left movements in rural West Bengal, the political and cultural question was rooted in the class struggle against feudalism and capitalism. For example, in the post-partition Bengal, the CPIM managed to handle the immediate trauma of refugee crisis from the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to West Bengal and the question of security and acute crisis of identity among the Muslim minority in the communally hostile situations were positively contributed in generating and building confidence among the refugees (mostly Dalits) and the Muslim minority community. Subsequently the land-reform agenda (distribution of *pattas*) and the initiation of the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) by the LFG has not only provided a piece of land and political representation (at the local level through Panchayati Raj

Institutions) but also inculcated a symbolic sense of dignity, belongingness and recognition especially among the Scheduled Castes (Dalits), Muslims and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis). Historically, these marginalized communities have been subject to oppression, humiliation and exploitation by the feudal caste based social order. Therefore, the LF's policy-discourse of land-reform (operation *barga*) and the political representation in the local government for these socio-economically marginalized communities have served both the purpose of recognition and redistribution for a short span of time.

In the last two decades, there have been massive changes and churnings especially among these aspirational marginalized communities, and the party-machinery of the LF is both conceptually and politically incapable to respond to these changes and challenges. In the aftermath of the Sachar Committee Report, the state of West Bengal has witnessed widespread mobilization by the faith-based community organizations (Furfura Sharif, JUH) citing the dismal socio-economic condition of Muslims under the three and half decades long LFG. This is quite obvious that in the last two decades, especially in the post-economic reforms phase, the traditional definition of minority rights and secularism have gone beyond the question of physical security and communal harmony. The idea of well-being, social justice, cultural recognition, equal rights and opportunities, social mobility and dignity etc. has become part of new definition of secularism and democracy. As a result, the LF was insensitive and confused about the Sachar findings and on how to respond to the layered Muslim question and to the community organizations. Initially, the LFG was in a denial to the Sachar Committee Reports' finding, but when they witnessed massive criticism both from the rights based groups and also from the community and its direct impact on the electoral politics, it was then that they started engaging with the community organizations and the Muslim questions. By then it was too late to convince the disenchanting Muslim electorates.

The LFG has not only been insensitive towards the Muslim question, but also showed a lackadaisical attitude towards the questions of social justice and reservation for the backward caste citizens, which include the overwhelming majority of Muslims and Hindu OBCs. The Mandal Commission Report was neither positively acknowledged by the LFG nor has it been implemented. West Bengal is one of the very few states in

India where reservation for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) have never been taken seriously. In the post-Mandal phase at the all-India level, there was a 27 percent reservation for the OBC which is a religious neutral category which include the backward castes of Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, etc., as recommended by the Mandal Commission Report. All major Indian states implemented the OBC reservation; but the LFG in West Bengal just included a few backward castes (as identified by the National Commission for Backward Class, Government of India) and there was only 7 percent OBC reservation until 2010. The states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had implemented the OBC reservation much before West Bengal did. The state of Tamil Nadu even went beyond the 50 percent cap on the reservation as directed by the Supreme Court of India. It was only in 2010, just a few months before the assembly election in 2011, following the recommendation of Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission's report, that the LFG announced 10 percent reservation for backward caste Muslims in employment under the OBC category. Hence, the total percentage of OBC reservation rose to 17 percent in the state. Subsequently, many other castes' names were incorporated by the TMC government led by Mamata Banerjee after coming into power in 2011.

The issues of expansion and representation of Muslims in higher education, bureaucracy, public employments, credit facilities, entrepreneurship, housing, women empowerment, and political leadership were severely affected due to the denial of the politics of recognition and redistribution. The whole idea of social justice largely remains outside the LFG's imagination and as a result, a sense of deprivation and anger were there in the subterranean level, especially among the literate aspiring section of Bengali Muslim community. Due to the lack of organized middle class and influential civil society groups including political leadership among the Bengali Muslim society, the religious organizations of various Islamic sects entered into the discourse and performed the task of pressure groups by mobilizing Muslims masses using the religious network and institutions such as *Madrasahs*, Mosques, Islamic *Waz-Mahfils*, pamphlets, Muslim improvement tracts, *Imams*, *Pirs*, and *Ulemas*. These religious mobilizations for 'secular' demands have made three larger implications in the political discourse. First; the religious networks like Furfura Sharif and Jamiet-e-Ulama-e-Hind (JUH) enjoy a considerable amount of support

from the Muslim community, *Pirs* of Furfura Sharif are even historically more rooted among the Muslim masses in rural West Bengal. JUH has a significant influence among the religious leaders including *Madrasah* teachers, *Ulemas*, *Imams* of mosques and local religious elites; as a result these religious organizations started to influence the common Muslim electorates by playing the role of 'political society'. This kind of mobilizational politics generated the new religious elites (often called middleman through intermediation and intermediaries in Indian politics who bargained or negotiated with the government on behalf of the community) and further limited the process of democratization and the building of political leadership within the community. Secondly, these religious institutions are mostly guided by short term agenda with very 'limited' understanding of the society by ignoring the internal social hierarchy, gender rights and the sociology of the community. Therefore, this kind of agitational politics by the religious organization mostly promote religious sectarian politics without engaging with the larger political concepts of social justice, democracy and secular citizenship. Finally, this type of religious mobilization by minority communities often fail to articulate and communicate with the larger civil society (transcending the religious community) in a democratic and inclusive language, given the historical onus of proving secularism and progressiveness in the communally polarized and hostile situation in contemporary Indian society. Muslim communities faces multiple processes of socio-political exclusion including stereotyping and stigma, which leads to more vulnerability.

In the post-Sachar and post-Left West Bengal, there has been a slight improvement in the socio-economic profile of the Muslim community under the TMC government. The representation in public employment, higher education institutions (HEIs), bureaucracy, has slightly increased due to the new OBC reservation and expansion of educational opportunities. The budgetary allocations for minority development, scholarships schemes for students, soft loans, student hostels, skill development initiatives and civil services coaching training programs etc. have significantly increased in West Bengal because of the positive intervention of Congress led UPA government at the Center and the TMC led government at the state level. However, this positive intervention could not stay long; with the mammoth growth of Hindutva politics across the country including the state of West Bengal, the political narratives from inclusive social justice changed to the politics of communal polarization. Even



during the early days of massive Modi-wave in India in 2014, West Bengal largely remained free from the political influence of BJP. In 2014 Lok Sabha election, BJP managed to win only 2 parliamentary constituencies (Darjeeling and Asansole), but in 2019, BJP vote share massively jumped from 17.02 percent in 2014 to 40.07 percent and won 18 parliamentary constituencies out of 42.

Apart from the sustained hate campaign against the Muslim community, the communal consolidation of the Hindu right and the expansion of Rashtriya Syayamsevak Sangha (RSS)'s activities in West Bengal and TMC's politics have further accelerated in the massive growth in the vote share and seats of BJP in West Bengal. In the last 5 to 6 years, TMC has derailed itself from the politics of inclusive social justice to politics of soft-communalism. Mamata Banerjee's politics of symbolism, her portrayal of herself as the 'messiah' of the Muslim community by hobnobbing with religious leaders, clergy and *Imams* and unnecessary introduction of the divisive scheme of *Imam-Bhata* (honorarium for Imams and Muazzins of Masjids) has further helped BJP to polarize the society by stigmatizing TMC as pro-Muslim party. The BJP's old theory of 'Muslim appeasement' have played a terrific role not only in the electoral mobilization of Hindus but also portrayed the Muslim society as the sole beneficiary of TMC's government. In the 2021 assembly election, the entire election campaign was largely dominated by the issues related to religious polarization and Hindu-Muslim binary. TMC's politics of soft-Hindutva and irresponsible engagement with the Muslim question by ignoring the Sachar Committee Report and the issues of social justice have helped the politics of secular-communal binary and religious polarization. The so-called secular-communal binary helped both BJP and TMC to sustain their electoral politics.

In conclusion, this thesis would argue that there is a limit to religion-based community politics; in a competitive electoral democracy, it is quite easy to mobilize people on the basis of religious identity but it does not serve the purpose of emancipation and empowerment of socio-economically marginalized groups always. Religion-based political category and using religious identity framework to mobilize for politics does not necessary lead to social emancipation. In the case of Bengali Muslim community, the questions of sociology of caste, class, culture, gender, regional and linguistic identities also have to take into consideration. In the last one

and half decades in post-Sachar West Bengal, there has been an emergence of multiple Muslim identities. Among them, a section of Bengali Muslims have emerged who can articulate the issues of the community in the broader democratic framework of social justice, inclusive civic solidarity with other oppressed groups and political identity which is rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Bengal, going beyond the hegemonic secular-communal binary. Simultaneously there is also the return of the traditional discourse of physical security by gradually obliterating the question of social justice, equity and class which is rooted with the Muslim question.

## Glossary

<b>Pir:</b>	Spiritual master based on the philosophy of Sufism.
<b>Silsila:</b>	Sufi order and tradition
<b>Bhadralok:</b>	In literal sense, the well-mannered person or gentlefolk but in the historical and political context of Bengal, it implies for the upper caste Hindus.
<b>Tableeg Jamaat:</b>	literally means Society of Preachers, was founded by a Deobandi Islamic scholar Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in Mewat, India, in 1926. The aims task of this group is to preach basic tenets of Islamic practices among the layman.
<b>Ashraf:</b>	which means ‘noble’ it includes all Muslims who claim to be of foreign descent. It also includes converts from high caste Hindus.
<b>Ajlaf:</b>	meaning degraded, comprises of ‘ritually clean’ occupational groups and low caste Hindu converts to Islam. Ajlafs are equivalent to OBC Hindu castes.
<b>Arjal:</b>	who are converts to Islam from ex-untouchable castes but still continue to follow unclean and stigmatized occupations. This group is also known as Dalit Muslims.
<b>Nasya-Sekh:</b>	an identifiable Muslim social group with the larger Muslim community. The ‘Nashya Sekh’ caste was stated to emerge as a result of conversion from the Koch, Rajbanshi and the Poliya caste of North Bengal from the 15th to 18th century. The Nasya-sekh caste is socially and economically marginalized group mostly concentrated in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Alipurduar districts of present West Bengal.
<b>Dhormonirephekkotha:</b>	Secularism

<b>Anjumans:</b>	associations, mostly community organizations
<b>Alim:</b>	learned person mostly in Islamic affairs
<b>Ulema:</b>	plural of Alim
<b>Jamaat:</b>	organization or group
<b>Waz-Mahfils:</b>	typical Muslim conglomerations in rural Bengal
<b>Khariji/ Qaumi Madrasah:</b>	Non-government Islamic seminaries
<b>Hanafi:</b>	one of the four major Islamic schools of jurisprudences in Sunni Islam named after noted jurist Imam Abu Hanifa. This school of thought is predominantly found in South Asia .
<b>Ahle-Sunnatul Jamaat:</b>	a dominant theological group within the Sunni Islam. In South Asia this group often identified at Barelvi Muslims but there are many religious denominations or groups within Sunni Islam claimed themselves as Ahle Sunnattul Jamaat.
<b>Halaal:</b>	pious in Islamic sense
<b>Khanqas:</b>	places where Sufi saints held their assemblies and used for multiple purposes.
<b>Zamindars:</b>	landlords
<b>Hadeeth:</b>	Islam has two primary sources. First is the Qur'ān which is the direct word of God inspired to the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. The second source is the Prophet's teachings. These teachings include his words, actions, and things he approved of. The Prophet's teachings are called Sunna. The Sunna is found in texts called ḥadīth. A ḥadīth is a statement of the Prophet upon him which was narrated by his companions and subsequently narrated to the next generation until these sayings were compiled in ḥadīth collections.

<b>Sonkhaloghu:</b>	Minority, in this context the Muslim minority community
<b>Bhagchasi:</b>	Sharecroppers
<b>Khet-mojur:</b>	agricultural labor
<b>Mufti:</b>	An Islamic legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious matters.
<b>Maulana:</b>	A Muslim man respected for his religious knowledge or scholarship and graduated from an Islamic seminary or Madrasah.
<b>Imam:</b>	One who leads collective prayer (Namaz)in Mosque
<b>Muazzin:</b>	a person who proclaims the call to the daily prayer (ṣalāt) five times a day
<b>Sunnat:</b>	The way of life prescribed as normative in Islam, based on the teachings and practices of Muhammad and on exegesis of the Koran (Quaran) and hadith (hadith).
<b>Farz/ foroj:</b>	compulsory in nature according to the Islamic practices or belief.
<b>Zakat:</b>	Zakat is a religious obligation for all Muslims who meet the necessary criteria to donate a certain portion of their wealth each year to charitable causes.
<b>Hajj:</b>	One of the five pillars of Islam central to Muslim belief, Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca that every Muslim must make at least once in their lifetime if they are able; it is the most spiritual event that a Muslim experiences, observing rituals in the most sacred places in the Islamic world. Hajj can be performed only in the lunar Islamic month of Jil-Hajj.
<b>Umrah:</b>	Islamic pilgrimage to Meccha and Madina and that can be performed throughout the year.

<b>Fiqh:</b>	Islamic jurisprudence based on different school of thoughts such as Hanafi, Maliki, Hambali, Shafi, Jafri etc.
<b>Shariyat:</b>	Islamic rules, regulations and laws based on Quran, Hadith, Ijma (consensus) and Qiyas (analogical reasoning).
<b>Isale-sawaab:</b>	Conveying Rewards to the Deceased persons.
<b>Tajkiya-e-Nafs:</b>	Reformation of the Self
<b>Mujaddid:</b>	Reformer, preferably Islamic reformer
<b>Mureeds:</b>	disciples of Sufi masters
<b>Waqf/Wakf/Auqaf:</b>	<i>Wakfs'</i> or Auqaf means the permanent dedication of the person professing Islam, of any moveable and immoveable properties for any purpose recognized by the Muslim law as pious, religious or charitable.
<b>Fatwa:</b>	a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law usually given by a qualified legal scholar known as a mufti. Fatwas are usually issued in response to questions from individuals or Islamic courts.
<b>Madrasah:</b>	'Madrasah' is an Arabic word which literally means centre or place of learning. In South Asia, the meaning of Madrasah is beyond its literal understanding with emotional attachments; identities are socio-logically and historically rooted among Muslim societies.
<b>Maktab/Moktob:</b>	local small scale Madrasah or primary Islamic institutions widely found in rural Bengal and South Asia.

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**List of Other Backward Classes (O.B.C.) - Category wise  
Recognized by Govt. of West Bengal**

<b>Sl.</b>	<b>MORE BACKWARD (Category-A)</b>	<b>Sl.</b>	<b>BACKWARD (Category-B)</b>
1	Abdal (Muslim)*	1	Baishya Kapali
2	Baidya Muslim*	2	Bansi Barman
3	Basni / Bosni (Muslim)*	3	Barujibi
4	Beldar Muslim*	4	Betkar (Bentkar)
5	Bepari / Byapari Muslim*	5	Bhar
6	Bhatia Muslim*	6	Bharbhuja
7	Muslim Bhatiyara*	7	Bhujel
8	Chowduli (Muslim)*	8	Bungchheng
9	Muslim Chutor Mistri*	9	Chasatti (Chasa)
10	Muslim Dafadar*	10	Chitrakar
11	Dhukre (Muslim)*	11	Scheduled Castes converts to Christianity and their progeny
12	Dhunias*	12	Devanga
13	Fakir, Sain*	13	Dewan
14	Gayen (Muslim)*	14	Dhimal
15	Ghosi (Muslim)*	15	Gangot
16	Hajjam (Muslim)*	16	Goala, Gope (Pallav Gope, Ballav Gope, Yadav Gope, Gope, Ahir and Yadav)
17	Hawari, Dhobi (other than those included in the list of Scheduled Castes)*	17	Hele / Halia / Chasi-Kaibartta, Das Kaibartta
18	Muslim Jamadar*	18	Kahar
19	Jolah (Ansari-Momin)*	19	Kansari
20	Muslim Kalander*	20	Kapali
21	Kan (Muslim)*	21	Karani
22	Kasai*	22	Karmakar
23	Khotta Muslim*	23	Keori / Koiri
24	Muslim Laskar*	24	Khen (Non-Bania category)
25	Mahaldar (Muslim)*	25	Kumbhakar
26	Majhi / Patni Muslim*	26	Kurmi
27	Mal Muslim*	27	Malakar



28	Mallick*	28	Mangar
29	Midde*	29	Moirra (Halwai), Modak (Halwai)
30	Muslim Molla*	30	Nagar
31	Muchi / Chamar Muslim*	31	Napit
32	Muslim Barujibi / Barui*	32	Nembang
33	Muslim Biswas*	33	Newar
34	Muslim Haldar*	34	Rai (including Chamling)
35	Muslim Mali, Faraji (Muslim)*	35	Raju
36	Muslim Mandal*	36	Sampang
37	Muslim Piyada*	37	Sarak
38	Muslim Sanpui/Sapui*	38	Satchasi
39	Nashya-Sekh*	39	Shankakar
40	Muslim Nehariya*	40	Sunuwar
41	Nikari (Muslim)*	41	Sutradhar
42	Patidar*	42	Swarnakar
43	Muslim Penchi*	43	Tamboli / Tamali
44	Muslim Rajmistri, Raj (Muslim)*	44	Tanti, Tantubaya
45	Rayeen (Kunjra)*	45	Teli, Kolu
46	Muslim Sardar*	46	Thami
47	Shershabadia*	47	Turha
48	Siuli (Muslim)*	48	Yogi, Nath
49	Tutia (Muslim)*	49	Muslim Darji / Ostagar / Idrishi*
50	Dhanuk	50	Dhali (Muslim)*
51	Jogi	51	Pahadia Muslim*
52	Khandait	52	Tal-Pakha Benia*
53	Kosta / Kostha	53	Adaldar (Muslim)*
54	Lakhera/Laahera	54	Aku nji/Akan/Akhan (Muslim)*
55	Roniwar/Rauniyar	55	Bag (Muslim)*
56	Sukli	56	Chaprashi (Muslim)*
57	Bhangi (Muslim)*	57	Churihar*
58	Dhatri/Dai/Dhaity (Muslim)*	58	Daptari (Muslim)*
59	Gharami (Muslim)*	59	Dewan (Muslim)*
60	Ghorkhan*	60	Dhabak (Muslim)*

61	Goldar/Golder (Muslim)*	61	Gazi (Muslim), Par (Muslim)*
62	Halsana (Muslim)*	62	Khan (Muslim)*
63	Kayal (Muslim)*	63	Sadhukhan (Muslim)*
64	Naiya (Muslim)*	64	Majhi
65	Shikari/Sikari (Muslim)*	65	Malita/Malitha/Malitya (Muslim)*
66	Sekh/Seikh*	66	Mistri (Muslim)*
67	Bayen (Muslim)*	67	Paik (Muslim)*
68	Bhuiya/Bhunya (Muslim)*	68	Pailan (Muslim)*
69	Borah / Bara / Bora (Muslim)*	69	Purkait (Muslim)*
70	Gorey (Muslim)*	70	Sana (Muslim)*
71	Hati (Muslim)*	71	Sareng (Muslim)*
72	Jatuya (Muslim)*	72	#Omitted
73	Khondekar/Khonkar (Muslim)*	73	Sarkar (Muslim)*
74	Pahar (Muslim)*	74	Shah (Shah/Sahaji)*
75	Raptan (Muslim)*	75	Tarafdar (Muslim)*
76	Kalwar	76	Gavara
77	Atta (Muslim)*	77	Mouli (Muslim)*
78	Khansama*	78	Sepai (Muslim)*
79	Hawaikar (Muslim)*	79	Baradi (Muslim)*
80	Khajonkriya / Khajankriya (Muslim)*	80	Dalal (Muslim)*
81	Hazari (Muslim)*	81	Hoseni Goyala (Muslim)*
		82	Khalashi (Muslim)*
		83	Kichni (Muslim)*
		84	Mukti/Mufti (Muslim)*
		85	Kalal/Iraqi*
		86	Sarala/Sarwala (Muslim)*
		87	Bagani (Muslim)*
		88	Bhandari (Muslim)*
		89	Katha (Muslim)*
		90	Mudi / Mehedi (Muslim)*
		91	Sahana (Muslim)*
		92	Kazi/Kaji/Quazi/Quaji (Muslim)*
		93	Kotal (Muslim)*

		94	Gurung
		95	Layek (Muslim)*
		96	Khas
		97	Shikder/Shikdar/Sikder/Sikdar (Muslim) *
		98	Chowdhury/Chowdhuri (Muslim) *
		99	Bairagi/Baishnab

\*Indicate Muslim communities amongst the OBCs

## FURFURA SHARIF PIR FAMILY CHART

