

Muslim OBCs in West Bengal: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are a residual category whose population is highly ambiguous and varied from one religious community to another. The term 'OBC' has been constitutionally used without having any definition but socio-economic and educational backwardness have been considered as basis to identify any group as 'backward classes'. On these bases, several Muslim groups have been recognised as OBCs in India and, in particular, in West Bengal. There is paucity of literature on the study of Muslims of West Bengal and particularly on the Muslim OBC. The present study is an attempt to explore the Muslim OBCs in West Bengal and to explore their problems regarding their identification and implementation of reservation. The study is based on the data collected from various sources. There are loopholes in identification of Muslim OBCs, in getting reservation as OBCs.

Keywords: Muslims, OBCs, Muslim OBCs, Muslim OBC reservation.

Introduction

Muslims are the largest minority and second religious group in West Bengal. According to Census 2001, it is estimated that one-fourth of the total population of West Bengal is Muslim by religion. They comprise about ninety six percent (96%) of minority population of this state, and about twenty five percent (25%) of population of this state belongs to the Muslim community after the Muslim population of Assam (31%) and Jammu & Kashmir (66.97%) (Intekhab 2012:14). Muslims of West Bengal adhere to the basic

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principles of Islam, and, at the same time share the local traditions of Bengal. There is no conflict between these two spheres, although, both the boundaries are sharply defined by their respective ideology and practice. But, due to the lack of research, we do not know much about the social matrix and cultural dynamics of Muslims of West Bengal (Mondal, 2006: 281). Majority of the Muslims is converted from Hindu religion, and are continuing with their traditional caste like features within the Muslim society in West Bengal. Even though Islam does not allow the practices of caste, reality is different from the text. There are practices of caste like features among Muslims on various bases such as occupation, marriage, etc. They predominantly live in rural area whose livelihood depends on hard physical labour, agricultural activities, etc. They are socially deprived, economically poor, educationally backward, politically powerless and physically unhealthy (Mainuddin 2011:125). On the basis socio-economic and educational conditions, Muslims have been recognised as other backward class. Even though there is lack of research study on such issue, the present study attempts to introduce some problems of Muslims OBCs such as identification issue, loopholes in reservation, infallible access to OBC, unequal distribution of reservation, etc. However, it needs a detailed sociological and anthropological study of Muslim OBCs in different context.

Muslim Population in West Bengal

According to 2001 census, West Bengal occupies third position among various state and union territories of the country in terms of percentage of Muslim population. The Muslim population in West Bengal constitute 25.25 percent of total state population (2001). The Muslim population exceeded one million each in 25 districts of India. Among these districts, ten districts are from West Bengal, of which Murshidabad is the largest Muslim concentrated district (3.7 million) in India and it is also a high Muslim concentrated district of West Bengal. Muslims constituted 50% to 75% of the population in 11 districts of which one district is from West Bengal (GOI, 2006:30). There is continuous growth of Muslim populations in West Bengal. It was in 1951 about 19.85%, in 2001 it was about 25.25% and in 2011 about 26.65% in West Bengal. Muslims are generally concentrated in all the districts of West Bengal in varied proportion which has been categorized into three levels of concentration. It may be considered that the districts where the concentration is more than 32.01 percent may be called as '*Muslim concentration districts*'. Further, the districts where the Muslim population is less than 16.95 of total population may be called as '*low Muslim concentrated district*'. There are 5 districts which show relatively higher concentration of

Muslim population out of the 18 districts. They are Murshidabad (63.67), Malda (49.72), Uttar Dinajpur (47.36), Birbhum (35.08) and South 24 Parganas (33.24), forming a continuous region of high concentration of Muslim population in the Middle parts of the state during the Muslim rule in the West Bengal (Hussain, N. 2012:44).

Table-1

Concentration of Muslim population, West Bengal 2001

Region	Concentration	Districts
High	More than 32.91	Murshidabad (63.67), Malda (49.72), Uttar Dinajpur (47.36), Birbhum (35.08), S 24 Parganas (33.24)
Medium	16.95-32.91	Nadia (25.41), Howrah (24.44), Koch Bihar (24.24), N 24 Parganas (24.22), Dakshin Dinajpur (24.02), Kolkata (20.27), Bardhaman (19.78)
Low	Less than 16.95	Hugli (15.140), Mednipur (11.33), Jalpaiguri (10.85), Bankura (7.51), Purulia (7.12) and Darjeeling (5.31)

(Source: census 2001, Hussain, N 2012: 45)

Muslim OBC Population

There is paucity of separate census enumeration for Muslim OBCs, yet it is claimed that the population of Muslim OBCs is 80-85% of the total Muslim population in India (Khanam, 2013:131). Moinuddin (2003) stated that the OBCs are a residual category whose population is highly ambiguous and varies from one religious community to another. Therefore, it is, in fact, difficult to provide an exact statistics of their number. The Mandal Commission has identified eighty-two groups as backward in Muslim community and the Commission has calculated 52% OBC population in India; 8.40% constitute OBCs in non-Hindu communities (Khanam 2013:131). According to the sixty-first round of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), the OBC population share in the total population is 40.4%, of these, 34% is the share of Hindu-OBCs and the remaining 6.4% of Muslim OBCs. Muslim OBCs share in total Muslim population is 40.7% (2004-05) and 15.75% in the total OBC population of the country (Sachar Report, 2006:204-205). As far as the population of OBCs among Muslims are concerned in different states of the country, the two states of West Bengal and Assam, both with substantial population of Muslims, the proportion of OBCs is miniscule. According to 61st round survey of NSSO, there is an increase in OBCs population

in different states, it is marginal in West Bengal. West Bengalis' share among Muslim OBCs is 2.6% in 1999-2000 and is 2.4% in 2004-05. Thus, all Muslims could not share equally the benefits attached to OBC status in West Bengal (Government of India, 2006; 203-04).

Total estimated OBC population in West Bengal is 1, 03, 81,600 and it constitutes 15.25% of the total state population. Total estimated Muslim OBC population is 12, 40,429 or 11.95% of the state OBC population (Moinuddin 2003:4906).

Proforma of Muslim OBCs in West Bengal

In the recent declaration, the state government of West Bengal has included 86% Muslims of the total Muslim population (25.25%) of the state into the OBC lists. The then West Bengal Left Govt had categorized these OBC Muslim Groups into two broad categories, viz. 'Category-A' denoting 'More Backward' and 'Category-B' implying 'Backward' on the basis of their relative backwardness (Hossain 2013:91). According to Mondal, "In 1994 the government of West Bengal prepared a list of backward classes on the basis of occupation with which social and economic backwardness is associated. Out of 60 OBC groups in the state there are eight communities which have been identified as Muslim OBCs. These communities are *Jolah* (including *Ansari Momin*), *Fakir* (including *sain*), *Hawari*, *Dhunia*, *Patidar*, *Kasai*, *Nashya*, *Shaik* and *Pahadia Muslim*." (Mondal2003:4895). The then Left Front Govt had listed around 108 social groups in the OBC list including Hindus and Muslims. Out of these OBCs, there were about 56 groups in Category-A and 52 groups in Category-B and Out of 108 OBC groups, Muslim constitutes about 53 groups. There were 49 Muslim OBCs in Category-A and 4 groups in Category-B in the state (Notification No. 6309-BCW/MR-84/10 Dated on 24-09-2010). These Muslim OBCs then constitute about 2.4% in 2004-05 in West Bengal (G.O.I, 2006:203). The Left Front govt. declared 10% reservations for the Muslims under the OBC category. The total number of Muslim OBCs population and groups were marginal in the community itself and in the state as whole. Thus, the benefits of reservation were inaccessible to the Muslims who being backward were unidentified as OBCs. Therefore, the new Govt. of West Bengal (Trinomool Congress, 2011) conducted a sample survey to find out the comparative backwardness of the underprivileged sections of the people, belonging to the Muslim community and included many new communities in the list of OBC 'Category-A' and 'Category-B'. About 35 OBC groups have been added including Hindus and Muslims in new the list of OBC. Out of 35 OBC groups, 9 OBC groups are in

Category-A including 8 Muslim OBCs and 26 OBC groups are in Category-B including 22 Muslims OBCs (Notification No.1673-BCW/MR-209/11 Dated on 11-05-2012).

Now the entire list of OBCs stands at 143 that include 83 Muslims. Of 143, Category-A has 65 OBCs that include 57 Muslims and Category-B has 78 OBCs that include 26 Muslims (Hoque, 18 May, 2012). However, the present list consists of 159 OBCs in the state. Of 159, Category-A has 76 OBCs that include about 63 Muslims and Category-B has 83 OBCs that include about 31 Muslims (G.O.WB, September, 2014). There are two government lists for OBC; State list and Central list. Of around 93 Muslim OBCs in the state, 9 OBCs were in the central list and newly 37 was included in the Central list of OBC under the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993, Section 9(G.O. I, PIB.2013, 23-April). These communities are as follows;

Jolah (Ansari Momin), Fakir/Sain, Kasai-quraishi, Rayeen (kunjra), Nashya-Sekh, Shershabadia, Patidar.

Devanga, Hajjam(Muslim), Chowduli (Muslim), Nikari (Muslim), Mahaldar(Muslim), Dhukre (Muslim), Basni/Bosni(Muslim), Abdal(Muslim), Kan(Muslim), Tutia(Muslim), Gayen(Muslim), Beldar Muslim, Khotta Muslim, Muslim sardar, Muslim Kalandar, Muslim Laskar, Muslim Jamadar, Muslim ChutorMistri, Muslim Dafadar, Mal Muslim, Majhi/Patni Muslim, Muchi/Chamar Muslim, Muslim Nehariya, MuslimHaldar, Muslim Sanpui/Sapui, Muslim Biswas, Muslim Mali, Ghosi Muslim, Muslim Darji/Ostagar/Idrishi, Muslim Rajmistri, Muslim Bhatiyara, Muslim Molla, Dhali(muslim), Muslim Piyada, Muslim Barujibi/Barui, Muslim Penchi, Gangot.

Thus, there is continuous change in the inclusion/correction/deletion of castes/communities in the state and the central list of OBCs. This change has been approved by the State Backward Classes and Welfare Department and Department of Social justice and Empowerment as per the advices of the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC). This change will enable persons belonging to these caste/communities to avail benefits of reservation in government services and posts as well as in Central educational institutions according to existing policy. They will also become eligible for benefits under various welfare schemes, and scholarships being administered by the Central Government, which are at present available to persons belonging to the OBCs. Thus, for the sake of achieving equality and as a part of the process of nation building, various compensatory discrimination policies are directed for the backward communities in India Such as SCs, STs, and OBCs related to

jobs, education, welfare, and development. Some Muslim groups also currently benefit from such affirmative actions as they are included in STs and OBCs (Mondal, S.R 2003:4893).

Muslim Society and Backward Classes

Islam denies division of society on the basis of race, caste and other bases into vertical dimensions like high and low or pure and impure and also denies inequalities and discrimination but it promotes equality, homogeneity and profess egalitarian structure of society. Those who follow Islam are commonly known as ‘Muslim’ and the group designated as ‘Muslim Community’. Various sociological and social anthropological study of the Muslim society stated that Muslim society in India is divided on hierarchical bases into *Ashraf* and non- *Ashraf* (atraf or *arzal* or *ajlaf* or aam) and on horizontal bases compose many small groups. And these divisions among Muslims was due to the continuation of various social distinctions like ‘ethnic’ and ‘caste-like’ features which are similar to the Hindu religious communities (Ahmed, 1978, Mondal 2003, Nazir 1993, Ahmad 1962). And another point is that the subjugation of converted Muslims from Hindu low cast who were in majority and the prejudices and discrimination by the Muslim ruling classes also give to raise such division among Muslim society (Zainuddin 2003: 4901). In recent times ‘status group’ and ‘class like’ divisions are also conspicuous among the Muslims (Mondal 2003: 4892). Non-Ashraf section of Muslims society was educationally and socio-economically backward due to lack of secular education for long period long time and continued to follow their traditional occupations. This backwardness was considered by various commissions set up by state and union government to designate them as ‘backward classes’ (Zainuddin 2003: 4901).

Muslims could not be treated SCs as this category is bound to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. The Schedule Tribes (STs) could be Muslims but they are very few such as microscopic population of small tribal groups of Lakshadweep and Gaddis and Bakrewals of Jammu and Kashmir. In this way, only the category of OBCs obviously seems to be open to Muslims (Khanam 2013:128). In this regard Khanam writes, “Muslim groups currently bracketed under the category of OBC came essentially from non-Ashraf section of Muslim population. They are the converts from the middle and lower caste Hindus and are identified with traditional occupation” (ibid: 131). But there are groups among Muslims of West Bengal, who use their surname as Syed, Sheikh, Pathan, Khan, and has recently been notified as backward classes in the State lists of OBC (G.O.W.B 2011). A question could be raised that how these groups of people could come under the OBC category, when they are the part and

parcel of Ashraf section of Muslim society. Mondal stated that Moulvi Abdul Wali said “in West Bengal, on conversion to Islam from the Hindu social order, most of the converts assumed the title Shaikh and others (who migrated to Bengal from outside or were converted earlier) according to convenience and their economic and social status began to be Syed, Mughal and Pathans” (Mondal 1998). In this way, the socio-economic and educational disadvantage of non-Ashraf section of Muslim society scope them to be included in ‘backward classes. In sociological terms, all Muslim caste/groups within Ajlaf-Arzal social categories are eligible for the status of OBCs (Khanam 2013:131).

Problems and Prospects

It is not easy to identify the problems of Muslim OBCs by simply providing its classification and categories in the state of West Bengal (Moinuddin 2003: 4905). However, some problems have been identified in the following way.

Identification of Muslims to be included in OBCs list, (whether state list or central list) is one of the important problems. There is no uniform basis for identification of any group as backward. But it is generally believed to include all kinds of backwardness-social, educational, economic which is recommended by various commissions. The state government has the sole authority to classify certain sections of the society as ‘Backward Classes’. But government of West Bengal follows the government of India’s decision to implement the Mandal Commission’s recommendation. According to the above proforma, prepared by the West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes, the indicators of social backwardness were in relation to the group as a whole and not any individual. In this consideration, one ethnographic group could be identified as OBC but other is not. Some other groups have been put within a particular group (Moinuddin 2003:4906). It is believed that the identification of any group as OBC based on the use of surname but it does not refer to their traditional and cultural identity. There are many groups who use different surnames or have no surname at all. But they have been identified as ‘backward classes’. The use of surnames; Sayed, Shaikh, Pathan, Khan have been included in the state list of OBC in West Bengal. The socio-economic and educational backwardness is considered to identify a group as ‘backward classe. How the use of surnames could be considered to include a group in ‘backward classes’? Converted Muslims use these surnames with reference to the Ashraf section of Muslim society in West Bengal (Mondal, 1998). There is no official survey regarding the socio-cultural and traditional identity of Muslims to determine their exact group identity. There are many converted

Muslims who are socio-educationally backward and changed surname but they could not be allowed to have access for OBC. In this way, the socio-economic and educational backwardness have been considered for the identification of Muslim backward classes but the cultural and traditional occupational features have been ignored in West Bengal.

There are also the problems of harassment and delaying to procure OBC certificate. There are many occupational groups in Muslim society which have experienced marginalisation and backwardness and their social situation is not much different from OBCs of this country (Mondal 2003: 4892).

Weaving, for example is the traditional occupation of the Jolah. In West Bengal, they use Sarkar, Mandal and Karikar as surnames. They are mainly concentrated in the districts of Howrah, Hoogly, Burdwan and Madnipur. Their total population in undivided Bengal was 2,70,292. They use Bengali and use the Bengali script. Weaving is considered a low-status occupation among the Muslim in West Bengal. And there is nothing wrong in including them in the Muslim OBC list. But today they do not follow their traditional occupation. Now, most of them are engaged in other occupations like bidi-making, poultry farming, rearing goats and running grocery shops. They are also employed in services industry or as agricultural labours. There has then been a noticeable shift from weaving to other occupations. Then the question arises how Jolah (who once practised weaving) can be included in Muslim OBC list (Moinuddin 2003:4906).

There are many Hindus and Muslims who have same occupation but Hindus get the benefit of reservation but Muslims participating the same profession is out of reservation. There is a community among Muslims named Guri. They are basically fishermen. Actually they are called so because they catch tiny (*Guro*) fishes. Non-Muslims who catch fish enjoy reservations as Schedule Castes but Muslims doing the same work will be left out of reservation. There is a community called penchi at Aurangabad in Murshidabad. Their number is considerable. Some Muslims earn their livelihood as cobblers. Hindu cobblers are inside the reservation as Schedule Caste but Muslim cobblers are left out of it. There are many other communities like Ghosi, Tantia, Dhakuri, etc. But these communities have been included in OBC list in West Bengal (G.O.B. 2010).

There is another problem of state list and central list of OBCs in West Bengal. Those backward classes in the central list could enjoy access to all opportunities which have been provided by both the State Government and Union Govt. but those backward classes in state list could access to opportunities only provided by Central Government. Majority of Muslim

OBCs, around 63, come under the category-A and around 31 Muslim OBCs in category-B (G.O.B, September, 2014). State list of OBCs consists of around 93 Muslim OBCs and in central list, there were 9 OBCs and 37 OBCs newly added (G.O.I, PIB. 23 April, 2013). There are loopholes in implementation of 10% for Muslim OBCs when they have been divided into two categories- A and- B. 10% reservation has been provided for the Muslim OBCs in Govt. jobs in addition to 7% OBC reservation in West Bengal. There is 17% reservation for OBC where 7% for B Category and 10% for A category, 22% quota for Scheduled Castes and 6% for Schedule Tribes in government recruitment in the state (Hoque, 18 May 2012). But both the category A and B consists of OBCs of both religious communities of Hindu and Muslim. The Muslims in category B do not get the benefit of 10% and Hindus in Category A get benefits of 10% reservation where they could get 7% but Muslims in Category B are getting 7% reservation in govt job. In this way, Muslim OBCs being a backward and socio-economically disadvantaged becomes victim of discrimination in govt jobs in the state of West Bengal.

Conclusion

Concluding, we can say that there are many loopholes in investigation and inquiry of households who are really eligible for OBC status. Thus, the identification of Muslim OBCs and implementation of reservation in West Bengal have become a recent issue of discussion in both academic and non-academic circles. Therefore, there should be some unusual criteria for recognition and identification of Muslims as OBC. In identification of Muslim OBC, the focus should also be given on the socio-cultural aspect along with economic and educational status. For this, we need more ethnographic information about the communities. Otherwise, politically articulate and organised groups will get maximum benefit out of it. We can say that the policy of the West Bengal government in determining the special status of the Muslim OBC did not measure up to the situation. The Muslim OBCs as the disadvantaged group needed some special facilities to overcome their social handicaps. For this it needs proper identification of Muslim OBCs in West Bengal. But the problem is that the government identified the interests of the Muslim OBC that only reflected the aspirations of a select group of individuals claiming to be the representatives of the community (Moinuddin, 2003: 4907).

Investigating officer must obey the duty to identify the eligible families for OBC status so that socio-economically advanced families could be excluded within the same groups or *bradaris*. State government must adopt its own technique of identification of exact groups for

OBC without simply following Mandal Commission Report, and should concentrate less on the use of surname.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said that some will get the advantage of reservation and some others will not as they have different worshipping methods. That means reservation is to be done on the basis of profession. However, the reservation for Muslim OBCs is one of the mandatory steps by West Bengal government after a long period of time. This positive action of the government could pave the way to challenge their socio-economic handicaps which they have been suffering from long period of time in the state.

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