Chapter IV
At Home, and Outside

It is one of the queer contradictions in the present history of West Bengal that while the greatest similarities between Hindus and Muslims are noted in the socio-domestic sphere, yet this remains one of the areas where both strive their utmost to maintain the distinctiveness of their identities. From the point of view of Bengali Muslims, this gives rise to a complex phenomenon: a painful process in which middle class women of the community have to balance themselves delicately among their socio-linguistic, religious and gender identities.

This often generates a crisis in the minds of those who think about it seriously. The flavour of this crisis has been very realistically captured in the novel, Akashlina, by Abul Bashar1.

The novel opens with a projection of this indecision in the character of Akashlina, a BA Final Year student, who is the narrator of the novelistic events. The young girl, while trying to use cosmetics on the festive occasion of Id, cannot choose between surma2 and eyeliner. The surma and the eyeliner are respectively the symbols of the sectarian and the mainstream female culture of self decoration. Whereas she feels3 the eyeliner would be more effective as make up, tradition insists that surma would be a more appropriate marker of her religious identity. The dilemma over a matter that apparently seems trivial is symbolic of larger problems of choice.

The present chapter is divided into two sections which deal with the domestic and social lives of Bengali Muslim women. The major objective is to highlight certain related areas where the similarities and separateness with the mainstream culture are most clearly visible. In the absence of any official data in this regard, this chapter has been written entirely on the basis of oral evidence, supplemented by my personal

2 Powdered collyrium: traditional Muslim make up for the eyes.
observations during the interviews and the reading of literary works. The social-realist fiction that relates to Bengali Muslims both represents and creates a certain self-image.

(I)

The migration of Bengali Muslims away from West Bengal to the East started after the great Calcutta Killings of 1946 and continued in sporadic waves up to the Indo-Pak war of 1965. Thus, a large part of the domestic lives of Bengali Muslim women after 1947 necessitated a continuous modification of the old order. Apart from a more practical readjustment with the new situation thrown up by the migration of a portion of their families, leading to a re-allotment of responsibilities within the domestic sphere, a large part of the discussions in the private domain of Bengali Muslims centred on those relatives who had suddenly become strangers and the emptiness that it had created in the lives of those who stayed back. Women, especially, recalled the unions and the absences with very intimate details.

Among the 218 families interviewed in Calcutta and 48 families interviewed in Burdwan which said they had relatives in present day Bangladesh, older people still spend a considerable time in the family gatherings discussing their siblings and other relatives who went away and the happy days they had spent together before that. Jahanara Begum of Burdwan said, “I was nine or ten years old at that time. My mother’s sister, Rabukhala, went away to Pakistan with her husband in 1948. This was very difficult for my mother who was specially close to her. She used to reminisce on every minute details about Rabukhala, like what food she loved to eat, what she would have said and how she would have reacted on this occasion or that... and start weeping. My mother’s brooding became a sort of an obsession and was very painful for us to bear. All of us, her four children, also wept with her. This mourning became a sort of family ritual, it went on for quite some years and then died down naturally ... we, as children, knew things would never be the same for us.”

Two major differences strike us when we try to compare these women with the relatives of the Hindu migrants from Pakistan. Hindu families, which stayed back in

4 Comment made the basis of interviews with the 266 families in Calcutta and Burdwan which said they had relatives in Bangladesh.
5 Khala means aunt; mother’s sister.
6 My interview with Jahanara Begum (b. 1939) on 19.02.03, Burdwan.
East Pakistan, were stranded in a decidedly unsympathetic environment and they themselves became keen to migrate. Apart from the occasional communal flare-ups which caused considerable insecurity in the minds of Muslims, Indian Muslims, on the whole, were aware that they live in a secular state and never seriously contemplated migration unless it was for the four major reasons that I have discussed in Chapter-II. In such circumstances, Bengali Muslim women, unlike their Hindu counterparts in East Pakistan, had to adjust to a more decidedly emotional loss. Coming to terms with it became more difficult if they continued to live in the same house.

The nostalgia for one's lost homeland, when communicated through private correspondences with those who had left, created a reverberating impact upon those who had stayed back. Nasima Banu's mother, poetess Motahera Banu (1906-73) was almost sixty years old when she went away to East Pakistan. There she stayed with her children and wrote back to Nasima Banu in India about how much she missed 'home'. She compared her 'self exile' with the condition of a 'caged chimpanzee'. Her daughter's house in the posh locality of Dhanmandi, Dhaka, seemed like 'a golden cage' to her. Sentences like "I am eating hilsa fries in Chhabi's (another daughter) house and remembering you," "When it rains, I remember Muniya and it seems that Babua is looking at me when I see the dark clouds in the sky," recur in her letters.

Even as late as 1997, fifty years after Partition, the nostalgia remains fresh. A migrant from Burdwan wrote to her friend, "I remember everyone. I would also have been with you if all this had not happened ... Today it is meaningless to discuss whether coming away from that country (referred to in the letter as '0 Desh' meaning..."

---

7 In many of the private correspondences that I came across, 'hari', literally home, and 'desh' literally country, were used interchangeably by the migrant Bengali Muslims as they wrote about the objects they missed. Exchange of letters becomes increasingly rarer with the greater use of telephone from the 1980s and the e-mail thereafter.
India) had been a wise decision or not ... I could never drive away the feeling that I was away from my birthplace (janna-bhumi).”

I am not directly concerned with these migrant women now in Bangladesh. But I mention these instances to evoke the impact that their expressions had upon Muslim women in West Bengal. Although most things were not stretched to such extremes as Jahanara Begum’s mother, many older women said they were ‘shaken’ by the separation.

The physical and mental distance between the families on two sides of the borders increased with time and these women gradually came to terms with reality. “My children would never miss Shamima Apa’s children as much as I missed Shamima Apa.” The bonds gradually loosened. Meetings are now restricted to occasional reunions during marriages or deaths in the extended family.

The pervasive shadow that Partition and subsequent communal insecurity cast on the domestic sphere of Bengali Muslims in the shape of broken ties has gradually lost its keenness as instances of migration became rare after 1965. The post-1965 Bengali male Muslim migration to other countries in Europe, America and the Persian Gulf region in search of better careers and by women mostly because of marriages, have generally followed the same trend as in other communities. As these have not been motivated by the religion-politics-riots-insecurity complex, these remain outside the scope of my discussion.

Coming to more recent times, it is first necessary to place my observations on the distinctive features of a Bengali Muslim household and the family structure.

A distinctively Muslim ambience was most discernible in Bamsor, where dress, etiquette, forms of address, use of household articles, etc. were clearly representative of a local Muslim culture. For instance, in all the houses in Bamsor, I was invariably

---

15 My interviews with
a) Saida Khatun (b. 1936) on 17.03.03, Calcutta
b) Reshma Begum (b. 1931) on 27.09.03, Calcutta.
16 My interview with Reshma Begum (b. 1931), on 27.09.03, Calcutta. Her elder sister (apa) migrated to East Pakistan in 1947.
17 Of the household articles may be mentioned the badna, a piped water mug used for washing and the silipchi, a portable small wash basin, used particularly by Muslims.
greeted with ‘as salam walai qum’;18 even before the formal introduction. This Islamic form of greeting was not so universal in Burdwan and Calcutta. Many Muslim women would respond in these two places with a distinctly Bengali salute, namaskar, with folded palms or simply smile and nod in greeting. The Muslim custom of eating together from the same dishes spread out on the ‘dastarkhwan’19 was also more common in Bamsor. Of the fourteen families interviewed in the village, only two used a dining table. The cultural switchovers in the form of greetings or in dining habits were found to be invariably linked with the economic level and the level of social interaction in the families. In contrast, all middle and upper middle class families in Calcutta and Burdwan used the dining table. Another incident also deserves to be mentioned here. Ghazala Parvin (b.1945), an upper middle class housewife at Ballygunge in Calcutta, met me in the drawing room of her house on the first day I interviewed her.20 However, when she invited me to tea following the next day’s session in another portion of the house, the crocheted dastarkhwan was meticulously spread. She said it was done to give me ‘a taste of Islamic culture’.21

Orthodox Muslims believe that namaz cannot be offered at any place where a man-made depiction of living beings in any form is displayed.22 But the culturally more progressive families hang portraits, pictures and photographs on their walls which are inspired aesthetically or politically23 or which recall memories from a personal album.24 The more orthodox houses do not have any portraits but many have Arabic prayers in the form of stickers, wall-hangings, etc., and a picture or a laminated photograph of the Ka’aba Shrine on the wall.25

18 A Muslim form of greeting in Arabic which wishes Divine Mercy to be showered on the person greeted.
19 A piece of cloth spread on the floor on which dishes are served.
20 My interview with Ghazala Parvin (b.1945) on 15.02.04, Calcutta.
21 My interview with Ghazala Parvin (b. 1945) on 19.2.04, Calcutta.
22 Md. Nurul Islam, Tariqat-e-Muslimeen, Calcutta, 1957, p. 239, may be cited as an example.
23 The two most common political photographs seen were those of Karl Marx in the CPI(M) families and Indira Gandhi in the few Congress families houses interviewed.
24 The term ‘progressive’ does not imply that they do not perform any ritual. The progression is noted in their action of hanging the portraits which orthodox Islam forbids. As in the novel Phulbou by Abul Bashar Calcutta, 1998, p. 32, we find that Raziya kept a calendar depicting a piece of Khajuraho sculpture in her room and turned it on its back when she offered namaz.
25 This, according to a section of Muslims themselves, is also a form of idolatry as had been noted by ‘Sammohito Musalman’, article by Kazi Abdul Wadud, Jyaystha, 1333 BS, reprinted in Banglar Musalmaner Katha, Calcutta, 2002.
As a mark of their married bliss, Muslim women, like others, wear ornaments and are not supposed to keep their ‘hands, ears, necks unadorned (khali)’. The nose pierced on the left side and decorated with a stud is regarded as a symbol of marriage. But these are general ornaments which all Indian women, irrespective of their religious affiliation, love to wear. There is no consensus among Bengali Muslim women on the point as to what visibly distinguishes a married women from one unmarried. Some women regularly wear red bangles (pala) often inlaid with gold, and a red bindi, to denote their married status. Muslim women normally do not wear vermilion or conch-shell bangles as ‘sankha-sindur’ are believed to be exclusively Hindu symbols. Only three among the 432 married women I interviewed said they wear sindur under special circumstances.

Ruby Jahangir, a front office assistant in a private firm, said she wears the sindur on the advice of her other women colleagues and this gave her a ‘sense of security’. Previously she was widely mistaken to be unmarried. Thirty nine years old Nazma Begum wears sindur under the influence of her Hindu sister-in-law (brother’s wife) and also because she is convinced that ‘sindur enhances beauty’.

For Homayra Parvin, the decision to wear vermilion was a jointly taken with her husband. Living in a ‘predominantly Hindu locality’ in a housing complex at Kasba, Calcutta, she wears it because she does not want people to ‘look at her differently’.

It is worth mentioning that nobody in their families had used the sindur before them. And when these women, all of them in their thirties, started wearing it, they faced mild criticism from their relatives but it was not strongly disapproved.

Wide diversity was noticed in the Bengali Muslim family structures. The joint family system was most prevalent in Bamsor because here at least a portion of the property, the land, was jointly owned. Joint families were also common in Calcutta and Burdwan. In two different families in Calcutta, it was found that transferable jobs prevented the sons from staying with their aged parents for considerable periods, yet...
their wives loyally identified themselves as members of a joint family.\textsuperscript{32} Again, living in the same ancestral house in separate blocks with their individual family units, the wives of the Ahmed brothers of Taltala in Calcutta, identified themselves as members of a joint family. Though they earn and spend separately, “no major decision, be it choosing a school for the girl or buying a new car, can be taken by any one unless it has been brought to the knowledge of the other two brothers”.\textsuperscript{33} Aileen Ross had noted in 1961 that among Hindus, young women desire separate homes more than men do, for these allow them independence from their mothers-in-law.\textsuperscript{34} Such ambition, boosted by higher academic attainments and economic independence among Bengali Muslim women, have now also led to the break up of the joint families.\textsuperscript{35}

However, this was not a universal phenomenon and in 36 families in Calcutta, 19 families in Burdwan and 4 families in Bamsor, daughters in law (including those from other communities) enjoyed an excellent relationship with their mothers-in-law, appreciating and understanding one another. The stereotyped hierarchical relationship of dominance and subordination was reported to be noticeably absent in 59 of the 185 joint families.\textsuperscript{36}

In most of the joint families, authority was held and responsibilities shared according to seniority. Domestic life centred on the oldest living woman. The widowed status of this woman does not affect her status in relation to the authority she wields within the family. In her capacity as the mother-in-law or the grandmother (dadi), she remains at the helm of the household and is seen as the repository of Islamic tradition.

\textsuperscript{32} For example, my interview with Hosnarea Khatun (b. 1969) on 19.09.03. Calcutta. Hosnarea, a nursery school teacher and wife of a Bank officer, lives with her husband and two daughters in a rented house in Entally. Still she views the entire set up as temporary and identifies herself as a member of the joint family of her in laws stationed in Baharampur. Mushidabad.

\textsuperscript{33} My interview with the wife of the eldest brother of the Ahmed family, Sabina Yeasmin (b. 1955) on 31.05.03. Her two sisters-in-law agreed with her.

\textsuperscript{34} Aileen Ross, \textit{The Hindu Family In its Urban Setting}, Toronto, 1961, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{35} Conflicting interests between members of the same generation, conflicting ideologies between parents and children of a joint household, transferable jobs, aspirations of a different kind of family pattern or lifestyle and economic efficiency of small families were cited as some of the other reasons by the respondents as to why nuclear families are on the rise.

\textsuperscript{36} The large joint families included unmarried daughters of the oldest woman and more than one son living with their families. My concept of joint families leaves outside its scope such families where the younger woman considers herself to be the most important (\textit{Kortri}) in all matters of family decision. In most of these families, the daughter-in-law considered the mother-in-law as being sheltered by her (\textit{asrito}) or looks upon her and others, e.g., an unemployed brother-in-law staying in her family, as a temporary measure.
and culture. She devotes a significant portion of her time in maintaining contacts with the relatives and the wider social circle of the community. In most cases, she is also the religious teacher for the younger children in the family, and for her neighbours. She also takes upon herself the responsibility of training the children in proper Islamic adab. For instance, Abida Kulsum, a sixty eight year old housewife at Metiabruj in Calcutta, instructed her granddaughter to serve me with the soap and the towel (though they were in the proper place) so that I could wash my hands before lunch. The twelve year old granddaughter, who studies in a reputed English medium school, promptly followed her instructions. When I asked her why she did this, Abida Kulsum replied, “A girl has to be taught everything. Only being educated in schools is not enough”. Her ‘everything’ included the Islamic adab of entertaining a guest.

Such a woman may also be viewed as the repository of ‘Islami’ or ‘Musalmani Bangla’ in the family. This was noticed more among women who did not have any significant social exposure to women from other communities. The stereotyped ‘dadi’ in Abul Bashar’s novel Akashlina, also confirms this as she confesses that she ‘feels more comfortable with the word Asmantara than Akashlina’. On the other hand, Jolekha Khatun, who has spent the greater part of her life in the company of Hindu friends, colleagues and comrades, uses very few such ‘Islami Bangla’ words in her private memoirs. A distinctive vocabulary, skill in Mughlai cuisine, expertise in hairstyling, henna designing, embroidery and crochet work, are the last vestiges of an old aristocracy which some of these women carry in themselves. These are declining among the next generations.

Women who belong to the middle stratum in their capacities as daughter-in-law and mother have to continuously try to maintain an effective balance between various disparate components. It goes without saying that the domestic role and status of a working woman is different from that of a housewife in the same socio-religious

37 My interview with Abida Kulsum (b. 1936), on 11.05.04, Calcutta.
38 These gestures of honour and splendid generosity towards a guest are however not particularly Islamic. The Hindu social dictum, too, ordains that guests are treated with divine honour, “Aitthi Devo Bhava”.
39 A form of local dialect in which Bengali is profusely interspersed with Perso-Arabic words. This issue has been dealt with in the context of the late 19th - early 20th century Bengal by Rafiuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims, 187-1906, A Quest for Identity, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 106 -132.
40 Abul Bashar, Akashlina, Calcutta 1994, p. 11

125
category or age group. In many cases, the working woman has to work out yet another compromise between her secular ‘public’ workplace and her religious ‘private’ home. Many working Muslim women, used to a secular lifestyle, and living in joint families said that they try not to antagonise the religious sentiments of their more conservative mothers-in-law and try to conform to religious practices, at home and among relatives. Within the home, she is also required to devise a strategic compromise between the more conservative mother-in-law and her own modern daughter, whose points of view rarely converge.

Nafisa Sultana, a lawyer, said that a considerable part of her energy is spent on settling strife at home, simultaneously ‘coaxing’ her mother-in-law to accept certain changes (like her teenaged daughter wearing jeans or staying out of home in the evenings) and ‘convincing’ her daughter not be too bold in her demands. However, the major problem with such tactical negotiation is that if any of the two women refuses to comply, the equilibrium immediately collapses and the joint family system faces a crisis.

I conclude that ideas like “in an Islamic society the role of the women is not the ballot but only maintenance of the home and family” are rapidly becoming obsolete. But the use of religion as a tool to try to restrict women to the domestic sphere continues to be used by self-proclaimed leaders of Islam in contemporary West Bengal. At a state level workshop conducted on the status of Muslim women in West Bengal on August 16 and 17, 2004, in Calcutta which I attended, Qazi Fazlur Rahman, a non-Bengali Maulvi, said in Urdu that just as the bowlers and the batsmen in a cricket team are required to perform their stipulated duties for the team to play well, so should women remain within the limits of their stipulated domestic roles for the proper functioning of the family. They should not overstep these norms and vainly try to imitate men. Delivered in chaste Urdu, the matter of the lecture could not be comprehended by many Bengali Muslim delegates and was generally not well received among those who understood it, though there was no formal protest.

41 My interview with Nafisa Sultana (b. 1958) on 19.05.03, Calcutta.
Generally daughters tend to acquire more freedom than their mothers did at the same age, unless some fundamentalist forces try to set the clock back. Compared with the daughters of the fifties and the early sixties, in my survey, most of the middle class Bengali Muslim daughters aged around 36 years or less (i.e., born around 1968 or thereafter), who grew up in the relatively open atmosphere of the seventies and the eighties neither measure their own lives, nor encourage their daughters to think of their lives only in terms of a probation for marriage and wifehood.

However, as marriage remains at the centre of any discourse on domesticity, some of its more important aspects are considered here. The majority of Muslim marriages were found to be negotiated. Relatives and family friends play an important role in bringing marriage proposals. There are no professional matchmakers among Muslims like the Hindu ghataks. Sometimes an old trusted maidservant or the imam of a local mosque hint at a possible marriage connection. Forty two marriages (all of them after 1980) were negotiated through newspaper advertisements. In another instance in Calcutta, where both partners were from the Bengali Muslim community, the bride and the groom came to know each other through the internet. These radically new methods of arranging matches are, therefore, not unknown among Muslim circles.

Most marriage bureaus in West Bengal politely refuse Muslim registration. As I spoke to the proprietor of one such bureau in Calcutta, who explained, “We cannot prevent you from registering here, but it becomes pointless. We cannot give you (Muslims) any guarantee of being able to bring you any proposal within three months as we promise in the other cases; we cannot do anything if we do not get enough Muslim registrations…”

The only marriage bureau specialising in negotiating marriages among Muslims, catering to both Bengali and non-Bengali clients, is Nikaah, established in 2001 at Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta. Its proprietor, who did not want to be named, said that she set up Nikaah ‘precisely because of the problem of negotiation among Muslims’. Neither the varna-gotra complex nor astrological consideration plays any role in Muslim match making. All the 540 women who were interviewed reported

44 My interview with Susanta Dasgupta, Samparka, Jogajog Kendra, Jadavpur, Calcutta on 3.7.04.
45 My interview with the proprietor of Nikaah, Calcutta, 18.07.04.
themselves as Sunni. Many members of the caste-like groups (biradari) among the lower orders of Muslims prefer not to be identified with their former professions, like those of the jolah (weaver) or nikari (fishermen), once they gain an entry into the middle class through vertical mobility. At that stage, they simply identify themselves as Sunni. Thus marriages among the middle class Muslims are generally negotiated within one’s present socio-economic class. However, the women (above 46 years of age) of many old aimma-dar Khandekar and Syed families said they would not negotiate ‘with the families of Malliks and Mondals’, who retain in their names the not-so respectable lineage of conversion, and also in ‘chasha ghars’ and ‘gerasto ghars’. Such statements prove that in spite of the proclaimed egalitarian principles of Islam, not only the current socio-economic status of family, but also its ancestry and lineage are considered important for marriage negotiations.

Marriage through self-choice, commonly referred to as ‘love marriages’ have also become more common since the late seventies. There were fewer instances of love marriages before that time. Altogether 118 of the 432 married women (27.31%) had exercised self-choice in marriage. While the majority of the younger generation (less than 26 years old) believed that “love marriages are better than negotiated ones”, the older generation (more than 46 years) expressed reservations. The majority among them said they would accept their child’s self-chosen partner if he/she was found to ‘good’, according to their own understanding of suitability.

In the domestic sphere, it was found that there are more Hindu brides than Hindu sons-in-law among the Muslim families that I interviewed. Muslim girls marrying into

---

46 This issue has been dealt with in detail by MKA Siddiqui. Muslims of Calcutta: A Study in Aspects of Their Social Organisation, Calcutta 1974.
47 Holders of landed estates granted by the rulers to the educational or religious elite among Muslims.
48 Nine women above the age of 46 years actually used this term of reference. This implies that they consider themselves more respectable and would not negotiate with those who did not have a respectable ancestry although they might have gained entry into the middle class through vertical mobility.
49 Gerasto is a derivation from grhastha, intended to mean an ordinary householder. Chasha denotes a farmer. Both terms imply that they are not respectable.
50 It deserves to be mentioned here that I have interviewed a select range of women many of whom are educationally and professionally very advanced. The percentage of women exercising self-choice in marriage may not be as high in the Bengali Muslim class generally.
51 Among the 85 girls below 26 years favoured love marriages (36.47%). 23 girls believed arranged marriages were better (27.06%), while 14 among them (16.47%) had no opinion.
other communities, were rare, but not entirely unknown.\textsuperscript{52} A noticeable trend is that whereas previously\textsuperscript{53} it was unthinkable that two people belonging to two different communities could marry and the event invariably aroused a great deal of hostility, from the nineties at last, such hostility seems to be on the decline.

Neela Azad (b.1956) of Calcutta and Roshenara Begum (b.1953) of Burdwan may be cited as examples of the recent trend. They have gladly accepted daughters-in-law from other communities without converting them to Islam.\textsuperscript{54} With co-operation from the brides’ families, weddings were arranged with some splendour. In both instances, marriages were registered under the Special Marriage Act along with the symbolic and informal performance of some wedding rituals like exchange of rings and garlands in the presence of friends and relatives. Priests had no role in these marriages. Although a great deal depends on individual points of view and it may be debated whether these women would still have sounded so liberal if the prospective daughters-in-law were not ‘good’, it is also true that such examples could be set only when both the families came from a similar socio-cultural milieu. In the two examples cited above, the similarity of political ideologies also played a role.\textsuperscript{55} This emerges as a remarkable trend among the Bengalis particularly if we remember that minister Haren Pandya had in July 1998 announced in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly about the formation of a special police cell to supervise inter-religious marriages.\textsuperscript{56} The actual motive behind the formation of such a cell was to prevent such marriages from taking place.

With the average age of marriage having considerably gone up among middle class Muslims, old customs, like marriage within the permissible range of cousins is also noted to be gradually going out of vogue. With the rise of a new middle class and

\textsuperscript{52} For example, Nasima Banu married Amalendu De in 1955, Nazma Begum married a Christian to become Nazma Rebecca Biswas in 1983 and Tania Khan married her Hindu friend in 1996.

\textsuperscript{53} ‘Previously’ refers to at least upto a considerable portion of the eighties as brought out from the interviews with those Muslim women who have married outside their community and women from other communities who have married in Muslim families.

\textsuperscript{54} My interviews with
a) Neela Azad on 16.04.04, Calcutta
b) Dr. Roshenara Begum on 05.08.03, Burdwan.

\textsuperscript{55} Both Neela Azad and Roshenara Begum said their daughters-in-law came from communist families, to which view they also subscribed. Both agreed that this made communication with the other families easier despite their religious differences. The homogeneous political outlook in a way contributed to the creation of a Bengali culture in contemporary West Bengal with which the families identified themselves.

\textsuperscript{56} Genocide, special issue of Communalism Combat, March – April 2002, p. 103.
consequent changes in family structures and patterns, there is now considerable
interactions among cousins. As a result, many young girls like Farha Nazneen said, "I
admire my cousins very much but I cannot think of marrying any of them; a cousin is
after all a brother". Farha's attitude may be said to have been influenced by her
acquaintance with the customs of other communities and greater interaction with her
cousins from childhood. Some other girls also found the custom of cousin marriage
detestable because they think there will be genetic disorders due to marriage between
close relatives.

Compared to 85 women in the 'above 46 years of age' category who had
married cousins, only 17 women below 46 years of age could be located among the 540
respondents. Ummeenadra Farzana (b.1954), who married a cousin in 1971, justified the
custom. She said, "Girls have to shift their homes with marriage and adjust to an
entirely new phase of life. Things become easier and more comfortable if the mother-in-law
is a known, sympathetic face, like that of a khala (mother's sister), jiju (father's sister) or
chachi (paternal uncle's wife)"). However, this is only an apparent reason
because the same woman who had been very sympathetic as an aunt may not be so
friendly as a mother-in-law. Preservation of property was found to be a more important
reason for such marriages. According to the provisions of Islamic law, for instance, if a
Muslim dies leaving a daughter as his only heir, she will not be allowed to take more
than one half of his estate. The other half will go to other relatives. In that case, a
greater portion of the property could be protected if the son-in-law was a relative.

Muslim marriages are contractual and are settled with a mahr which acts as a
security for the wife against the possibility of divorce at the husband's will. The
settlement of the quantity of mahr at the time of the marriage remains a mark of family
status and formality in most cases, since it does not need to be paid unless the
marriage breaks down.

57 My interview with Farha Nazneen (b.1983) on 18.07.03. Calcutta.
58 My interview with Ummeenadra Farzana (b.1954) on 14.03.04. Burdwan.
59 The Quran, 4:11.
60 The quantity of money payable as 'mahr' is an indication of the economic capacity of the groom, and
hence denotes the status of the family.
61 It is traditionally 'excused' by the wife in case the husband predeceases her.
On the other hand, the custom of dowry seems to be on the rise. The educated middle class feels uneasy and tries to avoid the term ‘dowry’- but all middle class parents have either paid or are prepared to pay it. The term ‘pan’ (dowry) us often politely replaced by ‘dan. The amount of dan’, literally meaning a voluntary gift, is not always left to the discretion of the parents of the bridge. An anxiety was associated with the issue which implied that there was an element of compulsion in most cases. My survey revealed that lower middle class families are particularly pressured and often have to borrow for the payment of dowry. Dowry has assumed such massive proportions in contemporary Muslim society in West Bengal that Rukhshi Elias, an Executive Committee member of the ABMWA, moved a proposal for the establishment of an anti-dowry platform during the State-level workshop on the status of Muslim women in West Bengal. It was accepted amidst wide applause.

Coming to the issue of purdah among Bengali Muslim women, I found that 4 upper middle class and 2 middle class housewives in Calcutta (all of them aged above 46 years) used the burqa while going out of the house. But they did so very rarely. Women who gave priority to their cultural-linguistic (Bengali) identity in all the three categories of the middle class did not use the burqa. Use of the burqa or the hijab, visible manifestations of the custom of purdah, are more common among non-Bengali Muslims. The Quran enjoins upon both men and women ‘to lower their gaze and guard their modesty’ but the burqa is imposed only upon women as it is widely believed to “protect women against men, and society against women, and on the other, by concealing women, to bring to them not only mystery and allurement but also freedom of movement.”

Muslim women in West Bengal, however, did not agree that the burqa permitted freedom of movement. Whereas the burqa made them anonymous in the public

---

62 Rukhshi Elias at the state level workshop on the status of Muslim women in West Bengal 16.08.04, Calcutta.
63 A scarf like covering for the head.
64 The Quran, 24:30,31
66 447 women (82.78%) expressed their opinion against physical manifestations of the purdah like the burqa or the hijab, though many of them extended the meaning of purdah to include ‘personal sense of decency’ which they definitely approved of. 68 women (12.59%) supported the custom of veiling
domain, providing them a 'symbolic shelter' in a 'separate world'\textsuperscript{67} of Muslims, at the same time it also invited looks which identified them as 'peculiar', different from the rest. If the burqa gave her anonymity, abandoning the burqa gave her a different anonymity: she could not then be very easily identified on the basis of her religion. This is a very important part of the emerging middle class structure and identity formation among Muslims in West Bengal who refuse to be identified only on the basis of their religion. The National Committee on the Status of Women had noted in 1974 that “respondents in West Bengal were found to observe purdah because it is a family custom, i.e., they would have no objection in leaving it”,\textsuperscript{68} and “would also support their daughters’ decisions to leave purdah.”\textsuperscript{69} Thirty years later, it is found that many of them had actually ‘left purdah’ and supported their daughters in doing so.

Nasima Banu told me about her mother Motahera Banu who had to daily visit her ailing eldest daughter at the Jadavpur TB Hospital in 1943. Until that time, Motahera had always used a burqa when she occasionally went out of the house. But with her daughter’s illness, when she had to travel alone twice a day on public transport between Park Circus and Jadavpur. She decided to abandon the burqa.\textsuperscript{70} This was before 1947 and Motahera’s action may also be explained in terms of the communal insecurity that prevailed at that time.

However, similar post-47 instances point to the fact that such action may also be a manifestation of the desire of emancipation and the desire not to be identified by religion alone. No working woman in the Bengali Muslim middle class was found to wear a burqa.

Burqa-wearers in the middle class are housewives, who do not need to come out of the house very often. And when they begin to do so more often, they prefer to leave the burqa behind. Farida Begum of Burdwan had previously used the burqa when she went out of the house very rarely with her husband. She was widowed with two teenaged daughters at the age of forty-five in 1993. The personal misfortune brought a

---


68 \textit{Towards Equality} op cit., p. 459.

69 Ibid.

70 My interview with Nasima Banu (b. 1930) on 19.9.2003, Calcutta.
great change in Farida's life. Now, she needed to "go to the bank, to the office where he (her husband) worked to take all the due payments and to the daughters' school and college more often." Though Farida is very meticulous about her prayers and fasts, she did not regard the burqa as an inseparable part of her identity and abandoned it after some time. However, many women were found to cover their heads with the ends of their sarees. This is also supposed to indicate a regard for purdah and a part of the 'adab' before elders, or on hearing the *azan*.

The burqa was found to be more of a lower middle class phenomenon. It functions as a status symbol amongst the women of the lower class to indicate a rise in their social status. In the rural site of Bamsor too, purdah was found to be a symbol of religious identity and a mark of respectability borrowed from the upper classes. The renewed activities of the Muslim religious groups in West Bengal since the nineties, like the *jamaat* and the *tabligh*, from the nineties have converted a section of the rural Muslim women to an increased use of the burqa and the *chadar*.

The use of *chadar*, a piece of cloth wrapped around the upper part of the body and the head and meant to conceal the female figure, has gained popularity in 'recent times'. My field work experience in Bamsor and acquaintance with other villages indicate that this trend has particularly increased after the demolition of the Babri Mosque. This resurgence of a heightened consciousness about a separate cultural identity insisting on a homogeneous *qaum* is a defensive retaliation against the alleged upsurge of Hindutvabadi cultural nationalism in the wider Indian context. Preachers from different places within the country as well as from Bangladesh form wandering groups and stay for some days in the local mosque. The preferred time for sermonizing

---

71 My interview with Farida Begum (b.1948) on 17.01.04 Burdwan.

72 The custom of covering the head on hearing the *azan* has a striking resemblance with the Hindu custom in which women raise their folded palms to the forehead to namaskar on hearing the conchshell being blown in the evenings.

73 46 among the 115 lower middle class women (40%), 4 among 72 upper middle class women (5.56%) and 2 out of the 353 middle class women (0.57%) interviewed used the chadar or the burqa. This accounts for 9.63% of the total women interviewed, actually wearing the burqa or the chadar. The figures amply demonstrate that the observance of purdah in its manifested forms, is more common among the lower middle class. It is practised by some women in the upper middle class and is least visible in the middle stratum.

74 ‘Idaning’, a Bengali word meaning recent times was used by many respondents. When I insisted them to explain how recent; it was found that the increased use of burqa and chadar has been noticed during the last one decade.

75 Comment made on the basis of analysis of interviews.
and interactive sessions is between the *maghrib* (evening) and *e'sha* (night) prayers. These sessions are attended by men who then try to enforce at home what they learn at these gatherings. Sometimes, such sessions are held in houses where women get a chance to hear for themselves what religion requires from them. A renewed regard for the outward manifestations of purdah (in the form of *burqa* or *chador*) among the rural middle classes is largely due to this phenomenon. The burden of Muslim communalism thus falls more heavily on women.

The *Quran* permits polygamy and upholds the ideal of monogamy at the same breath in the following verse:

Marry of your choice  
Two, or three, or four;  
But if ye fear that ye shall not  
Be able to deal justly (with them)  
Then only one,  
That will be more suitable  
To prevent you  
From doing injustice to them.  

The first two lines are widely popularised by those who defend polygamy and as well as by those who attack Islam as being primitive in its customs. It is noteworthy that while all the women I interviewed knew that Islam permitted polygamy, only 186 women (34.44%) knew that this was not unconditional. Akbar S. Ahmed had written that “although polygamy has been reduced to a caricature and is universally used as a stick with which to beat Islam, its incidence is rather low, 1-2%.”

The novel *Phulbou* by Abul Bashar centres on the custom of polygamy. Nisar Hossein, an old rich landlord in Murshidabad believed that marrying four times was a part of his religious obligation (*sunnat*). However, nothing of this sort was mentioned by any of the 399 families I interviewed. Altogether in six families (1.50% of the total

---

76 *The Quran*, 4:3  
number of families interviewed), the custom prevailed. In all the instances, the reason was stated to be a fulfilment of carnal desire rather than religious obligation.

The custom was seen to be prevalent only in one middle class business family in Burdwan.\(^{79}\) The number of other women living under polygamous conditions (not the co-wives) were three in Burdwan and two in Calcutta respectively. All these five women belonging to different age groups were from the lower middle class. However, only in two instances did the co-wives stay in the same house. Polygamy, like purdah was also seen to be more prevalent within the lower middle class.

Educated middle class Bengali Muslim women no longer approve of the custom. Four out of the six divorcee women said that they could have saved their marriage if they had compromised. Much less, all of them regarded living as a co-wife in a polygamous family as highly detrimental to their dignity and preferred to break up the marriage instead. Their own levels of religious belief or practice had no impact on their attitude towards this custom. The devoice processes in five out of the six instances were, however, initiated by man.

Personally very religious, Safina Ahamed (b. 1962) said she saw no reason to defend her ‘husband’s immorality’.\(^{80}\) She asked her husband for divorce when the situation ‘crossed (her) level of toleration’\(^{81}\) and had to forego the mahr. But she had no regrets. At the time of the interview, Safina was working in a responsible post in a private firm (a job which she got after the divorce) and had married again.

My observation is that economically and educationally weaker women who are neither supported by their natal families nor have the confidence to make an independent living helplessly accept polygamy. They sometimes find a reason for that in their religion. On the other hand, economically and educationally well-off women

\(^{79}\) My interview with Wahabunnessa Begum (b. 1955) on 04.01.03, Burdwan. She said she had trusted her husband too much with her cousin and was ultimately coerced to agree to his second marriage because she was economically dependent on him.

She did not stay in the same house with the other wife and said that she and her children were ‘looked after well’ by her husband.

\(^{80}\) My interview with Safina Ahmed (b. 1962) on 29.07.03, Calcutta.

\(^{81}\) Ibid.
denounce polygamy as “an outdated nawabi lifestyle entirely unsuited for present times”. ⁸²

Fourteen among the 115 lower middle class women interviewed (12.17%) spoke of experiencing domestic violence. However, all these women, said that they would not like the ‘interference of outsiders’ in their domestic affairs, the police and the women’s associations, were referred to as outsiders. In six among the 14 instances of women experiencing domestic violence, other relatives interned to help the concerned women. It is remarkable that none of the 425 women in the upper two strata of the middle class admitted of having experienced domestic violence in any form; perhaps because these disclosures were bound to damage the family’s prestige before an outsider. Cases of domestic violence are generally ‘under reported’ ⁸³ in India and this is because of the middle class wary about such admission which affect family honour. Bride-burning and dowry deaths also appear to be comparatively rare among middle class Bengali Muslims partly because the class itself smaller than its Hindu counterpart. Political leaders and social activists interviewed also said that domestic violence was more prevalent among the poor Muslims, as in other communities. ⁸⁴

The incidence of *talaq* or divorce among Bengali Muslim women was also found to be rare. Out of the 540 women interviewed, six were formally divorced (1.11%) while 2 lower middle class women were found to be ‘deserted’ by their husbands, without formal divorce. All the 540 women knew that ‘*talaq* is very easy for men’. Only 186 among them however (34.44)% knew that even the verbal triple *talaq* involved certain legal procedure.

Nineteenth century Islamic reform movements directed a significant portion of their energies to purge the Indian Muslim society of un-Islamic practices like dowry and social non-acceptance of widow remarriages. However both seem to be prevalent in contemporary Bengali Muslim society. All the 78 widows interviewed were

---

⁸² My interview with Amina Rahman (b. 1938) on 14.02.03, Burdwan. Many other women made similar comments.


⁸⁴ My interviews with
a) Kishwar Jahan Qader (b.1938) on 12.08.04, Calcutta.

b) Sumitra Konar, Commissioner of ward No. 3, a predominantly Muslim ward under Burdwan Municipality on 19.08.04, Burdwan.
widowed at quite an advanced age\textsuperscript{85} and I did not have the chance of interviewing any remarried widow, but the general opinion among Bengali Muslim women does not seem to favour widow remarriage. While only 127 women (23.52\%) believed that they had no personal bias against widow remarriage and felt that the matter should be left to the discretion of the woman concerned, an overwhelming 413 women (76.48\%) said that a widow should devote herself to bringing up her children rather than indulging her own pleasure and personal security in another marriage. Most women opined that a woman could think of another marriage only if she is a young and childless widow.

One of the general allegations against Muslims is that they are opposed to birth control and family planning measures. They are thus held responsible for dangerously increasing the Muslim population of India and are accused of trying to sabotage birth control measures, and consequently, economic planning. Such allegations are often used to enhance communal antipathy. Mention may be made of an article written on the basis of VHP leaflets. In these leaflets\textsuperscript{86}, it was alleged that Muslims made constant efforts to increase their population by not accepting family planning programmes of the government, by producing more children, keeping more than one wife and by converting Hindus to Islam. Such were the views propagated by the VHP leaflets shortly before the riots in Pune, Sholapur and Baramati in 1982. Theories of excessive sexual virility of Muslim men and the unnatural fertility of Muslim women are in fact continuations of the communal discourse created during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{87} Discussion about sexuality was found to be a taboo subject among most married women, particularly housewives. It is pointless to raise the issue of family planning with educated women, particularly a doctor or a nurse. Nevertheless, I asked about it of all the 432 married women, and all of them at least theoretically agreed that it was advisable to adopt family planning. Asked why, the following were the major reasons forwarded as answers:

i) 238 women (55.09\%) said it made better care of children possible,

ii) 118 women (27.31\%) said it was a more economic proposal, and

\textsuperscript{85} None of them was widowed before the age of 45.
\textsuperscript{86} Secular Democracy. February 1982. p. 5.
\textsuperscript{87} The colonial context has been discussed by Sashi Joshi, Bhagwan Joshi, Struggle for Hegemony in India, 1920 – 47, Vol. II. Delhi 1994. Charu Gupta, Sexuality, Obscenity, Community, Delhi, 2001, pp. 246-256. etc.
iii) 76 women (17.59%) said it would raise the standard of Muslims in the eyes of others.

It is noteworthy that no woman raised the popular argument that family planning is forbidden in Islam. Though all the women theoretically agreed with family planning, 37 women in the lower middle class were found with three children or more. While 8 women complained about the unwillingness of their husbands to adopt family planning measures, 29 women expressed their inability to restrict the family size because they wanted a son. This compulsion was also noticed in some middle and upper middle class families, which prevented the restriction of the family size to two children.

Muslim women also displayed conservatism in matters of medical advice. Most of the women said they depended on a woman doctor. Whereas 173 women (32.04%) said they had no bias about the doctor’s gender, 367 women (67.96%) including all the 36 rural women said they would prefer a ‘lady doctor’, especially on gynaecological matters which require physical examination. Only when referred to, would they visit a male specialist. The doctors interviewed also agreed that Muslim women generally prefer to consult women doctors.

The primary principle of Muslim law which grossly discriminates against women is that under the law of inheritance, “if there are male heirs and female heirs of the same degree, like a son and a daughter, full brother and full sister, the share of a female is always half that of the male”. Of the 540 women interviewed, 117 women (21.67%) did not know or feel that women were discriminated against in matters of inheritance. 423 women (78.33%) knew that the inheritance laws were not equal for men and women. But all of them were not in favour of a change; only 68 among them could specifically identify the areas where they were treated unequally and sought redress.

---

88 Term used by most of the respondents.
89 Example may be cited from interviews with Dr. Mumtaz Sanghamitra on 05.08.03, Calcutta and Dr. Nasima Khandekar on 12.08.03, Burdwan, both specialists in Gynaecology, who said that this was true. Interestingly, both of them also referred to a term commonly used by doctors, ‘Community practice’, to denote the clientele within the community of the doctor.
91 It is remarkable that 43 women among these 117 strongly defended the inheritance laws (even if they were unequal) on the ground that they were divine.
It is noteworthy that these 68 women were evenly distributed across the different categories of the middle class. Apart from the more informed respondents like the teachers, lawyers, etc., those who have studied the Quran or personally experienced the process of sharing in inheritance were also aware of the unequal treatment women receive in this area.

This brings us directly to the question of the Muslim Personal Law and Uniform Civil Code. When I asked them whether the Muslim Personal Law should accommodate and adjust to new realities, 75 women reserved their comments. Only 63 women (11.67%) belonging to different age groups and categories of the middle class said that “laws should adjust themselves to changing times”.

The remaining 402 women (74.44%) were not in favour of any drastic change. The number includes the five women who would like to effect a change only in the discriminatory aspects of the Inheritance Laws. Most of these 402 women believed that the law of Islam has been given by the Creator Himself and are hence unchangeable. Any law designed by men, in contrast, is likely to be filled with human follies. Twenty-four among these 402 women (5.97%) cautiously raised the point that it is unwise to agree to any change without knowing what the nature of the change would be. As Kishwar Parveen, a lawyer in Burdwan, said, “I know Muslims are projected as exceptionally backward in their outlook because they are resistant to change. But where is the blueprint of what the uniform civil code would be like? You cannot impose Hindu laws on Muslims in the name of uniformity”. An apprehension of being hegemonized by Hindus and losing her identity was clearly discernible the what Kishwar said.

Thus, while a section of the Muslims are seriously resistant to any change in the Islamic law because they believe it to be divine, another section among the Muslims resist the idea of change because they are uncertain about its possible direction.

As I have pointed out in chapter III, the level of religious education was found to be very high among Muslims. The level of regular religious performance was, however, found to be slightly lower. Manika Nag, researching on Bengali Hindu women had observed that “the claim that formal education in colleges/ universities

---

92 My interview with Kishwar Parveen (b.1971) on 13.08.03. Burdwan.
liberates middle class women from the clutches of theological orthodoxy or superstitious beliefs is itself a myth.93 She also challenged the prevalent idea that older people are more religious minded than their younger counterparts.94 Among Bengali Muslim women too, the level of institutional education or age was not found to have any impact on the degree of religious performance. However, a distinctively greater emphasis was placed on religious performance in the rural site of Bamsor. Women, by virtue of their positioning in the private domain, are expected to abide by religious norms; their fidelity to religious practices was found to become the basis for the social standing of the family. The more pious a family is thus renowned to be, the greater is its social respectability in the village.

Whereas only two women in Bamsor said they were not very meticulous about regular religious performances like Namaz and the Ramzan fasts and observed them only occasionally, the other 34 women interviewed in Bamsor (94.44%) said they considered themselves to be very regular about the five daily prayers, fasts during the month of Ramzan, attending religious gatherings (milad/jamat) and performing other rituals connected with the religious festivals.

The level of religious performance was a little less rigorous in the urban areas, compared to Bamsor, and the orthodox monitoring of the religious lives of women was also less stringent. In Burdwan, 19 women (including the 9 women who had no religious education) said they did not perform any religious activity at all and 12 women said their religious performances were occasional. In Calcutta, 58 women (including the 27 who had no religious education) said their level of religious performance stood at zero while another 36 women said their religious performances were occasional. Housewives in all the three places were found to be more particular about religious performance than working women. Although the level of religious performances was seen to decline slightly with increasing urbanisation, all of the 77 women who said they did not perform any religious activity, did not think that religion was unimportant in their lives. Fourteen among these 77 women were busy professionals who said that they cannot spare the time for the prayers or that their work

94 Ibid.
pressure does not permit them to keep the fasts. They expressed a sense of guilt over the fact that they could not perform what their religion expected from them and hoped to resume such activities in future. The level of religious performance among Bengali Muslim women as brought out from my survey may be represented in the following tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Total number of women interviewed</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Occasional</th>
<th>Nil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>252(72.83%)</td>
<td>36(10.40%)</td>
<td>58(16.76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>127(80.38%)</td>
<td>12(7.59%)</td>
<td>19(12.02%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34(94.44%)</td>
<td>2(5.56%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>413 (76.48%)</td>
<td>50 (9.26%)</td>
<td>77 (14.26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table - A

Apart from their personal faith in Islam and in God, many women said that they performed the rituals as a matter of habit because they have been taught to do so from their childhood. Some women also said that the religious performance gave them a 'sense of belonging', an identity and security as they asserted themselves as part of the greater religious community, the qaum, through these performances.

In spite of the varying levels of religious performance, all the women I interviewed said that they participated in the Muslims religious festivals. This shows that the socialisation connected with the celebration of festivals was not always directly linked with the level of religious belief or performance. Along with family members and other relatives, friends from other communities were also said to join in the celebrations.

This is a comparatively recent phenomenon and is one of the contradictions in contemporary Bengali society. While there is an increasing trend of separation along communal lines in the broader Indian context, a section of the Bengali middle class, both Hindus and Muslims, feel the necessity of increased interaction.95

---

95 This has been taken up in greater detail in the next section.
The *go-korbani* or cow sacrifice by Muslims had been a major cause of communal flare-ups in pre-1947 India.\(^9^6\) Associated with *Id uz zoha*, it remains a major source of embarrassment\(^9^7\) for the educated middle class Muslims in post-1947 West Bengal. As the interviews revealed, many women felt that Muslims themselves often fail to realize the symbolism involved in the animal sacrifice and insist on the *go-korbani* as a ritualistic assertion of their communal identity. This degrades their position in the eyes of the Hindus who generally regard *Id uz zoha* as a ‘meat eating festival’ for Muslims. However, this insistence on *go-korbani* was not noticed among the middle class - 486 among the 540 women interviewed (90%) did not think that the cow sacrifice was an essential part of *Id uz zoha*.\(^9^8\)

A few women who lived in non-Muslim localities said that even goat sacrifices during *Id uz zoha* were very inconvenient for them. They prefer to do the ‘*korbani*’ elsewhere in Muslim localities, or in their village homes. Thus, with the change in the family structures and dwelling patterns, private religious practices among Muslims are also showing certain signs of change.

The last part of this section on the domestic lives of Bengali Muslim women deals with their kitchen. It was noted that the culinary skills associated with a *sharif* Muslim lifestyle is on the decline. Many of the older women said that they had been carefully tutored to cook the Mughlai dishes in their youth. However, many later found it was futile to teach the skills to their daughters, because they thought that their daughters ‘should have other priorities rather than learning to cook’.\(^9^9\) Some daughters also refused to ‘waste’ their time on such trifles when “everything is so easily available in the restaurants’.\(^1^0^0\) Irene, who said this, is a senior lecturer in History in a college in Birbhum district. Her mother, Sufi Nur Afroze Selina, is a school teacher. Selina was taught to cook *biriyanis, rezalas* and *kormas* in her youth to become the ideal


\(^9^7\) Many women used the term ‘*aswasti*’ to imply the uneasiness or embarrassment. Distinctly Bengali in their culture, these women do not want to hurt the religious sentiment of the Hindus who regard the cow as sacred.

\(^9^8\) Majority of the other 54 women (10%) who subscribed to the view that the cow sacrifice was an integral part of the celebration of *Id uz zoha* belonged to Bamsor (22 women) and the lower middle class (32 women) in Burdwan and Calcutta.

All of them belonging to different age groups have seen this being performed in their families since childhood.

\(^9^9\) My interview with Ummenadra Farzana (b. 1954) on 14.03.04, Burdwan.

\(^1^0^0\) My interview with Irene Mustafa Mondal (b. 1971) on 24.05.03, Burdwan.
prospective bride. She wanted to import the same training to her daughters, both of whom refused to waste their time and concentrated on their studies instead. The increasing shift in the priorities of middle class Bengali Muslim women in favour of careers, instead of the private household, is thus a post-47, or more specifically, a post-70 phenomenon in West Bengal.

The insistence on consumption of ‘halal’ meat forms another important item in the domestic discourse of Bengali Muslims. It was found that the majority of the Bengali Muslim women show an inclination to preserve the domestic as a repository of religious values. Although many women said that they do not mind eating chicken/mutton that is not halal outside the house, at home they always insist on halal food.101

Food is after all, a matter of personal choice but the trends of consumption certainly speak a great deal about those consuming it. Beef-eating is one of the elements in the Muslim diet which is considered to be particularly obnoxious by Hindus and one of the major reasons why Muslim company is socially avoided. This custom seems to be declining among middle class urban Muslims. All the 36 women in Bamsor said they ate beef and have no problem about it. Hena Begum of Bamsor said, “We have very little interaction with Hindus in the village. This means that we do not have to keep them in mind while we are cooking or eating at home. We are more free to eat what our religion permits us than our relatives in the town.”102

Hena’s observations were proved to be absolutely correct when I raised the point with urban respondents. Nuclear families in predominantly non-Muslim localities and families with frequent non-Muslim visitors were the two major types which said they have stopped eating beef. In Calcutta, 97 families (35.27% of the total number of families interviewed) and in Burdwan, 45 families (40.91%) explicitly mentioned this. The reasons were also cited to be two fold:

i) to save themselves from the embarrassment of being identified with a lower level of culture, in which Muslims are identified primarily on the basis of their food habits,

101 This issue has been taken up in the next section in greater detail.
102 My interview with Hena Begum (b.1981) on 26.10.03. Bamsor.
ii) to express their regard for the religious sentiments of their Hindu friends and neighbours.

I have previously mentioned that a few Muslim women pointed out the possibilities of genetic disorders as the reason why they disapproved of cousin marriages. The fact that the general awareness about health is on the rise among Muslim women is also brought out by a similar observation. Many of them belonging to different age groups and to all the three categories pointed to health hazards which may result from beef eating. Forty eight women (35 in Calcutta and 13 in Burdwan), altogether 8.89% of the women interviewed, spoke about having stopped eating beef on medical grounds. This may be attributed to the increasing awareness about different diseases of the cow, for instance, mad cow disease and the resultant hazards incurred by consuming the flesh of an ailing animal. Apart from the general awareness created through media reports about such incidents, twelve of the more informed women referred to human brain cysts (taeniosis) caused by the consumption of diseased bovine flesh. The fact that it is not easy to identify such flesh with the naked eye was also pointed out by five women.

Thus with the changing pattern of Muslim families and their increasing awareness on different issues, the domestic lifestyles of Bengali Muslim women also seem to have changed a great deal.

(II)

A large part of the social life of the Bengali Muslims centres on the discourse of food. I have, in the second section (on employment) in chapter-II, highlighted upon how some Muslim women have complained about being discriminated against in workplaces, most of which centred around treatment in matters of sharing food. The issue of ‘halal’ food had been raised in the previous section in this chapter in the context of the domestic lives of Bengali Muslim women. This is also related to the broader social context. My findings in this regard may be represented in the following tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion regarding the consumption of ‘halal’ meat</th>
<th>Number of women and percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No comments</td>
<td>24 (4.44%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

144
Absolutely not bothered whether the meat is ‘halal’ & 130 (24.07%) 
Prefer halal meat, but do not always insist upon it in public & 110 (20.37%) 
Consumes meat that is only ‘halal’ & 276 (51.11%)

Table – B

Only 24 women (4.44%) did not want to comment on the issue. I had a feeling that for most of them, the fact that they consumed food which is not ‘halal’, was considered too disgraceful to be discussed. One hundred and thirty women (24.07%) said that they never gave a thought to whether the mutton or the chicken they were eating was ‘halal’.103 One hundred and ten women (20.37%) said they would prefer ‘halal’ food, which is what they normally eat at home to respect the values of the elders or to cater to the possibility of arrival of Muslim guests at odd hours. But these women would not insist on ‘halal’ while they were eating outside the home, in the company of friends or colleagues from other communities. It is worth noting that the opinion of these 240 women (44.44%) shows that at least among a significant section of the middle class Bengali Muslims, women were accommodative and not strictly restrained by orthodox religious prescriptions in matters of social interaction. Two hundred and seventy six women (51.11%) said that they would, under no circumstances, touch food that is not ‘halal’. This restricts the level of social interactions in public functions where the religious identity of the individual stands clearly underlined. Serina Jahan, who has never in her life bothered about whether the food was ‘halal’, explained such insistence as ‘a sort of retaliation’104 against the Bengali Hindu ‘fuss’105 over food. “As you know, many Bengali Hindus do not eat non-vegetarian food on Thursdays or anything sour on Fridays. This emphasis on the ‘halal’ affair is an area where Muslims can identify themselves with food and underline their identity as members of a ‘different’ group”,106 Serina, an upper middle class woman and co-editor of the Pashimbanga, a monthly magazine of the West Bengal State Government, thus explained this orthodoxy.

103 It was not noticed particularly in the women belonging to the younger age group; the openness about food was spread among people belonging to different professions, categories of the middle class and age groups.
104 My interview with Serina Jahan, 3.7.03, Calcutta
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
While talking about social interaction with other communities, the issue of food surfaced again. Most of the Muslim women I interviewed felt that Hindus have a prejudice about accepting personal invitation to a Muslim household. It is noteworthy that while most of the women felt humiliated as a result of such refusal, some other women belonging to the older age group, i.e., more than forty-six years old, defended the Hindus. As Shakila Khatun said in a rather contemplative mood, “Hindus have so many complex rules of commensality. They have to live in their own systems. You cannot blame them”. While a section of the Bengali Muslim women felt that ‘Hindus try to avoid eating in a Muslim home’ which restricts the level of social interaction between the two communities, 98 families (24.56%) also said that they have very close friends among Hindus. They dine at each other’s houses. Discussions with these families revealed that in post-1947 West Bengal, with the emergence of a ‘new’ educated Bengali middle class, there is increased social interaction among certain sections of the Hindu and Muslim population. A part of it came about naturally as such families identified themselves as belonging to a common cultural level; an intimate friendship growing from a primary acquaintance between students in educational institutions, colleagues at workplaces, neighbours and political comrades with similar points of view. Increased interaction helps to clear away many misconceptions that the members of the two communities have about each other. As the interviews with the first generation Muslim girl students in Burdwan prove, their classmates were generally very ignorant about Muslims and were often misled by many popular myths current about Muslims. This was primarily because the Hindu girls were also the first generation girl students from their respective families. Women in such Hindu families were influenced by popular myths like, ‘All Muslims speak in Urdu’, ‘Beef is an essential item in the daily Muslim diet’, ‘Muslim girls have to compulsorily wear the burqa’ or ‘Muslim men keep a number of wives’. These underlined how very different Muslims were from them and hence the necessity of maintaining a social distance from them. Then they met these Muslim girls in schools and colleges, which is the only possible place where they could initially have come across each other. Muslim women said their Hindu class-mates were very curious to know about how they behaved at

107 My interview with Shalitsa Khatun, 16.07.03, Calcutta.
home, what they ate, the language they spoke and the dresses they wore. Finally, when they found that they were ‘not really very different from each other’, the myths exploded and friendships developed which lasted throughout their lives, often extending to their children and grandchildren.

In the private memoirs of Syeda Jolekha Khatun, we have numerous references to her closest friend, Pratima Sen who was her classmate in school (BMGS). Neither the Syeds nor the Sens had any friend in the other community before the two girls met. The two also went to college together. Both of them settled in Burdwan after marriage and became headmistresses of two primary schools. The childhood friendship thus extended to the professional life and lasted throughout their lives. Gradually, as they came to know each other well, Jolekha writes that both of them ‘discovered that there is not really much difference’ and their friendship actually extended to their children and grand children. Many other women spoke of such friendships. Masuda Begum spoke about her schoolmate Chhabi Chowdhury, Nesar Fatma spoke about Priyamvada Agasti, Anwara Khatun spoke about her friend Dipali Dasgupta from the Victoria Institution.

I have tried to show that in many cases the education, employment and domestic patterns of Bengali Muslims are not always strictly limited by religious convention. When at least a portion among them uphold secular Bengali values in their culture and lifestyle, it becomes difficult for the rest of the population to identify them as just Muslims. Four hundred seventy eight of the 540 women interviewed (88.52%) said that they have, at some stage of their life, been told that they ‘do not look like a Muslim’ or that they had been ‘mistakenly thought to be a Bengali’. The fact that they were neither regarded nor expected to be at the same level of socio-cultural standards with Bengali Hindu women despite their best efforts in this direction, caused a sense of hurt. This was evident in their narrations at this point. There is also a reference to it in the novel Bijolibalar Mukti. Bijolibala Bhattacharya, a Brahmin widow of North Calcutta, says

---

108 My interview with Kazi Sahin Sultana (h. 1949) 28.01.04, Burdwan. Sahin also spoke about the similar experience of her deceased elder sister, Nazneen (b. 1937). Both of them had made many friends in school (BMGS) and these lasted long.
109 Private Memoirs.
110 My interview with Masuda Begum (b. 1948) on 24.06.03, Burdwan.
111 My interview with Nesar Fatma (b. 1934) on 16.02.03, Burdwan.
112 My interview with Anwara Khatun (b. 1939) on 23.08.04, Calcutta.
that she could not believe that Hashi (whose actual name was Hasina Bano) was a Muslim because, after all, Hashi did not ‘look like a Muslim’

Such comments, in real life as well as in their realistic depiction in literature, prove that a certain section of the Bengali Hindus are oblivious to the growth of a Bengali Muslim middle class due to the dearth of social interaction with the ‘new’ Muslims. The stereotyped images of a Muslim woman persist in the popular perception. This is either of a burqa-clad purdanasin sharif woman, or a socially more visible lower class working woman (as domestic help, vegetable vendor, etc.) in printed sarees and cheap glass bangles. I have already referred to surma as a typical ‘Musalmani make up’; there is also a reference to peculiar ‘Muslim hairstyles’ in the novel Hasu Banu, by which Muslim women can be visibly distinguished from the rest.

Such popular images about what Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular are like, gradually fade out as members of the two communities get to know each other well. Apart from the natural sources of interaction mentioned above, such interactions are sometimes consciously taken up by members of both communities. In the broader Indian context, with increasing trends of communal separation, a section of the Bengali middle class, both Hindu and Muslim, feel the necessity of increased interaction. This could either be a form of social obligation felt by alert citizens or a part of the deliberate secular political move by the leftist parties, which uphold a secular ideology.

Many women felt that the increased participation of other communities in religious festivals, like the Durga Puja and the Id, has been a conscious effort to improve the social relations between the two communities during recent years. Although largely restricted to men, such social interaction also takes place between the wives of such men and women comrades and colleagues in some instances.

However, natural or diligently constructed, such instances of social amity was not the only version of the social situation that the Muslim women provide. Although the communist influence was mentioned by many respondents as contributing to improved Hindu – Muslim social relations, more than twenty five years of the Left

---

Front Government in West Bengal (since 1977) has not been able to wipe away all vestiges of communalism. It is socially manifested in various forms, as much as it exists in individual minds. Many of the respondents felt that while on the one hand, there is a conscious move to control communalism, on the other, communalism has become more verbally overt. “In the post-47 scenario, communal comments were thought to be socially condemnable for a long time under the influence of the communists in Bengal ... but now with the communal elements, particularly the militant Hinduism and the Hindu cultural nationalism of the BJP – RSS on the rise, communal remarks against Muslims have become more common”,¹¹⁵ said Hosneara Khatun. Many other respondents spoke in similar terms. Naushaba Khatun (b. 1960) gave a concrete example. She has been travelling regularly on the Howrah - Rampurhat railway route for the last eighteen years. She says, “I keenly watch the Tarapith pilgrims¹¹⁶ on the train. Previously religiosity used to be the dominant spirit of such journeys. But these days an overriding spirit of fundamentalism is clearly discernible. Many of them make aggressive communal remarks, which were not heard during the seventies and the eighties.”¹¹⁷

Such complaints are sometimes printed. In a letter published in the Anandabazar Patrika¹¹⁸, a certain Ashrafi Khatun from Shillong in Meghalaya, wrote about a conversation she overheard on a Sealdah-bound local train. The older woman was telling her niece that she had found a competent tutor for daughter but she could not be appointed, because she was Muslim. It was unthinkable that “a Muslim would walk inside the house, sit on our chair and drink water from our glass.”¹¹⁹ The aunt, writes Ashrafi, was terribly shocked to hear that her niece drinks from the water bottle of her Muslim friends. This letter invited a series of letters throughout the next month in the newspaper, citing many more similar anecdotes. These were either attempts to defend such discrimination as customs (samskaras)¹²⁰ or as expressions of ethnic hatred.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Tarapith is a place of pilgrimage close to Rampurhat, in the Birbhum District of West Bengal.
¹¹⁷ My interview with Naushaba Khatun (b. 1960) on 22.05.03, Calcutta.
¹¹⁸ Anandabazar Patrika, 15.05.04, p.4
¹¹⁹ Ibid.
¹²⁰ Letter from Chandraprakash Sarkar, Murshidabad, Anandabazar Patrika, 15.06.04.
¹²¹ Letter from Saritsekhar Das, Barrackpore, Anandabazar Patrika, 1.06.04.
If religious intolerance has become more vocal during the nineties, certain other elements in Hindu-Muslim social interaction have remained a sensitive affair throughout the period. For instance, Muslim edited papers have never found a wide readership in West Bengal. This matter has been noted by P.K. Datta. For the pre-47 period, he says, "The limited readership for newspapers edited by Muslims (since Hindus did not read them) made the mofussil readership a more important component of Muslim newspapers than for Hindu newspapers." While trying to explain her perception about the social interaction between Muslims and other communities, Begum Maryam Ajij also brought this factor to light which implied that the situation was not much different in post-47 West Bengal. She, of course, did not refer to the pre-47 situation. But as the wife of the editor of Jagaran (1956-63) and Kafela (1966-73), and herself the editor of the women's section of these journals, Maryam Ajij had a deep sense of dissatisfaction that despite their best efforts, they could not increase the subscription of the papers among Hindus. A survey of the files of Jagaran and Kafela show that they were gradually compelled to restructure themselves as they had to cater to a predominantly Muslim readership. Most of the advertisements in the paper also came from Muslim patrons like 'Anwar Tea Company' or 'Ashrafia Jewellery'. Even as late as 2004, Arambha, a magazine edited by Baharuddin had to being out a special Id number keeping the Muslim readership in mind. All the non-Muslims Bengali journals interestingly have special autumn issues on the occasion of Durga Puja.

Another important aspect of Hindu-Muslim social interaction was raised by Rahatunnessa Nabi, proprietor of a shopping complex in Burdwan town. Rahatunnessa pointed out that Muslims are often compelled under circumstances to use non-denominational Bengali names for their concerns. This, on the one hand, points to the distinctive acculturation in the mainstream of Bengali social life. On the other, a number of interviews with proprietors of such business concerns prove that this was also related to the issue of retaining their acceptability before a wider clientele. This point, discussed with Muslim businessmen in Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor, revealed various intricate layers in the discourse.

---


123 My interview with Rahatunnessa Nabi (b. 1956) on 18.5.04, Burdwan.
It was found that Muslims generally feel comfortable in using distinctly Muslim names for their shops in places where they cater to predominantly Muslim buyers. For instance, in the Bamsor Bazar, outside the village on the main road, shops like Salma Cloth Stores and Sultan Shoe House are quite common. In Burdwan too, only in a few instances, did well known Muslim people in predominantly Muslim localities set up shops with distinctly Muslim names in the post-47 period. Mention may be made of the ‘Molla Hardwares’ in the predominantly Muslim area of Krishnapur in Burdwan town as an example. This shop was set up in 1982 by the Molla brothers who are widely popular among both communities in the locality.

In Calcutta, the old Muslim business houses, like J. K. Mohammedally or Barkat Ali and Brothers as clothiers, the Aminia restaurant, etc. belong to non-Bengali Muslims and have customers from both communities since pre-47 days. In fact, these names carry an extra weight in certain areas of business, like restaurants for Mughlai food or tailoring shops, where Muslims are supposed to excel. However, this does not hold true about the Bengali Muslim middle class entrepreneurs starting a new business in goods or services not considered especially a Muslim preserve during the post-47 period. In most cases, small shops and bigger business concerns use a distinctly secular Bengali name in the hope of attracting a wider range of customers.124

Hamida Rahman runs a readymade garments shop for women and children called Shreya, in Gariahat, Calcutta. Hamida, an honours graduate in Philosophy from the City College, Calcutta, initially insisted that she had given her shop a distinctly Bengali name – ‘it is not particularly Hindu’.125 The other half of the story was revealed after repeated questioning. Hamida soon said, “Most of my customers know that I am Muslim but that does not matter to them in any way ... But that is only after they know me. If I had put up a distinctly Muslim name on the signboard, the very sight of it would have driven away many customers. They would have thought it was something to do with Muslims only... And why should I put up a Muslim name when I am not catering to Muslims only?”126

124 A number of furniture shops, bedding stores and travel agencies in Calcutta and Burdwan were found which, though owned by devoutly religious (sometimes very orthodox) Muslims, carried distinctly Bengali names as a conscious marketing strategy.
125 My interview with Hamida Rahman (b. 1962) on 30.06.03, Calcutta.
126 Ibid.

151
women in Calcutta and Burdwan also raised the point that Muslim maidservants often adopt Hindu names to get jobs in Hindu families.\textsuperscript{127} They thus tried to draw my attention to the point that such incidents are representative of the social stigma against Muslims. However, working women belonging to the lower economic categories remain outside the scope of my work.

Another important vantage point from which the social position of Bengali Muslims may be assessed is the availability of accommodation on rent. Many women raised this point. I have noted in the previous section that 35 years old Homayra Parvin was one of the three women (interviewed by me) who used vermilion regularly. Gradually it came to light that before buying their own flat in a housing complex at Kasba, they had lived as tenants at various places in Calcutta after their marriage in 1994. Homayra’s husband, also a Bengali Muslim, teaches in a college in Garia. So they had preferred to live in South Calcutta. Muslim habitation as such is sparse in South Calcutta which has largely been settled by Hindu migrants from East Bengal.

A few political friends were kind enough to find them an accommodation in Jadavpur for some time. As they lived in the house of a common friend as a tenant located deep inside a \textit{para}, Homayra said, “Curious eyes scrutinised me every time I came out of the house. Bengali eyes, by nature, are first cast on the parting of your hair. After a few days, I started wearing sindur as a strategy to try to make myself acceptable as ‘Huma Boudi’ in the locality.”\textsuperscript{128} But most people interviewed were not as lucky as Homayra to have friends who would accept Muslims as tenants. The problem is aggravated in cases of mixed marriage. Nasima Banu remembers that her husband Amalendu De, had been refused as a tenant a number of times even by well-known political and academic families after they came to know that his wife was Muslim.\textsuperscript{129} Irene Mustafa Mondal could not find an accommodation in the predominantly Hindu village in Birbhum where her college is situated. Her other Hindu women colleagues had no problem in this regard. No villager was willing to keep a Muslim as paying

\textsuperscript{127} My interviews with.
\textsuperscript{a) Saira Banu (b. 1959) on 1.09.03. Calcutta.}
\textsuperscript{c) Nafisa Sultana (b. 1958) on 19.05.03. Calcutta.}
\textsuperscript{d) Ashrafi Khatun (b. 1966) on 22.08.03, Burdwan, etc.}

\textsuperscript{128} My interview with Homayra Parvin (b. 1969) on 10.9.04, 12.9.04. Calcutta.

\textsuperscript{129} My interview with Nasima Banu (b. 1930) on 19.9.03. Calcutta
guest - they would on some pretext express their inability in this regard. The only other Muslim working in the college is an assistant in the library. Irene's colleagues often suggested to her to ask the man for renting a room in his house as a solution. Irene feels annoyed, "I understand it all... Everyone knows that this man does not have any extra room in his house. But every time only his name comes up as my possible landlord ... it is disgusting".130

This difficulty of Muslims in obtaining accommodation where the landlords are Hindus has been highlighted in a news report. After receiving complaints in this regard, The Statesman selected 35 classified advertisements from different newspapers looking for paying guests. Then telephone calls were made to the respective advertisers as a potential tenant with a Muslim name. Five instances were cited in the report and the veracity of the allegation was confirmed.131 The Muslim tenant was politely refused on a different pretext in all the instances.

This matter has also been reflected in contemporary fiction. Bijolibalar Mukti may be cited as an example. Jyotirmoy Chakraborty, the tenant of Bijolibala Bhattacharya, breaks down before her after his wife's death. Bijolibala charges him as to why he had hidden the real identity of his wife - that Hashi Chakraborty was, after all, a Muslim named Hasina Bano. Jyotirmoy says, "Because I was helpless, people refused to accept us as tenant once they heard my wife was Muslim. We could get an accommodation only after Hasina was introduced as Hashi".132

This refusal to accept Muslim tenants naturally leads to ghettoisation. Saonli Mitra, daughter of the noted theatre personalities, Sambhu and Tripti Mitra, and herself an artist and cultural activist, notes this. She had grown up in the predominantly Muslim locality of Park Circus in the house of a Muslim landlord and amid Christian neighbours during the fifties.133 She notes how the situation started changing rapidly from the sixties.134 The ease with which children belonging to different communities previously interacted was getting strained from around this time. This is, in spite of the

---

130 My interview with Irene Mustafa Mondal (b. 1971) on 24.05.03, Burdwan.
132 Bijolibalar Mukti, op cit., p. 69.
134 Ibid., p.48.
fact that communal riots became rare from the sixties. It may thus be regarded as a sort of non-public communalism.

Ranabir Samaddar has noted “how mixed settlements are on their way out over large areas of West Bengal (I suspect, in entire Bengal) and new settlements based on exclusive religious identities are growing up”.135 Gargi Chakravartty verified his ‘suspicions’ and found them to be true in Calcutta. She notes, “community consciousness drove migrants to safer places, which meant clustering around persons of their own community; although no personal bond or connection existed between the migrants and the original inhabitants, the fact that both groups belonged to the same community lent them some measure of security”.136 Gargi Chakravartty locates such internal displacement of communities and consequent ghettoisation in Calcutta during the post-1964 period137. In Calcutta, Park Circus, Rajabazar, Kidderpore and Metiabruj are renowned Muslim localities with the greatest concentration of the Bengali Muslims in the Park Circus area.

Interviews in Burdwan also revealed that the importance of living in the neighbourhood of one’s own community was felt after the insecurity generated by the 1964 riots. Ghettoised neighbourhoods in the town, however, grew up during the seventies and the eighties. Newer areas like Nazrul Pally have come up as a result of increased demand for land among the ‘new’ middle class Muslims and older Muslim-majority areas like Bahir Sarbamangala, Rasikpur, Pir Baharam, etc. have developed a great deal in recent years. Land prices in these predominantly Muslim areas have gone up immensely from the eighties with the increase in demand.138

Amanullah Akbar (b.1932), who was vice-Chairman of the Burdwan Municipality during 1981-87, raised the point while talking about contemporary Hindu-Muslim social relations. A CPI(M) whole timer, Akbar said, “I was in charge of civic settlement in the town during my tenure as vice-chairman, and for a long time before that, as the Commissioner of the (predominantly) Muslim ward of Pir Baharam

137 Ibid, p.145.
138 Conclusion derived at from the observations and comparative prices given by
a) Syed Abdul Halim (b. 1930) on 25.02.03.
b) Amanullah Akbar (b.1932) on 29.05.03.
(presently ward no 19), where I live. In spite of our best efforts, all is not well in Hindu-Muslim social relations. Or else, these Musalman paras would not have needed to develop so rapidly.\textsuperscript{139}

Interviews with other families prove that with money accumulating in the hands of the new middle class professionals, which became considerably visible in West Bengal since the sixties, Muslim families have shown an inclination to build houses in Muslim localities. Mixed habitations are on their way out both in Calcutta and Burdwan.

In Calcutta however, I found 11 families which in the last twenty five years have bought apartments in non-Muslim localities to give priority to their secular Bengali values. Many of them said they were initially not well received by their neighbours. It is also remarkable that 7 out of these 11 families have migrated to Calcutta after 1964 and in 4 families both the husband and the wife were born after 1964. Thus, without any personal experience of what turn communal violence might take in Calcutta, all these families expressed a deep faith in the secular culture of Calcutta.

Apart from the old residents of Burdwan town who have been living in non-Muslim localities since the pre-Independence period, only three families were found to have built new houses in non-Muslim localities.

When the comparatively new residents in any 'Musalman para' were asked as to why they chose Muslim localities for habitation, the following answers came up: some women said they felt a sense of security among their 'own people'\textsuperscript{140} and were sure that "jealousy among neighbours could never take a communal turn".\textsuperscript{141} Riots were definitely at the back of their minds. This was more clearly articulated by Ruksana Haque as she said, "... nobody knows what happens when; in case of an attack at least the possibilities remain that we (Muslims staying together) can put up a united resistance."\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{139} My interview with Amanullah Akbar, op cit.
\textsuperscript{140} My interview with Ruksana Haque (b. 1951) 23.08.03, Burdwan.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid
Firdousi Bibi (b.1945), an upper middle class housewife in Laskardighi in Burdwan, has both her sons living in the United States of America. She lives with her husband in this Muslim neighbourhood in a house, which they built after his retirement in 1997. She had a different reason. “For some people, who do not have many relatives or whose relatives do not stay near them, it is advisable to live in a Muslim neighbourhood, near people of one’s own community. This is because, in times of crisis, like a death in the family, it ensures definite help. Certain events in life require religious rituals to be performed and necessitate community intervention. Friends from other communities, however genuinely helpful, cannot do anything in such matters. You need to have your ‘own’ connections”,¹⁴³ she said.

This brings us to the immediately next issue: of the level of social interaction within one’s own community. It was found that older women, i.e., those more than 46 years old, had more friends within the community (and outside the circle of relatives) than those in the younger age group. Social relations within one’s community were found to be largely restricted among relatives in the younger generation. Festivities associated with Akika, the first major religious ceremony among Muslims after the birth of a child, in which the child is given a proper name, is no longer restricted to the community alone. Friends from the other communities are also invited to the feast. Circumcision seems to have become a more private affair among the middle and upper middle class. Many people felt that it was ‘a necessary ritual for Muslims’, but to associate festivities with its performance would indicate ‘low taste’.¹⁴⁴

Akikas, weddings and deaths were cited by most of the respondents as the occasions when they interact most with other members of their community. Another platform which provides Muslim women a chance of social interaction within the community are religious gatherings called jamaats. Jamaats for women are normally held once a week or once a month in the afternoon in a house chosen for the purpose. The venue may shift each time, being held in the house of each interested family, or may remain constant.

¹⁴³ My interview with Firdausi Bibi (b. 1945) on 7.09.03. Burdwan.
¹⁴⁴ My interview with Dr. Roshenara Begum (b. 1953) on 05.08.03. Burdwan. She is a mother of two sons whose circumcisions had been a quiet family affair.
Only women, mostly housewives, attend these gatherings. Whereas a section of Muslim women belonging to different age groups (164-30.37%) said that they were not interested in attending these jamaats, an overwhelming number 376 women (69.63%) said that attending these jamaats should give them a chance to identify themselves with the broader social life of the community. It is worth mentioning that among these 376 women, there are many who have never attended a jamaat. But their desire of participation remains an indicator of the significance of religion in their lives.

In conclusion, it may be noted that various conflicting patterns emerge from a study of the socio-domestic lives of Bengali Muslim women. Some women give priority to their Bengali socio-cultural identity over their religion, which also alters their domestic pattern from the conventional Muslim type and changes the nature of their social interaction and attitude towards other communities. It is more visible in the ‘new’ middle class and the newer generation of the old pre-1947 middle class families. The pre-eminence of the ‘Bengali’ identity is also noticed in many of the old political families. It makes greater socio-cultural interaction possible; with Hindus and Muslims participating in each other’s festivals. The other significant section of the Muslim women interviewed, including those in the rural milieu as well as among the urban lower middle and upper middle classes gives priority to their Muslim religious identity, which restrict the scope of their interaction with other communities. In any case, their decisions are not autonomous. They are crucially shaped by Hindu neighbours, colleagues, clients and by Hindu communalists operative within and outside Bengal.