CONCLUSION

I have a few things to note in conclusion. This work was originally intended as a survey of 45 years. I have, however, covered a historical time-frame of more than a century. I have traced the transition form purdah to modernity in the lives of Bengali Muslim middle class women: I have, however, devoted greater attention to what these women perceive and encounter when they step out of purdah into the bigger world. I have tried to focus on their views, crises and inherent self-contradictions in the process of identity-formation, as members of a minority community. I have simultaneously tried to show how such an effort at identity-formation is thwarted by several other factors, like the partition of the country and communal riots. At the operational level, themes of education, employment, socio-domestic status, political participation, etc, helped us to comprehend the totality of the phenomenon called identity formation. The dearth of written sources for this subject need not be repeated here My enterprise only confirmed the proposition of Paul Thompson that “for the social history of any minority group, the limitations of written documentation are such that the use of oral sources introduces an entirely new dimension to the subject”.¹ I only hope, I could bring recognition to a “substantial group of people, who had (until now) been ignored in history”.²

The exercise in oral history has been enlightening for me in many ways. On the one hand, it familiarised me with diverse social experiences of people; on the other, it enabled me to “understand the people (I was interviewing) and their historical points of view”.³

I have tried to explode the myth of a generalised or absolute backwardness of Muslim women in education. Economic constraints, difficulties in finding a groom and the conservative fear that education would instil arrogance in women and would lead to an undue assertion of independence are more operative among a section of the lower

² Ibid.
middle class Bengali Muslims. No such factors restricted the women who were slightly higher in the social scale. It is true, on the whole, that Bengali Muslims appear to lag behind in education. This may be explained by the fact that while Muslims form a numerical minority in the Bengali population there are fewer middle class persons among them. The majority still belong to the lower classes with professions like agricultural and manual labourer, masons and tailors, paan and tea stall owners.

Considerable openness regarding co-education and co-curricular education was noted in the Muslim middle classes. It is remarkable that the necessity for a separate 'Purdah College' for Muslim girls was felt in Calcutta during the nineteen thirties. This was, as I have discussed in chapter I, because of certain problems Muslim girls faced while studying with girls from other communities and living with them same in the boarding house. This was also because they could not think of attending a co-educational college. Burdwan was a step advance in this regard. Except for a few schools which existed earlier like the Maharani Adhirani Girls’ School, girls from both communities in the town started going to school on a larger scale, after the foundation of the Burdwan Municipal Girls’ School in 1936. It may be argued that, it could not, in any case, have been feasible to establish a separate college for Muslim girls in the town. It is also true that Muslim girls did not face any discrimination on religious grounds when they started going to Raj College from the forties.4

Both Hindu and Muslim girls faced the same kind of hostility from a generally conservative society of the mufassil and from their male class-mates. Girls from both communities jointly countered such criticism and hostility.5

Music, singing, dancing, painting and acting and similar cultural activities are forbidden in orthodox Islam. They are now encouraged. I have tried to locate several factors during the post-1947 period, which has led to such widening of the scope of cultural initiatives among Bengali Muslims.

An interesting contradiction regarding religious education is seen among Bengali Muslims. In spite of considerable modernisation in their curriculum in recent years,

4 My interview with Syeda Jolkha Khatun on 08.09.2002, Burdwan; also Private Memoirs.
5 Ibid.
Bengali Muslim women, however religious they may be in their personal lives, expressed a strong disapproval of the madrasa system of education. Bengali medium government schools or English medium private schools under the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations and, in some instances, the Central Board of Secondary Education were preferred, depending upon the availability and / or the affordability of these schools.

Such education is believed to equip the girls for their future career and it helps them to acquire the same status as girls in other communities. This aspect of social competition has led to increased interest in co-curricular activities among Bengali Muslim girls. On the other hand, this does not imply a devaluation of the importance attached to religious education. Religious education and training are found to be integral components in the identity of most women in the different categories interviewed. The second level of contradiction here is that, though the level of religious education is considerably high, the actual level of religious performance is not so high among Bengali Muslim women.

Widely circulated ideas regarding the obsession of Muslims with ideas of purdah and female seclusion are also largely untrue. On the contrary, the desire to ‘work’, i.e., take up gainful employment is on the rise among the middle class women of this community. Those who cannot compete academically, explore non-conventional areas of employment, like fashion and beauty industries. Better economic prospects also lure lower middle class women into these professions.

Working women from this community encounter a wide range of experiences as members of a minority community, which have an impact upon how they publicly remodel themselves. Some women become more assertive of their religious identity, some women imbibe the culture of the majority community. For some, this comes spontaneously as they try to ‘improve’ themselves according to this standard. For others, identifying with the dominant culture becomes a strategy for survival. They often nurture a deep resentment against such compromises.

With greater participation in public life and the widening sphere of interaction with other communities, as well as the influence of the print and the electronic media,
there is a considerable break from the stereotypes about Bengali Muslim women, their world-views and family structure.

Such changes are distinctly visible in the rising age of marriage among middle class Bengali Muslim girls, declining rate of cousin marriages, rarity of the incidences of polygamy and divorce, general disapproval of the custom of widow remarriage, adoption of, or at least strong support for family planning measures, etc. Some of these changes, like reducing the contract of mahr at the time of marriage to a mere formality and the growth of the custom of dowry, may be viewed as the Hindu influence. But certain other features, like preference for nuclear families, indicate the growth of a new companionate marriage ideal among many Muslim couples.

It is also interesting to note that while there is an increasing trend of separation along communal lines in the broader Indian context, a section of Bengali middle class, both Hindu and Muslim, feel the necessity of increased interaction. While it is a strategy of the Leftist political parties to widen its mass support base, the necessity for increased interaction has also been felt by conscious citizens as a part of their social responsibility. Such interaction becomes meaningful when both parties belong to the same cultural and intellectual plane. Naturally achieved or diligently constructed, the uniformity of this Bengali identity achieved through language, culture and other symbols can be noted among a section of both Hindus and Muslims in contemporary urban West Bengal.

The widening ideological base of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which does not insist upon atheism as one of its principles today, has been able to accommodate a significant number of Bengali Muslims women within its fold. In Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor, most of the politically active women were attached to this party. There are also some leaders and activists from other parties in the Left Front. The ruling party is perhaps thought of to be able to provide the greatest security to its subscribers.

A majority of the Muslim women interviewed said that they keep themselves informed on political issues, an issue that I have condensed as 'political awareness', in Chapter V. The generally high level of political awareness is not always a result of a high level of personal interest in politics. Many women who said they detested politics, still kept themselves politically aware of different events at the local, state, national, and even
international level, out of a deep-seated communal insecurity. They are aware of political events to calculate what turn these might take. As one of my respondents, Farida Begum, who has started looking after the family business after her husband’s death, told me, “There are no riots…. This does not mean that there shall be no riots in future”. What she meant was that she followed political news to be sure that the events were not going to affect her life and property in any way.

It is from this sense of insecurity that Bengali Muslim women tend to participate in politics and prefer living in a communitarianised neighbourhood, leading to increased ghettoisation in recent times. Many women also abandon the burqa, when they have to come out of the house more frequently than before. Whereas the burqa provides a physical anonymity to the wearer, abandoning it implies the loss of a communal identity in public. This is sometimes desired for reasons of greater security.

Communal insecurity among Bengali Muslim women is on the rise primarily due to two recent but stable factors. Firstly, the growing prosperity of the Muslim middle class is likely to incite the jealousy of other communities and secondly, the nation wide growth of Hindu fundamentalism is also believed to bear an impact upon the apparently peaceful socio-political life in West Bengal.

The fact that many women reported that they have faced comments like, “You do not look like a Muslim” or “I had mistakenly thought you were Bengali” show that the idea about stereotypical Muslim women is still very much alive in popular perception. It also establishes the point that a Bengali Muslim woman, culturally comparable to her Hindu social counterpart, is still not socially visible in significant numbers.

Many Muslim women in the village and also among the lower middle class in Burdwan and Calcutta, referred to the ‘Hindu’ culture as ‘Bengali’ or ‘Bengali’. The Muslim, in this context, formed the ‘other’ to themselves. The last question I asked my respondents was which of the four elements in their identity – Bengali, Muslim, middle class and woman, was most important to them. I also asked what was the role of the other three elements in their lives. This initiated such a great deal of discussion that I find it impossible to quantify and tabulate the data in this regard.

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6 My interview with Farida Begum (b. 1948) on 17.01.04, Burdwan.
Politically active women worked in the women’s front of their respective parties. Only five women in Calcutta, including Miratun Nahar, who is also a member of the West Bengal Commission for Women, are attached with non-political women’s movement. Two women in Burdwan are attached with the Soroptimist International, an international body which focuses on women’s issues. Muslim women revealed that the gender identity becomes important at the workplace, where they encounter men as clients and colleagues. It is here that some Muslim women feel the necessity of taking up Hindu symbols, like the sindur. This is expected to act as a shield in many cases.

Gender as identity acquires importance in the domestic sphere as women face discrimination in matters of inheritance. When faced with crisis situations in family life, like polygamy and divorce, Muslim women realise how different and disadvantaged they are, in comparison to the women of other communities. The implementation of Uniform Civil Code seems to be the most desirable solution in this case. Still, some women refrain from speaking in its favour since there is no clear picture of what such a code is going to be like. These women are not orthodox themselves, but resent the idea of being hegemonised by Hindus in the name of uniformity.

At the social level, gender acquires the greatest importance during the time of riots. The woman’s body is an easier and more effective target to heap insult to the men of the ‘other’ community. The Gujarat carnage also confirmed that women of all age groups are potential targets. The barbarity inflicted on pregnant women and little girls was raised by the women to point out that, their gender becomes important during the time of riots.

Many women said they had never seriously thought about these four components in their identity until I raised the issue. Middle class identity becomes more important with the rising price level when women find it increasingly difficult to maintain their standards of living. Other middle class values are reflected in their domestic organisation, personal discipline, dress code and socialisation.

However, the other two elements are intertwined in such a way in the identities of these middle class women, that it becomes virtually impossible to separate one from the other. To some women, education and a search for identity have resulted in the growth of
a distinct Bengali-ness. To others, its remains a strategy to gain entry and acceptance into the wider social order.

For a new group of Bengali Muslims, religion is of no significance at all in their personal lives. In the words of Ummenadra Farzana, "The fact that I am Muslim is important perhaps to the rest of the world. This is how, everybody, including Muslims, starts to form an opinion about me. This is not important to me at all". On the other end, Dr Mumtaz Sanghamitra was more assertive, "Islam would not have really been important to me if there was no other religion in the world. But so long as there exists any other religion, I would, at any cost, prefer to remain a Muslim".

The wide range of diversities of opinion in this regard only establishes the reality of the complex interplay through which the subject of my research is formed.

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7 My interview with Ummenadra Farzana (b. 1954) on 14.03.04, Burdwan.
8 My interview with Dr. Mumtaz Sanghamitra (b. 1945) on 05.08.03, Calcutta.