Chapter –III

To Learn, To Earn

In this chapter, I return to the theme of on the educational and employment situation of Bengali Muslim women. I focus on the period between 1947 and 1992. However, I would make some observations on the post-1992 trends as well. The fieldwork was conducted during 2002-04 and many respondents referred to their post-1992 experiences which I felt compelled to consider. 1

This chapter is divided into three sections; the first deals with education and the second with employment. The third section is a small epilogue written on the basis of material gleaned from contemporary fiction.

(1)

'Lord, increase me in knowledge!' 2

This is a prayer which every Muslim who reads the Quran utters. The Quran also clearly states, 'They are losers who besottedly have slain their children by keeping them in ignorance'. 3 Other sayings of the Prophet like "Seek knowledge even if it be in China" or "The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr" have been quoted enough often to establish the place of education in Islam. At different places in the Quran, Muslim women (Muslimatin) have been separately mentioned along with Muslim men. Although the word Muslimin would have been enough to include both men and women, such specific and separate mention of Muslim women was deemed judicious 4 so that men could not find any excuse of depriving women of their rights, as in education. In spite of the theoretical approval for women's education in the law books of Islam, Bengali Muslims had, for a long time, deprived their women of this right. 5

The idea regarding the backwardness of Muslims in education is so commonplace that several scholars who have dealt with the issue have tended to make only very generalised statements. For instance, a statement that, "To a large extent Muslims can be

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1 This is also applicable for chapters IV, V and VI.
2 The Quran, 20: 114.
3 Ibid., 6: 141.
5 Supra, Ch. I
said to be about 4 to 5 times behind others”,

hardly takes into account the comparative socio-economic conditions of Muslims and the ‘others’ before making the comment. M. Indu Menon also said, “It is true that Indian Muslims themselves are backward compared to other communities”. M K A Siddiqui also ignores the class factor while commenting on the general educational level of Muslims in West Bengal. He notes that Muslim students form an appallingly low 1% (4,500 out of 4,50,000) of the total number of students sitting for the Madhyamik Examination in 1980. He records that Muslims form 2.3% of the total number of students enrolled in primary education which declines significantly with every advancing stage in Calcutta, where Muslims form more than 15% of the total population. Though the Census figures do not give us any data on the class composition of students from the different communities, we can understand why this is so if we remember that the majority of the Muslims in Calcutta belong to the lower economic categories.

Although the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India expressed its awareness about the regional and socio-economic differences among women, it, too, could not escape from generalising on the educational condition of Indian Muslim women and from treating them as a homogeneous category. It states, “Apart from the lower literacy rates among Muslim women, our survey of minority communities definitely revealed that the number of Muslim women with no formal education continues to be very high in the states which have otherwise progressed considerably in the development of women’s education (e.g. Kerala). However, the obvious impact of the socio-economic status of women on their education has also been duly considered by some other scholars. The nation-wide survey of Muslim women conducted by Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon also deserves to be mentioned in this regard.

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7 M. Indu Menon, Status of Muslim Women in India, A Case Study of Kerala, New Delhi, 1981, p. 2
9 Ibid., p. 16
10 "The meaninglessness of national and state averages in determining the actual condition and status of women in the country, in the context of the gross inequalities and wide variations in socio-economic factors that influence women’s lives" ... Towards Equality: Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India, New Delhi, 1974, p.15
11 Ibid., p. 96
Unequal Citizens\textsuperscript{13}, the monograph based on this survey, devotes a section to the education of Muslim women across different socio-economic classes.

Starting from the basic issue of literacy, it addresses the patterns of school enrolment, average years of schooling, obstacles to schooling, attitudes to co-educational schools and reasons for dropping out. Inequality and difference between communities as well as regional and zonal variations have been highlighted in this work.\textsuperscript{14}

Educating Muslim Girls\textsuperscript{15} is an expansion of the educational themes taken up in Unequal Citizens. Here the authors draw on their survey findings on the education of girls, based on data collected across five cities in the country, to present a macro consideration of the complex factors that influence the schooling of Muslim girls. Since the survey was conducted across different socio-economic groups, the authors cannot escape generalisations like, “High levels of poverty and the low availability of government-run education have marginalised Muslims generally, and Muslim girls in particular”.\textsuperscript{16}

However, I am looking at a cross section of Bengali Muslim women who are not particularly plagued by poverty. This makes a significant difference in their educational status and aspirations.

I have tried to represent data about both class and age vis-à-vis the educational level of my respondents in the following tables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Lower Middle</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Upper Middle</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upto class X (19.26%)</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Class X but less</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than graduate (8.51%)</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate (31.67%)</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{13} Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India, OUP, New Delhi, 2004.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, pp. 47-74.

\textsuperscript{15} Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, Educating Muslim Girls: A Comparison of Five Indian Cities, Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2005.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p. 55.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Graduate (26.85%)</th>
<th>Calcutta</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>126</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra academic</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualifications like M.Phil. / Ph.D. etc. (3.70%)</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree/ Diploma MBBS / MS / BE / ME, etc. including Diploma in Tailoring &amp; Physiotherapy. (10.00%)</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE – II**

Educational Qualification and Age (as in 2004) of the Respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Below 26 yrs</th>
<th>26 – 46 yrs</th>
<th>46 – 66 yrs</th>
<th>66 yrs &amp; above</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upto class X</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Class X but less than graduate</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Graduate</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra academic qualifications like M.Phil. / Ph.D. etc.</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree/ Diploma MBBS / MS / BE / ME etc. including Diploma in Tailoring &amp; Physiotherapy</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables have been prepared on the basis of the data collected from my fieldwork. There are some limitations in the representation. For instance, I have
interviewed 6 girls in Burdwan\(^\text{17}\) and 3 girls in Bamsor\(^\text{18}\) in the ‘upto Class X and below 26 years of age’ category. In Burdwan 2 of the 6 girls and in Bamsor 1 of the 3 girls were studying in Cl. X at the time of the interview and were to sit for their Board Examinations in 2005. It was apparent from the interviews that they would not stop with Cl. X although they were included in this category.

Among the 23 girls enlisted in the ‘graduate below 26 years of age’ category\(^\text{19}\) there were 5 girls (4 in Calcutta and 1 in Burdwan) who were waiting for their final graduation results at the time of the interview. They aimed at higher education.

In spite of the limited scope of my study, I have tried to locate the impact of a few major factors, viz., class, age, availability of infrastructural facilities, outlook/attitude towards education, place of residence and the educational level of other family members on the education of Bengali Muslim women. These factors are interrelated. Since it is not possible to discuss all the intricate aspects of the matter; I have tried to highlight only the most significant findings.

Class was found to be the most important factor influencing the level of women’s education. No woman in any of the categories of the middle class was found to be illiterate.\(^\text{20}\) Educational discrimination between sons and daughters was found be absent in the middle and upper middle classes for whom affordability is not a major issue. This was found to be true to some extent even for a few lower middle class families (7 out of the total 399 families interviewed –1.75%), closer to the ‘poor’ economic category. They expressed their preference to spend more funds on the potential breadwinner. Income levels of the family and the prospects of higher education of a girl were found to be very directly interrelated in such cases.

Women ‘from and above 26 years of age who had not passed through Cl. X’ were 46 in Calcutta\(^\text{21}\) (13.29% of the total women interviewed in Calcutta), 31 in Burdwan \(^\text{22}\) (19.62% of the total women interviewed in Burdwan) and 15 in Bamsor\(^\text{23}\) (41.67% of the total women interviewed in Bamsor). The majority of them belonged to the lower

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\(^{17}\) Table II, Row 1, Column 1, Burdwan

\(^{18}\) Table II, Row 1, Column 1, Bamsor.

\(^{19}\) Table II, Row 3, Column 1.

\(^{20}\) There are still chances that there may be some illiterate middle class women among those above sixty years of age who had belonged to the ‘poor’ economic category in their childhood.

\(^{21}\) Table II, Row 1, Columns 2.3 and 4, Calcutta.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., Burdwan.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., Bamsor.
middle class and 74 of the total 92 such women (80.43 %) said that their education had been discontinued due to economic reasons.

Graduation was found to be the maximum attainable academic limit for lower middle class girls. This was related to their social outlook which considered that it would be difficult to get their daughters married off if they were ‘too educated’. Of the 19 graduates I have interviewed in Calcutta who belong to the ‘less than 26 years’ age category, four girls (21.53%) said they are likely to settle down as housewives and 6 girls (31.49%), who were aware of their academic limitations, wanted to take up vocational courses. All these girls came from the lower middle class. General education was found to qualify middle and upper middle class girls for different professions like teaching, law or other competitive services. They devoted more time for this type of formal general education. Lower middle class girls, on the other hand, were found to take a more serious interest in vocational training, like tailoring or beauty trade, from a much lower age. Educational ambitions often being seriously hampered by financial constraints and marriage prospects, these girls took up some sort of training which would enable them to earn a living on their own as soon as possible. This issue has been taken up again in the next section. Nine girls (47.37%) wanted to pursue post-graduation and were confident about their academic potentialities. Seven among them belonged to the middle and two to the lower middle classes.

Thus, the theory of a generalised absolute or backwardness of Muslim women in education doesn’t hold good for the middle class though the level of academic aspiration was found to vary with one’s membership in the lower, middle or upper categories of the middle class.

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24 Table II Row I Column I
25 6 lower middle class mothers and 4 girls actually expressed this apprehension. This was also confirmed from an interview with Kishwar Jahan Qader (b.1938), social worker, Calcutta interviewed on 12.08.04. She said she was aware of this trend and has personally dealt with some problems related to marital maladjustment when an educationally more qualified girl is married to a boy with lesser academic qualifications, particularly among the lower middle class Muslims of Kidderpore and Metiabruj. She said “Muslims being a minority, the range of choice of suitable grooms as such is quite restricted ... most of the lower middle class boys enter into some sort of trade as fast as they can after school, sometimes even before... lower middle class families have many handicaps. Most of them withdraw their daughters from education under compelling circumstances because they neither have the funds for a richer marriage, nor would qualified grooms with better socio-economic background normally negotiate with these families”.
26 Table II. Row 3. Column I. Calcutta.
27 Courses like soft toy making, beautician training, telephone and computer operation were mentioned by the girls.
It is also a common belief that "Muslim women have not been able to take full advantage of education largely due to the dominance of social, structural and institutional factors in Islam such as early marriage, polygamy, unilateral divorce, segregation, veiling, etc. which impede their utilisation in full."\textsuperscript{28} The conservative social outlook that such statements imply does seem to regulate the education of lower middle class girls, in some instances. Along with economic constraints and the possible problems of finding a groom, certain other values were voiced by some lower middle class respondents of the older age group who still viewed women’s education with suspicion.\textsuperscript{29} They believed that higher education might lead to the growth of undue assertion or independence by daughters or that they might get “emotionally involved with the ‘wrong’ kind of man”.\textsuperscript{30} Women themselves articulate such fears. It is possible that some middle and upper middle class women also subscribed to these values, but it is also remarkable that no one belonging to these two categories openly voiced any strong conservative view about restricting the education of girls.

The history of Muslim women’s education shows distinct changes through the generations. The impact of age on the level of education of Muslim women is related to the changing availability of infrastructural facilities as well as a change in outlook. Women above fifty years of age with academic qualifications below Cl. X talked about the indifference of their families or having spent their childhood in areas where the schools were ‘located at a long distance from home’.\textsuperscript{31}

Farida Bibi, an upper middle class housewife in Calcutta, who spent her childhood in Antpur, North 24 Pargans, mentioned both factors. She said, “I cannot recall any particular religious bias against the education of girls during my childhood. We went to the village primary school together, Muslims and Hindus, girls and boys, all ... After that the boys started going to the high school in a nearby village and we girls were left behind, playing with dolls and preparing for marriage. How could girls have daily walked up and down so far? Even Hindu girls in the village had the same fate. There was no idea that girls needed to study - it had nothing to do with religion”.\textsuperscript{32} As

\textsuperscript{28} M. Indu Menon. op. cit., p.23.
\textsuperscript{29} Among the total 115 lower middle class respondents interviewed (13.04%) shared this opinion.
\textsuperscript{30} Mentioned by Munira Begum, b. 1954 interviewed on 07.01204, Calcutta. She got her daughters married soon after they were admitted in the B.A. Class.
\textsuperscript{32} Farida Bibi. b 1932. interviewed on 09.01.04, Calcutta.
most Bengali Muslims live in the villages, the lack of infrastructural facilities affecting the education of women was found to be more operative in case of Muslims than among other communities. The lack of infrastructural facilities restricting the prospects of education of Muslim women was found to be true for the women of Bamsor during the post-47 period. Of the 5 women ‘between 26 and 46 years of age with educational qualification less than Cl. X’ in Bamsor, two women were below forty. Thus came to this village as brides from places without a high school. None of the other three women above forty years (who have also spent their childhood in this village) have studied above Class VIII. The Bamsor Village High School was made co-educational in 1967 after which it became easier for girls to take the final school leaving examination from the village itself. The Bamsor - Burdwan road was built during 1972-73 and with the ‘regularisation of the bus service soon after that, communication with Burdwan became much easier and faster. As a result, we know of graduate women in the village from the mid seventies. All the nine Muslim women graduates of the village have passed out after 1974.

The dearth of infrastructural facilities and its impact on women’s education is understandable in the colonial context in India. However, to explain such increase only in terms of ‘an indication of the importance given to women’s education’ by the government during the post-1947 period is also an oversimplification. The governmental initiative in West Bengal has been conditioned by specific realities. The Annual Reports on Progress of Education in West Bengal neither analyse the reason for the increasing academic interest of women nor include any separate data on Muslim women. But they could not overlook the increasing demand for women’s education. One such Report for the year 1953-54 stated, “Demand for such education (of girls) is increasing very fast and the number of institutions also is rapidly increasing in almost all the stages of

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33 Table II, Row 1 Column 2, Bamsor.
34 Aged 35 and 38 years respectively.
35 Conclusion drawn on the basis of data collected from the admission registers of the Bamsor Village High School.
36 Information from senior residents of the village. Abul Hossain, 22.10.03. Md. Asoduddin Layek, 22.10.03.
37 Table II, Row 3 columns 1, 2 and 3, Bamsor. It is however not possible to exactly enumerate how many women have passed their BA/MA Examinations from this village, because the majority of them have shifted elsewhere after marriage.
education. The following table comparing the 1952-53 and 1953-54 situation on the increase in the numbers of institutions for girls and the number of girls studying in various courses may give us an indication of the average annual volume of increase in the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of institutions for girls</th>
<th>Number of girls (including those studying in institutions for boys)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University &amp; collegiate Education</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary &amp; Pre-primary</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and Special Education (college &amp; school)</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>1519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that both Hindu and Muslim girls of East Bengal were academically more advanced and more ambitious than the girls of West Bengal (except Calcutta) during the pre-1947 period. This trend continued during the post-1947 period with the permanent migration of Hindu families of East Pakistan to West Bengal, which necessitated the foundation of more schools and colleges. Along with this was the dire economic stress which many of these migrant families faced. Under changed circumstances, many migrant Hindu women were required to take up jobs to sustain their families. As better academic qualifications would fetch better jobs, there was greater demand for education and the attendance of girls in the schools and colleges of West Bengal increased considerably after 1947. East Bengal people who are variously praised and criticised for having 'introduced a whole new set of ideas and

40 Ibid. p.55
41 It is remarkable that this is the phrase used in the report to state the number of girls studying in the co-educational institutions.
42 The statement is a conclusion derived on the basis of a study of the admission and pass record registers in BMGS and the Burdwan Raj College in Burdwan and the SMGS and the LBC in Calcutta.
an entirely fresh value system in the life of West Bengal; also had a liberating impact on the education of both Hindu and Muslim women of West Bengal.

Among the new schools and colleges established for women during the fifties in West Bengal, we may cite the example of two new girls’ schools and a women’s college in Burdwan. The setting up of the Maharajadhiraj Uday Chand Women’s College, (hereafter MUC Women’s College) in 1955 was ‘symbolic of a changing society’ and the Principal of this college explained, “The Burdwan Raj College with its limited staff and resources could not bear the increased pressure of girl students (most of whom were migrants from East Bengal) at one stage .... there was a rising demand for a separate girls’ college in the town. When our college was set up, many guardians, both Hindu and Muslim, who were previously hesitant about sending their daughters to a co-ed college started sending them here...... Girls from rural areas in the district of Burdwan have also displayed a general preference for this college”.

Interviews with Bengali Muslim men and women reveal that many of them suffered from an adjustment crisis in post-1947 West Bengal. Under a growing minority complex, they initially recoiled into their community confines and yielded to the renewed social control exercised by the orthodoxy. A number of didactic manuals, which sought to regulate the socio-domestic lives of Bengali Muslims, were published during the fifties from Calcutta, 24 Parganas, etc. Interestingly, many of them are totally silent about the changed social circumstances. No points are raised on desirability or non-desirability of the education or mobility of women. Rather, they lay a great deal of emphasis on the duty of a Muslim woman towards her husband and family.

Many Muslim women who had attended school or college during the fifties and the early sixties recalled a certain uneasiness. For instance, Ishrat Ara Ahmed who studied English Literature in Scottish Church College and later at the Calcutta University

43 Gargi Chakravartty, op cit. p.90.
44 Manju Chattopadhyay in an interview with Subhoranjan Dasgupta, in January 2000. quoted in Gargi Chakravartty. ibid. p-89 mentions the impact on their ‘sisters of West Bengal’, though she does not mention the impact on the respective communities.
45 Bharati Balika Vidayalaya, 1952.
47 My interview with Dr Sukriti Ghoshal, Principal, MUC Women’s College, Burdwan. on 11.04.2004. The last statement was verified from the college admission registers which record the permanent residence of the students as well as the Bamsor data: majority of the women graduates are alumnae of this College.
during 1959-63, (both co-ed institutions) said, "My (Hindu) friends regarded me as a member of the enemy community which had partitioned 'their' country and killed 'their' people.... At home, my father who was a doctor expressed great concern regarding the performance of Muslim rituals, he had a very strict eye on our roza, namaz... people in our para (predominantly Muslim) in Taltala and other relatives were very curious to know about my future plans ..... they were almost sure that I would marry a 'Hindu' because they said, I had become a 'half Hindu' myself. There was pressure on all sides".49

Serina Jahan belongs to the generation of students after Ishrat. An alumnus of SMGS [Madhyamik (Cl. X) Examination, 1982, Higher Secondary, 1984] and the LBC (BA, 1987) Serina felt the she enjoyed a better chance for higher education, a larger choice of subjects, institutions, etc. than her mother and her aunts who were students during the fifties and early sixties. This was despite the fact that there was no remarkable change in the status of the family.50

A part of this change in outlook towards women's education and the greater inclination for higher education may be ascribed to the demonstration effect of the achievements of the Hindu girls. This statement is an inference drawn from the review of the attendance of Muslim girls in five institutions in Burdwan and two institutions in Calcutta51 during the 1947 - 92 period as well as the interviews. The new competitiveness also implies that female education gradually came to be regarded as an index of the state of progress of the family and the community.

Although I encountered certain difficulties in the process of the survey52 it indicated the increased attendance of Bengali Muslim girls from the late sixties, to a

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49 My interview with Isharat Ara Ahmed b. 1941. Calcutta, 16.10.03.
50 My interview with Serina Jahan, b.1965. Calcutta, 03.07.03.
51 Maharani Adhirani Girls' High School, BMGHS, Burdwan Raj College, MUC Women's college founded 1955) and the University of Burdwan (founded 1960) in Burdwan and the SMGS and the LBC in Calcutta.
52 Apart from the fact that the data for all the years in each institution was unavailable (except the University of Burdwan whose records are available from 1960). I encountered three major difficulties in surveying the records of the various institutions:
   i) in ascertaining whether names like Bulbul Mallik or Hira Choudhury were names of boys or girls in co-educational institutions, like the Burdwan Raj College or the University of Burdwan.
   ii) in ascertaining whether names like Mamtah Sahana or Rinku Monda) were names of Hindu or Muslim girls; to locate the father's name in such cases was essential if the religion was not specified, and
   iii) in ascertaining whether the Muslim girls were Bengali or non-Bengali, because I am concerned with Bengali Muslim women only.
maximum of 16% of the students in any batch. There has been a steady flow of Muslim girls into these institutions since then though they have not always been numerically very significant. Dr. Mumtaz Sanghamitra, Head of the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics at Calcutta Medical College, noted that she was the only Muslim girl in the entire college during the sixties; but by the time her daughter Shabana studied in the same college during the early nineties “a Muslim girl studying to become a doctor was no longer a piece of wonder”.

Dr. Gopa Dutta, Principal of the LBC said, “Many Bengali Muslim families still prefer to send their daughters to this college, rather than any where else. They participate actively in recitations, debates, songs, college plays as well as in inter-college cultural and sports meets ... They make their presence felt, no matter what percentage of the total students they form”. This view expressed in the last sentence was shared by the other heads of the institutions interviewed.

The pattern of the growth of education of Muslim women from the late sixties may also be explained in terms of the growth of ‘new middle class’ in the community during the period. It is remarkable that though the majority of the women interviewed (468 out of 540-86.67%) knew about Begum Rokeya, most of them (516 out of 540-95.56%) were not aware of the general progress that Bengali Muslim women had made in education, employment and politics during the pre-1947 period. So with the exception of the families which already had a pre-47 tradition of women’s education, the pre-47 examples of Bengali Muslim women may not be taken to have inspired the post-47 achievers in any way.

In chapter II, I explained the noticeable social vacuum created in the Muslim middle class of West Bengal as a result of the partition. I also mentioned the categories that stayed back and the new ones that emerged during the post-47 period. The last two categories and the older ones in an altered situation formed the ‘new middle class’ during the post-47 period in West Bengal. This ‘new’ middle class which was socio-culturally parallel to the Hindu ‘bhadralok’, reformulated many of its norms and ideals under the

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53 BMGHS, list of successful candidates in the Madhyamik (Cl. X) Pariksha, 1988. 12 out of the 75 girls (16%) were Muslim.
54 My interview with Dr. Mumtaz Sanghamitra, b. 1945, on 5.8.03, Calcutta.
55 Ibid
56 My interview with Dr. Gopa Dutta, Principal, LBC, Calcutta on 13.4.03.
57 My interviews with
Leena Sengupta. Headmistress, SMGS, 17.4.03
Dr. Sukriti Ghosal, Principal, MUC Women’s College, 11.4.04
Dr. Subhash Ch. Nandy, Principal, Burdwan Raj College, 3.7.04.

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influence and pressure of social competition from the dominant culture of their Hindu colleagues and neighbours.  

Their achievements, in turn, inspired others within the community. Dr. Mahzabeen Begum\(^59\) may be cited as an example. Her father came from an 'ordinary' rural background and had by virtue of his merit become a professor in the KG Engineering college, Bishnupur, Bankura district. He took personal care of his daughter's education. Mahzabeen thinks this was possible because they lived on the housing estate of the college where the children of the other professors were doing well in studies. She said, "This competitive milieu and attitude towards education would not have been possible if we were living in the village. My father took personal care, prepared me for the Joint Entrance Examination and eventually, I became a doctor from the Nilratan Sircar Medical College, Calcutta. I was treated as an example in the extended family and I watched the gradual change in their aspirations. Many of my younger cousin sisters now took studies seriously and some of them have done brilliantly well".  

Thirdly, the Bangladesh liberation war was also mentioned by twelve women as having a liberating impact on the educational and cultural lives of women in West Bengal. As Miratun Nahar, Professor of Philosophy in a Calcutta College and member, West Bengal Commission for Women, described, "This war confirmed the primacy of culture over religion and perhaps all progressive Bengali Muslims, particularly those who belonged to my generation supported the cause of Bangladesh. Bangladesh showed us the way, it was a sort of cultural leadership ... our last links with Urdu were severed and our Bengali identity confirmed. The bewildered minority of West Bengal could now gather some confidence and set out to define itself. In the process we became more Bengali, culturally and socially". \(^63\) Miratun believes that the increased academic interest of the Bengali Muslim girls at least in Calcutta from the seventies was partially related to the secular cultural values upheld in this war. It signalled an inclination towards the

\(^{58}\) Interpreted on the basis of the 540 interviews as well as with men in the community.  
\(^{59}\) My interview with Dr. Mahzabeen Begum, b. 1965, on 9.4.04, Burdwan.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid. Term mentioned by Mahzabeen herself.  
\(^{61}\) Whereas no woman in the family was educated beyond matriculation before Mahzabeen, she mentioned one of her cousins presently working in the USA as a scientist. Mahzabeen felt that she was definitely a source of inspiration in the younger girl's life.  
\(^{62}\) 8 women in Calcutta and 4 women in Burdwan mentioned this.  
\(^{63}\) My interview with Miratun Nahar (b. 1949) on 1.9.03 in Calcutta.
Bengali part of the socio-cultural identity of women and a restricting the religious part of their identity to a minimum. The primacy accorded to the Bengali identity implied that they had to fast catch up with the Hindus since in education Hindus were admittedly more advanced as a community.

It is also remarkable that no middle and upper middle class Bengali Muslim women attending school/college after 1970 commented on any form of patriarchal antipathy towards their educational endeavours. The level of higher education among Bengali Muslim women was considerably raised under the influence of the three factors mentioned above, along with an improvement of infrastructural facilities. Closely related to this are two other points, the attitude of Bengali Muslims towards co-education and towards co-curricular education.

I have already referred to the orthodox reservations against co-education voiced by some lower middle class women. Middle and upper middle class mothers, particularly in the younger age group of 26-46 years were, however, not ready to accept any compromise regarding the education of their daughters. Nurnahar Begum, a widow who works in the Metro Railway Bhavan, Calcutta, in the senior clerical grade, has a college going daughter. Nurnahar herself covers her head with the end of her sari to indicate her regard for purdah and has quite a conservative viewpoint on certain social issues like widow remarriage and Hindu-Muslim intermarriages. But on the issues of co-education and co-curricular education she said, “I have always wanted to give my daughter the best education. I have sent her to various reputed teachers to learn singing, dancing, painting, etc. During my childhood, there were some Muslim girls doing all this, but they were still treated as exception. My daughter studied in a renowned English medium school and is now studying Chemistry in Jadavpur University. I could not have done anything to give her a setback, she had to know everything her classmates knew... preventing her

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64 The only pre-1962 Bengali Muslim women of Burdwan who did an MA was Zarina Begum, daughter of Syed Abdul Allam (referred to in chapter 1). She passed her M A in History from the University of Calcutta in 1945. The Bengal Educational Gazette, Vol. II, No. 5, November 1945, p. 427. After the foundation of the University of Burdwan in 1960, it became easier for Muslim girls in the town to acquire post graduate degrees. Bajmeara Begum (b. 1940) is the first Muslim women to do her MA in History in 1963 from this University. The first Muslim girl students in the Department of English and Political Science have also been interviewed. Here too, the trend of postgraduation among Muslim women shows an increase from the late sixties.
from dancing or joining the University Drama Club because she is Muslim would have been *Talibani*. I can not do that*65.

Poor academic capabilities and a feeling of contentment that ‘I have studied enough’ were found to be the two general reasons for Muslim women discontinuing their studies66. Shifting to other priorities like marriage was another reason. Marriage is generally, though not invariably, looked upon as an agency of oppression restricting the potentialities of women. While six of the 432 married women (15.74%) talked about quitting studies as a result of the tremendous domestic workload after marriage, politely avoiding the mention of the role of their in-laws in it, and another 26 women (6.02%) openly complained about the role of their in-laws or/and husbands in stopping their education, there was also a significant number of women in all the three areas (112 in all - 25.93% of the total married women) who recalled with gratitude the ‘tremendous sacrifices’ their husbands made for them. For 178 women (41.20%), the issue of education was not related to marriage in any way. Though another 48 women (11.11%) have continued their education after marriage, they do not find any encouragement or discouragement from their husbands / in-laws worth mentioning.

Dr. Roshenara Begum recalls with great pride the support and constant inspiration she received from her husband, a renowned income tax lawyer in Burdwan. “I was married while doing my M.Sc. and my husband had just started his career. He had to attend different social functions and parties; public relations is an important part of his profession... But he always insisted that I should stay at home and study”.67 Roshenara is a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Reader in the subject at Burdwan Medical college.

Ashrafi Khatun68, Selection Grade Lecturer in Bengali in a college in Bankura district also mentioned that the cooperation of her husband made it possible for her to achieve what she aimed for. Ashrafi’s in-laws at one point of time expressed disgust with her ‘forwardness’69 and the couple had to break away from the joint family with two little children. Thirty five years old Samsera Khatun of Bamsor, the only postgraduate

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65 Nurnahar Begum, b. 1954. Interviewed on 2.7.03. Calcutta. use of the word Talibani is significant to denote an orthodox point of view.
66 Statement made on the basis of analysis of the interviews.
67 My interview with Dr. Roshenara Begum (b. 1953). on 5.8.03. Burdwan
68 My interview with Ashrafi Khatun (b. 1966) on 22.8.03. Burdwan.
69 Term used by Ashrafi herself in the interview. She remembered her mother-in-law used this term to define her aspirations.
woman in the village, also mentioned the contribution of her husband. Thus middle class Bengali Muslims cannot be regarded as a universally conservative category which tries to shut off its women from higher education. The report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India stated, “In higher socio-economic strata, the education of women has been boosted by the education of men and their preference for educated wives. Educated men are likely to prefer educated wives and encourage them for education”. The findings of the Report were found to be true for a considerable section of Bengali Muslims.

It is important to mention here that only 60 of the 540 respondents (11.11%) who have spent their childhood in villages have studied at a madrasa at some stage. All three categories of the Bengali Muslim middle class women expressed disapproval of the madrasa system of education. While most of them acknowledged the contribution of the madrasas in educating the rural Muslim masses, it is remarkable that they would not like to associate themselves or their children with it. This, however, does not imply the negation of the values attached to religious education. Three hundred and nineteen out of the three hundred forty six women interviewed in Calcutta (92.20%), 149 out of the 158 women interviewed in Burdwan (94.30%) and all 36 women interviewed in Bamsor (100%) said they had received religious education, the level of which although varied from one another. It was generally imparted by the older women at home. It consists of a basic literacy in Arabic to enable the learners to read the Quran and a more practical training in the ritual performances, like ablutions (waju) and the prayer (namaz). Some families engaged a Maulvi to tutor the children; while in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods both in Calcutta and in Burdwan, occasionally a woman volunteered to impart religious education to the children, twice or thrice a week during evenings. Religious education is a symbol through which a woman seeks to legitimise and secure

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70 My interview with Samsera Khutun (b. 1968), on 25.10.03. Bamsor
71 Towards Equality, op. cit. p. 95.
72 This statement does not overlook the possibilities of presence of men with indifferent, selfish, jealous, orthodox or oppressive mentalities among Bengali Muslims who may have a definite antipathy towards the idea of higher education of their wives.
73 This was either because of affordability (madrasa education is cheaper) or because the madrasa was the only academic institution available in the villages where they spent their childhood. In their nationwide survey of Muslim women, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (Unequal Citizens A Study of Muslim Women in India, New Delhi, 2004, p. 53) also noted that among those who ever attended school, 98% went to government or private schools, while less than 2% attended a madrasa.
74 The women of Bamsor also regarded the village madrasa as an institution for educating the poor; and preferred to send their daughters to the primary school.
her position in the community; going beyond traditional confines but simultaneously feeling satisfied that she performs her allotted role in the preservation of her religious culture. But the level of religious performance was not found to be as high as the level of religious education in the community. I asked if the concept of religious training was incompatible with Marxism, to a political family renowned for its leftist commitment in Park Circus, Calcutta. Astonished at my audacity, Anwara Khatun asked if I would dare to ask this of a Hindu. Later she explained, “See, politics belongs to the outer domain (bairer byapar, she said). Don’t you see Hindus performing different pujas? There are many devotees of Loknath Baba among our Hindu comrades. It is very important to know about one’s culture and be respectful about it, without harming others”. It is significant that she used the word ‘cultural’ as being synonymous with ‘religious’. Thirty-six respondents who did not have any religious training (6.67% of the total number of women interviewed) explained their situation through one or the other of the following reasons:

i) they either came from politically radical families where religious education was discouraged, or

ii) they have parents of mixed marriages who have not insisted on religious education, or

iii) a few considerate Muslim parents had postponed their children’s religious education to some uncertain future when their academic burden would be lessened, and it never finally materialised, or

iv) they had themselves at some stage refused to take religious education.

For instance, Tamanna Yousuf, who was introduced to religious education at the age of fourteen, gave it up after a few days. She regards her level of religious education to be non existent and says, “It is not that I disregard Islam or the Koran. But whey force it on me? Why force it on me in Arabic?”

The objectives of higher education among Bengali Muslim women were found to be generally the same as among others. Higher education was believed to enhance the prestige and status of the women as well as her family in society. It is remarkable that

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75 This legitimization of one’s identity and performance of a religious duty were the two major points highlighted upon by the respondents in explaining the significance of religious education in the life of a Muslim.

76 This issue has been taken up in Ch. IV.

77 My interview with Anwara Khatun (b. 1939), on 23.8.04, Calcutta.

78 My interview with Tamanna Yousuf (b. 1984) Calcutta, on 17.6.03
although a few women still cherished the value that a woman should not seek employment, it did not affect the desirability of higher education for women.

Education was also related to the discourse of marriage and motherhood and the idea that 'parents educated their daughters in order to marry them off on better and easier terms'\(^7^9\) was found to be still operative. The confusion over the objectives of education, between the traditional role of women as wife and mother and their role as income earners, is not the dilemma of a confused minority community alone. This contradiction has been reflected in different Education Commission Reports in India, both at the national and at the state levels. For instance the *Kothari Commission Report*, at the beginning of the section on the education for girls, had stated that "their education was of greater importance than that of men"\(^8^0\) because they were responsible for "full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes and for moulding the character of children during the most impressionable years of infancy".\(^8^1\) Even the Marxist government in West Bengal could not resolve this dilemma. A subsection of the *Report of the Commission for Planning of Higher Education in West Bengal, 1984*, which deals with 'Home Science Education for Girls' in the chapter on "Courses of Study" stressed the urgent need to expand home science education because it prepared girls, "to rebuild homes consistently with the demands of modern life, to create an atmosphere of peace, happiness and moral and spiritual well being in the family".\(^8^2\) Quite ironically the same Report also called for girls to become "economically independent and capable citizens of the community".\(^8^3\)

Increasingly greater numbers of Bengali Muslim women appreciate economic independence not only for emergencies but also due to a change in outlook which seeks to utilise the education they have acquired. Areas of employment, hitherto regarded as non-conventional – journalism, mass communication, business administration and entrepreneurship – now attract them in more recent times. At the beginning of the twentieth century education itself had been a taboo.

\(^7^9\) *Quinquennial Review of Education in India*, 1917-22, Calcutta, 1923, para 244.
\(^8^1\) Idid.
\(^8^3\) Ibid.
The growing opinion among Bengali Muslim women in favour of employment\textsuperscript{84} necessitates the review of the situation of employment among them. There is no specific verse in the \textit{Quran} prohibiting women from participating in public affairs. Rather, there is a clear indication in favour of the economic rights of women in the following verse:

\begin{quote}
Unto men a fortune from that
Which they have earned
And unto women a fortune
From that which they have earned.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

Poor women in all communities have always worked to maintain themselves. But the entry of Indian middle class women in the formal economic sector is taken to show ‘a remarkable rise in the post-war period’.\textsuperscript{86} The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India noted that ‘after 1940, the Second World War gave an impetus to women’s employment and even married women came forward to take up gainful employment’.\textsuperscript{87}

In surveying the employment situation of Bengali Muslim Women during 1947-92, there were two major difficulties:

i) ‘Work’ has been differently defined in the different Censuses. Traditionally, work has been defined as activities for ‘pay or profit’, though now, in keeping with the suggestion of the system of \textit{National Accounts}, 1993, the term ‘economic activity’ rather than ‘work’ is used in official statistics. The definition of economic activity has been broadened to include several domestic activities carried out by women but the underlying emphasis on paid work remains uncharged. For the sake of convenience, a worker has been generally taken to mean a person whose ‘main’ activity is income generating and is beyond the household space.

ii) Neither the West Bengal Government nor the State Minority Commission preserves any data on the employment statistics of Bengali Muslim women. The situation does not seem to have improved in any way from what Imtiaz Ahmad noted in 1975, “Given the lack of detailed and dependable statistics on the Muslim population, it is well nigh

\textsuperscript{84} 482 women (89.26\% of the total women interviewed) supported the view that women should work.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Quran} , 4:32.


\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Towards Equality}, op. cit. p.87.
impossible to adduce any precise estimates of the percentage of Muslims who have been affected positively, negatively or not at all by the developmental process and to detail the extent of improvement or deterioration.\textsuperscript{88}

Nearly sixty years after Independence, the Central Government has finally realized that it does not know enough about Indian Muslims. So it has formed a seven-member team in 2005 headed by Rajendra Sachar, retired Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, to gather information regarding the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims.\textsuperscript{89} The report is still awaited.

I have tried to break up the total number of women interviewed during my fieldwork into their occupational categories in the following table. All of these, like students, are not economic categories. ‘Unemployed’ denotes a category of unmarried women who are neither students nor engaged in any income generating work. The categories of social workers/ political activists include those providing voluntary service as well as paid workers, like the councillors. In the wider socio-economic and regional spectrum that Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon conducted their survey, they found “most Muslim women are self-employed, with only a very few in formal employment”.\textsuperscript{90}

However, in my selective survey among middle class Bengali Muslim women, I found most of them in the teaching profession.

\textbf{Table IV}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Calcutta</th>
<th>Burdwan</th>
<th>Bamsor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Teachers</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College &amp; Univ. Teachers</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartered Accountants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{88} Imtiaz Ahmad, "Economic and Social Change", Article in Zafar Imam (ed) \textit{Muslims in India}, New Delhi, 1975, p. 232.
\textsuperscript{89} "60 Years on, govt. tries to understand Muslim mind", Article by Srinjoy Choudhury, \textit{The Sunday Statesman}, 13.03.05, p.1.
\textsuperscript{90} Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, \textit{Unequal Citizens}, op. cit, p. 101
Lawyers 8 4 -
Engineers 2 - -
Social Workers 6 5 -
Pol. Organisers/ leaders 10 8 2
Entrepreneurs 06 03 01
Landladies & Rent earners 07 02 02
Officers & Executives 05 03 -
Other working women 70 15 02
(in the private and public sector)
Journalists 05 01 -
Housewives 97 45 18
Total 346 158 36

The issue of employment is all the more significant for Muslim women because of the prevalent ideas about the obsession of this community with ideas of female seclusion and purdah. However, the custom of purdah restricting the employment prospects of women is now operative among the lower middle class alone. Twelve lower middle class women (6 in Calcutta, 2 in Burdwan and 4 in Bansor) who themselves ‘observed purdah’ by wearing a burkha or a chadar\(^1\) said that their religion forbids women from going out to work. The twelve different versions repeated the same conviction that Islam ordains this sexual division of labour and virtuous women are expected to remain at home and perform their domestic roles assigned by God.

Purdah was, however, not the only issue which prevented Muslim women from taking up employment. Seven upper middle class women (5 in Calcutta and 2 in Burdwan) subscribed to the values of upper class ‘sharif’ respectability which prevented women from working outside. Not only was the concept of feminine izzat associated with women’s unwillingness to take up employment, the concept of male prestige and family honour was also intertwined with it. These 7 women (all of them educated at least up to the graduation level) were otherwise found to be highly sophisticated in their lifestyle, fashion and etiquette.

\(^1\) A piece of cloth wrapped around the head and upper part of the body like a shawl in all seasons to conceal the figure.
Kismatara Parvin, an upper middle class housewife, for example, took great pride in the fact that she ‘did not need to work’. To Kismatara this was a status symbol as she believed. ‘My husband has given me all that I have asked for. In that case, my looking for job would imply dissatisfaction with my present state of being and indicate disrespect for him.’

“But what about Hindu women who work?” I asked.

“O they belong to a different system and have a different training,” said Kismatara. She, however, failed to locate any difference except that of religion between herself and other Hindu working women from the same class.

It is remarkable that the 482 (89.26% of the total number of women interviewed) women who approved of the idea of employment of women were spread across all three categories of the middle class. Many middle class housewives ‘aged above 46 years’ regretted that they did not get an opportunity to work, while many lamented that they did not have enough qualifications to get a job. The urge for economic independence was however found to be not always related with education.

In Burdwan, I have interviewed 6 girls in the “less than 26 years of age” category who did not have a Cl X degree at the time of the interview. Four of them belonged to the lower middle class category. These girls, unlike the older generation, have quit studies not under any direct economic pressure but with the hope of better economic prospects.

Maya Begum found it more profitable to join her father’s tailoring shop after she passed out from Cl. VIII. Maya has been a great help to her father during the last eight years and she says, “My father used to cater only to the needs of men. We have opened a women’s section after I joined the business and our sales has gone up considerably. I look after the shop when my father is away. What would I have done by studying? ... No other woman in our family had come out to work before me. I am paid enough by my father and I am very happy”.

Shayima Khatun had joined a beauty parlour as a trainee after she failed twice in Cl. VII. Her father, in addition to owning a tea-stall, worked as a peon in the school

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92 My interview with Kismatara Parvin (b.1964) on 23.05.04. Burdwan.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Table II. Row I. Column I. Burdwan.
where she studied. She said, “My parents wanted me to study, the teachers were helpful, but I found it more interesting and economically profitable to join the beauty parlour. No woman in our family has ever worked before me. Some day, I hope to start my own business when I accumulate enough capital.”

These examples prove that non-conventional areas have also lured the lower middle class Muslim girls in the towns and cities to employment. Tufani Khatun of Bamsor had come away from her in-laws’ home as she could not bear the torture they inflicted on her. She returned to her parents, acquired a tailoring diploma from a school in Burdwan and opened a tailoring shop for women in the village in 1993. She was the first woman in the village to go into business. It is remarkable that Tufani says she has never been criticised by the villagers but admired for her efforts instead. Tufani has gradually added to her business by including the sale of readymade dresses. New markets have been opened up even in the rural areas with the increasing prosperity and consequent greater purchasing power of the people. Whereas previously beauty and body care was limited to personal effort, and the necessary clothing restricted to readymade garments or were stitched by women themselves at home (particularly in the villages), now greater awareness about beauty and fashion conveyed through the electronic media has led to the spread of fresh needs and their consequent commercialisation and customisation. These are industries that are regarded as the special preserve of women. Moreover, being all women businesses, they are also considered safe. The mushrooming of beauty salons and tailoring shops help lower middle class women like Shayima Khatun of Burdwan or Tufani Khatun of Bamsor to become economically independent.

There is another curious contradiction in the entire process. The ‘advertisement and fashion’ culture is often portrayed as a major factor in perpetuating the subordination of women. On the other, it simultaneously enhances employment and independence for another group of women.

\[97\] My interview with Shayima Khatun (b.1982) on 13.3.03, Burdwan.
\[98\] My interview with Tufani Khatun (b.1967) on 25.10.03, Bamsor.
Rafiya Khatun, a primary school teacher in Bamsor, died in 2001, eight years after her retirement from service. She was the only Muslim working woman in the village for a long time. The increasing tendency to become economically independent and engage in diverse occupations became noticeable among the women in this village from the eighties. Among those working women residing in the village at the time of the interview were two land owning women, who administered their own property and earned an independent income from it; a school teacher, an assistant in the Department of Health (ICDS) employed on a contractual basis and a physiotherapist. Physiotherapy also denotes the commercialisation and outsourcing of personal services beyond the household. Again, caregivers being traditionally women and increasingly women becoming receivers of care, the field becomes a female preserve for a large social spectrum.

A majority of the Muslims in all the three locales seemed to be successfully adjusting to the rapid changes. Maulvi Syed Abdul Wali, chief Maulvi in the Kantapukur Mosque in Burdwan town, said, “Look at the tremendous effort Muslim girls are putting in to get educated. It would be unfair to keep them locked up at home.” The contradiction between his vocation and his appreciation of social change was however discernible in the following statement, “At the same time they have to be trained to hold up their iman (faith) under all circumstances”. Wali thus deftly devised a strategy of managing change – by strengthening religious controls through instruction on the one hand while loosening up domestic surveillance under compulsion, on the other.

The ‘effort’ that Maulvi Wali referred to is no longer taken up only through personal or family initiatives. The community has also shown organisational initiative in forming trusts, societies and councils for the economic upliftment of the community and changing the attitude towards women’s employment.

Muslim girls have benefited from such constructive activities. The widening scope of higher education is also linked with prospects of employment. It was with this objective in mind that Muslim Girls’ Hostels have been set up in Calcutta, Burdwan and other district towns. Roshenara Khan writes, “The pace of change in the Muslim society

99 This is how the information about Rafiya Khatun was passed by the villagers. This would mean that she was about 73 years old at the time of her death and born around 1928 retiring from service in 1993.
100 My interview with Syed Abdul Wali, 27.7.04 in Burdwan.
101 Ibid.
102 Mention may be made of the All India Council of Muslim Economic Upliftment, Minority Upliftment Society, Muslim Welfare and Educational Trust, etc.
has become rapid from the eighties. The change in the mentality of the Muslims can be perceived by looking at the girls who come from the villages to study in the town and stay in these hostels”.

Roshenara’s statement was confirmed by interviews with the Superintendents of the Muslim Girls’ Hostels (hereafter MGH ) at Calcutta and Burdwan.

Lailunnesa Begum, superintendent of the Calcutta MGH, said, “These girls are spending so much of their resources, time and energy here. Why should they pay the price for the meaningless orthodoxy of a section of the community? I keenly watch the confidence and ambition among these girls coming from the suburban areas and villages of West Bengal. The competitive mentality gradually builds up with exposure to the metropolitan environment and some of our girls have done extremely well in law, medicine and even in areas like fashion designing”. Starting with five boarders on August 1, 1990, there were 170 boarders in the hostel at the time of the survey. The demand for this hostel may be understood from the statement that, “the hostel can accommodate 200 girls, but we get around 600 applications every year at the beginning of the academic session.”

The MGH, Calcutta, also runs a Technical Training Institute for Girls on its premises with the co-operation of the Minority Development Welfare Society.

The Muslim Girls’ Hostel in Barabazar, Burdwan started on September 23, 1989 and had 95 boarders at the time of the survey. Most of the girls were from the rural areas of Burdwan district as well as from the neighbouring districts of Bankura and Birbhum. It is noteworthy that it was still found necessary to establish separate hostels for Muslim girls during the eighties and nineties in West Bengal under a Left Front government. While it certainly denotes a rising curve of economic independence and also independence from family protectionism, the boom in such hostels, at the same time, denotes a constant compulsion to remain confined within the protection of the community, segregated from mixed community environment. Both these hostels were established in predominantly Muslim localities, Park Circus in Calcutta and Barabazar in Burdwan respectively, apparently for reasons of security.

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104 My interview with Lailunnesa Begum Superintendent, Calcutta Muslim Girls’ Hostel. 18.8.03.
105 My interview with Khadija Khatun, (b. 1951) Superintendent, Burdwan Muslim Girls’ Hostel. 15.8.03.
106 supra footnote 99.
107 Ibid
The All Bengal Muslim Women's Association (founded 1986) at 17 Syed Amir Ali Avenue, Calcutta, is another voluntary organisation dedicated to the upliftment of Muslim women. "It offers seventeen types of training including computer operations, dress making, knitting, etc. for Muslim girls in and around Park Circus. The increased demand for these courses has led us to open another branch at 9 Peter Lane", said the President of the Association, a majority of whose executive members are non-Bengali Muslim. The Association also runs a production-cum-marketing unit. Beneficiaries belong to both Bengali and non-Bengali categories of the economically underprivileged and lower middle classes. There were altogether 134 students enrolled in the various courses at the Amir Ali Avenue training centre at the time of my survey in August 2004.

The West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (WBMDFC) aided and supervised by the State Government, the State organ of the National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC), was founded on January 8, 1996 and started functioning from August 1997. Between August 1997 and January 2004, 2025 Muslim women109 across West Bengal have been given loans. Priority is given to lower income groups while awarding loans, i.e., those with less then Rs. 40,000 as annual family income in the rural areas and less than Rs. 55,000 in urban areas.

Although the period of functioning of the WBMDFC as well as its major target group are outside the scope of my work, it deserves mention for the considerable awareness it has created for the necessity of economic self sufficiency among women not only as a financing agency but also through awareness programmes and vocational training schemes through workshops and lectures for minority women across the state.110 Another commendable area where the Corporation has extended its activity is in giving interest free education loans to the minorities. Among such beneficiaries during 2003-04 mention may be made of Rabea Ali, a B. Tech student in the College of Leather Technology, Calcutta.111

I raised the question as to why Muslim women should work with all the 540 respondents. Various answers came up in the process which may be best summed up in

108 My interview with Noor Jahan Shakil, President, All Bengal Muslim Women's Association on 23.8.04, Calcutta.
110 Ibid. "Minority also includes Christian, Sikh and Buddhist women. However, considering the population and economic structure of West Bengal, such beneficiaries were found to be extremely marginal in the Performance Report of the WBMDFC.
the words of Bajmeara Begum. “For the reason that other women work”, she said. However, some women also factored in the particular context of Muslim women. Kishwar Parveen, a lawyer in the Burdwan Court, gave serious thought to the matter. “Look at the example of Shah Bano”, she said. “She was divorced by her husband so many years after marriage and was so helpless. Muslim women are generally more vulnerable to the whims of their fathers, brothers or husbands. They are so unequally treated in the property and Inheritance laws. They have so little connection beyond family relations. Muslim women need all the more to be socially aware and economically independent so that no one dares to deprive them or treat them badly.” The absence of legal reform in personal laws is thus viewed as a challenge which stimulates other forms of self-reliance.

As I have mentioned before, earlier examples of Bengali Muslim working women, like Fazilatunnessa or Samsun Nahar were not remembered in post-1947 West Bengal. With the migration of the majority of these women to East Pakistan, the tradition of working women among Bengali Muslims had to be built up anew.

Syeda Jolekha Khatun writes, “I taught for some time in the Municipal Girls’ School... I left this job to look after my mother’s school after her death. For some time, I followed my mother’s customs, like talking to guardians from behind the door. Then I found all this was meaningless. I was used to moving out alone. I started meeting the Inspector personally and went to his office whenever needed. This spared me from a lot of problems my mother had faced”.

Her junior contemporaries in the field also came from ‘respectable’ backgrounds. Nesar Fatma (b.1939) and Bajmeara Begum (b. 1940), the first Muslims girl students in the Departments of English (1968) and History (1963) respectively in the University of Burdwan also worked as teachers. Bajmeara, daughter of a rich landlord, was widowed within three years of her marriage and returned to Burdwan. The ‘chance to do something’ came in the form of a job offer from the Secretary of a school in 1968. She

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112 My interview with Bajmeara Begum (b. 1940) on 28.7.03. Burdwan.
113 My interview with Kishwar Parveen (b.1971), on 13.8.03. Burdwan.
114 Fazilatunnessa Zoha, Professor of Mathematics and Vice - Principal, Bethune College, Calcutta.
115 Samsun Nahar Mahamud, Professor of Bengali, Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta.
116 Official records in the school show that she worked as an assistant teacher in BMGS during 1946-48.
117 Private Memoirs.
118 Pass Record Registers of the University of Burdwan, 1963 and 1968.
119 My interview with Bajmeara Begum (b. 1940), on 30.7.03. Burdwan.
did not face any particular hostility or social criticism. “Jolekhadi and her mother had already started the tradition among Muslims in the town and there were already a lot of Hindu women working”, 120 she said. Nesar Fatma’s opinions were also similar.

Interviews with women like Nesar Fatma and Bajmeara Begum revealed that Bengali Muslim society in Burdwan was gradually adjusting itself to changes, particularly from the sixties, proving that comments like, “Islam is inevitably resistant to change in general and change in the position of Muslim women in particular”, 121 are not universally true.

However, the interviews also reveal that rural Muslims did not accept the idea of employment of women so easily. Although the Bamsor interviews confirm that Rafiya Khatun was highly respected by the villagers, three women narrated the hostility they faced in rural environments during the sixties.

Jebunnessa Begum taught in a village school in the Rampurhat Subdivision, Birbhum District during 1962-64. It was a predominantly Muslim village and her husband’s relatives harassed her, accused her of violating purdah and damaging family prestige. Jebunnessa now feels that “they did all this out of jealousy”122 and there was a positive response from the students and their guardians. Muslim parents were grateful to ‘Didimoni’ and Jebunnessa noted that there was considerable increase in the attendance of Muslim girls in the school after she joined. When she shifted to Calcutta where her husband worked and joined a school near the Kareya Thana in 1969, Jebunnessa faced no social antagonism. She feels that the examples of other working women and the anonymity that the metropolitan environment of Calcutta provided had helped her. 123

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India had noted that the increased participation of women in the workforce in post-47 India has resulted due to the expanding structure of opportunities, increased educational qualifications of women and mounting economic compulsions.124 Ester Boserup had noted in 1970 that, “In India, as in most other developing countries, women’s work outside home is changing gradually”. 125 My survey also revealed that from the seventies the number of Muslim working women increased. Here too, in addition to the inspiration provided by the

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120 Ibid
122 My interview with Jebunnessa Begum (b. 1941) on 15.5.04. Calcutta.
123 Ibid.
124 Towards Equality, op cit., p. 87.
examples of the working migrant women from East Bengal, the example of Hindu working women married in Muslim families was cited in two instances to have boosted the desires of their sisters-in-law to look for jobs. The first Bengali Muslim women who took up employment after 1947 inevitably favoured teaching. Table IV above shows that teaching continues to remain the most valued profession among Bengali Muslim women. With the expanding scope in the employment sector, a greater number of Bengali Muslim women are also found to have taken up non-conventional professions, like engineering or journalism, from the late seventies and definitely from the eighties. All the chartered accountants, entrepreneurs, journalists, dietitians and beauticians interviewed among Bengali Muslim women have come to work after 1980. Safiunnessa, a journalist working with the popular Bengali newspaper Bartaman, had a similar opinion.

To the question as to why they worked, many women of the older generation, i.e. those above 46 years said that they were either:

i) ‘invited’ to work by the employer, for instance, through the Secretary of the managing committee of a school as in the case of Bajmeara Begum, or

ii) looked for a job under economic compulsion.

Although some of the younger working women also acknowledged having looked for employment only after meeting with some disaster in their lives, a definite competitive attitude and ambition were discernible in the majority of the younger respondents. Moreover, Bengali Muslims are not outside the general pale of middle class aspirations which are under constant pressure of mounting consumerism. Younger Bengali Muslim women are also finding it difficult to thrive on a single income in the face of rising demands and cost of living, and hence look for jobs.

The various experiences of these women at their workplaces have also to be taken into account to comprehend the employment situations of Bengali Muslim women. Excluding the students, the unemployed, the entrepreneurs, the landladies and rent-

126 This is not typical of Bengali Muslim women alone. The National Council of Women’s Education in India (1962), Chandrakala A. Hate, Changing Status of Women in Post Independence India, Bombay, 1969, p-654 and Towards Equality p.206 on the basis of the Census of India. 1971, also established the view that the majority of women prefer teaching.

127 My interview with Safiunnessa, (b.1962), on 17.8.04, Calcutta.

128 Mention may be made of Salina Ahmed (b.1962) interviewed in Calcutta on 29.7.03 and Saira Banu (b.1957), Calcutta 1.9.03. A divorced Safina and a widowed Saira had looked for jobs after the tragedies befell on them.

129 Comment made on the basis of the interviews.
earners, as well as voluntary social workers and political activists, there were altogether 260 working women interviewed (182 in Calcutta, 74 in Burdwan and 4 in Bamsor) who have to encounter colleagues from other communities at their workplaces. Of these 260 women, 144 (55.38%) said that they had identified themselves with the culture of the majority community, the Bengali Hindus, or with a secular Bengali culture at work. They also said that they did so either voluntarily or as a strategy of compromise because they ‘do not always want to be differently marked as Muslims’. There were 116 women (44.62%) who carried their distinct Muslim identity in their workplaces. They are particular about the Ramzan fast, the namaz observed five times a day, two of which, the johr and the asr prayer timings, fall within the office hours; as well as refusing to eat flesh that is not halal. However, these attitudes do not necessarily determine the kind of treatment they are likely to receive at the work place. Whereas 183 (70.38%) women felt that they worked in an amicable environment and have never been discriminated against for their religion, 77 women (29.62%) felt that they were victims of a latent and invidious discrimination; ‘doubly handicapped, not only as women, but also as Muslim’. This could come either in the form of comments or more direct discrimination. Staff rooms, canteens and office recreation clubs were cited as places where such comments were mostly heard. Shama Nizam is the only Muslim in her office at Park Street in Calcutta. She says, “When I hear communal remarks on public transport or in the market, I don’t mind. But when my colleagues, knowing perfectly well that I am a Muslim, make uncharitable remarks, I am very hurt. I feel that they are doing it deliberately within the range of my hearing, or not taking my presence into account at all”. “What sort of comments do they make?” I asked. “It could start from anything like the attack on the American Centre or the series of dacoities in Bhangar, South 24 Parganas... all the terrorists, criminals and antisocials in this country are unfortunately Muslim ... the discussion starts from a news item and is soon diverted against the community itself. Derisive comments about Muslim customs

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130 I exclude entrepreneurs and landladies from this category because they are not subject to any overt communal comment action for the privileged positions they hold.  
131 My interview with Sabina Yeasmin (b. 1974) on 23.01.04, Calcutta.  
132 My interview with Masuda Begum. (b.1948), 24.6.03, Burdwan.  
133 My interview with Shama Nizam (b.1948), 12.4.04, Calcutta.  

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like polygamy, purdah and beef eating are also common”.\textsuperscript{134} Twenty six other women in Calcutta and Burdwan gave similar accounts. Even if some of these 27 women are taken to be over sensitive or suffering from an exaggerated minority complex, there were also narrations of more overt acts of discrimination. In many instances, Hindu colleagues tactically avoided dining with Muslims in the same row, or politely refused an invitation to a Muslim house on some pretext. Some examples of this discrimination may be cited.

Nasima Banu who passed out from SMGS (1947) and LBC (1951) and did her MA from the University of Calcutta in 1953, married Amalendu De in 1955. Nasima says, “There were not many women with MA B Ed qualification is those days. Finding a job should not have been difficult ... But I was much harassed by the Interview Boards in a number of schools. They would ask me strange personal questions like why I did not wear sankha-sindur\textsuperscript{135}. Many of them thought I would set a bad example as a teacher because of my non-conformist stand ... Finally I was able to get a job in a school for refugee children at Garia which was set up by the Communists.”\textsuperscript{136}

Monowara Begum, an alumnus from BMGS (1965), MUC Women’s College (1968) and the first Muslim girl student in the Department of Political Science at Burdwan University (1971), had joined a school in Katwa as assistant teacher in 1973. She had never faced any discrimination on grounds of her religion in her student life. On the eve of the Saraswati Puja, the headmistress of the school told her, “Tomorrow is an official holiday. You need not take the trouble of coming all the way from Burdwan”\textsuperscript{137}. Monowara took some time to understand that the headmistress would not like her presence at the puja. She was shocked to discover that her other colleagues too had not expected her on that day. Monowara says, “The uneasiness persisted as long as I worked there.”\textsuperscript{138}

Lailunnessa Begum, the superintendent of the Calcutta MGH, also works in the Adarsh Balika Vidyalaya on the BT Road in Calcutta. She is the lone Muslim in a school which has around 3000 students and 60 teachers. In 2002, the school authorities decided to cancel the Muharram holiday (25.3.2002) and advised Lailunnessa to apply for casual leave on that day. This was done in spite of the fact that Muharram is a statutory holiday.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Conch shall bangles (sankha) and vermilion (sindur) are believed to be the distinguishing marks of Hindu married women in Bengal.
\textsuperscript{136} My interview with Nasima Banu (b.1930), 19.9.03. Calcutta.
\textsuperscript{137} My interview with Monowara Begum (b. 1947) 2.7.04. Burdwan.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
She found this step highly discriminatory and strongly protested against it in a letter addressed to the Secretary of the School, dated March 12, 2002. The school authorities soon rectified their mistake by announcing a holiday on Muharram but Lailunnessa fears that she may be in for trouble. 139 Along with the problems they face at the work place, Bengali Muslim working women have to reconcile with some other problems that arise about their working status.

With aspirations for higher education and preference for employment, Bengali Muslim girls experience a steadily rising age of marriage. Negotiations become more difficult because not only does the desired groom have to match the girl in socio-economic and educational status, he also has to be placed relatively close to the girl’s place of work, or she has to get a convenient transfer to set up a family. 140 In most cases of married working women, husbands were reported to be sympathetic and supportive. The increasing trend towards nuclear families was also noticed. This was mainly due to two reasons:

i) non co-operation or hostility of the in-laws towards a working women,

ii) changing socio-domestic aspirations of the younger generation.

Eighteen young married women complained about the ‘stifling conservative atmosphere’ in the joint families from which they have broken away. This implies a stronger presence of the companionate marriage ideal in some cases. The ‘breaking away’ becomes easier if the women are economically dependent.

Thus, the social benefits of increased autonomy through higher education and financial independence lead Bengali Muslim women towards greater control over their lives. This is likely to initiate a change in their domestic and social role, status and outlook. These aspects are explored in the next chapter.

III

139 My interview with Lailunnessa Begum (b. 1952) on 18.8.03, Calcutta.

140 Irene Mustafa Mondal(b.1971). interviewed on 25.05.03, Burdwan. was one of the young working women who noted this to explain the delay in her marriage. She works as a lecturer in a college in the interior of the Birbhum district. She can neither find a well-placed groom in the vicinity nor can she think of quitting her job. Unlike the lower middle class where the higher education of girls was found to restrict their marriage prospects, among the middle and upper middle classes it was found that not higher education but the placement of women limited their marriage prospects to a certain extent. Though the idea of employment for women was generally accepted among the Bengali Muslims, the idea of a wife staying separately from her husband for her job was definitely resented.
It is a pity that Muslim women have never formed a part of the social imaginary of mainstream Bengali cultural life. They have not been adequately portrayed in the creative arts of West Bengal. Very rarely does a subaltern Muslim woman find a place in Bengali theatre or in films. A few attempts made by the stalwarts of Bengali literature to portray Muslim women have remained confined to representing elite or the poor women of the community. We may cite examples like the daughter of the Nawab of Badraon in Rabindranath Tagore’s short story, *Durasha*, or characters like Ayesha and Zebunnissa in the novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Durgeshnandini* and *Rajsimha* respectively. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay has immortalised the character of the poor peasant girl Amina in his short story, *Mahesh*.

However, middle class Bengali Muslim women, though largely unrepresented in Bengali literature, are not entirely absent. We catch a glimpse of their changing situations in education and employment from a few novels. *Shahryar*, a novel by Syed Mujtaba Ali,\(^{141}\) deserves a mention. Married to a descendant of one of the aristocratic families of Murshidabad, Shahryar is an upper middle class housewife in Calcutta. She is an accomplished woman, with very strong roots in Bengali values and culture. The educational level may be gauged from statements like “She is acquainted with the less known poems of Tagore”\(^{142}\) or “She says her life stands on 3,000 pillars, the 3,000 songs of Tagore”.\(^{143}\) This was, as the author notes, a bit contradictory because music is normally ‘detested like pork’ in the ‘traditional puritan families’\(^{144}\) like the one she came from.

Shahryar has acquired all this herself and in the process she realises her crisis, of not being able to relate with anyone around her. Her despair leads her to say, “I feel that I am living alone on an island. I have a lot of money with me but nothing to buy”.\(^{145}\) Writing the novel in the sixties, the author notes, “A decade ago, Muslim girls (students) were so rare that Hindu professors treated them with greater care, perhaps it also included a bit of curiosity towards the unknown, the new.”\(^{146}\) This indicates the post-partition decline in the number of Muslim girl students in West Bengal. The gradual widening of the scope of education for them from the sixties has been brought out in the

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\(^{142}\) Ibid., p. 178.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., p. 273.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., p. 248

\(^{145}\) Ibid., p. 192.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., p. 207.
character of Shahryar’s niece. The ‘new woman’, gets a more concrete shape in her depiction. She is shown to have attended college, overriding the hesitation of her guardians in this regard. She also acquires a formal training in music unlike her aunt Shahryar who had attained proficiency in music through lone endeavours. She thus reflects the increasing interest of Muslim girls in co-curricular activities.

*Phulbou*, a novel by Abul Bashar\(^\text{147}\), is the story of a poor girl Raziya who gained her entry into the middle class through her marriage with an old, wealthy landowner, as his fourth wife. Raziya was a victim of her circumstances, particularly her poverty, which led her malicious relatives to get her married off to an old man when she was in Class IX. Her marriage lasted for three days after which she returned and resumed her studies. Raziya’s beauty and intelligence distinguished her from others in her economic category. The character of Raziya shows a discernible advance in the status of Bengali Muslim women during the eighties. She does not meekly submit to the misfortune that befalls her. She tries to overcome it and challenges her destiny at every step.

An accomplished Shahryar during the sixties was shown to be tormented by her loneliness; she sought respite in spirituality but did not think of taking up employment. The author probably could not imagine a *sharif bhadrmahila* working in the sixties; because the sight of Muslim working women had indeed become rare after the first generation of Bengali Muslim working women had migrated to Pakistan. However, Raziya enrols at the Employment Exchange after her graduation during the eighties. She earnestly looks for a job because earning is necessary for her. She is also shown to have shifted to the town hoping for better prospects.

There have been endless debates on whether literature reflects social reality or society is inspired by ideals projected in literature. We can cite the example of another novel, *Bijolibalar Mukti*, by Moti Nandi\(^\text{148}\), which throws up exactly this kind of debate. Hasina Bano, daughter of a furniture merchant in Calcutta, is a science graduate. At first she is introduced only by her pet name, Hashi, and there is no reason to believe that ‘she is not Hindu’.\(^\text{149}\) Here, the author drops a hint that though the predominant majority culture of West Bengal is believed to be secular, it has a deep Hindu undertone. Hasina works in a transport agency. Her education and employment give her a self-confidence,


\(^{149}\) Ibid., p. 68
which enables her to many a Brahmin schoolteacher, Jyotirmoy Chakraborty, in the face of great opposition. She says, “I cannot bear the thought of sitting idly at home while my husband shall toil the whole day to maintain the family”. 150

A rebellious individualist, Hasina marks the emergence of the ‘new woman’ among Bengali Muslims. Other aspects of domestic and social lives of Bengali Muslim women as portrayed in these novels have been taken up in the next chapter.

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150 I bid., p. 23