INTRODUCTION

The present work deals with Bengali Muslim middle class women between 1947 and 1992. This topic has not been addressed by any research as yet. However, before explaining what this subject is about, I would like to say a few words on the historiography relevant to it.

Islam is often regarded as an immutable monolithic system in popular perception as well as in serious academic discourses. Muslims are, therefore, viewed as members of a single undifferentiated community, their identity entirely derived from a total commitment to Islam. On the one hand, this oversimplifies a complex and highly diverse religious terrain: for Islam is by no means as monolithic as it is made out to be. The perception papers over social diversities, sectarian differences, cultural pluralism and specificities of historical contexts among Muslims. On the other hand, this leads to a dangerous tendency of segregating the Muslims as a category ‘separate’ or ‘different’ from the rest of society.

Modern Indian Muslims have been a topic of considerable interest to historians. The dominant focus of interest has been the growth of a distinct political identity of the community, eventually leading to communalism and separatism, and, finally, to the partition of the country. There have also been attempts at generalizing Indian Muslims as a monolithic group of people in the post-1947 context in India. Muslims across India are believed to share the same frustrations and aspirations by scholars like S Abid Hussain, M A Karandikar and S T Lokhandwala. Such attempts to bring the entire mass of Indian Muslims within a single frame again tends to overlook regional, cultural and class differences among Muslims in India.

Many other scholars, among whom Md. Mujeeb was one of the earliest, have shown a greater appreciation of the specific conditions of history, geography, language, customs and culture, and the pluralities among different Muslim communities in India. Francis Robinson dealt with the complexities of the identity of Indian Muslims and the

M A Karandikar, Islam in India’s Transition to Modernity, Bombay, 1968.
political moves that resulted from a sense of separate identity. His work deals with the specific context of the United Provinces in the colonial period. If Robinson concentrated on the political identity of a segment of the Indian Muslims, David Lelyveld explores the nature of Muslim cultural identity in India in the 19th century, and the changes it had undergone in the colonial context.

The author argues that as Muslim social identity was closely tied to the political traditions of the late Mughal period, there was an urgent need to find methods of adapting received concepts of family and religion to the ideological and institutional challenges of colonialism and nationalism. Concentrating his focus on Aligarh’s first generation alone, Lelyveld shows how Aligarh gradually prepared a new generation for the political and cultural leadership of a newly formulated Indian Muslim community.

Imtiaz Ahmad and Zoya Hasan too, deserve mention for highlighting the wide diversities in the social realities of Muslims in different regions of India. Considering the wide regional diversities, cultural complexities and internal contradictions among the Indian Muslims, I have chosen to focus on Bengali Muslims only.

The term ‘Bengali Muslims’ does not denote the same thing as Muslims residing in Bengal. The latter category includes temporary migrants to Bengal, as well as those, who, in spite of staying in Bengal for generations, refuse or fail to imbibe either the language or the culture of the land. ‘Bengali Muslims’, on the other hand, denotes a category of Muslims, who subscribe to the Bengali identity, sharing the regional language, culture and values with non-Muslims. When I refer to the term ‘Muslim’ in this work, apart from denoting religion, I also signify a legal and social category which includes some non-practicing people of Muslim birth, like the Communists.

A survey of the extant historical works shows that Bengali Muslims have always interested researchers. The socio-cultural origin and crystallization of the identity of Bengali Muslims have been discussed by Richard M Eaton and Rafiuddin Ahmed. Richard M. Eaton deals primarily with the spread of Islam during its earliest period in

6 David Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s First Generation Muslim Solidarity in British India*, Delhi, 1996.
7 Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims*, Delhi, 1973.
8 Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender Communities and the State*, New Delhi, 1994.
Bengal. Along with addressing the conversion theories to explain the growth of Islam in Bengal, Eaton has taken into account various other sociological factors which made Bengal a congenial home for this new religion.  

Eaton traces the origins and expansion of Islam in Bengal. Rafiuddin Ahmed, in an earlier work, had analysed how Bengali Muslims during the period 1871-1906, tried to balance the different disparate components in the identity. The different instruments, like the devising of a typical Islami Bangla vocabulary, operative in the process of the formation of a Bengali Muslim identity has been taken up by Ahmed. The divergent pulls of cultural assimilation and orthodoxy among Bengali Muslims forms another interesting dimension of his work.

The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal has been dealt with by scholars like Asim Roy who have focused on the accommodative and acculturating traits of Islam and have tried to analyse the reasons for its immense popularity. Another volume, edited by Rafiuddin Ahmed, is a collection of ten essays, the last three of which concern contemporary Bangladesh. Mention may also be made of Tazin M. Murshid's work where she traces the growth of the social identity of Bengali Muslims over a century. Muslims of West Bengal have a direct relation with this work until the Partition and they find no place in this type of works after 1947. The entire academic focus on Bengali Muslims seems to be on East Pakistani, or Bangladeshi Muslims after 1947.

The people of both West Bengal and Bangladesh are equally the inheritors of the Bengali cultural tradition. I have, however, used the term Bengali in this work mostly to denote the people of West Bengal.

I have tried to be historically precise by referring to the same region as East Bengal for the period before 1947, as East Pakistan during the period 1947-71, and as Bangladesh thereafter. The province of Bengal had the largest concentration of Muslims in pre-1947 India and was a major site for the growth of communal politics, at least from 1906 onwards. Historians like Sufia Ahmed have tried to deconstruct the phenomenal

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growth of the political psyche among Bengal Muslims. The Bengali Muslim middle class was the focus of her work. However, women do not find any mention in these types of work.

I mention just a few important examples of the different types of work here and the historiographical review cannot be regarded as exhaustive in any way.

The other group of literature available on the subject directly concerns Muslim women. Among these are the theoretical works dealing with the position and status of women as enshrined in the Quran, Hadith and the Shariat. Some of these are merely prescriptions on the rights and status of Muslim women in a pan-Islamic agenda, ignoring local specificities of culture and tradition; some try to reconcile the emerging trends in feminism with the theoretical tenets of Islam. Fatima Mernissi aims to shed light on the status of women by examining scriptural sources as far back as the 7th century AD to justify the claim to gender equality in contemporary Islam. 15 Haifa A Jawad explores the practical problems and different social realities and highlights the contrast with what Islam prescribes through the Quran and the Sunnah. 16 Here too, the causes of such contradictions are shown to lie in other socio-cultural and political dynamics and the realm of the revealed religion and scriptural prescriptions and adequately defended.

Various dimensions of the lives of Indian Muslim women during the colonial period have interested researchers. Barbara Daly Metcalf, for instance, has delved deep into the reviverist agenda of the conservative Islamic order in colonial India and the impact it had on women. Her first work discusses the issue in the context of the Deoband school; 17 the second, an edited volume, highlights on how this reformist agenda sought to restructure the concept of decency, adab, in the lives of South Asian Muslims. 18 Muslim women, with the changing pace of time were, from the second half of the 19th century, allowed a limited access to formal education and social activities. But these had to conform strictly to the religio-social norm defined by the patriarchy.

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Gail Minault has dealt with this contradiction in her work which rightly regarded the subjects as secluded scholars.\(^{19}\)

Along with activities like stepping out of purdah under patriarchal tutelage for a more benign cause like getting educated, Muslim women also started stepping into hereto untrodden areas, like demand for reform and active political participation.

Azra Asghar Ali deals with how Indian Muslim women responded to the changes and challenges during the decades leading to independence and creation of Pakistan.\(^{20}\)

Most accounts of Muslim women in post-independence India focus on their role and legal status within the theoretical framework of Islamic doctrine and practices. The very name of Shabbir Khan’s book, *Status of Women in Islam*,\(^{21}\) for instance, speaks of its possible content. The first part of the book deals with the theoretical status of women within family structure and in society and economy according to the tenets of Shariati Islam. The second part deals with the actual status of Muslim women in India as supported by the data generated from several surveys conducted in different parts of the country and the findings of the Core Groups appointed by the Department of Women and Child Welfare, Ministry of HRD, Government of India.

The case of Indian Muslim women has also been taken up in the post-1947 context by scholars like Asghar Ali Engineer.\(^{22}\) Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon took up a nation-wide survey of Muslim women across different socio-economic categories. The aim of the survey, in their own words, was “to describe the status of Muslim women from a gender and social equity perspective; second, to portray the diversity in the status of women and situate them in a class, community and regional context and third, to analyze social inequality and disadvantage, and suggest some directions for empowerment based on the status of Muslim women in India”.\(^{23}\) The report of this survey,\(^{24}\) and another monograph which followed from it, and concentrated particularly on education\(^{25}\)

\(^{19}\) Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1998.


underline how variously Muslim women have been affected by the social, economic and political situation facing different Muslim communities in India and by those facing Indian women as a whole.

Islam cannot be the only factor in determining the social, political and economic problems of Muslim women. Though they may be criticized as being microscopic from the point of view of coverage, scope and giving only a partial understanding of the position of Muslim women in the complex Indian social structure, localized studies on Muslim women in India can address specific issues intensively.

Instances of such area-intensive work may be found in Shahnaz Merchant who deals with the position of Marathi Muslim women from the perspective of marriage. 26 M Indu Menon has primarily tried to locate the educational status of Muslim women in four districts of Kerala. 27 She has shown why and how Muslim women failed to exploit the educational opportunities available in the state and consequently remained more disadvantaged than women of other communities in a similar social milieu. Without going into more examples, we may say that most of these researches have been taken up from a sociological angle where the methodology includes interviewing randomly selected respondents through a structured and fixed questionnaire. A limitation of the random sampling process is that the more interesting respondents with a wider range of experience and activities may be missed out. The process of interviewing through a structured, objective, yes/no type questionnaire reduces human beings to mere statistical figures and leads to generalization about their experience and understanding on the basis of mathematical calculations.

K N Jehangir's work suffers from this lacuna. 28 Apart from the broad generalization reached through the sampling method, this study of Bengali Muslim women in Murshidabad does not give any historical background for Muslim women in the district. Thus we are not in a position to compare the findings of this research with the conditions of the subject in the past. Sonia Nishat Amin’s work is the only one that deals

27 M Indu Menon, Status of Muslim Women A Casestudy of Kerala, New Delhi, 1981.
with all the four components of the present topic of research.\textsuperscript{29} Amin, however, traces the development and growth of the concept of Bengali Muslim \textit{bhadramahila} mainly from literary sources. The historical narrative in this work stops in 1939, eight years before Partition. The history of Bengali Muslim middle class women during the post-independence period thus remains one of the least explored areas of research; this is where I choose to concentrate.

There are four primary components in the subject of my research. These are Bengali, Muslim, middle class and women. As the works cited above would show, there has been a considerable amount of research on a single element or on a combination of two or more of these components.

However, before I take up the issues of time frame and locales of the study, a few words need to be said about the ‘class’ factor in this work. If the perceptions and positions of a person are conditioned by his/ her community and region, it also varies with the class to which an individual belongs.

Class variations are significant determinants of status and role of women in a society. Class differentials determine levels of nutrition, education and training, which can help women exercise control over their lives and permit easier exploitation of economic opportunities. In the categorization of levels, economic conditions definitely play a vital role but simultaneously other characteristics like culture, education, leadership, leisure pursuits, etc. are also associated. They are not independent of the class location but they do possess a relative autonomy.

Going beyond the typical ashraf-ajlaf categorization based on origins and ancestry, Bengali Muslims are also a large and diversified group, containing various socio-economic categories within it. A discourse on the physical segregation of women in the name of purdah is absolutely meaningless to women who cannot afford not to work outside the home. Similarly, educated middle class women cannot perceive the influence that the verbal ‘triple talaq’ wields over the lives of poor rural women in Bengal. Instead of bringing in the class contrast between different categories of Bengali Muslim women, I have chosen to focus on middle class women alone. The middle class usually forms the most visible group in any society or community as it articulates the self-definition of a

\textsuperscript{29} Sonia Nishat Amin, \textit{The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal}, 1876-1939, New York, 1996.
larger society, community or the nation. Defining the middle class, however, is difficult. The criterion of occupation as a basis of classification of population into class groups as used by the sociologists Ogburn and Nimkoff, is often quite useful. In this sense, the middle class does not engage in manual labour or are ordinary craftsmen, peddler, factory operators, that mark the working class on the one hand, and the big industrialists and propertied men forming the upper class at the other. But the middle class itself is not homogeneous and at least three different components may be located within this extensive class.

At the one end, is the upper middle class whose status, lifestyle and aspirations are closer to what we may call the 'rich'; on the other is the lower middle class, some of whom are closer to what we call the 'poor'. The dividing line among the three categories within the middle class is at times very faint. It becomes difficult to categorise the middle class women respondents in my work because all three levels come under the definition of what we commonly call 'bhadra' and there is no standard definition on the basis of either cultural level or professions. The standard definition of the bhadralok is in terms of the Hindus who are so defined by a combination of class, caste and educational advantages. But for Muslims the caste category is not applicable in quite that sense. Also different categories of businessmen would come under all three categories of the middle class. On the other hand, a school teacher’s standing was found to vary between the middle and the upper middle class. The West Bengal Human Development Report, the National Sample Survey and the National Family Health Survey Reports were not found to be of great help in locating subdivisions within the middle class.

The monthly family income could not be regarded a proper determinant because much depends upon the number of people this income is expected to sustain. In many Muslim families that I interviewed, it was found that the income sustained few more than the immediate family-members, like old parents or an unemployed brother staying in the village home. They are sometimes overlooked by researchers reporting on the number of dependents. The monthly salary earned cannot be regarded as the true determinant of the standard of living, also because they are usually supplemented by other sources of

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income, like agricultural income, income from rent or ancestral property. These add substantially to the standard of living, but are often unreported.

The respondents were thus asked to assess themselves. I interviewed two sisters-in-law, Sultana Jahan and Nargis Khanam in Calcutta. The elder, Sultana, is a school teacher while her husband works in a private firm. Sultana reported herself as belonging to the middle class. Her sister-in-law, Nargis, is a housewife. Her husband runs a small tailoring shop which is the only source of their income. Nargis said she belonged to the lower middle class, although both women belonged to the same family tree.

In another instance, a widowed mother said she belonged to the middle class, while her daughter who works as an executive in a multinational publishing company and is also the wife of a surgeon, reported herself as belonging to the upper middle class. The self-estimations, according to my review, were remarkably precise. There was not a single instance of overestimation of one's location; there were, however, four instances of polite understatement. It is remarkable that those belonging to the lower middle and middle classes never underestimated their status because this would imply a loss of social prestige. Upper middle class families, on the other hand, sometimes politely underestimate themselves as belonging to the middle stratum within the middle class. It probably seems arrogant and brash to claim an elite status.

In one instance, the wife of a prosperous businessman reported herself as belonging to the middle class. In that case, I questioned if she meant the 'upper middle-class, and she approvingly smiled. It is interesting that though she agreed with this description, she did not use it herself. All the interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents, so I had a personal chance to verify the standard of living of the concerned respondent. A lower middle class family in West Bengal would not have an air conditioner or a washing machine. An ordinary middle class family does not as yet possess more than one car for its private use.

Most of the lower middle class respondents were found to have gained an entry into the middle order from the lower economic groups through business. In just two instances, one in Calcutta and another in Burdwan, we had the examples of middle class families slipping down into the lower middle one through loss of economic fortunes.

32 My interview with Nazme Molla (b. 1964) on 27.03.04, Calcutta.
On the broad canvas of the state of West Bengal, I have specifically concentrated on women in Calcutta and Burdwan. Although these names are officially re-spelt today as Kolkata and Bardhaman, I have used the older spellings of the more Anglicized pronunciations of the two places, as they are still very popular.

Calcutta is the most important socio-cultural as well as political and economic centre of Bengal. Different categories of Muslims, indigenous and migrant, from inside and from outside Bengal (like the merchant classes of Bihar and UP), have had a pervasive presence in the heterogeneous culture of Calcutta since the 18th century. No study of Bengal can be considered to be complete without a close look at Calcutta.

Although the spatial concentrations within the city have undergone changes from time to time, the concentration of the Muslim population in different areas of the city has generally been decided according to regional and linguistic affinities. The main areas of concentration of Bengali Muslim population lie in the areas around Park Circus extending up to Topsia. In the southwest, it extends from Kidderpore to Metiabruj extending up to Rajabazar and Burtolla within the Garden Reach area. Relatively more affluent sections of Muslims from various regional and linguistic backgrounds live around Mechua bazar, Coo totolla and Canning Street. There are also small pockets of Muslim population in areas of Narkeldanga, Rajabazar and adjacent areas of Patwar Bagan and Parsi Bagan. Small pockets of Muslim population are also to be found in East Calcutta near Tangra, in a place known as Bibi Bagan, as also at Motijheel near Convent Road in the Entally area.

There is also a small settlement of Muslims at Tollygunge around the mosque on Deshpran Sasmal Road. Apart from these areas of concentration, individual Muslim women were also interviewed in areas like Garia, Bagha Jatin, Prince Golam Md. Shah Road, Gariahat and Salt Lake. Thus, much of the geographical area of Calcutta was covered in this work. To compare and contrast with the metropolitan example of Calcutta, the district town of Burdwan was chosen as another locale of the study. Mughal records first mention Burdwan in the *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazal in 1574. The contact started from the Sultanate period and Muslims may be said to have an intimate relation with the history of the district for a long time now. Although Muslims have never found

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more than 20% of the population of either the district or the town, they have displayed significant achievements in different fields. Citing only an instance from politics, we may mention the Congress leader Maulvi Abul Kasem (member, Bengal Legislative Council, 1912-36) of the pre-47 era and Syed Sahidullah and Syed Mansur Habibullah, prominent Marxist leaders during the post-independence period.

Burdwan town, which accommodates the largest urban population of the district and is its most important town, has been chosen for studying the Bengali Muslim women in the mofussil areas.

Here too, the entire geographical area of the town was sought to be covered. Many of the respondents live in the Muslim-majority localities of the town like Dubrajdighi, Mehdi Bagan, Khan Para - Tikepara - Barabazar, Krishnapur - Baburbag - Khagragarh, Bahirsarjamangala Nazrul Pally, Golahat, Pirbahram, Laskardighi and Tentultala Bazar. Others living in areas known to be predominantly non-Muslim were also interviewed.

As 77.29% of the total Muslim population of the district live in the villages, it is not possible to meaningfully comprehend any social situation without comparing the metropolitan and mofussil examples with the rural. More so, as scholars have regarded that "no study of Indian Muslims can be objective and no information about them can be complete unless we consider both the urban and the rural population". Although India is a predominantly agrarian society, the pattern of Muslim habitation is curiously different. The percentage of urban Muslim population on an all-India scale, as Census figures reveal, is higher than that of the urban Hindu population. The picture of West Bengal is, however, quite different. Here, the urban population of the Muslims is less than the national average and the concentration of their population is still in the rural agrarian sector. This makes the consideration of a rural locale all the more significant. For rural areas, I had identified the following criteria for choosing my locale:

a) presence of a higher secondary school in the village,

34 From a survey of the Census Reports, 1881-2001.
36 H Y Siddiqui, "The Studies of Muslim Women in India; Approaches and Methodology", in Mohini Anjum (ed.), Muslim Women in India, New Delhi, 1992, p.9
b) availability of an adequate number of households with a fairly large Muslim population.

c) connection to Burdwan town by rail or road, as an index of social mobility.

In the beginning, six such villages with a predominantly Muslim population were identified in the vicinity of Burdwan. Initially, I spent some time in all of them trying to understand the situation, locate my respondents and establish a rapport.

Finally, on the basis of availability of different categories of the middle class and their eagerness to participate in the research, I selected Bamsor (JL code No. 67 under Bhatar Police Station) with an area of 398.57 hectares for the purpose of field work. However, as this village comes under the district of Burdwan, it has not been separately mentioned in the title of this work.

Coming to the time-frame of the present work, it is located between 1947 and 1992. The implications of 1947 were deeper than a mere political event. Partition restructured Hindu-Muslim relations in West Bengal in very significant ways. Along with the migration of the majority of the Bengali Muslim social elite to East Pakistan, Partition also split a dynamic women's movement that was growing up among the Bengali Muslims since the 1870s. Reduced overnight to a minority population from their former status of majority after 15 August, 1947, Bengali Muslims lived in the midst of a deep general suspicion created by partition and riots. The influx of Hindu refugees from East Bengal into West Bengal added the third decisive element to the situation of Muslims in West Bengal after 1947.

Muslims thus evolved as a fresh category during the post-1947 period. This study is an enquiry to perceive how far the subjects have been able to balance the different components in their identity, Bengali, Muslim, middle class and women, to which of these four they give priority, and in what order. Bengali Muslim women during the post-47 period had to negotiate a space for themselves between two blocs of pressure – memories of and the possibility of communal violence from Hindus and patriarchal controls from the self-proclaimed guardians of Islam. Both were exacerbated in 1947 and 1992. The Ram Janmabhumi - Babri Masjid controversy, which flared up from 1986 and climaxed in 1992 reaffirmed the continuities of a political discourse based on religious antagonism. It also brought to the surface certain problems the partition was supposed to have solved.
The time period of my work is thus held between two very traumatic events in the lives of Muslims in West Bengal. There are also some references to post-1992 events in this work. As the fieldwork was conducted during 2002-04, I refer to significant post-92 socio-political trends and events and their impact on the personal lives of the respondents, which I felt compelled to consider.

We are trained in a methodology which says sources should be cross-checked, documentation should be provided and evidence must be weighed carefully. Archival sources for post-colonial times have not been made available. They, moreover, generally tend to ignore histories of women. This work, therefore, primarily relies on the non-conventional evidence of oral testimonies. The history of the present cannot be written without oral sources. Oral history and women's history have enjoyed a symbiotic connection since the late 1960s.

Interviews with women are supposed to provide an invaluable source for uncovering and exploring experiences which are ordinarily 'hidden from history' and challenge historical interpretations based upon the lives and documentation of men. The concept of 'participatory research' emphasizes that both researchers and the subjects of their research should be encouraged to assess their own situations and their viewpoints should also be given due emphasis in understanding the situation. This study therefore makes an attempt to encourage the respondents to undertake a self-assessment.

Whilst an 'outsider' status which is based on the externality of the researcher and her distance from the subject of her research is believed to ensure objectivity and detachment between the subject and the researcher (though history teaches us that objectivity is elusive), an 'insider' perspective also has the benefits of special insight which would otherwise be obscure to outsiders.

I felt a sense of 'shared sex' with the interviewee, a feeling modelled on the Marxist notion of 'shared class' since I, too, am a Bengali Muslim middle class woman. A kind of complicity could be established and deeper and more sincere feelings would emerge from the interview. The distance between the subject and the object often became blurred. How, then, could I verify the truth of what they said? What the respondents said would often be subjective, yet they could not have altered certain hard facts about their

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life events and there were important indices. Moreover, their subjective presentation of these events – even when not fully accurate – were interesting clues to their modes of self perception and self-representation.

Any sample is only as reliable as the sampling method used, and can never guarantee against leaving out a ‘quality’ narrator whose testimony alone might be worth ten statistically selected ones. In selecting my participants, I made no conscious effort on my part to do ‘scientific sampling’. However, the resultant interviews can indeed be described as a ‘sample’ of Bengali Muslim middle class women who were interested in my research and were willing to participate in it.

It is true that I could not very easily interview everyone I wanted to. Some housewives would be prepared for the interview only after the approval of the husband and /or other male guardians (like the father-in-law or the elder brother-in-law) was obtained. In such instances, I was first interviewed by the men and had to convince them of the innocence of my purpose, before I could get to interview the women. I could successfully persuade such men to grant the permission for interview on nine occasions. However, on two occasions in lower middle class business families in Calcutta, I was refused permission. I understood that they suspected that I would poison the minds of their women with knowledge and ideas harmful to them. They could also have feared that their women may disclose uncomfortable facts about their family life.

Women were interviewed as one person at a time. As this facilitated the establishment of a rapport with the respondents, women relaxed and opened up, many of them spontaneously spoke of things (like, the role of religion in their lives) which I believe, their men would not have always approved.

Most of the women were not only ready to answer questions, but were eager to do so. They spoke unreservedly - the longer the interview lasted, the more the women relaxed, opened up and even enjoyed the occasion, confiding many personal and / or family secrets with a shy conclusion, “I am sure this is not going to help you in any way”. This shows the importance of self-narration of lives for women who usually have to live out their lives according to the dictates of family and community. Only through these tellings, would they feel a sense of gaining control over their own lives.
In order to collect relevant information for the study, an exhaustive questionnaire was framed. It was designed in such a way that it included questions to help me understand the socio-economic, educational and political status of Muslim women, their attitude to various religio-domestic aspects, etc.

The questions (included in Appendix B) were both 'close ended' and 'open ended' depending upon the utility and purpose of that question. This planning also helped in a quick recording of the answers to avoid delay in interviews. More time, therefore, could be devoted to establish the rapport with the respondents enabling them to open up. However, I did not always stick to the given questionnaire. Women’s own narratives sometimes prompted my questions. These sources are not fixed and closed but remain a dynamic, continuing process as I found more and more questions to ask as the interviewee talked.

My basic purpose in the study has been to try to delineate the collective imagination of middle class Bengali Muslim women. But attitudes cannot be treated as homogeneous and space had to be provided for individual variations and complications. Reality is complex and many-sided and it is a primary merit of oral history that, to a much greater extent than most other sources, it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be retrieved.

Therefore, I had to learn to be a good listener, giving priority to the respondent, listening to what she wanted to tell rather than to what I wanted to hear. Considering the fact that the interview is a linguistic, as well as social and psychological event, there was much more to be ‘read’ from the interviews than what was ‘told’. Silences and omissions were revealing; slowing down for instance, while women recalled their riot experiences, could either mean greater emphasis or greater difficulty. Acceleration showed a wish to glide over certain points, as well as a greater familiarity or ease in some cases. Initially I was a bit nervous handling a non-conventional source because the open-ended questions required a lot of alertness. I became more confident as the number of interviews increased.

In the process, I interviewed 540 women - 346 women from 275 families in Calcutta, 158 women from 110 families in Burdwan and 36 women from 14 families in Bamsor. Normally, women are treated as belonging to a different family after marriage, but I have treated all women who at some point share a common family history, as belonging to one family. Thus married sisters, a mother and her married daughter were regarded as belonging to one family, because the narrative of women on the effects of partition or the experiences of riots seemed often as bits and patches of incoherent reminiscences that I would later learn was actually a long narrative history of the family which has been passed down across generations. Regarding the sectarian affiliation of the respondents, I should say that all these women reported themselves as Sunni. I did not have the chance to interview any Shia woman.

Among other categories of people I interviewed were some non-Bengali Muslim women. Women like Noor Jahan Shakil, President, All Bengal Muslim Women’s Association, Zarina Ghafoor Firdausi, Chief Personnel Officer, Metro Railways, etc, were interviewed to understand what they thought about Bengali Muslims and how their perceptions varied from one another. Women belonging to other religious communities, who were relatives, close friends and colleagues of Bengali Muslim women, were also interviewed. For instance, a Hindu girl who has married in a Muslim family could not be counted among the respondents for technical reasons. Practically too, her experiences would be different from a Bengali Muslim woman in many ways. But such women had also to be interviewed to verify certain points her Muslim relatives, for instance her mother-in-law, might have raised. Another category of men and women interviewed was that of social workers, politicians, elected representatives and those in their professional capacities, from both communities. It was thus that I interviewed Leena Sengupta, Headmistress, Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ High School, Dr. Gopa Dutta, Principal, Lady Brabourne College, Dr Sukriti Ghosal, Principal, Maharajadhiraj Uday Chand Women’s College, Burdwan, Dr Subhash Ch. Nandy, Principal, Burdwan Raj College, Professor Jasodhara Bagchi, Chairperson, West Bengal Commission for Women, etc. Their in-depth work experience among Muslim women in different capacities gave me access to a range of issues that my respondents may not have thought of or experienced. This provided a broad context and perspective for understanding what the respondents said.
I also interviewed a significant number of Muslim men in the process. Most of them were politicians and social workers. In some other cases, when I interviewed the women in their homes, they themselves referred me to their fathers, elder brothers and other male relatives whom they regarded as more informed than themselves on a particular issue, like a riot experience in the family or encroachment of the family property by Hindu refugees, and how it was resisted.

Although I insisted on the women’s knowledge and perceptions on the topics, for instance, on Hindu-Muslim social relations or on political options before Muslims, I also talked to men on various other issues, apart from the particular one for which I was referred. Interviews with these men, especially with those more than 60 years old, on Hindu-Muslim social relations or political options before Bengali Muslims, were enlightening in many ways. These instances have been highlighted in the text.

Oral sources were supplemented by my participant observation in various meetings, seminars and workshops like those conducted by the Minorities’ Forum, All Bengal Muslim Women’s Association and West Bengal Minorities’ Development Council. West Bengal Minorities’ Development Council as well as the more religious gatherings—the jamaats.

The fieldwork could not be started off without spending arduous months ploughing through written material. Important published works have been enlisted in the bibliography. There is lack of archival data on Bengali Muslim women. Nor do government agencies assess the role of social inequality, and particularly of religion, in access to opportunities, livelihood and services. However the position of Bengali Muslim women could, to some extent, be gauged from official records and reports, for instance, on education. Newspapers, journals and magazines, particularly those edited by Muslims, both before Independence, Al-Eslam, Dhumketu, The Mussalman, Saogat, etc. and during the post-1947 period in West Bengal, like Jagaran, Mijan, Kalam, Kafela, etc. were another important source.

Magazines, souvenirs and official records (admission and pass registers) of academic institutions where Bengali Muslim girls have always had a significant presence were also reviewed to identify the trends in their education. Similarly, membership patterns of the different political parties were reviewed to assess the trends of political
participation of Bengali Muslim women. Muslim religious prescriptive literature written in Bengali which contain socio-religious codes for women, didactic manuals, as well as modern Bengali novels which deal with Bengali Muslim women have also been used in this work.

Many respondents granted me access to their private papers, like diaries and letters from friends and relatives in Bangladesh. Some of these have also been used as primary material in this work.

My objective in this work has been to locate the elements of continuity and change in the lives of Bengali Muslim women. I have also attempted to explore and try to explain the disparity between the Muslim female stereotype and actuality. I have tried to establish that the status and role of women in a minority community is as much affected by their perception of themselves as a minority within a minority, entrusted with the responsibility of preserving a community’s identity in a society undergoing change, as it is affected by the strata and region to which they belong.

No work can claim to be complete in its focus and I am aware of some of the limitations of this work. This study is not at all a universal comment on either the entire Bengali Muslim community or on all Muslim women in Bengal. This work may be regarded as microcosmic from the point of view of coverage, scope and generalization. Considering the vastness of the total Bengali Muslim population involved, I would admit that the study has been intensive rather than extensive. A self-selected group can rarely be taken to be fully representative of a community. It is not possible to understand a dominant class or religious community without locating its relationship to other social strata and religious groups. Though I have occasionally raised such points of comparison and contrast, more intricate dimensions could have been added to the present study if it were compared in greater detail with Muslim women belonging to other socio-economic categories, particularly the lower working class, and those belonging to the same economic class, and those belonging to the same economic class in other communities. This work may be treated as a combined exercise in contemporary history and women’s studies. There is also an undertone of minority history and local history in the focus of the study. Considering the limited scope of the present work, I have made an effort to
intensively study certain issues related to the lives of Bengali Muslim women. The first two chapters are arranged chronologically and the next four thematically.

The first chapter situates the topic in its colonial context, trying to locate the pre-1947 examples and the historical tradition of education, employment, socio-domestic status and political participation of Bengali Muslim women.

The second chapter deals with the effects of Partition on the lives of Bengali Muslims, particularly their women. It tries to see whether 1947 meant independence, or partition to them. This chapter also discusses the elements constituting the Bengali Muslim middle class during the post-1947 period and the major political events and forces to which they were subjected during the period.

The third chapter traces the attitudinal changes of Bengali Muslim women towards education and employment and the infrastructural improvement during the period. Both quantitative and qualitative changes have been noted.

The fourth chapter analyses certain issues in the domestic and social lives of Bengali Muslim women. The points of Bengali Muslim household and its family structure, domestic patterns, purdah and some other important points like cousin marriage, child marriage, divorce and polygamy have been raised in this chapter.

The fifth chapter narrates the current trends of political support and participation among Bengali Muslim women. The sixth chapter discusses the psychological effect of riots on victims, witnesses and their next generations. This chapter is not a documentation of the post partition riots in West Bengal; it is written on the basis of oral evidence of the respondents on their assessment of riots and their deep suspicions regarding the possibilities of their recurrence in future.