

# CHAPTER - 7

## ROLE AND STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the role and status of Muslim women living in Darjeeling hill. There are four major sub-headings in this chapter. In the first, an introduction of the topic is given for the proper understanding of the subject. In the second the position of women as reflected in spiritual text or ideal role of women as Islam is given. The third broad subheading describes the profile of the Darjeeling Muslim women where a portrait of the scenario is drawn and the last one is the findings of the chapter.

The role and status of Women has become a matter of great concern in the wake of the importance of Gender Studies or Women Studies in a developing country like India. The third world women particularly the women in Indian subcontinent are facing a lot of oppression and subjugation in various forms of gender discrimination in today's life. And the Muslim societies in particular are the most sited examples in India. In his critique of the inferior position of women, particularly the Hindu women, Raja Rammohan Roy, the great Bengali social reformer, stressed prime importance of civil liberties and individual rights and the need to abolish practices which actively affect the women folk such as female infanticide, polygyny and etc. Muslim societies in India are largely a complex diversity of indigenous converts and are not free from such evil practices. There is a stereotype among the peoples mind that the fatal point in Islam was the degradation of women status in Muslim society. The practice of *Purdah*, the lack of women education and their discrimination within Muslim law creates a situation to blame the Muslims to believe the stereotype of their too much attachment to Islam. And this misconception has been regularly taken up by the politicians, media

personals and other non Muslim leaders as a stick with which to beat Islam and Muslims. Though there are certain factors for which Muslims have to own responsibility like imposing restrictions to women, which are rooted more in social customs and traditions of the past but legitimized in the name of *Shariat* and which have nothing to do with Islam (Engineer, 1987, 1997).

Muslim women in India are suffering from both internal and external oppression. There are so many oppressions which Muslim women faces are of social nature and are common to women of all religions elsewhere India. All women face problem of social conservatism as they are reduced to lesser sex. The only difference is that among other religious communities this situation is fast changing. But situation is not so bright as far as Muslim women are concerned. As because of their rampant illiteracy these sections of society do not know what is written in their religious texts which ultimately creates a wide gap between text and context. There are two ways of trying to understand what Islam and Islamic or Muslim society is all about. One is by interpreting it theologically which is the ideal or 'textual Islam' and another 'contextual Islam' or how actually Muslims practice their faith i.e. from the peoples perception (Mondal, 1951). This widening gap between text and context has had a disastrous consequences on the Muslim society manifested in almost all aspects of their life; political tyranny and fragmentation, economic backwardness, social injustice, intellectual stagnation and etc. And very interestingly, most of the cases they are oppressed not so much by religion as by society. In order to bring about change in the plight of Muslim women it would be equally necessary to bring about change in socio-economic conditions of Muslims in India. If Muslims remain poor and illiterate, it will be very difficult to improve conditions of Muslim women.

However, the present study among the Darjeeling Muslims is an empirical enquiry which also focused into the dynamics of change in the role and status of Muslim women of Darjeeling Hill. The study of

Muslim women of Darjeeling hill has one great obstacle and that is the difficulty in finding ample historical records and observations. As all the previous studies emphasized on the status and role from the perspectives of Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha community. And there were hardly any work on Muslim women of Darjeeling Hill.

## **7.2 Position of Women in Islam as Reflected in Text**

There are two ways of trying to understand what Islam and Muslim society is all about. One is by interpreting it theologically which is the ideal or 'textual Islam' and another 'contextual Islam' or what Muslims are supposed to believe in. The *Quranic* verses clearly mentioned woman as an independent entity, and thus a fully responsible human being. Islam addresses her directly and does not approach her through the agency of Muslim males. A woman would assume full capacity and liability once she has attained maturity and has received the message of Islam. The *Quran* and *Hadis* established the fact that a woman is at least as vital to the life and society as man himself (Engineer, 1987; Khan, 1990; Mondal, 2005).

### **7.2.1 The Spiritual Aspect of Women**

The *Quran* provides clear cut evidence for her equitable rights and responsibilities with man but not necessarily identical with man. They are created equals. There is no image of their inferior position. In terms of religious obligation, such as daily prayer and pilgrimage, they are not different from their male counterparts. Even Islam has given some special privileges or advantages over man like women are exempted from the daily prayers and fasting periods for certain days after the birth of a child. She can make up her missed fasting days of Ramadan whenever she can (Engineer, 1987; Khan, 1990; Mondal, 2005).

### **7.2.2 The Social Aspect of Women**

Family, society and marriage is treated by Islam purely on ethical basis. As a child Islam protects her life to forbid female infanticide which considered a crime as like as murder. The *Quran*

effectively ended the cruel pre Islamic practice of female infanticide. The *Quran* went further to rebuke the unwelcoming attitudes among some parents upon hearing the news of the birth of a baby girl, instead of a baby boy. Parents are duty bound to support and show kindness and justice to their daughters. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad in this regard are following:

*“Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, Allah will enter him into Paradise.”* (Ibn Hanbal, No.1957)

The *Quran* clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well being and spiritual harmony. To the Muslims, marriage is not a religious sacrament, but a secular institution mainly based on the theory of contract. Her consent is requisite to the validity of marital contract. As a mother she deserves special privileges or good treatments from her society which is sanctioned by *Quran*.

There is a stereotype that the ideal of Islam prohibits secular education and encouraged only the religious education for women. But there is no evidence of such in religious texts. According to Islamic perceptions, “acquisition of knowledge is compulsory for all Muslim men and women” (Mondal, 2005).

But the *Ulemas*, Muslim theologians, position on women was based on orthodox medieval Islamic tradition symbolized by the notion of women as “*fitna*” (potential disorder). Accordingly, women's social interaction with men had to be regulated which in effect translated into a control over female sexuality and female seclusion from public place. And from that reason, the observance of *Purdha* is imposed by them as *fatwa* (Mondal, 1979).

### 7.2.3 The Economic Aspect of Women

Islam gave women a variety of rights. Islam ensured women's basic rights to property. Ideologically there is no distinction between men and women. The *Quran* however, established the right of women to a share in inheritance. According to *Quranic* injunctions six persons will never be deprived over their rights of inheritance. They are, father, mother, husband, wife, son and daughter. She is also free to dispose of her property; donate it, rent it, sell it, invest it or in any way she likes without consulting any one else. As a mother she is entitled to receive one sixth share of her deceased son, as a wife one eighth of the properties of her deceased husband and as a daughter her share is equal to the half of each brother (Mondal, 2005).

### 7.2.4 The Political Aspect of Women

There is a deep rooted stereotype among the peoples mind that Islam does not support women's political participation though there is no textual evidence of distinction between physical and mental power of men and women. Theoretically Islam does not accept superiority of one sex on other and there is no distinction between men and women on the issues of leadership and organization (Siddique, 1971; Mondal, 2005). Prophet Muhammad believed that which is mentioned in *Hadith* that a people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader. History of Islam also reveals that Prophet's wife Hazarat Aisha actively participated in the battles of *Uhud* (Mondal, 2005).

## 7.3 Muslim Women of Darjeeling Town: A Profile

Muslims in Darjeeling town are predominately a minority group not only in religious sense but also in their numerical strength. They are concentrated mainly in a century old *basti* (local term for habitation) which previous name was Butcher *Basti* presently as Dr. *Zakir Hussain Basti*. Besides they are also found in *Tungshung basti*, *Kaakjhora*, *Lebong* and *Darogabazar* (near *Jama masjid*). There is a difficulty of finding ample historical records regarding Muslim

population of Darjeeling as the documents at Darjeeling District Magistrate office are not properly stored and very sadly a sudden fire burnt the old Darjeeling Municipality building in the year 1996 where all the old paper records turned into ashes. However, from some previous census records made by O' Malley and others, we can speculate the Muslim population and their women folk as they had written few words for Muslim population of the district Darjeeling as a whole. But for the first time, Arthur Jules Dash made a significant outline of the Muslim population of Darjeeling hills and plains based on 1941 census records. Later on 1961 and 19671 census also published the Muslim population of the district subdivision wise. There is a table below (table 7.1), where Muslim population from 1941 to 2001 are given. The 2001 population is calculated from the 2001 religious census CD file.

**Table: 7.1**  
**Muslim population at Darjeeling Town from 1941-2001 censuses**

1941*		1951	1961		1971		2001	
Male	Female	Male/ Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1041		Not available	739	336	717	400	2421	1713

(Source: \* Dash, 1947 & Census reports)

For this present study data were collected from 151 Muslim families permanently living in the town since three generations back. The Muslim population of the town has diverse ethnic and occupational backgrounds. On the basis of this, the Muslims are largely categorized into four broad categories namely - Nepali Muslims, Bihari Muslims, Tibetan Muslims and Kashmiri Muslims. The status and role of womenfolk is also varied from community to community even though they shared the basic principles of social-cultural life. Socio-economic conditions of the families also make a significant role in defining the status and role of Muslim women. The influence of Nepali speaking ethnic groups and their inclination

towards the present shifting world presently make a significant role in building awareness among the Muslim women for change.

Conversion has a great role in shaping the status of Muslim women in the town as a large number of indigenous women were converted into Islam since colonial times after got married with the migrated Muslim males. According to the Islamic law one who wants to marry a Muslim has to convert at least in name of Islamic faith. In Darjeeling town, generally women are converted to Islam from the ethnic Nepali communities which are an age old tradition. Since the early phase of the town's formation, Muslim male individuals were migrated in search of work. And these non-familial male individuals got married with the local ethnic girls and established their settlement as a permanent residence of the town. Particularly the Nepali Muslim communities are the decedents of such mixture. Thus female conversion had a great role in shaping Muslim identity at Darjeeling hills as their mother land is Darjeeling. There might be some familial resistance during conversion, but cultural similarities to some extent never create obstacle in conversion. In general, Darjeeling hill society is more secular in case of their religious faith and food consumption. Even the Hindu Nepali ethnic communities and the Buddhists Bhutias's consume beef which is tabooed to Hindus. And these ethnic categories never took Hindu religion an integral part in their society where beef consumption is strictly tabooed. That is why; there is no tension between their past and present after conversion to Islam. Consciousness of their Islamic identity and the degree of the intensity of their faith and religious adherence grew later gradually. However, self desired conversion of females into Islam is very meager among the other communities in Darjeeling town which is more personal in character.

### **7.3.1 Population**

For the present study data has been collected from 151 Muslim households of the town Darjeeling and majority of these families

resides permanently in butcher *basti*. There are altogether 737 individuals and the female population is 355. The percentage of female population is 48.16 which are against the male percentage of 51.83. Hence, there has been a less of 3.67 percent females against total male population.

**Table: 7.2**  
**Population Structure of the Muslims of Darjeeling Town**

Sex	Nepali Muslim	Bihari Muslim	Tibetan Muslim	Kashmiri Muslim	Total
Male	182 (50.27%)	102 (52.57%)	73 (53.28%)	25 (56.81%)	382 (51.83%)
Female	180 (49.72%)	92 (47.42%)	64 (46.71%)	19 (43.18%)	355 (48.16%)
Total	362 (100%)	194 (100%)	137 (100%)	44 (100%)	737 (100%)

(Source: Author, Field work)

**Fig: 7.1**

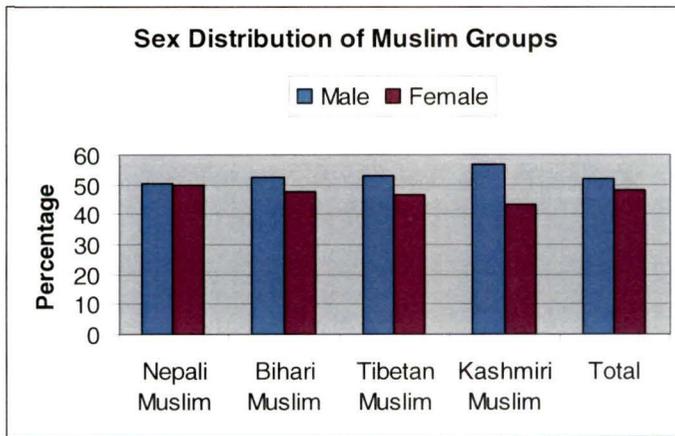


Table number 7.2 shows community wise Muslim male female population and their percentage. Among the Nepali Muslims the females are total 180 and constitute 49.72 percent. And there has been a less of 0.55 of females against Nepali Muslim male population. Among the Bihari Muslim communities the females constitute 47.42 percent and there is a deficiency of 5.15 percent females among them. The Tibetan Muslim has a female population of 46.71 percent and the deficiency of female population is 6.57 percent among them. Among the Kashmiri Muslims the female population is only 19 and the

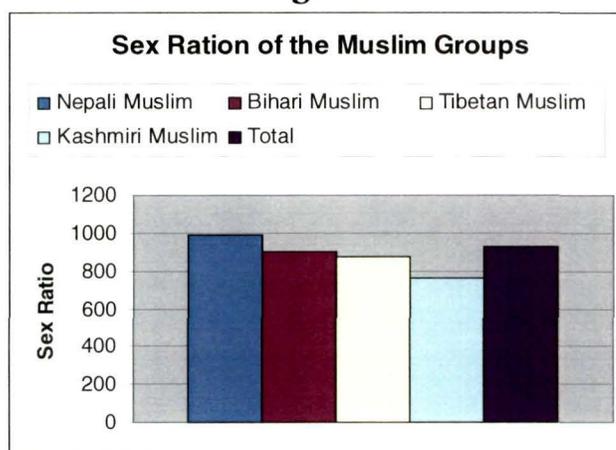
percentage is 43.18 percent and there is a less of 13.63 percent females against male population of them.

**Table: 7.3**  
**Distribution on the Basis of Sex Ratio**

Muslim Groups	Male	Female	Sex Ratio
Nepali Muslim	182	180	989.01
Bihari Muslim	102	92	901.96
Tibetan Muslim	73	64	876.71
Kashmiri Muslim	25	19	760
Total	382	355	929.31

(Source: Author, Field work)

**Fig: 7.2**



The sex ration of the Muslims of Darjeeling is 929.31 females per 1000 males. The sex ration among the Kashmiri Muslims is very low which is 760 females per 1000 males. The reason is majority of the male members living Darjeeling alone or sends their females in Kashmir where they have a separate set up. Among the Tibetan Muslims the sex ratio is 876.71 females which is also very low. Higher mortality rate among female birth is the main reason behind this. The sex ratio is better among the Nepali Muslims compared with other Muslim communities.

### 7.3.2 Health and Nutrition

The neglect of health care of girls and women in general is a common feature among the Muslims of Darjeeling town. The underlying gender

discrimination in their families is the main reason for the same. However, in the opinion of health workers and medical experts the maternal under nutrition is a common incidence among the females in general and more particularly among the Nepali Muslim females. No doubt their economic condition is one of the major factor for their under nourishment. Often health care is restricted as it is not considered necessary by the elderly males. The poor century old health infrastructure of Darjeeling town is not sufficient for overall development of the females. There should be an urgent assessment of their health status. And the priority should be given to the mother and their children. Other wise the future of the community or the pillar of hope will be slashed.

### **7.3.3 Age at Marriage**

It is a common believe that the fertility of the Muslim women is very high. But this fact has no authentic validation. May be earlier days the fertility among the Muslims were high, but present situation does not support the fact. It is usual practice that a woman bears 2-3 children on an average. The modern health care services and education has reduced the earlier condition of high fertility rate among the Muslims. In contemporary times there has been a large decline in fertility in all the religious groups in the town. The process of fertility transition is in progress in all communities across India. The recent data observed from Muslims (from either the NFHS-2 estimate or the 2001 Census estimate) cannot be described as 'high fertility', but can be referred to as 'moderate fertility'. However, fertility varies among Muslims according to their socio-economic characteristics as well as on the level of the individual. There are large community wise variations in fertility among the Muslims of the town also. Sometimes the relatively high fertility of a section or group among them could be on account of various factors. A low age at marriage obviously is conducive to high fertility. However, collected data show that the Muslims of Darjeeling town does not have a lower age at marriage than

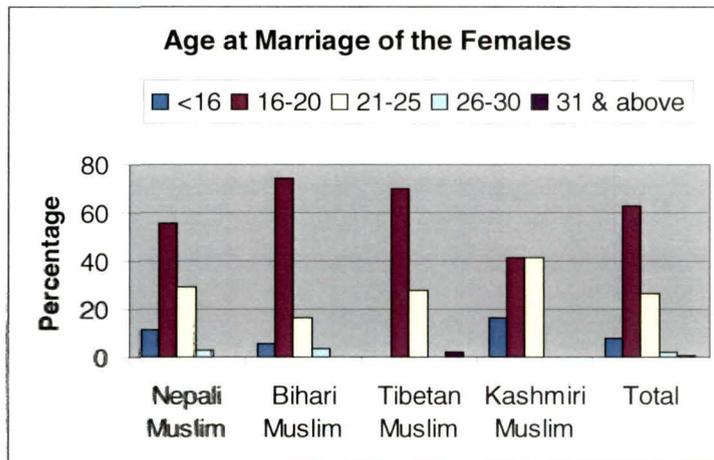
average. A point made on the higher fertility of Muslims was that the proportion of women married in reproductive ages was relatively high, because widow remarriage is well accepted in the Muslim communities.

**Table: 7.4**  
**Age at Marriage of Ever Married Muslim Females**

Age group	Nepali Muslim	Bihari Muslim	Tibetan Muslim	Kashmiri Muslim	Total
Below 16	12 (11.76%)	3 (5.55%)	-	2 (16.66%)	17 (8.05%)
16-20	57 (55.88%)	40 (74.07%)	30 (69.76%)	5 (41.66%)	132 (62.55%)
21-25	30 (29.41%)	9 (16.66%)	12 (27.90%)	5 (41.66%)	56 (26.54)
26-30	3 (2.94%)	2 (3.70%)	-	-	5 (2.36%)
31 & above	-	-	1 (2.32%)	-	1 (0.47%)
Total	102 (100%)	54 (100%)	43 (100%)	12 (100%)	211 (100%)

(Source: Field work)

**Fig: 7.3**



The age at menarche has played a crucial role in determining age at marriage of the Muslim girls traditionally. In Darjeeling town the Muslim girls are married by the age of 16-20 years. A small number among them are married before 16 years or more particularly in the age of 15 years. Out of total population 25.50 percent females are

married. About 62.55 percent females are married in the age ranging from 16-20 years. Only 8.05 percent females are married before the age of 16 years. Late marriage is not common among the Muslims of the town. Only 2.36 percent are married by the age of 26-30 years.

#### 7.3.4 Literacy and Education

The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress is well accepted today. And our constitution committed to provided elementary education for all. Regarding the Muslim women literacy education status most social researchers found it alarming nevertheless a trend of gradual improvement is also observed (Mondal, 1997). The religious texts always support the equal position of women in pursuit of education and knowledge among the Muslim communities. But in reality it often varies from region to region and group to group.

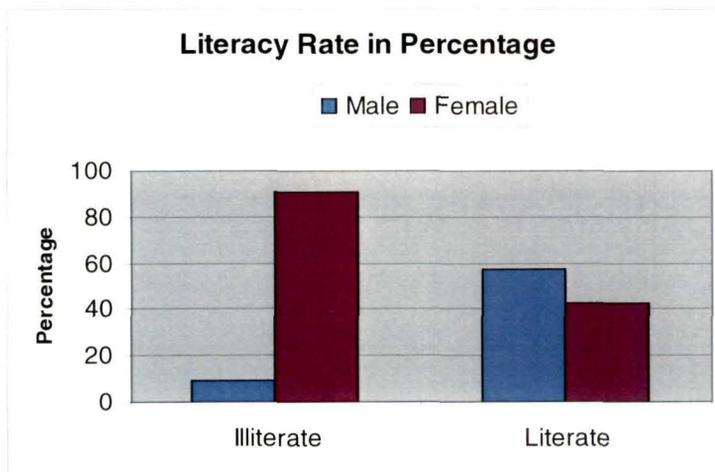
There is a Girls *Maktab* in Darjeeling up to class four exclusively for the Muslim girls was established in the year 1910 by Khan Bahadur Dr. Abdul Aziz Khan, who was a govt. veterinary surgeon in profession. During the early days all the Muslim families usually send their girl children to this *maktab* for learning religious as well as modern scientific subjects. But due to familial orthodoxy most of the girls stopped education after finishing their class IV examinations there. From the very beginning it was run by Municipal administration and later after independence more particularly after the formation of DGHC, it goes to the control of hill council. Since then, the administrative setup of the *maktab* is break down as there is no permanent teacher due to their complexity. Books are not provided by administration. Mead day meal is also stopped for some uncertain causes. And now a day only the families below poverty line or from low income groups are sending their girl child to the *maktab*. Those who can afford, send their child to some other modern schools for learning.

In Darjeeling town, the literacy rate among the Muslim communities is quite satisfactory in comparison to state and national level. The literacy rate is 90.97 percent. Where as the percentage of illiteracy is only 9.02 percent.

**Table: 7.5**  
**Literacy Rate of the Muslims of Darjeeling Town**

Sex	Illiterate	Literate	Total
Male	6 (9.37%)	369 (57.20%)	375
Female	58 (90.62%)	276 (42.79%)	334
Total	64 (9.02%)	645 (90.97%)	709

**Fig: 7.4**



From the table number 7.5 it is clearly shown that the rate of illiteracy is very high among the females. 90.62 percent females are illiterate and the rate is varies from community to community among the Muslims. The female illiteracy rate is very low which is 2.77 percent among the Nepali Muslim communities in the town. As because of their hybrid culture they widely accepted to send their children in Girls *Maktab* at least for elementary education. And this continues as a usual practice among them though economically they are lagging behind in comparison to other Muslim communities. The female

illiteracy rate is high among the Bihari and Tibetan Muslim communities (see table no. 3.18 and 3.19). This is because of their orthodoxy in familial matters.

The dropout rate is high among the Muslim families of low income groups. Because sending a girl child to school is a double loss to a poor family as it causes additional expenses for her and the family is deprived from her physical contribution to family. However, those who can afford send their child to English medium schools. And there again the rate of dropout is high as after secondary education, a large number of them stopped their education due to familial oppression directly linked to orthodoxy. Case studies show that these incidents are happened more particularly among the Bihari Muslim families. Some times their economic condition opts for the education of boys not for girls after primary or secondary level.

However, whatever education or schooling level the women received seems to have an impact on their role and status. Education influenced their willingness to opt for empowerment. The Muslim mothers are now sending their children or more particularly their female children to schools. They are now more confident to understand the contextual situation of the Muslims, their identity and equality.

### **7.3.5 Participation in Economy, Family Finance and Control**

There is a great fate of the Indian women that their participation or activities in familial development is not recognized by official statistics as productive because these are not measured in terms of money. Traditionally we believe that, if there is no monetary profit in any activity of a person then it should be treated as unproductive. The economic participation or contribution in formal sense of Muslim women in Darjeeling is meager or not satisfactory. This is because of various reasons like lack of education of their father or husband, economic instability or inequality of families, poor quality of Muslim

human resource and to some extent their practical common religious believe (viz. practice of *purdah* among economically elite families). The present socio-political tension of Darjeeling hills which starts back during eighties of last century was also creates a serious obstacle to their economic development as all the opportunities are being enjoyed by the dominant Nepali communities. No doubt, their economic participation is very low but their 'invisible' economic contribution to their families and also to their familial businesses is not to be ignored. Particularly the women from Tibetan Muslim and Nepali Muslim families are frequently looking after their businesses. They usually handle the customers during the rush hours of festive seasons. There are hardly any females from orthodox Bihari and Kashmiri Muslim families in active economic activities but contribute to their families greatly by their endless domestic chores to sustain their family like sewing and fowl keeping.

However, the world in the twenty first century is creating new challenges, opportunities and aspirations for Muslim women, and generating forces for change which are often uncontrollable. There is no employment opportunity for women in Darjeeling. Their attitude towards employment is also not satisfactory as they do not fell much interest until and unless employment is necessary for their family sustenance. But some modern educated Muslim women of Nepali and Tibetan group are seen to be engaged in active economic opportunities like teaching and insurance or recurring deposit company's viz. Appelline. Mostly they spent their income to maintain the whole family's subsistence, yet they do not enjoy the right to manage the family's cash income. The concept of Self Help Group (SHG) is not common among them and thus there is no opportunity of home based economic activities which circulate their money for reliance. The families those have bank account are mainly in the name of elder or adult male members. The handling of account is also the men's privilege.

### 7.3.6 Family, Marriage and Divorce

The family forms the basic building block of the Muslim society in Darjeeling. One of the most striking features of these Muslims is the importance attached to their family. Traditionally Muslim families in India were joint and extended in structure, often spanning 3 or more generations. An extended structure offers many advantages, including stability, coherence, and physical and psychological support, particularly in times of necessity. But such kind of family structure is under considerable threat among the Darjeeling Muslims as nuclearization of the family is an emerging trend because of various socio-economic reasons. There are two major factors which effect in crumbling the Muslim families. Number one is, as the ancestors of these Muslims were migrated from distant land, migration pattern here have resulted in fragmentation of their traditional extended family structure. Where as the second one is, many Muslim women who are converted from Nepali speaking ethnic communities have grown up in nuclear families, not having first hand familiarity with the richness and complexity of living within extended family networks which the Muslims generally practiced provoked their husbands to stay separate. No doubt economy and shortage of accommodation in their households are rigorously influenced to do so.

However, in Darjeeling town Nepali and Bihari Muslim families are numbered much in comparison to Tibetan and Kashmiris. There number is very few. Elderly parents are respected on account of their life experiences and their hierarchic position within the family unit.

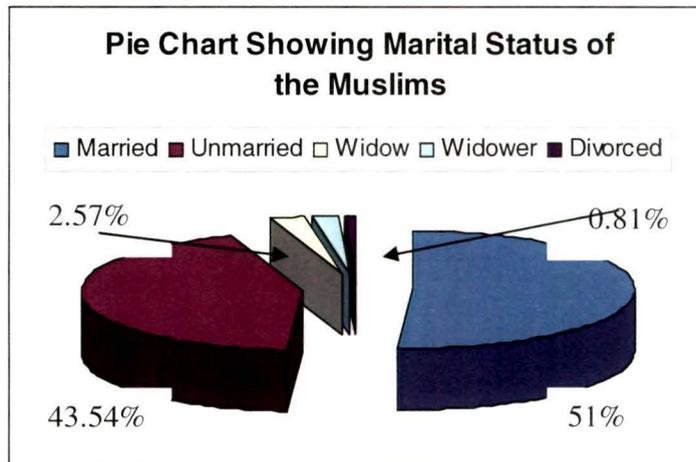
The marital status of Muslim female population of Darjeeling is 51.04 percent. Out of total population 19.53 percent females are unmarried. It reveals from the present study that marriage by negotiation is mostly practiced among the Darjeeling Muslims. The parental influences in acquiring mates are still greatly operating in the case of marriage of women and men. Love marriage is also common

but popular and practiced only among the Nepali Muslim communities. Mostly it happens when a Muslim boy fall in love with a Nepali and Bhutia girl. There is a popular stereotype about the polygyny of Muslim men though which has no empirical reality. In Darjeeling monogamy is the usual and common practice. Only men adopt second marriage after early death of his wife. At the study area monogamy is 95.74 percent as against only 4.25 percent of polygamy.

**Table: 7.6**  
**Marital Status among the Muslim Females of Darjeeling Town**

Sex	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Widower	Separated/ Divorced
Male	188 (25.50%)	177 (24.01%)	19 (2.57%)	15 (2.03%)	2 (0.27%)
Female	188 (25.50%)	144 (19.53%)			4 (0.54%)

**Fig: 7.5**



Divorce or *talaq* among the Muslim families is very debatable and controversial issue. People from other communities often beat the Muslims with this which often have no reality. In the town Darjeeling the frequency of *talaq* is very low. *Talaq* in popular sense, which is pronounced after three times, is not usually practiced for separation of conjugal mates. If they want to separate, go to the legal step along with the *shariat* rule. The concept *talaq* is not popular among the Nepali and Tibetan Muslims. If they want to separate, goes to legal way

for separation. Where as only the Bihari Muslim females are desired *talaq* as *shariat* for separation.

The most significant information in the context of marriage is payment or dowry which is not a usual practice among the Muslims in Darjeeling. The Nepali Muslim communities, whose economic position is the worse in comparison to other Muslims at the town, are strongly against of such practice. Tibetans also believe the so. But dowries in the form of kinds are practiced among the Kashmiri and Bihari trading families.

### **7.3.7 Gender Relations**

The word gender is a social category and stands both for male and female. Gender roles are not fixed structures but change over time and space and are reinforced and created by society. There is always an effective role of traditions or great traditions on gender relations which is finally formed by the society. But the fate of the Muslim society is misleded by some orthodox religious theologians whom the people most believe. The trans-cultural environment of Darjeeling town influenced the concept gender among the Muslims living there. There are two main factors which greatly effect in gender relations among the Darjeeling Muslims. The one is cultural factors includes traditions, values, belief system, habits and acculturation. While the others underline the primacy of economy and technological factors which are inducing corresponding changes at the level of social organization and cultural attitudes. Education is no doubt playing the crucial and most visible role there which could lead to societal change. If we look into the daily work pattern of the Muslim females, we will hardly find any distinction between Muslim women and other hill women as their daily work pattern is highly associated with the economic condition of their family and locality where they live.

The work pattern among the Muslims in Darjeeling is marked by gender based division of labour but varies between different Muslim

groups. The Kashmiri and Bihari Muslim males refuse to entertain any thought of changes in the concept of gender and oppress their women to believe that what they practice is Islamic. As a result, reciprocity in household activities among male and female is almost invisible. Whereas the womenfolk of Nepali Muslims and Tibetan Muslims in the hill town are independent to think and work and of course within the framework of their popular religious faith and theological adherence. Their educational status is also helped in making healthy social relations with men. If we look into the daily work pattern of Darjeeling Muslim women without thinking about their social category, we will hardly find any distinction between them as they believed that these works are their assigned duties. A general daily routine of Darjeeling women is noted below:

**Table: 7.7**

**Daily Routine of Work of Muslim Women of Darjeeling Town**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Works</b>
5.00 a.m.	Clean and wash household utensils
6.00 a.m.	Prepare breakfast for household members
6.45 a.m.	Prepare children for school
8.00 a.m.	Wash and clean cloths, water fetching
10.00 a.m.	Go to market for buying vegetables and foods
12.30 a.m.	Prepare lunch for household members
7.00 p.m.	Prepare and serve dinner
8.30 p.m.	Go to sleep

The women perform almost all the household work. The kitchen is always women's terrain. She has complete responsibility of cooking food for family members. The women have to shoulder all the activities related to child care. Aged females do not perform much domestic activities. Young and adult women perform the main task of the family. Girl child help their mothers and look after their younger brothers and sisters including the aged. Men are usually involved in marketing but women participation in shopping among the Nepali and Tibetan Muslim community is a common picture at Darjeeling town. Nepali Muslim women and Tibetan Muslim women often look after their familial business at Darjeeling market. Whenever I went to any

garment or other shops of Tibetan or Nepali Muslims, I found their female members attending customers with their male counterparts.

A general gender activity profile of Darjeeling Muslims is noted below in a tabular form:

**Table: 7.8**  
**Gender Activity Profile**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Male/Female</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
<b>Productive Activities:</b> a) Fetching water b) Cooking foods c) Cleaning of room & utensils d) Washing clothes e) Child care f) Caring of sick g) Marketing	F F F F F F M/F	Only young girl child assist her mother in household activities
<b>Social and Ceremonial Activities</b> a) Arranging b) Organizing c) Attending d) Kinship obligation	F/M M/F F/M F/M	Predominately females
<b>Economic Activities</b> a) Earning b) Saving and management	M F/M	Predominately males
<b>Political &amp; Organizational Activities:</b> a) Informal community meetings b) Formal political meetings	M M	Females only assists
<b>Religious Activities:</b> a) At home b) Out side	M/F M	Females only assists

(M = Male and F = Female)

### 7.3.8 Nature and Forms of *Purdha* Practices

The concept and practice of *purdah* in popular sense among the Muslim communities in Darjeeling varies according to different social groups and class levels. But in general it is not a common and popular practice among the Muslims of Darjeeling hills. The exact meaning of the word *purdah* is curtain but means much more when it applies to Muslim women. It is the practice that includes the seclusion of women from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. Traditionally in India both the Hindu and Muslim women practiced it since the medieval periods but vary according to their different class or economic or status levels. But the social situation of Darjeeling hills are quite different as a large chunk of the Darjeeling Muslims are hybrid from ethnic Nepali and Bhutia communities where women had traditionally a dominant role. And after marriage with the Muslims, their decedents brought up the liberal traditions of *purdah* constructed in their minds. The origin of the *purdah* system is not actually relevant to them but its applications do matter because whether in a negative or positive light, it stills remains an integral part of everyday life for some peoples and marks a part of their culture.

Veiling through *burkah* is not popular among the Muslims of Darjeeling. Irrespective of their all social segments, Muslim women in the upper economic strata are more likely to practice all aspects of *purdah*. Majority of them are from Bihari and Kashmiri origin and practiced veiling because they have been brought up to do it as tradition and have been constructed to do it even after marriage in a distant land. The Bihari and Kashmiri Muslim families have had a strong social-cultural bondage with their place of migration and thus often import popular Muslim traditions as religious to women in order to upgrade their position in the social hierarchy among the Muslim of Darjeeling hills.

Muslim women or girls of Nepali and Tibetan group are unique in all aspects of *purdah* practices. In the case of Tibetan Muslims, the aged used to prefer to wear traditional Tibetan dresses but observes to keep them at home. Veiling in common sense is not popular among them. *Burkah* is absent, but due to the influence of Islamization process, the females are now using *urna* or *dupatta*, a small cotton or silk cloth, to cover their head and neck as *purdah* which is a recent change among them. While in case of Nepali Muslim women, the picture is almost identical. They hardly use any system of veil while in public places or interaction even before a couple of years back. Girls are allowed to go everywhere without any male partner. They can freely interact with the outsiders even with a non-Muslim. But *purdah* as an integral part of their Muslim culture never abolished from their believe system. It continues its existence in the form of low voice which is known as voice of *purdah*, restrictions in interaction with elderly kins and nonkins etc. A woman is taught to speak in low voice since the very date of her enculturation. It is considered that a women's voice reaching outside the home is a symbol of bad culture which they believe ultimately effect the formation of their personality and behaviour pattern. However, due to forces of change or modernizing forces, groups of educated female are now interpreting the concept of *purdah* through the light of Quran and other holy books. They try to make understand the women that veiling is sanctioned by Quran but there is a misconception to understand it. Everybody mix the concept *purdah* with *burkah* which is not an Indian tradition. They advised Muslim women not to wear any dress which provoke men to tease them. However, these kinds of reform within themselves are still persisting in recent times.

### **7.3.9 Political Participation and Women Association**

Muslim women in political matters are almost invisible and comparatively lesser than the other hill communities in Darjeeling. The reason for this is their low level of modern higher education,

confinement in the home and less opportunity to interact with the outside world. However, the situation is now changing due to forces of change in their traditional family structure. Muslim women are becoming self-sufficient and, in some cases, also decision makers and thus express their political thoughts by giving votes often motivated by their male family members. Particularly the Nepali Muslim women are seen participating in various rallies of *Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha* in support of *Gorkhaland* movement actively. Their participation is passive in character. It seems the winds of change are slowly being felt even in Darjeeling town.

There is no formal association of women particularly for Muslim women in Darjeeling. However, few years back, the Muslim women particularly of Nepali Muslim category create a group or '*majhlish*' to carrying the vision of working for women's empowerment and eradicating social evils which starts its first step from Butcher *basti*. And now they are organizing *estema* in various Muslim populated areas or more particularly monthly in a house with the support from *Dawat-e-Islami* group.

## 7.4 Findings

In defining the status and role of Muslim women in Darjeeling the Socio-economic conditions of their families along with their ethnic or regional background has a significant role. It was very difficult to analyze the position without making reference to the status given to them by the Islamic great traditions manifested in religious texts like *Quran* and *Hadith*. The Muslim population of the town has diverse ethnic and occupational backgrounds. On the basis of this, the Muslims are largely categorized into four broad categories namely - Bihari Muslims, Kashmiri Muslims, Nepali Muslims and Tibetan Muslims. The status and role of womenfolk is also varied from community to community even though they shared the basic principles of social-cultural life.

Out of total 737 Muslims there are 355 females comprising 48.16 percent of the total Muslim population and the sex ration of the Muslims is 929.31 females per 1000 males. The sex ratio is better among the Nepali Muslim groups compared with the three other Muslim communities and in case of them it is low as except the Tibetan Muslims, the two rest Muslim groups frequently keep their female members in their places of origin.

It is a common believe that the fertility of the Muslim women is very high. But this fact has no authentic validation in Darjeeling. The modern health care services and education has reduced the earlier condition of high fertility rate among the Muslims which is reflected among the Muslim women in Darjeeling town. However, the neglect of health care of girls and women in general is a common feature among the Muslims of Darjeeling town. The underlying gender discrimination in their families is the main reason for the same.

The literacy rate among the Muslim females is 42.79 percent which is below the state and national level and a big chunk of this percentage have received only the elementary education in the girls *maktab* situated at the butcher *basti*. The dropout rate is high among the poor Nepali and Bihari Muslims because sending a girl child to school is a double loss to their family as it causes additional expenses for her and the family is deprived from her physical contribution (labour) to family.

There is a popular stereotype about the polygyny of Muslim men though which has no empirical reality in Darjeeling where monogamy is the usual and common practice. Only men adopt second marriage after early death of his wife. The most significant information in the context of marriage is payment or dowry which is not a usual practice among the Muslims in Darjeeling. The Nepali Muslim communities, whose economic position is the worse in comparison to other Muslims at the town, are strongly against of such practice.

The work pattern among the Muslims in Darjeeling is marked by gender based division of labour but varies between different Muslim groups. The women perform almost all the household works like cooking, child rearing and caring. Even some Nepali Muslim women and Tibetan Muslim women often look after their familial business at Darjeeling market. However, whatever education or schooling level the women received seems to have an impact on their role and status. Education influenced their willingness to opt for empowerment. The economic participation or contribution in formal sense of Muslim women in Darjeeling is meager. Lack of education of their father or husband, economic instability or inequality of families, poor quality of Muslim human resource creates a serious obstacle to their economic development. No doubt, their economic participation is very low but their 'invisible' economic contribution to their families and also to their familial businesses is not to be ignored. Particularly the women from Tibetan Muslim and Nepali Muslim families are frequently looking after their businesses.

Veiling through *burkah* is not popular among the Muslims of Darjeeling. Veiling in common sense is not popular among them but due to the influence of Islamization process, the females are now using *urna* or *dupatta*, to cover their head and neck as *pardah* which is a recent change among them.

The influences of the multicultural and multilingual environment of Darjeeling and its inclination towards the present shifting world presently make a significant role in building awareness among the Muslim women for change in the spheres of their life ways. They are now more confident to understand the contextual situation, their identity and equality. There is no formal association of women particularly for Muslim women in Darjeeling. However, few years back, the Muslim women particularly of Nepali Muslim category create a group or '*majhlis*' to carrying the vision of working for women's empowerment and eradicating social evils.