

PREFACE

Women account for more than half of the world's adult population. They usually perform vital roles in developing land, producing and procuring foods etc. to accelerate familial welfare as well as national development. According to UNFPA report, women are mainly engaged in child rearing and child education through which they make the highest contribution in constructing worthy future generations.

The emergence of industrial revolution in the eighteenth century by virtue of its subsequent technological development in the nineteenth century has brought tremendous changes in the status and role of women. Women are now enjoying almost all the rights and protection in the fields of human activities which were formerly forbidden to them. Yet a significant part of the society is still guided by so called traditional values that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers. This portion also considers the womenfolk as secondary section of the society and confines them to thankless familial jobs. From ancient period they are made to believe through myths, rituals, customs and social opinions that such odd jobs are the only expression of womanhood. So the paradoxical changes that are usually noticed in the status of women from ancient period to modern time do not indicate the real status of women throughout the world. Because, women of the developing countries in general and Muslim women of those countries in particular are lagging much behind in respect of their education, health and empowerment than the women of the contemporary developed societies and also in comparison with male members of their own. Still they are suffering from a number of problems that need urgent attention of the sociologists for study.

The above feelings lead me to conduct the present study on Muslim women of greater Bengal i.e. West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh where ignorance, squalor, idleness, unemployment and massive poverty are known as common phenomena of the society. Since education is considered as a vehicle of the progress and socio-economic transformation through which women's empowerment as well as their overall development is facilitated, the present study has been designed on Muslim women of rural West Bengal and rural Bangladesh with special reference to their education.

In fact, West Bengal and Bangladesh were the parts of undivided Bengal a few decades ago. Both of them are still deeply related with the bonds of same language and almost of the same culture. The basic difference between the two is that the Muslims are standing as the largest minority in West Bengal occupying less than one-fourth (23.61%) of its total population whereas they are standing as absolute majority in Bangladesh constituting more than three-fourths (88.3%) of its total masses. As an inevitable consequence of the said minority status, Muslim population does not represent sizeable middle class in West Bengal. On the contrary the Bangladeshi Muslims, as an effect of forming the absolutely major religious community, are representing a very prominent middle class. Apart from the above dissimilarity some other differences may be noted between the national policies for the expansion of female education adopted by West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. Discrepancy is also observed in their governmental and non-governmental programmes that are now being executed or have already been executed over the years and decades. Hence, comparative studies on the sociology of education among Muslim women of rural West Bengal and rural Bangladesh would be an interesting issue of exposition.

Owing to this, the present study has been designed for the situation analysis of the existing nature of literacy among Muslim women of rural West Bengal and rural Bangladesh. More specifically, this study is prosecuted for the assessments of the educational status and enrolment patterns of Muslim girls and women, and to understand the attitudes of Muslim women and influential Muslim males towards female education, employment and empowerment of women and other aspects of gender equity and modernization. This study is also an approach to determine the comparative backwardness of Muslim society in general and Muslim women in particular in the field of education and modernization. In addition to delineate their comparative backwardness in the fields of education and modernization, the traditional pre-Islamic attitudes of the Muslim masses regarding functional necessities of formal education for the women and various aspects of modernization have been focused in this study. Moreover, efforts have been activated to determine the common factors which are acting as hindrances against the educational growth and modernization of Muslim women and their greater society with a view to eradicating the basic causes of imbalances by supportive policy formulation.

The empirical data for the present research have been gathered by intensive and comprehensive field study at four Muslim dominated villages of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The villages were selected purposively from both the countries to ensure their regional representation. Detail information about the study villages was composed at the first stage by physical observation and discussion with the local elite and knowledgeable persons. Later on the demographic information of the study villages have been accumulated by census survey through an exhaustive census schedule.

At the final stage information on research questions have been collected by interviewing the selected respondents through well-structured and pre-tested interview schedules. Stratified random sampling technique has been adopted to select the respondents from the heads of the households and kinships, parents of the school going children, teachers and white collar professionals, Imams of the mosques and members of power structure, local elite and knowledgeable senior persons, formal and informal leaders and other influential males, dignified female professionals, continuing female students, drop-out girls and housewives etc. As a supplement to the primary data obtained through empirical research, relevant data and information obtained from secondary sources have been extensively used to prepare this thesis. The empirical data through field study have been gathered within the time period- January 1997 to December 1998. Thus this thesis is the outcome of my full time research work for about five years. I am immensely grateful to the authority of Indian Council for Cultural Relations for providing me the fellowship to conduct the research. I am also grateful to the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for sanction of deputation order to conduct the study.

I find it most difficult to express my deep sense of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Sekh Rahim Mondal (Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal), for his generous guidance and valuable suggestions throughout the course of this study. Without his profound help, sincere supervision and perspicacious directions the work might not be completed. I am also grateful to the other teachers of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology of the University of North Bengal for their help and encouragement.

I am thankful to my wife Maksuda Parvin Mimi for her unflinching support and untiring help right from commencement to the completion of this research project. I apprehend, interviewing the rural girls and housewives who usually refuse to meet and talk with any outsider and stranger, might not be so nicely possible had I not been provided with her cordial and generous cooperation.

With a sense of moral liability I would like to record the name of my little daughter Afia Abida Nitunta who exists in my heart as a source of radiant inspiration but became deprived of pleasing paternal love and affection during the period I was wholeheartedly engaged in research work.

I would like to note my special thanks of gratitude to my beloved parents and parents-in-law, respected teachers, intimate friends and prudent colleagues for their best wishes and constant encouragement.

I owe to erudite authors and scholars (whom I have made references) a great deal for their sagacious contributions that helped me gathering a lot of secondary information to develop the conceptual frame of this research. I am also thankful to all the interviewees for sparing their precious time from domestic preoccupation.

Last but not least, I am grateful to the villagers of my study villages who received me cordially and provided me with all sorts of expected helps and cooperation including family accommodations, transport and guide during the time of my fieldwork.

Dept. of Sociology & Soc. Anth.
University of North Bengal,
Darjeeling-734430, WB, India.

(MOHD. SHAHADT HOSSAIN MAHMUD)

Dated: 30.07. 2001

