

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Muslims constitute about 25 percent of world population and about 68.3 percent of Muslims of the world live in Asia . India is one of the seventeen countries where Muslim population is at least 10 percent of total population. More than 90 million people of India follow Islamic religion out of a total of about 1000 million Muslim population of the world. Percentage of Muslim population to the total population of the country is nearly 12 percent whereas more than 80 percent follow Hinduism. Other religions altogether constitute less than 8 percent of the country's total population. Hence the Muslims are considered as the largest minority community in India.

According to 1991 Census, 101596057 Muslim people comprising of 5263136 males and 48964692 females live in India. They are exactly 12.12 percent of total population of the country. Sex ratio is 930. Decadal growth rate is 32.76 percent. Majority of the Muslims live in rural areas. In the rural areas 6563695 people live whereas 36032362 persons live in urban areas. But concentration of Muslim population is high in cities and towns of the country. Muslims constitute 10.53 percent of the total population of rural areas whereas 16.70 percent of urban population belong to Islamic religion. Male-female ratio is almost 50: 50 in both rural and urban areas. Variation is noticed in regard to concentration of Muslim population in different States of the country. Excepting

the Union Territory of Laccadives (94.30 percent) and the State of Jammu and Kashmir (exact figure is not available) Muslims are the minority in the States.

In West Bengal Muslims constitute 23.61 percent of total population. They have a decadal growth rate of 36.89 percent. A total of 16075836 Muslims are there in West Bengal. Majority of them live in rural areas.

According to 1981 Census, out of 16 districts of the state, six have a higher proportion of Muslims than the state's average of 21.51 percent. These districts are Murshidabad (58.7%), Malda (45.3%), West Dinajpur (35.8%), Birbhum (29.6%), Nadia (24.1%), and 24- Parganas (23.9%). Murshidabad comprises of 2169121, Malda 919918 and 24- Parganas 2563751 Muslims. Murshidabad district exceeds half way mark of total population. Malda records a Muslim population nearing the half-way mark of total population whereas in West Dinajpur Muslims (860797) constitute 35.89 percent of total population. Darjiling district contains the lowest number of Muslims (37299) which is only 3.66 percent of the district's total population.

About 300 ethnic groups have been noticed among the Muslims in the world. They belong to various sects and sub-sects and Muslim groups are again sub-divided into a number of sub-groups sometimes defined as status groups and social groups. In India Muslims are mainly categorised on the basis of ethnicity and migration. Broadly the Indian Muslims are either of foreign origin having a different language and culture or the local converts with little traditions. On the basis of status also, various Muslim groups are found in India. Saiyyed,

Sheikh, Mughal and Pathans are considered as ethnic groups whereas Ashrafs, ajlafas and Arjals are the social groups. Similar groupings are found in West Bengal too but ethnic grouping, social grouping or status grouping have not been done distinctively in the state. Hence it is better to think of endogenous grouping of Muslims in West Bengal. They are recognised as jat (in rural areas) which is akin to endogenous group. The endogenous grouping is an overlapping of ethnicity and traditional occupational category as it is noticed that the groups are called Saiyad, Mir, Shah Fakir, Shaik, Pathan, Bhako, Julah, Dhunia, Osta, Dhai, Fakir, Badia etc. All these groups have different position in the local hierarchy.

Badia is one of the groups of Muslim society. Though information regarding this Muslim group is sketchy, it is considered that members of this group belong to a distinct theological school called Ahl-e-Hadith. The members of Badia group are settled in few districts of West Bengal. In Murshidabad, Malda, both North and South Dinajpur, and Darjeeling districts they have been found with a substantial number. Traditional occupation of this group is supposed to be castration. Now-a-days the members belonging to Badia group are engaged in various types of works specially agriculture and masonry. Like any other group, members of Badia group have some cultural traits of their own and they have a limited social interaction with neighbouring communities. Detailed descriptive study on different aspects of life of Badias is needed in order to understand and conceptualize how they maintain their group identity.

Physical proximity, dialects and social organisation and the level of socio-economic development are the areas of importance for finding out the difference between Badias and other local Muslim groups.

Separate identity of the Badias can be observed through maintenance of social boundary with other Muslim groups in regard to intermarriage, inter dining and other rituals.

Review of Literature

At the outset it must be pointed out that a good number of research works have been done on various aspects of Muslim society but only a few studies are there to depict the culture of a particular group. At the outset it may be noted that anthropological and / or sociological research work on the Badias has not yet been done. Only sporadic information on these people are available in the discussions of scholars dealing with other sort of works. Those works are helpful in any way to have a first hand knowledge on the Badia group of people.

In the discussion of the nature of social stratification among the Muslims of North Bengal, Mondal (1991) has mentioned that the Badia is one of a number of endogamous groups of Malda district. It has been observed that there occurs a "very limited social interactions between Badias and other Muslims groups of the locality" (Mondal,1991:223). It is also revealed that "Badias are a little known small Muslim group, mostly concentrated in some areas of eastern region of the country. They are the followers of orthodox

tradition of Islam. Badias conceive themselves as a community having social and cultural relationship confined to their own group members" (Mondal, 1998a:200). Mukherjee (1971) in his famous book entitled "Six Villages of Bengal" has paid attention to the occupation of the Badias. Banerjee (1993) has also dealt with involvement of the Badias in various works. Hoque (1986) has delineated the role of the Badias in the Bengali folk literature in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis (in Bengali). Rahaman (1996) has talked about the backwardness of various Muslim groups of North Bengal and demanded reservation facilities for the Badias. Samad (1991) has made an unique contribution (in Bengali) on Badias from the viewpoint of an insider.

For the purpose of this research work a thorough understanding of the Muslim society and culture is also required. Hence, a brief review of literature on Muslims has been done in this context.

On the origin and history of the Muslims in India scholars from various disciplines have contributed their views (Ahmad,1964; Qureshi,1962; Smith,1947; Bose,1951; Srinivas,1968; Mandelbaum,1970; Guha,1965; Leach, 1960 and Risley,1891). These scholars are of the opinion that Muslims of India have diversity in their origin.

Fragmentation in Muslim social order and social divergence among the groups has been pointed out by a number of scholars. Existence of various Muslim groups having differential backgrounds are found in India (Ahmad, 1973; Ansari,1960; Barth,1960; Bhattacharyya,1973; Khan,1968; Misra,1964 and Siddiqui,1974).

Systematic study on the categorization of Indian Muslims was initiated by Ansari (1960). He has shown four distinct groups --- Priest, Warrior, Commoner and Serf among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh in the line of *Varna Model* of Hinduism. According to him there also exists two status groups called Ashraf and Ajlaf each having some sub-groups. Ashrafs are said to be the descendants of foreign immigrants and considered as a noble section while Ajlafs are the commoners, mostly of indigenous stock and engaged in traditional skills and trades. Ashrafs are the elite and the Ajlafs are non-elite including a number of occupational groups and untouchables. For various reasons these Muslim groups have followed a tradition of endogamy.

Nazmul Karim (1980) has made a categorisation of Bengali Muslims into Upper Sharifs, Poor Sharifs, Mixed Sharifs, Non-Sharifs and Arzals.

Levy (1957) has classified the Bengali Muslims into three categories - Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzal. Ashraf category is comprised of the descendants of foreign Muslims whereas both Ajlaf and Arzal are the converts from functional groups and low caste groups of the Hindus respectively.

Risley considered Arzal as the lowest group of Muslims consisting of Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya with whom "no other Muhammedan would associate and who are forbidden and enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground" (Risley, 1908: 119).

Rizvi and Roy (1984) have dealt with "Muslims Bio-cultural Perspectives" and identified various groups in Muslim society. They have also classified the Muslims into Shurfa and Nau-Muslim. In the former group they have incorporated

the migrant Muslims of different origin while the later group is comprised of converts. They have mentioned about the presence of 138 Muslim groups in Indian Sub continent.

Ahmad has tried to present a comprehensive picture of Muslim society and culture by editing a series of publication in 1973, 1976, 1983 and 1984. In *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India* (1973), various scholars have shown the presence of caste like groupings among Muslims analysing their traditional association with particular occupation, economic obligations, mechanism of dispute settlement and ritual performance etc. with the help of micro-level studies from different parts of India viz. Bombay, Laccadives, Rajasthan and Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. In *Family, Marriage and Kinship Among Muslims in India* (1976) significant aspects of social structure have been illustrated. Ahmad (1983) has also made an appraisal on the responses of Muslim communities to modernization and social change. Religious beliefs and practices of the Muslims living in different parts of the country have been discussed by various authors in a volume edited by Ahmad (1984). Main thrust of the book was on religion as practised by the Muslims rather than theological and spiritual principles of Islamic religion.

Barth (1960) has shown the formation of groups based on economic and social distinction prevailing among the Swat Pathans who live in a remote valley of North West Pakistan where there is no influence of Hinduism is noticed.

Alavi (1976) has made a significant contribution on the study of kinship system among the Muslims. Concept of "biradari" has been revealed by him in

his study on *Kinship System in West Punjab Village*. He is of the opinion that *biradari* is restricted to a number of households having fraternal solidarity and participating in ritual exchange of presentations. *Biradari* exists within or outside a village boundary. He opines that kinship system rather than caste is the basis of social organisation of the Muslims.

Titu (1959) has observed mobility of Muslim cultivators in Western Uttar Pradesh. A Muslim cultivator has no such hurdles to cross for enhancing his status if he wishes to do it with accumulation of wealth. Boast of a cultivator has been considered in this context which is self explanatory:

"Last year I was a Julah, this year a Shyak and next year if harvest be good I shall be a Sayyed".

Dumont (1971) has commented upon partial contamination of Ashraf group of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. According to him *biradari*, the basic framework of Muslim Social Structure, enables various sub-groups of Ashrafs to retain their separate identity. Inter marriage in the upper stratum (Ashraf) of Muslims is normally restricted. It only happens when suitable spouses are not available in their own clan or kin groups.

Imam (1975) has edited a book entitled *Muslims in India*. It includes various articles on the problems confronting Muslims of India and their implication in their social life. Economic, political, social and historical aspects of the Muslim society in India are the issues dealt in this volume.

Madan (1976) has made a study on socio-religious life of the Muslims of Kashmir. Various dimension of Muslim culture has also been highlighted in his edited book entitled *Muslim Communities in South Asia*.

Roy (1979) has stressed on the concept of "khandan" because she considers it as the basis of grouping in Muslim society. According to her *khandan* is the "lineage of recognition" where the persons are traceable and recognized. The concept of *khandan* is quite similar in nature to that of *biradari*.

Siddiqui (1974) has identified about sixty Muslim groups in Calcutta on the basis of nationality, linguistic, ethnicity and regional characteristics. These groups are again classified on the basis of sect, sub-sect, khanqah and silsila affiliations.

Wali (n.d.) has classified Bengali Muslims into Sherif or Ashraf and Atraf or Ajlaf categories. Ashrafs are considered as the members of landed gentry having noble ancestry but the Atrafs are the toiling masses and peasants.

Mondal (1994) has critically examined the situation of Muslims in West Bengal and pointed out the weaknesses of Varna-Jati Model to describe the system of social stratification among the Muslims. He emphasizes on the application of electical model which is a combination of historical, structural-functional, interactional and attributional approaches. To him "it is very difficult to classify the Muslim groups exclusively in terms of ethnicity" (Mondal,1994:72). He is of the opinion that the term "jat" (a variant of "jati") or "endogenous group" may be preferred to describe the social segments among the Muslims.

Bhattacharyya (1973) in "The Concept and Ideology of Caste among the Muslims of Rural West Bengal" has shown the existence of caste like features in the social life of different Muslim ethnic groups. Siddiqui(1973) has also pointed out the caste element among the Muslims of Calcutta. Both the scholars have

applied the term 'ethnic groups' (Marriot, 1960) to various social groups among the Muslims.

Bhattacharjee (1980) has made an empirical study on Patua culture and commented that the Patuas are neither Hindus nor Muslims. Among them 'cultural oscillation' has been operating.

Aims and Objectives of Present Study

This study on the Badia group of Muslim society is aimed at delineating various aspects of social life and culture of the group. The study envisages to revealing data on demographic profiles, social structure, material culture, economic pursuits, religion and rituals, roles and position of women and the changing features in Badia society. To be precise, it depicts the situation of Badias that exists today. The specific objective of this study is to highlight the social as well as cultural life of the Badia regarding whom no Sociological and/or Social Anthropological study has been made so far. It is also envisaged to find out how far the Badias adhere to maintain the uniqueness of their cultural traits.

Rationale of the Study

There are about 246 Muslims groups in India having varied size and culture pattern. As a Muslim group the Badias have some characteristics common to other Muslims but as a community they have some distinctiveness as well. Along with inter-community differentiation Badias have intra-community variations. Despite intra- as well as inter-community variations Badias maintain an integrated village life.

In the absence of census data on the Badias it is really very difficult to know the exact spatial distribution of the people. Scanty published documents provide a sketchy distribution of the Badias in West Bengal and Bihar. In West Bengal they are mainly concentrated in Murshidabad and Malda districts. Presence of Badias in Darjiling and North Dinajpur districts has also been reported. It is, therefore, pertinent to know (i) Why the people of this group have settled in these latter districts? (ii) How do these people live at present? and (iii) What are the changes that have been experienced by the Badias in their socio-cultural life?

Methodology

(i) Research Design:

The study has been made following exploratory research design keeping the objectives in mind. As the main purpose of this study is to narrate the socio-economic life of a community the approach undertaken is purely descriptive.

(ii) Sources of Information:

The study is mainly based on primary data collected through direct interaction with the people. The researcher has to select some key informants along with careful selection of informants for supplying census data. People, both male and female, from Badia Muslims, non-Badia Muslims and non-Muslims have been selected for interview. For history of the Badias this study heavily

dependent on the oral history. Secondary data regarding their history or any other aspect of life have been incorporated in this study in a very limited way because of non-availability.

(iii) Locale of the Study:

The study is the outcome of information collected from seven Badia settlements (Bastis) in three districts of West Bengal. These seven Bastis are distributed in six Mouzas. In Milangarh-JorePakri Mouza of Darjeeling district there are two distinct and adjacent Bastis ^{members of which} ~~which~~ have migrated from Malda and Murshidabad districts. After the name of the district of origin these two Bastis are called as Malda Basti and Murshidabad Basti. Other two Bastis of Darjiling district are in Hakragach Mouza and Chikanmati Mouza. Two settlements from North Dinajpur district have been included in this study. These two are from two different Mouzas viz. Dhamargach South and Dhamargach North. A portion of Badia settlement of Durgapur Mouza in Malda district has also been incorporated in this study.

(iv) Selection of Area and Informant:

Badias mainly live in the rural areas of Malda and Murshidabad districts of West Bengal. Due to various reasons they have started to migrate and settle in some other districts. Seven settlements of the Badias in the districts of Darjiling, North Dinajpur and Malda have been selected in this study purposively

considering their concentration, accessibility and economic pursuits. Causes and consequences of migration have also been kept in mind for selecting the area.

As sufficient information is not available on the distribution of Badia population in West Bengal a sort of snowball sampling method has been adopted in this study in selecting the settlements.

For information on various life-situations of the Badias both male and female members of their community have been consulted. Head of the families as well as senior members of the household were asked to supply the Household Census Data. Persons from Badia Muslims, non-Badia Muslims and non-Muslims have been selected for interview also in order to understand the process and extent (or nature and degree) of interaction of the Badias. Moulavis, Political leaders as well as Members of Gram Panchayat have been interviewed.

(v) Fieldwork:

Fieldwork for this study was started in the month of August 1996. At my first visit to Badia Para of Darjiling district, the people accepted me very friendly. They responded cordially to my curious questions. They became overwhelmed listening that their culture would be depicted. The people spoke in slight different dialect than their neighbouring communities belonging to both Hindu and Muslim religions. My pronunciation somehow struck them and they asked me about my place of origin. As they found some similarity in my dialect they dropped the tendency of suspecting me. This was the attitude of common Badias of that locality but the knowledgeable persons like Moulavi still had a suspicion on my

activity. However, that had also been overcome when I, being a follower of Hindu religion, took lunch with him at his residence without hesitation. In this way I gained confidence of the people under study. They helped me in selecting other settlements and conducting fieldwork with the Badias of other districts. In spite of all their co-operation and help problems arose at the time of data collection by administering the Household Census Schedule. The people were not ready to supply information in such details. Nevertheless the settlements were in the border regions and people were scared of any untoward event. Apart from the data collected with the help of Household Census Schedule information have been gathered from male Key Informants. Case studies of both male and female members of the community have been undertaken in order to strengthen the qualitative nature of the study. For observing the behaviour of the people fieldwork has been conducted staying inside the settlements as far as practicable.

(vi) Tools and Techniques of Data Collection:

Intensive fieldwork has been conducted in four villages of the district of Darjiling. In other settlements, survey method of data collection has been deployed. In other words, both intensive and extensive methods have been used for collection of primary data during the period from 1996 to 1999. Additional information from other places have also been incorporated in this study in the form of case study. Both qualitative and quantitative data have been gathered through holistic approach. Census schedule has been used as an important tool

of data collection on demographic and economic aspects. Unstructured interview guide is also employed for taking detailed descriptive information. Techniques of Interview and observation--both participant and non participant -- have been followed for data collection. Case history and genealogy have also been drawn to understand net-work of marital relations, inter-generation change in occupation, education and migration.

(vii) Data Analysis:

Data collected with the help of Household Census Schedule have been checked and edited at first. Classifying and analysis of data have been done manually as well as statistically depending on their nature. Statistical devices are applied for the analysis of quantitative data while the qualitative data have been analysed through systematic description. Analyses of data are followed by representation of the facts in tabular and diagrammatic forms in the respective chapters of the thesis. Systematic description of the qualitative data has been done at a number of times because the study is primarily descriptive in nature.

(viii) Presentation of Data:

Information collected from all sources have been presented in the following Chapters:

Chapter II - Badias : Past and Present

140422

16 MAR 2001

Bengal University
Library
Kolkata

Chapter III - Research Setting : Demographic and Socio-economic Features
of Badia Settlements

Chapter IV - Aspects of Material Culture

Chapter V - Economic Pursuits

Chapter VI - Marriage, Family and Kinship

Chapter VII- Religious Practices and Life Cycle Rituals

Chapter VIII - A Profile of Badia Women

Chapter IX - Badias Within the Larger Framework of Muslim Society

Chapter X - Badias in Transition

Chapter XI - General Observation

(ix) Limitations:

Fieldwork for this study has been conducted in such a period when the whole country suffered a political restlessness. A swing of power in the Parliament from secular political Parties to a so-called Communal Party led some Muslim people scared of their identity. The Badias, with whom the fieldwork has been conducted, are mainly settled in border regions. They fear that such type of work leads to declare them illegal migrants. It takes sometime to remove their fear-psychosis. So, the actual time-budget for completion of fieldwork exceeds for about a year.

Published material on different aspects of life of the community is extremely limited. It is, therefore, a major limitation for suspecting and comparing the data collected from the field situations.

In the absence of systematic account on the Badias this research work is a strenuous and time consuming job. However, with much interest as well as challenge it has been completed within a period of less than 5 years from my first visit to Badia Para of Darjiling district.

Present study is mainly concerned with the Badias of Darjiling and North Dinajpur districts along with a short account of the people settled in a village of Malda. The study has been made collecting primary data with the help of fieldwork in seven settlements of three districts in North Bengal region only. A total enumeration of six settlements of Darjiling and North Dinajpur districts has been made whereas a part of another settlement has been studied from Malda district. More precisely it can be stated that the observation made in this study is based on a limited area of West Bengal.