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# A Quest for Identity: Living Reality of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the complex identity of Bangla-speaking Muslims in West Bengal, who make up about one-fourth of the state's population. Despite their important social, economic, and cultural contributions, this community faces a persistent identity crisis. They are often reduced to a single religious label, while their Bengali heritage, economic situations, and educational backgrounds are ignored. This marginalization is reinforced by various groups, including government officials, media, and political extremists, who often treat the community as just a "vote bank" during elections. The research reveals a double challenge to their identity. Urdu-speaking Muslims often view them as "impure" because of their history of conversion, while elite Bengali Hindus dismiss their "Bengaliness." Furthermore, while the state's cultural narrative tends to focus on upper-class individuals, more than 90 percent of Bengali Muslims in rural West Bengal live in poverty. Their real-life experiences are overshadowed by these glorified stories. By examining historical origins—from the peaceful introduction of Islam by Sufi mystics to the deepening communal divides during British colonial rule and the 1947 Partition—the article shows how this community navigates a rapidly changing world in a constant quest for recognition and social acceptance.*

**Keywords:** Muslim Identity, Bengali Muslim, Representation, Marginality, Partition.

## Introduction

*Na kisi ki aankh ka noor hoon,*
(I am the light of no one's eyes)
*na kisi ke dil ka qaraar hoon*
(nor the peace of anyone's heart)
*Jo kisi ke kaam na aa sakey*
*(that can be of use to no one)*
*mein woh ek musht-e-ghubaar hoon*
(I am that handful of drifting dust)
Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775 -1862)

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In West Bengal Bangla-speaking Muslims represent a large part of the population approximately one in four people. Even though they actively participate in various aspects of society and the economy their identity is often reduced to a single label: Muslim. Other important aspects of their lives including their Bengali identity their jobs their education level their economic status and their home are often disregarded. This neglect is unfortunately reinforced by the government uninterested media outlets religious and political radicals and also by the Muslim community itself. The lack of recognition faced by Bangla-speaking Muslims results in marginalization and deep identity issues. Their cultural exclusion is often ignored as if they are unwanted until the next election. This "vote bank" politics leads to years of mistreatment in their homeland and elsewhere. Their identity issues come from two problems. Urdu-speaking Muslims see them as impure because of their conversion.

Elite Bengali Hindus often dismiss their Bengali identity. This divide causes a painful identity crisis for Bangla-speaking Muslims in West Bengal.

In Kolkata's lively marketplaces the fertile rice fields of Murshidabad and the peaceful fishing communities of South 24 Parganas a deep but often unspoken question arises daily. This question concerns understanding the true meaning of being a Bengali Muslim a group navigating the complex intersection of Bengali culture and Islamic history. West Bengal celebrated for its artistic renaissance strong political views and rich customs shows how its largest religious minority lives with resilience compromise and a constant need for acceptance. More than 90 percent of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal experience poverty in rural areas and their experiences are frequently overshadowed by the state's idealized tales of upper-class figures such as Tagore and Ray. This complex identity shapes their daily lives and interactions, influencing everything from cultural practices to social dynamics. As they navigate their unique position, these individuals strive for recognition and acceptance within a rapidly changing landscape.

**Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis. The research relies on government reports, committee reports, census data, academic publications, journal articles, and policy documents to examine the identity, socio-economic conditions, and political representation of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal. Key sources include the Sachar Committee Report, Kundu Committee Report, Census of India data, SNAP reports, and studies on minority communities in West Bengal. Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to identity formation, marginalization, education, health, economic conditions, and political participation. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical and contemporary realities of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal.

**Historical Roots of the Identity Quest**

Identity plays a significant role in how one is perceived in society. Andrew Weigert and colleagues posit that identity is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon rather than a fixed trait. They argue that an individual's sense of self is constantly evolving because it is composed of numerous micro-identities specific roles and internal understandings—that contribute to the overall construction of the self.In the context of comprehending the more comprehensive framework of social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner articulate social categorization mainly as the concept of self-image and the mechanism through which individuals classify others into distinct groups of affiliation within a society, based on shared characteristics (Tajfel and Turner 7-24). Even though this could be a personal activity to understand ones place in the community, it also allows others in society to categorize you. It has the possibility of creating considerable psychological divides between people. Therefore, social groups also work as a key identity tool, influencing a person's feeling of belonging and connection to, or separation from, other people.Therefore, the other is an important part of someone's place in society, a symbol that might not matter much to who you really are as an individual, but it can greatly affect how people see you. This situation then changes a person's identity and their sense of fitting in with society.

Nowhere was the path clearer than in Bengal, where becoming part of an anticolonial wave tangled closely with shaping who you were. People there often shifted - now stressing they were Bengali, now emphasizing being Muslim. Standing with others didn't only answer private longings; it stitched lives together through common cause. Belonging mattered, not as a distant idea but as something built daily, side by side.

A river flows - not straight, but shifting. Like the Padma fed by distant Himalayan melt, this identity bears traces of older thoughts, long held. It bends, much like the Meghna splitting into many streams, adjusting as ground changes beneath. Shape shifts happen quietly, guided by what lies ahead, not force. Integration tells the story more than invasion ever could. Not brought by armies, faith arrived softly - like rain soaking soil over weeks. Traders from Arabia carried it, scholars from Persia shaped it, yet mystics mattered most. Their presence settled slowly, without noise, becoming part of daily breath. Moving through wet paddies and tangled shore trees since the 1200s, holy wanderers known as Pirs and Auliyas spoke plainly - never hiding behind sacred jargon but using words ordinary people knew. When British control arrived, that quiet flow broke apart. Census counts came first, then fixed labels; slowly, stubbornly, boundaries hardened where none had stood before between

those called “Hindu” and those named “Muslim.”

The division in 1947 significantly impacted the Socio-economic structure of Bengal, which changed the socio-political situation in South Asian History. One moment, it was a single region - next, two nations stood where one used to be. West stayed with India; East joined what would become Bangladesh years later. Lives cracked open when riots spread, families fled, and borders drew lines through communities. People moved in waves, often scared, sometimes beaten, many losing everything. Women faced horrors that few talked about at the time. Religion played a big role in deciding who went where - yet the fallout touched every part of daily life. Trust faded fast, especially among those Muslim families who stayed behind in places suddenly seen as hostile. A sense of belonging vanished almost overnight. That old rhythm of shared markets, mixed neighborhoods, common songs - gone. Numbers don’t show how deep it cut. Homes left empty. Fields untended. Voices silenced mid-sentence. Maps shifted - yet thoughts fractured deeper. Minds now carried two versions of what it meant to be Bengali: one rooted in words, untouched by faith, the other torn apart by belief. Before borders cut through land, shared speech held people together despite different prayers. Then came division. Lines drawn on paper weakened long-held connections built through stories, songs, rhythms[1]. Suddenly, those who followed Islam but stayed in West Bengal found themselves unseen, unheard. Their rituals felt out of place where others practiced differently. Belonging blurred when neighbors viewed them with quiet suspicion[2].

**Insufficiently Islamic**

What shapes Bengali Muslims in West Bengal isn’t just faith or speech but layers - language binding them here, religion marking them there. Their tongue fits right into the region’s rhythm, yet their beliefs often land elsewhere on the social map. Through Partition's shadow they carry old fractures, stories passed down like heirlooms no one asked for. Belonging seems split - not fully seen, even when rooted deep. Being understood means navigating both closeness and distance at once. What sets Bengali Muslims apart is how they get caught between layers of distrust. Not only do some see them warily because of religion, but even among Muslims, standing tall isn’t easy. Urban circles where Urdu dominates have long shaped power lines - those voices often dismiss Bengali speech as less faithful somehow. Strange as it sounds, belonging becomes harder when your roots grow in village soil and your prayers carry local echoes. High-status groups, tracing lineage back to foreign origins, quietly label others behind terms like Ashraf. Meanwhile, those rooted locally find themselves brushed aside - not quite clean enough, not quite correct, according to old hierarchies that linger without saying their name. Faith does not always unite; sometimes it reveals cracks. In the early 20th century, movement such as the Faraizi and Wahhabi pushed to clean up Bengali Islam, removing old blended customs - say, joining Durga Puja festivities or using Hindu calendars - that had long been part of daily life. Over time, Muslim upper classes in Bengal, known as Ashraf, stuck with Urdu for serious matters, treating faith and art through its lens, while seeing Bengali-speaking Muslims, often called Ajlaf, as less refined, shaped by earlier conversions[3]. That divide built quiet layers of status and identity, some echoes still felt now, even if softer, within communities.

**The Modern crisis Infiltrator vs. Citizen**

Nowadays, questions about who belongs aren’t just about culture but also about staying safe in a changing political climate. Talk around the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act shakes how people see themselves within the nation. For many Bengali Muslims, being called an “infiltrator” - or onuprobeshkari - is common. That word blurs the line between actual undocumented migrants and those born right here, making even rightful citizens scramble to show proof they belong. The CAA lets non-Muslims fleeing nearby nations gain citizenship, yet shuts out Muslims completely. Paired with a future NRC drive, someone could find that a document-less Bengali Hindu gets refuge under law, whereas a Muslim neighbor, equally paperless, faces life stripped of status - branded foreign, cast aside. This shaky ground under the law brought back old wounds from 1947, leaving Bengali Muslims always proving they belong. Because of it, life feels like living behind walls, where holding on to papers matters more than keeping traditions alive.

**Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal**

Most Muslims in West Bengal speak Bengali, a detail noted in the 47th report on linguistic minorities covering mid-2008 to mid-2010. In places near Bihar and Jharkhand, a few switch to Hindi or Urdu instead. People living in Kolkata sometimes prefer those languages too. Nine crore

twenty lakh people call West Bengal home. About three out of every ten are Muslim, painting a clear share of the state's makeup. Elections here often tilt where these voters gather, especially with polling due by spring. A recent look at daily life for Muslims reveals hardship more than hope. Numbers tell part of it, but stories behind them speak louder.

Literacy is seen as a key determinant of a society's progress. However, in India, the number of educated people in a society cannot be ascertained by looking at the literacy rate. The three components of literacy in this nation are reading, writing, and math. A person is deemed literate if they are able to read, write approximately (typically, they are only deemed literate if they can sign), and perform simple addition and subtraction. However, enrollment and completion rates in primary and higher education are more crucial indicators of the true state of education than the literacy rate. According to the 2011 Census, Muslims make up approximately 27 percent of the population in West Bengal, making them the largest minority group in the state. Nevertheless, their educational level is lower than the state's average in several areas, including literacy rates, school enrollment, and success in higher education. This difference is due to issues like poverty, insufficient educational resources in districts with large Muslim populations such as Murshidabad, Malda, and Uttar Dinajpur, gender-related customs, and socioeconomic difficulties. As per the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate for Muslims in West Bengal is 68.74 percent, up from 57.47 percent in 2001. This is lower than the state average of 76.26 percent. It is clear that Muslims throughout West Bengal are falling behind with regard to both the quantity and quality of education.

According to the Sachar Committee report[4], Muslims face a double disadvantage due to low levels of education combined with inadequate educational quality. The percentage of Muslims who have completed at least a bachelor's degree is less than 5 percent (in 2001) in West Bengal[5]. It is commonly thought that Muslims are more inclined to pursue Madrasah education.[6] In West Bengal, where Muslims make up 25 percent of the population (based on the 2001 Census), the number of Madrasah students, at 3.41 lakhs, is only about 4 percent of those in the 7-19 age range.[7] A report titled "Living Realities of Muslims in West Bengal" was compiled by Pratichi Trust, an organization founded by Amartya Sen, in collaboration with Guidance Guild and the SNAP association[8]. The report was unveiled on February 14, 2016, in Kolkata by Amartya Sen himself. This document sheds light on the living conditions of Muslims in the region. According to the survey, only 2.7 percent of literate Muslims have a graduate degree or higher. The overall enrollment rate for Muslim children aged 6 to 14 is 85.9 percent, with girls slightly ahead of boys (86.4 percent versus 84.6 percent). Unfortunately, approximately 15 percent of Muslim children in this age group are not attending school. Of these, 9.1 percent were never enrolled, and 5.4 percent have dropped out. Financial hardship is the main reason for not attending school, impacting 42.5 percent of boys and 40.4 percent of girls. Other important factors contributing to school dropouts include poor infrastructure, lack of motivation, limited access to schools, a feeling of despair, and long travel distances. The report also reveals a clear inverse relationship between the number of schools available and the concentration of Muslims in different areas.

**Table 1: Distribution of Government management schools in segregated Blocks of West Bengal, 2011-2012**

| Share (%) of Muslim population at segregated Blocks of West Bengal | Primary school/Ten thousand population | Secondary and H.S schools/lakh population |
|---|---|---|
| Up to 15 | 7.7 | 10.7 |
| 16-25 | 6.3 | 10.2 |
| 26-40 | 5.9 | 9.4 |
| 41-50 | 5.6 | 9.2 |
| Above 50 | 4.6 | 6.7 |
| West Bengal | 9.5 | 9.3 |

Source: Association Social Network for Assistance to People (SNAP) Report (2016) based on DISE and Secondary Education Management Information System (SEMIS) 2011-

The lack of educational institutions in proximity to Muslim communities represents a major challenge. The data clearly indicates that regions with a larger Muslim population generally have fewer schools (See Table), highlighting insufficient infrastructure in Muslim-majority areas of West

Bengal, at both the local and district levels. Similarly, the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) serves as another indicator of the quality of education in terms of teaching and learning. According to DISE and SEMIS 2011-12 records, areas where more than 50 percent of the population is Muslim show the highest PTR. This implies that a large number of students are being taught by a relatively small number of teachers, and the state's average is 10 percentage points lower than in these areas (See Table). The situation is even more severe in schools managed by the Madrasah board, where the PTR of 52.7 is nearly twice the state average (SNAP, 2016).

**Table 2: Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) at school (Govt.mangement) in segregated Blocks of West Bengal, 2011-12.**

| Muslim population (%) at segregated Blocks of West Bengal | PTR at Primary school | PTR at Secondary and H.S school |
|---|---|---|
| Up to 15 | 22.7 | 24.9 |
| 16-25 | 24.7 | 27.6 |
| 26-40 | 26.7 | 27.1 |
| 41-50 | 30.7 | 26.9 |
| Above 50 | 36.8 | 36 |
| West Bengal | 27 | 27.9 |

Source**:** SNAP Report (2016) based on DISE and SEMIS 2011-12.

Healthcare, a key measure of human development, reveals significant shortcomings when it comes to access for the Muslim community. The health conditions in areas predominantly inhabited by Muslims remain well below acceptable standards. These regions face persistent gaps in medical infrastructure, a scarcity of nurses, and a lack of doctors, particularly in primary health centers and facilities offering inpatient care. In West Bengal, primary healthcare is delivered through the National Health Mission (NHM) alongside state-led efforts, operating via Sub-Centres (SCs), Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Block Primary Health Centres (BPHCs), and Health & Wellness Centres (HWCs)—the latter being upgraded Sub-Health Centres under the Ayushman Bharat initiative[9]. While the state averages 1.8 hospitals per lakh population, Muslim-majority districts such as Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, and South 24 Parganas report only 1.0, 1.4, and 1.3 hospitals respectively. Notably, there are no healthcare facilities exclusively designated for Muslims. Given that Muslims constitute around 27 percent of West Bengal's population—and exceed 50 percent in districts like Murshidabad, Malda, and Uttar Dinajpur—they largely depend on public health services in these areas. They do benefit from broader schemes such as Swasthya Sathi, which provides cashless treatment up to ₹5 lakh per family, and targeted NHM programs aimed at marginalized groups, including religious minorities. Despite these initiatives, disparities endure, especially in rural blocks with large Muslim populations. Research indicates such areas have 10–20 percent fewer healthcare facilities per capita than Hindu-majority blocks. According to the 2014 preliminary report on the "Status of Muslims in West Bengal," 35 percent of villagers must travel at least four kilometers to reach a Primary Health Centre, while 12 percent face journeys exceeding eight kilometers. Many PHCs exist in name only—some are non-operational, and their structures are deteriorating. Around 46 percent lack doctors, and 75 percent have no beds or inpatient services. Infant mortality among Muslims is 23 percent higher than among Hindus. A common assumption holds that Muslims are reluctant to use modern healthcare, but evidence shows they favor institutional deliveries when facilities are nearby challenging the notion that religious beliefs deter hospital births. Instead, the limited availability of services suggests that the community is willing to access quality care, but constrained by access rather than choice.

The Muslim community in West Bengal is facing significant economic challenges. In rural areas, many are involved in farming, agriculture, bidi manufacturing, small-scale trading, and craftsmanship. In contrast, in urban settings, they are commonly found working as traditional artisans, laborers, small business owners, shopkeepers, mechanics, street hawkers, drivers, assistants, rickshaw pullers, bangle makers, barbers, dyers, and workers in medium and large industries, often in unskilled, semi-skilled, or skilled roles. Self-employment is widespread among them, though their economic activities typically remain on the periphery. Multiple reports indicate that Muslims frequently occupy the lower end of key socio-economic development indicators.

Recently, the economic difficulties experienced by Muslims in West Bengal have gained more attention, particularly following the submission of the Sachar Committee Report to the Central Government in 2006. In response, the State Government has implemented measures to address the issues impacting this community within the state.

Justice Rajindar Sachar has pointed out a worrying trend: Muslims in West Bengal are not only lagging behind those in other states, but they also form the most marginalized group within the state itself. The extent of poverty among Muslims, both in urban and rural areas, exceeds that of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For example, urban poverty rates are estimated to be approximately 44 percent for Muslims, compared to 46 percent for SC/STs and only 21 percent for Hindus. In rural regions, the figures stand at about 36 percent for Muslims, 31 percent for SC/STs, and 24 percent for Hindus[10]. On a national level, although the urban poverty rate for Muslims is somewhat lower than that of SC/STs, it is still notably higher than that of Other Backward Classes and the Hindu General Category (Ibid, 158).

The Kundu Committee was established in 2014 under the leadership of Prof. Amitabh Kundu to evaluate the status of Muslims in India. Its primary purpose was to review the impact of the recommendations from the Sachar Committee Report. The findings of the Kundu Committee showed a modest improvement in the socio-economic and educational conditions of Muslims. According to the Kundu Report covering the period from 2011 to 2012, approximately 50 percent of Muslim households in urban areas were self-employed, compared to 33 percent of Hindu households. The report also noted that only 28 percent of Muslim households had regular wage income, as opposed to 43 percent of non-Muslim households. These figures suggest that employment opportunities, poverty rates, and overall living conditions for Muslims have changed very little since the Sachar Committee Report was published[11].

Perhaps the most striking discovery of the recent report called “Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal” is the understanding it provides about the income of Muslims in West Bengal. The report details the amount of poverty by stating that around 80 percent of Muslim families in rural West Bengal have an income of Rs. 5000 or less each month, which is similar to the income limit for the poverty line for a family of five. Additionally, 38.3 percent of Muslim families in rural West Bengal make Rs. 2,500 or less per month. More than three-fourths of rural Muslim families do not own any land. Over half of the poor Muslim families in rural West Bengal do not have BPL cards or MGNREGA job cards. 23.8 percent of urban Muslim families earn Rs. 2,500 or less. This weak showing regarding citizenship rights suggests that the State is not doing enough to make democracy meaningful for such a large group of people.

In the largely rural areas, the Muslim population in the state is deeply engaged in agriculture, with numerous individuals employed as farm workers. Unfortunately, many people also struggle with unemployment or working in jobs that do not fully utilize their skills. The range of educational choices is very limited, and those that are available frequently come with costs that most families cannot afford. As a result, many people are forced to turn to self-employment in order to support themselves, focusing on a limited variety of crafts such as carpentry, sewing, zari work, tailoring, embroidery, paper crafts, and goldsmithing. Others take on a variety of unusual jobs, such as pulling rickshaws, which frequently brings them to city centers like Delhi and Bombay. In Kolkata, however, there are limited job opportunities, and the community's presence is not particularly noticeable. Every morning, day laborers, including women from struggling suburban families, travel to the city, primarily using local trains, and often face severe mistreatment. The concerning accounts of their challenges genuinely warrant our careful consideration.

As stated in several government reports, Muslim women are one of the most vulnerable groups in the country, facing issues such as poverty, limited access to education, financial instability, and political exclusion. The shortage of information about their lives continues to reinforce cultural stereotypes, making it difficult to understand their true experiences and difficulties. This often results in a widespread misunderstanding that the challenges Muslim women in India encounter stem from unalterable “Islamic” characteristics or that their social standing is solely due to Muslim laws.

Most Muslim women in West Bengal actively participate in family and household decision making. Nearly three out of four handle everyday grocery runs, especially food buying. Whether city or

village life, their role shows up clearly here. Work comes in different forms - some roll Bidi leaves, others do day labor. A smaller group supports households by working as cleaners or helpers indoors. Craft jobs like Jodi or Smith tasks also give some a way to earn. Each path adds something distinct to how families manage.

The Preliminary Public Report on the "Status of Muslims in West Bengal" (2014), points out tough living conditions among Muslim populations across the region. Infrastructure gaps show up clearly when looking at things like power supply, clean water access, farming needs, medical care, schooling, jobs, along with basic public services. Roads stay flooded more often in places where adivasis, dalits, and Muslims live - unlike areas dominated by upper castes. Power shortages hit harder in neighborhoods made up of Muslims and other disadvantaged groups, especially next to richer localities nearby. Not having enough water isn't rare; most villages included in the study face this problem regularly.

**Table 3: Road and Electricity Status in West Bengal (% Percentage)**

| Para characteristics | No electricity | Waterlogged | All | Number of paras |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-dominantly Upper caste Hindu | 3.35 | 16.47 | 4.71 | 85 |
| Pre-dominantly Scheduled Caste | 6.25 | 27.78 | 7.98 | 144 |
| Pre-dominantly Schedule Tribe | 8.33 | 36.67 | 3.33 | 60 |
| Pre-dominantly Muslim | 8.19 | 27.13 | 50.06 | 903 |
| Pre-dominantly Diverse | 8.17 | 26.47 | 33.92 | 612 |
| Total | 7.82 | 26.77 | 100 | 1804 |

Source: Public Report, W.B:2014

The above figures clear that Muslims face greater struggles with power access compared to both SCs and those from upper castes. Waterlogging hits ST communities harder than it does Muslims or SCs. Still, when it comes to flooded conditions, Muslims, SCs, and STs all deal with worse situations than higher-caste groups in West Bengal. However, on closer look, Muslims are more victimised to electricity deprivation and waterlogged than SCs, STs, and upper caste[12].

**Political engagement**

Muslim political involvement in Bengal has a long history that dates back to the colonial period, especially from 1905 to 1947. During this time, key figures in the Muslim League significantly influenced regional politics, pushing for separate electorates through reforms like the Morley-Minto Act of 1909. After India gained independence, the Partition resulted in Muslims becoming a minority in West Bengal, with their population falling to about 19.85 percent. Nevertheless, they managed to integrate into Bengali society, despite occasional communal tensions, particularly during the 1965 Indo-Pak war and the 1971 Bangladesh liberation[13].

When the Left Front government ruled from 1977 to 2011, they addressed issues of identity and security. However, real progress for backward Muslims only began in 2010 with the introduction of reservations, following the Ranganath Misra Commission report. By 2017, this expansion meant that 90 percent of the Muslim population was included in the OBC lists. In recent elections, Muslims have expressed strong support for the Trinamool Congress (TMC)[14]. Their backing grew from 75 percent in the 2021 assembly polls to 83 percent in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This shift was

largely driven by concerns over policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). This solidification of support was vital for TMC, enabling them to secure 106 out of 112 seats influenced by Muslim voters in 2021. Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) faced challenges in gaining traction in areas where the Muslim population exceeds 30 percent. TMC's initiatives, such as providing monthly allowances for imams and muezzins since 2011, further bolstered this support, although some critics view it as religious appeasement. Historically, Muslim support for TMC has soared, increasing from 22 percent in 2006 to 51percent in 2016, marking a clear shift from past alliances with the Left [15]. The BJP has attempted to divide Hindu and Muslim communities to expand its reach, but this approach has largely backfired in Muslim-majority areas, where it won only one seat in 2021. Communal incidents, like those in 2025, have been used politically, with TMC accusing the BJP of orchestrating them[16].

Muslim representation has improved under the TMC, with Muslims constituting about 5.73 percent of state government jobs by 2016, up from 3.4 percent in 2006. This increase is mainly due to expanded OBC reservations. Notable Muslim politicians include Mohammed Salim, a CPI(M) MP and former state minister, Sultan Ahmed, a former TMC Union Minister, and Nadimul Haque, a TMC MP and waqf board member. At the ministerial level, this rise in representation has helped TMC strengthen its position. However, significant challenges remain, especially related to lower socio-economic indicators identified in the 2006 Sachar Report, which pointed out problems in education and employment[17]. Recent events indicate growing fragmentation. The Special Intensive Revision of voter rolls for 2025–2026 has flagged over 60 lakh voters as "under adjudication," with a large number in Muslim-majority border districts like Murshidabad and Malda. This situation has sparked concerns about possible disenfranchisement and led to community polarization. In response, independent Muslim leaders are emerging, such as Humayun Kabir, a suspended TMC MLA from Murshidabad, who launched the Janata Unayan Party in December 2025[18]. He intends to contest 135 seats and considers himself a "game-changer" for Muslims, even proposing a symbolic rebuilding of the Babri Masjid[19] Other parties, like the Indian Secular Front led by Abbas Siddiqui and the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, are also expressing Muslim concerns. However, previous mobilizations in 2016 and 2021 generated some enthusiasm but had limited success at the polls.

**Results and Discussion**

The findings reveal that Bengali Muslims in West Bengal continue to face a multidimensional identity crisis shaped by historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political factors. Despite constituting a significant proportion of the state's population, they remain underrepresented in education, employment, and public institutions. The study shows that identity-related challenges emerge not only from communal divisions but also from internal hierarchies within the Muslim community.

Educational indicators demonstrate persistent disparities. Literacy rates, school enrollment, and higher education participation among Muslims remain below the state average. Districts with higher Muslim concentrations suffer from inadequate educational infrastructure and unfavorable pupil-teacher ratios, contributing to lower educational attainment[20].

The analysis further indicates that healthcare access remains limited in Muslim-majority regions. Inadequate medical infrastructure, shortages of healthcare professionals, and poor accessibility continue to affect health outcomes. Economic findings reveal high levels of poverty, dependence on informal employment, and widespread self-employment among Muslim households.

**Conclusion**

The identity crisis of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal is a complex mix of history, culture, and politics. This struggle began in the medieval period when Persian Islam merged with local Bengali traditions. Over time, it has evolved into a significant existential challenge. At its heart is a dual tension. First, there is the shared Bengali language and culture with their Hindu neighbors, which fosters a sense of unity. Second, the allure of Islam often sets them apart, placing them as the "other" in a country dominated by Hindus. The legacy of partition has only heightened this conflict. The division of Bengali land has made Muslims in West Bengal feel like they are always seen as insiders and outsiders at the same time. Their loyalties are constantly questioned due to anxieties about the

Bangladesh border. Today, Bengali Muslims face not only cultural confusion but also real marginalization. Economic exclusion caused by neoliberal policies weakens community bonds. Additionally, the harmful narrative labeling them as "outsiders" or migrants leads to strict measures like the Special Intensive Revision under the Modi administration, which threatens their citizenship. This crisis ultimately revolves around inclusion. Bengali Muslims find themselves in a precarious position. Their claims to a "Bengali" identity often diminish their religious differences. Meanwhile, a focus on Islamic solidarity can provoke doubts about their connections to Bangladesh—a stereotype that overlooks centuries of shared Bengal history. This situation has led to divided consciousness. Bengali nationalism, which once promised unity, now seems to "appease" rather than empower Muslims. At the same time, a revitalized but conflicted Muslim identity struggles against Arab-influenced radicalism that disrupts local integration. This reflects a broader cultural erasure in South Asia. The outcome is social division. Communities retreat into protective groups, which perpetuates cycles of underrepresentation in education, media, and government. This retreat also stifles local artistic traditions, such as the Sufi-inspired Baul songs and the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam, which once captured the region's spirit. However, this story does not have to end in hopelessness. The strength of Bengali Muslim identity lies in its blend of influences, showcasing its historical adaptability—from the Turkish invasions in the 11th century to the secular discussions surrounding language movements. Addressing this crisis requires multiple approaches: inclusive constitutional protections against unjust loss of citizenship, a renewed secular education that celebrates shared cultures, and community conversations aimed at breaking down the binary narrative that reduces their history to an "immigrant" myth through a legacy of anti-colonial resistance. Political leaders in West Bengal must move beyond narrow views tied to election gains. They need to foster a Bengali spirit where faith and language can coexist without conflict. Ultimately, navigating this identity challenge is not just about restoring a community's dignity. It is also about reclaiming Bengal's promise of diversity. A place where, as Tagore envisioned, rivers from various sources come together in a single, unbroken sea. In a time of growing nationalism, the Bengali Muslim experience reflects a broader truth for India. If the nation fails to embrace these complexities, it risks damaging its multicultural foundation. The way forward is both urgent and hopeful—will the call for change be acknowledged?

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