

Status of Muslim Women in Darjeeling Town, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: Muslim women in India are suffering from both internal and external exploitation and are being subjugated by their own communities. . The Muslim women in India have to face social exploitation which however is found to be common to women of all religious groups elsewhere India. All women face problem of social conservatism as they are governed by patriarchal society. However, some differences have been observed in some communities where women are educated. In some religious communities the situation is fast changing. Among the Muslim women generally the change is not very perceptible. The present paper is a modest attempt to profile the role and status of the Muslim women residing in Darjeeling hills of West Bengal, India.

INTRODUCTION

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 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 cited examples here. They are suffering from both internal and external oppression, exploitation, harassment etc. The browbeating what Muslim women are facing is of a social nature, and it is more or less common to women of all religions groups elsewhere India, and varies only in extent. All women face problem of social conservatism as they are reduced to weaker sex. The only difference is that among other religious communities of India this situation is fast changing. But situation is not so bright as far as Muslim women are concerned (Mondal, 2005). Because of the illiteracy of the women largely, due to the discouraging attitude of the Muslim men,

the women of the Muslim society have not come to know what is written in their religious texts, and this has created a wide gap between text and context (Mondal, '83, '94). This widening gap between text and context has had a disastrous consequences on the Muslim society that has manifested in almost all aspects of their life — politically, socially, culturally, economically; and has brought fragmentation, economic backwardness, social injustice, intellectual stagnation, etc. And interestingly, most of the cases where they are oppressed, it is not so much by religion as by the 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.

The paper is based on an exploratory study among the Muslims of Darjeeling township, with the objective of understanding the dynamics of change in the role and status of Muslim women of Darjeeling town of West Bengal. Darjeeling is a town in the Indian state of West Bengal. It is located in Lesser New Series ©SERIALS

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Himalayan range at an average elevation of 6,710 ft (2,045.2 m). It is noted for its tea industry and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Darjeeling is the headquarters of Darjeeling district which has a partially autonomous status with a population of 132,016 people in Darjeeling Municipality as per 2011 Census of India. The development of the town dates back to the mid-19th century, when the colonial British administration set up a sanatorium and a military depot. Subsequently, extensive tea plantations were established in the region, and the tea growers developed hybrids of black tea and created new fermentation techniques, and the resultant distinctive Darjeeling tea is internationally recognized and ranks among the most popular of the black teas.

The study has one great obstacle, that is, difficulty in finding ample historical records and observations on Muslim community as all the previous studies emphasized on the status and role of women from the perspectives of Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha communities. Thus there is hardly any report on Muslim women of Darjeeling, in respect to their social status and role in this hill township.

Position of Women in Islam as Reflected in Text

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, '87; Khan, '90; Mondal, 2005).

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 (Engineer, '87; Khan, '90; Mondal, 2005). 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).

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. 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).

There is a deep rooted stereotype in the mind of the peoples 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, '71; Mondal, 2005).

Profile of Muslim Women of Darjeeling

Muslims of Darjeeling are primarily a minority group not only in religious sense but also in their numerical strength. They are concentrated mainly in urban centers of Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong Sub-Divisions. Darjeeling, the small mountain town is multiethnic in its character and the Muslims are in a minority there. The Nepali speaking Hindus represent the dominant community both in socio-economic and political sphere. The available historical facts revealed that the Muslims migrated to this mountain town from the plains of India, largely from Bengal, for their specific occupations and served the imperial administrators and their native associates since the initiation of Darjeeling as a sanatorium and later summer capital of British colonial rulers. The Muslim groups of the town exhibit diverse regional and ethnic variations. However in present day Darjeeling town the Muslim population is found to be significantly divided into four main regional or ethnic varieties. These groups from time to time came to the town for trade or as servants of colonial government. The groups may be classified as:

1. *Nepali* Muslims or the embraced caste families of Nepali origin and the decedents of marriages between Muslim father and Nepali mother.
2. *Bihari* Muslims or the Muslim groups migrated from various districts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
3. *Bhutia/Bhote* or Tibetan Muslims who took shelter in Darjeeling due to India-China war during 1962.
4. *Kashmiri* Muslims or the Muslims who migrated from the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

For this present study data were collected from 151 Muslim families who are permanent settlers in the town and are living in the town since three generations back. The Muslim population of the town has diverse ethnic and occupational backgrounds. 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.

Religious 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 the colonial times after they got married with the migrated Muslim males. According to the Islamic law one who wants to marry a Muslim has to convert herself in the name of Islamic faith. In Darjeeling town, generally women are converted to Islam from the ethnic Nepali communities which has an age-old tradition. Since the early phase of the town's formation, Muslim male individuals had migrated to this region in search of labour or trade. And these non-familial male individuals got married with the local ethnic girls and established their settlement as a permanent resident of the town. The Nepali Muslim community is formed of decedents of such mixture. The 1891 Census of India exhibits very low number of females among the Muslims of the

town (male: 1030; female: 268). Hence, it is to be clearly speculated that majority of these non-familial male Muslims later got married with the local native hill girls and got settled permanently in Darjeeling.

Thus female religious conversion had a great role in shaping Muslim identity at Darjeeling hills. 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 community and the Buddhis Bhutias have been found to consume beef which is a taboo for the Hindus. And these ethnic categories never took Hindu religion as an integral part in their society where beef consumption is strictly tabooed. That is why there is no tension between their past and present culture 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 residing in Darjeeling town, and there conversion to Islam is more of a personal nature and wishes.

MUSLIM POPULATION

For the present study the data have been collected from 151 Muslim households of Darjeeling town and majority of these families are residing through generations permanently in the township. There are altogether 737 individuals and the female population is 355. The percentage of female population is 48.16 as against the male showing 51.83 per cent. Thus females are only 3.67 per cent less as compared to the total Muslim males in the sample.

TABLE 1
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 (100.00)	194 (100.00)	137 (100.00)	44 (100.00)	737 (100.00)

Source: Field data * Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

TABLE 2
Sex-ratio among the Muslim groups of Darjeeling town

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	760.00
Total	382	355	929.31

The sex-ratio of the Muslims of Darjeeling is 929.31 (females per 1000 males). The sex-ratio among the Kashmiri Muslims is very low which is 760 females per 1000 males. The reason is majority of the male members are living in Darjeeling alone or some send their females to 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 as compared with other Muslim communities.

Health and Nutrition

The neglect of health care of girls and women in general is a common observation among the Muslims of Darjeeling town. The underlying gender discrimination in their families is the main reason for this. However, in the opinion of health workers and medical experts the maternal under nutrition is a common factor 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 healthcare development of the females. There should be an urgent assessment of their health status. And the priority should be given to the mothers and their children.

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 in earlier days the fertility among the Muslims were high, but the present situation does not support the fact. It is usual practice

that a woman bears 2-3 children on an average. The modern healthcare 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 status. 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, the data from the field 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.

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 only 25.50 per cent females are married. About 62.55 per cent females are married in ranging in age from 16-20 years. Only 8.05 per cent 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.

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 status most social researchers have found it alarming however, a trend of gradual improvement is also observed now (Mondal, '97). The religious texts always support the equal position of women in pursuit

TABLE 3
Age at marriage of ever married Muslim females

Age- groups (in years)	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 (74.0%)	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 (100.00)	54 (100.00)	43 (100.00)	12 (100.00)	211 (100.00)

* Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

of education and knowledge among the Muslim communities. But in reality it often varies from region to region and group to group among the Muslim community.

There is a Girls *Maktab* in Darjeeling up to class IV exclusively for the Muslim girls which was established in the year 1910 by Khan Bahadur Dr. Abdul Aziz Khan, who was a government veterinary surgeon by profession. During the early days all the Muslim families usually sent their girl children to this *Maktab* for learning religious as well as modern formal school subjects. But due to the pressure of familial orthodoxy most of the girls stopped continuing their 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 went under the control of Hill Council. Since then, the administrative setup of the *Maktab* has broken down because of not having any permanent teacher due to the complexity of the system. Books are not provided by the administration. Mid-day meal has also been stopped for some unspecific reason. 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 per cent. Whereas the percentage of illiteracy is only 9.02 per cent.

TABLE 4
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

*Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

From the Table 4 it is clearly evident that the rate of illiteracy is very high among the females. 90.62 per cent 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 per cent among the Nepali Muslim communities in the town. As because of their urban culture they widely accepted to send their children in girls' *Maktab* at least for elementary education. And this continues as an 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. 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 middle and high schools. They are now more confident to understand the contextual situation of the Muslims, their identity and equality.

Participation in Family Economy and Control

There is a great underestimation of the Indian women, that in 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 or underproductive. 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 (viz. practice of *pardah* among economically elite families). The present socio-political tension of Darjeeling hills which started back during eighties of last century was also created 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 cannot 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 by working on 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 in the society. There is no employment opportunity for women in Darjeeling. Their attitude towards employment is also not satisfactory as they do not find 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 chit funds. Mostly they spend their income to maintain the family's subsistence level, 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 which have bank account are mainly in the name of elder or adult male members. The handling of bank account is also the men's privilege.

Family, Marriage and Divorce

The family forms the basic building block of the Muslim society in Darjeeling. One of the most striking features of the Muslim families is the importance attached to their family. Traditionally Muslim families in India were joint and extended in structure, often spanning to three or more generations. An extended structure offers many advantages, including stability, coherence, and physical and psychological support, particularly in times of necessity when a problem arises. But such kind of family structure is under now under considerable threat among the Darjeeling Muslims as formation of nuclear family is an emerging trend because of various socio-economic reasons. There are two major factors which are effecting crumbling of the Muslim families. The one is relating to the ancestors of these Muslims who had migrated from distant land long back, in those families migration factors have had resulted in fragmentation of their traditional extended family structure. Whereas the second one is, many Muslim women who had

converted from Nepali speaking ethnic communities and having grown up in nuclear families before marriage, and who are not having first hand familiarity with the complexity of living within an extended Muslim family networks are now persuading their Muslim husbands to stay separately, for developing a nuclear family. The family economy and shortage of accommodation in their joint family households are greatly influencing to stay separately. In joint families elderly parents are greatly respected because of their experiences in life and their hierarchical position within the family unit.

The marital status of Muslim female population of Darjeeling is 51.04 per cent. Out of total population only 19.53 per cent 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 commonly practiced only among the Nepali Muslim community. Mostly it happens when a Muslim boy fall in love with a Nepali and Bhutia girl. There is a popular stereotype about the polygamy among Muslim men, however, it has no empirical reality in Darjeeling. In Muslims of Darjeeling monogamy is the usual and common practice. A Muslim man can go for a second marriage only after the death of his wife. At the study area it was observed that monogamy is 95.74 per cent as against only 4.25 per cent of polygamous marriage.

TABLE 5

Marital status among the Muslim females of Darjeeling town

Sex	Married	Un-married	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)

*Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

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*(divorce) is very low. *Talaq* in popular sense, the word, when pronounced thrice, (*talaq, talaq, talaq*), is generally not practiced for

separation of conjugal mates, unless a serious they situation arises between husband and wife. If they want separation, they go for the legal steps as provided under the *Shariat* rule. The concept of *talaq* is not popular among the Nepali and Tibetan Muslims. If they want to separate, they go the legal way for separation. Whereas only the Bihari Muslim females if they want separation from their husband then they desire *talaq* as provided under the *Shariat* rules for separation.

In the context of marriage payment in cash or dowry, is not an usual practice among the Muslims of Darjeeling. The Nepali Muslim community whose economic position is much lower in comparison to other Muslim communities of Darjeeling town, are strongly against such practice. Tibetan Muslims also believe so. But dowries in the form of kinds are practiced among the Kashmiri and Bihari trading Muslim families.

Gender Relations

The word gender is a social construct and stands both for male and female. Gender roles are not fixed structures but changes 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 guided by some orthodox religious theologians on whom the common Muslim people trust, believe, and follow. The trans-cultural environment of Darjeeling town influenced the concept of 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 which 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 among 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. An approximation of general daily routine of Darjeeling women is presented below (Table 6).

TABLE 6

Daily routine of work of Muslim women of Darjeeling town

Time	Works
5.00 a.m.	Cleaning and washing of household utensils
6.00 a.m.	Preparing reakfast for household members
6.45 a.m.	Preparing children for school going
8.00 a.m.	Washing and cleaning of cloths, water fetching, etc.
10.00 a.m.	Marketing cooking and food items, and necessary household items
12.30 p.m.	Preparation of lunch for household members
7.00 p.m.	Preparation of food items for dinner
8.30 p.m.	Setting household things in order before going to bed

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 relating to child care. Aged females do not perform much domestic activities. Young and adult women perform the main task of the family. Grown up girls help their mother and look after their younger brothers and sisters including the aged people. 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. During field survey I found in Tibetan or Nepali Muslims shops of garments, the female members of the community are attending customers along with their male members. A general gender activity profile of Darjeeling Muslims is presented below (Table 7).

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 meaning of the word *purdah* is veil but means much more than that when it applies to Muslim women. It is the practice that includes the seclusion of women from general public by wearing and concealing the body from head to foot, and the women may be kept away from public eyes by erecting high walls, curtains, and screens 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 of mixed origin from ethnic Nepali and Bhutia communities, where women had traditionally a dominant role. After marriage with the Muslim males, their decedents brought up the liberal tradition of *purdah* 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 Muslim families and marks a part of their culture.

Veiling through *burkah* is not popular among the Muslims of Darjeeling. Irrespective of their social segments, Muslim women in the upper economic level are more inclined to practice *purdah* culture. Majority of them are from Bihari and Kashmiri origin and practiced veiling because they have been brought up to do so as their tradition and have been instructed by elders to do so even after marriage in a distant land. The Bihari and Kashmiri Muslim families have had a strong social-cultural bondage with their place from where they migrated and thus often import popular

TABLE 7
Gender activity profile

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

Muslim religious traditions for their 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 women used to prefer wearing traditional Tibetan dress. Veiling in common sense is not popular among them. Wearing *burkiah* is absent, but due to the influence of Islam, 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. In case of Nepali Muslim women, the picture is almost identical with Tibetan Muslims. They hardly use any system of veil now while moving in public places or interacting with boys. Now girls are permitted to go to nearby places within the township without any male relative accompanying them. They can freely interact with the outsiders even with a non-Muslim. But *purdah* as an integral part of their Muslim culture has not been 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 non-kins etc. A woman is taught to speak in low voice from the early days of her

childhood. 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. The elders try to make the young girls understand that veiling is sanctioned by Quran. The elders of the society are advising Muslim women not to wear any dress which provokes men to tease them. However, these kinds of reform within themselves are finding inroads in recent times.

Political Participation of Women

Involvement of Muslim women in political matters are almost non-existent in Darjeeling. The reason for this is their low level of modern higher education, confinement of women 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 are also involved in decision making process. They 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. Though their participation is of passive character however, it seems that the winds are changing and is being felt in Darjeeling town.

There is no formal association of women particularly of Muslim women in Darjeeling town. However, for the last couple of years, the Muslim women particularly of Nepali Muslim community, are creating a group or '*majhlish*' to carrying out the idea and the vision of working women for women's empowerment and for eradicating social evils. This initiative of the Muslim women got started first from the Butcher *basti*. And now they are organizing *estema* in various Muslim populated areas, once in a month in a house of the Muslim populated area with the support received from *Dawat-e-Islami* organization.

CONCLUSION

In defining the status and role of Muslim women in Darjeeling township 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 society is as stratified by economic classes as other societies are and the conditions of Muslim families at the bottom of the pyramid are pitiable. There is an observable class differential between families living in the hills. Though Muslims of Darjeeling town exhibit a distinct indication of a mixed culture, however the religious rituals followed by the Muslims do reflect the traditional or 'popular Islamic culture' in the region.

Present study indicates growing awareness amongst Muslim families of Darjeeling about child education, preventive and promotive health care, but their access to public services is found to be extremely limited. Stereotyped home based work has disabled them to get exposure to alternative livelihood. While sensitive community based facilitation can help them to get linked to public services, hands on training and exposure can build confidence in alternative livelihood. The emergence and multiplication of self-

help groups is a phenomenon which should be taken advantage of to reach the excluded Muslim women of Darjeeling hills. Empowerment of Muslim women through SHGs would lead to benefits not only of individual women or their families but also of the Muslim community through collective action. Empowering is not just for meeting financial needs but also for holistic social development of the community and of the neighbourhood.

The influences of the multicultural and multilingual environment of Darjeeling and its inclination towards the present shifting world are presently helping to make a significant role in building awareness among the Muslim women for a 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, for the last few years, the Muslim women particularly of Nepali Muslim community have created a group or '*majhlish*' to carrying on the vision of the working women for women's empowerment and for eradicating social evils.

Field study reveals multiple deprivations of Muslim women which need to be addressed and taken care of by the community itself. While some of these are common to all women irrespective of their community affiliation the development deficit of Muslim women in the bottom layer of the pyramid is significantly higher than their counterparts in the hill society. Though many Muslim women feel safe within the boundaries of their home and community. However, the primary responsibility of social mobilization should come from the Muslim community itself and more community based organizations should be developed and capacitated to act as a catalysts for change. Otherwise the deep rooted social customs, orthodoxy and traditions of the past will be further legitimized by the males in power in the name of *Shariat*, and the women of the Muslim community would remain deprived from their overall development needs and would be deprived from empowerment.

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