

Status of Muslims in West Bengal

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Abusaleh Shariff, the Chief Economist of the National Council of Applied Economic Research, who was the Member-Secretary of the Sachar Committee, presented a paper on the socio-economic development of Muslims in West Bengal, at a seminar organised by the Institute of Objective Studies in March. A newspaper report of his presentation claimed that the situation of Muslims in West Bengal was worse than in Gujarat.

This is an erroneous and shocking statement. The ghettoisation and marginalisation of Muslims in Gujarat since the state-sponsored pogrom of 2002 is well-documented. West Bengal, on the other hand, has had no communal violence since 1964, and Muslims enjoy security.

The figures of Muslims' access to government employment and education in West Bengal as presented by Mr. Shariff are based on outdated data. He has relied on Census 2001 figures. In fact, the West Bengal government seems to be among the few governments that have taken both the criticism and recommendations contained in the Sachar Committee Report seriously.

The newspaper report said: "Shariff's figures on education, sourced, according to him from the census database and the Planning Commission, show that 50 per cent Muslim children attend school at the primary level, 26 per cent remain in middle school and only 12 per cent complete matriculation against 54 per cent, 30 per cent and 13 per cent respectively for SC/STs and 80 per cent, 58 per cent and 38 per cent for others." These are data from the Sachar Report (pages 295-299), based on Census 2001. Since then, there has been a significant improvement in the matter of enrolment of Muslims in school in the State. Latest data from the District Information System for Education,

Misleading data cited in a seminar paper on the situation of the minority community in the State tend to detract from the Left Front government's exceptional record on this count.

which is a joint initiative of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), the Department of School Education and Literacy, the Ministry of Human Resources Development and UNICEF, show West Bengal in a good light.

According to the NUEPA report, in the last three years (2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10), respectively 28.13, 28.28 and 32.30 of every 100 primary school children in West Bengal were Muslims, while 25.25 per cent of the State's population is Muslim. West Bengal's figures for Muslim students' enrolment at the primary level are better than the national average of 10.49 per cent (in 2007-08), 11.03 per cent (in 2008-09) and 13.48 per cent (in 2009-10) respectively, while Muslims form 13.43 per cent of India's population. West Bengal's record is far better than that of Gujarat. There, Muslim students' enrolment at the primary level was 4.57 per cent (2007-08), 4.73 per cent (2008-09) and 6.45 per cent (2009-10). Among all States and Union Territories, West Bengal ranks sixth in primary school level enrolment among Muslim students.

In 2009-10, upper primary school enrolment among Muslim students in West Bengal was 26.46 per cent. At the elementary school level it was 30.56 per cent, more than the proportion of Muslims in the State's population. The State thus occupied the sixth position among all States and Union Territories. The figures for West Bengal are better

than the national average of 11.89 per cent and 13.02 per cent respectively, and far ahead of Gujarat: for that State the corresponding figures are 6.44 per cent and 6.45 per cent respectively.

On employment of Muslims in West Bengal, Mr. Shariff has again quoted from the Sachar Report (page 370), which had said its data for West Bengal were incomplete (pages 170, 173). The Report ignores the employment of Muslims in secondary and primary educational centres, which, according to the State government's data is 37 per cent of the total teachers employed. Since more than 20,000 teachers in registered madrasas receive the wages and benefits of government school teachers and the majority of them are Muslims, they should be counted as government servants. For the expansion of madrasa education, the State budgetary provision has increased from only Rs.5.6 lakh in 1976-77 to Rs. 574 crore in the current year. The Central government's allocation for madrasa education (SPQEM) was Rs. 127 crore in the 2011 budget.

In 2010, West Bengal reserved 10 per cent of all State government jobs for OBC Muslims, as per the recommendation of the Ranganath Misra Commission. The newspaper report quotes Mr. Shariff as saying: "A look at OBC statistics in Bengal shows only 2.4 per cent of its Muslims belong to that category." In truth, after the recommendations of the Misra Commission were made

public, a list of 56 'more backward communities', 49 of them Muslims, was included in the OBC list in West Bengal. As a result, of the 2.02 crore Muslims in West Bengal, 1.72 crore, or 85 per cent of the total, were notified as OBCs. West Bengal is the first State to implement the Misra Commission recommendations.

The Central government's commitment to the Sachar Committee recommendations is half-hearted and meagre. Whereas the Committee recommended increased spending on Muslim minority educational, health and other needs to the extent of about 15 per cent of the Union Budget, and West Bengal demanded a sub-plan for Muslims on the lines of the SC/ST sub-plans, the Centre has allocated less than 0.5 per cent in the Budgets it has presented since the Committee's Report was tabled in Parliament. In Budget 2011, the Centre reduced the allocation to the Multi-Sectoral Development Plan of minority-dominated districts by Rs. 100 crore. West Bengal, which accounts for 12 of the 90 MSDP districts, has the best record with respect to the implementation of the scheme.

West Bengal's track record in other welfare measures is also impressive. The West Bengal Minority Development Corporation had disbursed term-loans and micro-credit to 1,82,646 persons till January 2011. This is the best record of credit disbursement among all minority finance corporations. The share of bank loans for the minorities in the total priority sector loans of banks in the State increased from 7.89 per cent as on March 31, 2009, to 14.76 per cent as on March 31, 2010. This grew to cross the national level target (15 per cent) and reached 15.01 per cent as on September 30, 2010. At the national level, it is still to reach 10 per cent.

West Bengal is the topper in implementing the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme. Among self-employed business persons who benefited from PMEG, over 30 per cent are from among the minorities. Among all self-help groups in West Bengal with access to institutional credit, 21.8 per cent are groups with Muslim members.

An important aspect of the backwardness of the Muslim minority is landlessness. In most parts of India, landlessness among Muslims has increased after 1947. West Bengal is an exception. The success of land reforms under Left-led governments here has significantly benefited Muslims. Among rural households in West Bengal, Muslim households, which constitute 30.9 per cent, have access to 25.6 per cent of the total cultivated land. This is second only to Jammu and Kashmir, which has a much higher percentage of Muslim citizens who have access to 30.3 per cent of cultivable land in the State. Of the land pattas distributed in West Bengal during the period 1977-2010, 18 per cent went to Muslim households.

While more needs to be done for the Muslim minority in West Bengal and, indeed, all over India, it is important to set the record straight. At a time when incorrect data are being used as part of a propaganda offensive against the Left Front government, this has become even more essential.

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