



Identity Crisis and Bengali Muslims in West Bengal

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Abstract:

We delve into the deeply felt identity crisis among Bengali Muslims, particularly pronounced for those in West Bengal. The term 'Bengali Muslim' itself represents a complex identity, blending cultural heritage with religious affiliation. Unfortunately, the 'Muslim' aspect often raises concerns and can be exploited by unethical politicians, intensifying the struggles faced by this community. Since the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the sense of crisis has become almost overwhelming for many. The introduction of the SIR for electoral rolls in West Bengal has heightened anxieties within the Muslim community, evoking fears reminiscent of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The door-to-door verification process and the cross-referencing with 2002 records are understandably perceived as attempts to label them unjustly as foreigners, leading to distress over the possibility of deportation. These experiences highlight not only the challenges of identity for Muslims in the region but also the broader conflicts that exacerbate these feelings of insecurity. It's a critical moment that calls for understanding and compassion towards those grappling with such an identity crisis.

Keywords: Bengali Muslims, NRC, SIR, Identity Crisis.

Introduction:

Understanding identity is a complex journey, not a straightforward one. Each person holds multiple identities that can shift depending on the situation. Our group identity emerges from the beautiful tapestry of our diverse and unique backgrounds. It can be overwhelming to realize that our differences are, in fact, what strengthen us as a team. Each of us is unique, and these differences enrich our collective efforts. It's important to recognize the significance of belonging to a group, as this deeply impacts our experiences and interactions. When we're faced with decisions about how to acknowledge our various identities, it can be challenging to navigate which aspects to highlight. The context we find ourselves in, along with how we perceive our identities, plays a crucial role in this process. Ultimately, the choices we make in expressing our identities shape how others see us and can significantly influence the outcomes we encounter. We all share this struggle, and by understanding and supporting one another, we can truly thrive together. Identifying with others is essential in society. This connection provides individuals with a sense of belonging, which is fundamental to their well-being and happiness. Without it, people can feel isolated and disconnected from their community. Therefore, fostering connections with others should be a top priority for anyone who wants to lead a fulfilling life in society. Social analysts have faced challenges in merging identities in ways that satisfy everyone involved.

Bengali Muslims in West Bengal:

India is a beautiful tapestry of diversity, where a rich array of cultures and religions coexist. While the majority of the population is Hindu, millions of individuals from Muslim, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, and Christian communities live together in harmony with their Hindu neighbours. This peaceful coexistence reflects a profound respect and understanding among people, fostering a sense of unity that transcends religious differences. Hindus make up about 80% of the population, and Muslims are the second-largest minority, comprising approximately 14.5%. In West Bengal, the 13th-largest state by area in eastern India, this spirit of togetherness is particularly evident. According to the 2011 census, nearly 27.01% of West Bengal's population identifies as Muslim, with about 2.47 crore Muslims among 9.13 crore residents. This means roughly one in every four people in West Bengal is Muslim, underscoring the state's vibrant multicultural landscape. It's heartening to see how diverse backgrounds can come together, creating a shared sense of belonging and mutual respect.



Muslims, like many other groups in our society, hold identities beyond their religious beliefs that they deeply cherish. Despite the significant presence of Muslims and their diverse contributions to the socio-economic fabric of West Bengal, a singular narrative often dominates the viewpoints expressed in academia and political discourse. This portrayal frequently oversimplifies a complex reality; for example, it is mistakenly believed that Muslims do not wish to enroll their children in government schools or utilize government health services. Such misconceptions can stem from the lack of representation of Muslims in higher echelons of society, where opinions and decisions are shaped. Additionally, the dearth of thorough, evidence-based discussions and debates about the socio-economic and political circumstances of Muslims contributes to this misunderstanding. It's crucial to foster a more inclusive dialogue that recognizes the multifaceted identities and experiences of Muslims, allowing for a deeper understanding and connection within our community.

In the aftermath of 2019, many Muslims across India find themselves facing significant challenges regarding their identity, particularly in West Bengal, where the question of sustaining the unique "Bengali Muslim" identity feels increasingly urgent. Within this community, there exists a rich tapestry of religious practices that shapes their varied social identities. This diversity is deeply rooted in a range of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Despite the longstanding history of coexistence and mutual association with Bengali Hindus, West Bengal's Muslims often cling to their distinct religious identities. It's important to recognize that they cannot be easily categorized; rather, they embody multiple identities, including that of 'Bengali Muslims' and 'Bihari Muslims.' This complexity underscores the need for understanding and empathy, as these diverse identities contribute to the region's vibrant cultural landscape.

The 'Bengali Muslims' hold a cherished place within the rich tapestry of Bengali society. Together with 'Bengali Hindus', they share a profound collective identity as 'Bengali', showcasing the beauty of unity amid diversity. The contributions of both communities have played a significant role in shaping the essence of Bengali nationality. However, today, 'Bengali Muslims' face a concerning crisis of identity. This community, which has historically coexisted peacefully with others under the umbrella of 'Bengali nationalism', now finds itself grappling with uncertainties surrounding its own distinctiveness. There is a palpable fear that their unique identity could be overshadowed by shared religious affiliations. Moreover, within the varied social landscape of West Bengal, 'Bengali Muslims' often find themselves amongst the more vulnerable groups. Despite their rich historical influence, they now face numerous challenges, including identity, security, and political representation, as well as economic deprivation and educational challenges. It is essential to acknowledge these struggles and work towards fostering an inclusive environment that celebrates the diverse identities within Bengali society.

Over time, various Muslim groups have journeyed to West Bengal, seeking a place to call home. They have settled here, creating vibrant communities enriched by their diverse occupations, languages, and cultures. Within the broader category of 'Bengali Muslims,' there are two main groups: the long-established Bengali Muslims and those known as 'Bihari Muslims.' The Bengali Muslims have deep roots in the region, while the Bihari Muslims, who have migrated from the neighbouring state of Bihar in search of better opportunities, have also contributed to the local tapestry. Following the division of Bihar into two states—Bihar and Jharkhand—Muslims from these areas are now often referred to as 'Bihari Muslims.' Each group brings its unique history and experiences, reflecting the rich multicultural landscape of West Bengal.

The migration of Muslims into West Bengal during the 19th and 20th centuries has profoundly influenced the region's demographics. This shift has raised concerns about the preservation of 'Bengali identity,' leaving many uncertain about their place in the community. 'Bengali Muslims,' in particular, face



heightened anxiety regarding their identities, especially in the context of illegal entries from former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This has unfortunately led to a complex and challenging identity crisis between 'Bengali Hindus' and 'Bengali Muslims' in West Bengal. Understanding and compassion are essential in navigating these sensitive dynamics and fostering a sense of unity amidst diversity.

Throughout history, there have been numerous poignant examples of Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus coming together to voice their dissent against British rule during the 1905 freedom movement. This shared struggle highlights a unity that transcended religious differences, even as we cast a sorrowful glance at the riots of 1946 and 1964 that shattered communities. Today, Bihari Muslims have blended into West Bengal society and often engage socially with Bengali Muslims. However, it's important to recognize that Bengali Muslims represent one of the more marginalized groups within West Bengal, facing challenges on multiple fronts. Despite their rich and influential historical contributions, they now face challenges related to identity, security, and social and political disenfranchisement. It is disheartening to acknowledge that Bengali Muslims continue to experience educational and economic setbacks, highlighting the need for a collective effort to address these disparities and foster a more inclusive society for all.

The Reason behind the Identity Crisis of Muslims in West Bengal:

The people of West Bengal, predominantly Hindus and Muslims, have shared a rich history of coexistence, woven into the fabric of society. However, recent developments, particularly around the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, have begun to strain these long-held relationships in ways that many may not have fully realized. It's disheartening to see how some in the Hindu community have come to view their Muslim neighbors through a narrow lens of religious identity, influenced by a small group of self-serving politicians. These politicians, motivated by their own interests, sometimes overlook the fundamental truth that Muslims are an integral part of Bengal's identity. The essence of our country lies in its pluralism, which should be cherished rather than challenged by divisive forces. It's truly troubling to see a few individuals sowing discord, fostering unfounded fears and misunderstandings that can poison community ties. Our history shows that Hindus and Muslims have lived harmoniously for centuries, yet there are now instances of hurtful sentiments being directed toward those who share our land and language. Terms like '**Intruder**' and '**Ghuspeteea**', '**Lungi Bahini**', '**Termite**', etc, reflect a painful division, rather than the unity we should strive for. It's important to navigate these challenges with compassion, recognizing our shared humanity and the need to uphold the bonds that hold our communities together.

India's partition in 1947, driven by the unfortunate dynamics of bi-nationalism, left many people feeling deeply affected by the British manipulation of communal sentiments. The proclamation that Hindustan was for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims created lasting challenges, yet many Muslims in this nation cherish the rich tapestry of India's multi-dimensional society. They hold dear the longstanding tradition of harmonious coexistence with their non-Muslim neighbors. In Bengal, the Muslim community has consistently exemplified the values of pluralism and togetherness for centuries, rising above temptations and divisive narratives. Unfortunately, some politicians, driven by self-interest, continue to exploit religious identities for their gain. However, it's heartening to see that a significant portion of the country's educated and progressive citizens have actively opposed this divisive agenda, both historically and in the present. Their commitment to promoting unity and understanding offers hope that, together, we can continue to cultivate a society that values coexistence and shared humanity for generations to come.

It is often claimed that the division of India and Bengal was driven by the desires of the Muslim communities in these regions. Such narratives sometimes portray Muslim-majority areas as resembling "mini-Pakistan," suggesting that Muslims may feel culturally disconnected from India. Unfortunately, this leads to judgments about their identity and behavior, dividing them into categories of "good" and "bad" Muslims. Many misconceptions surround the Muslim community, such as claims of polygamy, high birth rates, and a lack of engagement with modern education. These stereotypes create a narrative that Muslims

are responsible for population growth concerns in Bengal and India, fueling doubts and fears among others. Additionally, some express anxiety that the growing Muslim population could lead to a shift in political power, raising unreasonable fears about the safety of fellow Hindus. Even after 75 years of independence, many Muslims still face undue humiliation and stigma rooted in unfounded rumors and communal tensions. There is a serious risk that these narratives are instilling a sense of identity crisis among Muslims, fueled by negative portrayals and pessimistic agendas. Such efforts not only undermine the dignity of Muslims but also sow divisions within society, ultimately affecting the social fabric of our communities. It's essential to approach these discussions with empathy and understanding, recognizing the shared humanity that binds us all.

The increasing political and diplomatic tensions between India and Bangladesh have sadly become commonplace, and these underlying strains are particularly affecting the Muslim community, the second-largest in the country. This atmosphere of suspicion and division is leading to a growing sense of unease and fear among Muslims, who are grappling with the challenges of their identity in a society that was once more harmonious. Many individuals in this community face significant hurdles in finding housing or engaging in property transactions. This struggle is compounded by the rise of 'Islamophobia', which, whether intentional or not, is shaping the environment around us. In the wake of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, there have been alarming attempts to incite communal violence in various parts of West Bengal, with Muslims frequently portrayed unjustly as instigators. Disturbingly, reports and social media posts reveal the brutal treatment faced by everyday Muslims at the hands of extremists, underscoring the tragic consequences of these tensions. Additionally, there are persistent rumors suggesting minority favoritism aimed at securing political support, further complicating the lives of ordinary, often less-educated Muslims who find themselves caught in a web of political maneuvering. The recent introduction of the **CAA** and **NRC** has heightened their sense of vulnerability, deepening the identity crisis they face. It's essential to acknowledge these struggles and work toward fostering understanding and compassion in our society.

The topics of **CAA** and **NRC** seem to be recurring issues that contribute to the ongoing feelings of division and tension among communities. This situation has left many Muslims grappling with a profound identity crisis, which is becoming increasingly visible. Instead of fostering a sense of unity and peace, we are witnessing a rise in racial strife that undermines the ideals of egalitarian coexistence. The struggles faced by the Muslim minority community have taken on a more complex dimension, as these identity concerns are amplified over time. There appears to be an effort to marginalize Muslims, particularly in India and West Bengal, leading to significant psychological distress within the community. The human toll of this situation will be deeply felt, not only in West Bengal but across India.

Understanding the Identity Crisis of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal after 2021:

The identity crisis faced by Bengali Muslims in West Bengal is a deeply complex and sensitive issue, reflecting the severe social, political, and economic challenges this community endures. This situation often reduces their rich, multifaceted identities to a single religious lens, overshadowing the diversity within their experiences. Despite comprising around 30% of the state's population, Bengali Muslims frequently find themselves marginalized—often rendered invisible in mainstream narratives and facing distressing challenges to their citizenship and belonging.

i. The Challenge of the "Bangladeshi" Label and Citizenship Concerns:

Many Bengali Muslims encounter harmful stereotypes that categorize them as "illegal immigrants" or "Bangladeshi infiltrators." These labels stem from political narratives that inaccurately portray them as outsiders, even though many have called West Bengal home for generations. This has fostered a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear regarding citizenship, especially after updates to the National Register of

Citizens (NRC) in neighboring states. Many feel a profound anxiety about the possibility of needing to prove their citizenship, making them feel like "infiltrators" in their own homeland.

For poorer, rural Bengali Muslims, challenges are compounded by a lack of necessary documentation to establish their lineage, making them vulnerable to state scrutiny and harassment, as highlighted in a 2025 report.

ii. Socio-Economic Exclusion:

A significant portion of Bengali Muslims (about 82%) live in rural areas such as Murshidabad, Malda, and North 24 Parganas, Uttar Dinajpur, Birbhum where they often feel excluded from mainstream development initiatives. This geographic isolation contributes to high rates of poverty and severely limited access to quality education. Many are underrepresented in formal employment, particularly in skilled jobs, and are primarily engaged in low-income, informal, or agricultural work.

Educational barriers are significant as well, with surveys showing that a considerable number of Bengali Muslims (47.7%) may be functionally illiterate or have not completed primary education—often due to a lack of available educational resources rather than a lack of interest.

iii. Cultural and Linguistic Marginalization:

For Bengali Muslims, their rich linguistic heritage is often devalued. While Bengali is their mother tongue, the dialect spoken by many in rural communities is frequently dismissed by urban elites as "gaiya" (rural) or unrefined. This reinforces feelings of alienation, as they are not only marginalized from broader Muslim circles—often viewed as "other" by Urdu-speaking Muslims in urban areas—but also feel a disconnect from those who may see them as "impure" or "half-Muslims" due to their roots in syncretic and agricultural traditions.

Media portrayals often fail to recognize the distinction between Bengali Muslims and Bangladeshis, leading to a sense of invisibility that deepens their cultural isolation.

iv. Political and Communal Pressures:

The political landscape in West Bengal is increasingly relying on identity politics to rally a "vote bank" rather than genuinely addressing community needs. This creates a subtle form of marginalization where their welfare takes a back seat to communal polarization. With the rise of Hindutva politics and the presence of the BJP, many Bengali Muslims experience heightened insecurity, feeling compelled to hide their identity in public spaces to avoid discrimination.

Additionally, the recent legal controversies surrounding the cancellation of OBC status for various Muslim groups have further intensified feelings of identity crisis and economic anxiety, as evidenced by protests occurring in 2024–2025.

In essence, the identity crisis of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal is not merely a religious issue but reflects a broader, systemic marginalization that diminishes their socio-cultural and linguistic ties to the region. This ongoing struggle underscores their resilience and the urgent need for empathy and understanding to address their unique experiences and aspirations, as highlighted by a 2026 report.

In the aftermath of the 2021 West Bengal assembly elections, the Bengali Muslim community has found itself navigating a complex identity landscape, balancing linguistic heritage with concerns regarding their citizenship status amid ongoing national discussions surrounding citizenship policies (NRC/CAA). As Bengali-speaking Muslims, they often encounter challenges that stem from a misinterpretation of their nationality, occasionally being mistaken for illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite their legitimate Indian citizenship. This situation has intensified uncertainty in the community, particularly in an environment marked by rising political polarization.

A significant number of Bengali Muslims express apprehension regarding their status as Indian citizens, with fears of being labeled as undocumented migrants tied to broader political narratives that can foster insecurity. The linguistic association with Bengali often leads to misunderstandings about their nationality, resulting in what can be described as "double suspicion"—facing marginalization as Muslims while also

being questioned for their Bengali identity. The political environment in West Bengal following the 2021 elections has seen an increase in religious polarization, with the Bengali Muslim community becoming a key topic of political discourse. A notable segment of the Bengali Muslim population, especially in rural regions, experiences economic challenges that contribute to a perception of being marginalized in their own state, despite representing a substantial portion of the demographic. The rise of Hindu nationalism has led to a narrative where the essence of "Bengaliness" is often associated with Hindu cultural elements. This has resulted in Bengali Muslims feeling the need to affirm their place within the fabric of Indian society. Ultimately, the community faces ongoing pressures to affirm their Indian identity while acknowledging their deep cultural and historical connections to the region.

S.I.R and Fear of Identity Crisis among Muslims in West Bengal:

The recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal has understandably caused significant anxiety within the Muslim community, reminiscent of the fears surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The door-to-door verification and cross-referencing with records from 2002 have raised concerns about being unfairly labeled as foreigners, leading to a palpable sense of panic over the possibility of deportation.

Several key issues have emerged during this difficult time:

i. Fear of NRC-like Consequences: Many community members are worried that the SIR, which seeks to verify voter legitimacy against older records, might be used as a means to identify undocumented immigrants, disproportionately impacting Indian Muslims.

ii. Panic about Documentation: Despite having the necessary documents, there is widespread distress about the potential to be mistakenly excluded from voting lists, echoing past experiences of individuals in border districts who have reported missing names.

iii. Political Implications: The ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) has voiced concerns that this process could lead to the exclusion of residents, particularly affecting minority communities. Tragically, there have even been reports of deaths linked to the anxiety stirred up by this exercise.

iv. Challenging Narratives: The situation is further complicated by political narratives that conflate local Muslims with immigrants, which only intensifies the feelings of vulnerability and alienation experienced by the community.

Overall, the atmosphere has become increasingly tense, with the legal process intended for verifying citizenship transforming into a profound source of identity-related fear for many people in West Bengal. It's crucial to approach this sensitive situation with understanding and compassion for those who are feeling threatened and anxious during these challenging times.

How to Overcome the Identity Crisis of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal:

Overcoming the identity crisis faced by Bengali Muslims in West Bengal is a journey that involves navigating a challenging landscape marked by political marginalization, social stereotyping, and internal cultural conflicts. Many in this community feel the weight of being labeled as "outsiders" or solely as "Muslims," rather than being recognized for their rich Bengali identity.

To address these deeply felt challenges, it is essential to embrace a blended cultural-religious identity, strengthen educational opportunities, and use legal and social tools to combat misinformation.

Key Strategies to Foster a Stronger Identity:

i. Embrace the Syncretic "Bengali Muslim" Identity: It's vital to reclaim the beautiful blend of heritage that defines Bengal, where local customs and Islamic practices coexist. By acknowledging this rich, syncretic history, we can resist external pressures that seek to enforce a narrow and rigid identity on Bengali Muslims.

ii. Strengthen Education and Socio-Economic Status: Education serves as a powerful tool for uplifting marginalized communities and enhancing social mobility. Many Bengali Muslims come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and improving access to education is crucial for their growth.

iii. Combat "Epistemic Islamophobia" and Stereotypes: It's important to actively challenge the negative media and political narratives that wrongly associate Bengali Muslims with being "illegal immigrants" or "traitors." Promoting accurate information about their deep roots and contributions to West Bengal's fabric can help foster understanding.

iv. Assert Constitutional Rights and Legal Protections: In a climate where citizenship is often questioned, securing vital documents such as Aadhaar, land records, and voter IDs is essential. Engaging with legal aid organizations and civil society is important to protect against wrongful detentions and ensure that rights are upheld.

v. Promote Intellectual and Cultural Representation: The growth of Bengali Muslim literature and art is key to affirming their place within the cultural landscape, showcasing their unique perspectives and experiences.

vi. Foster Intra-Community Unity: Addressing internal social stratifications, such as those between Ashraf and Atrah or Bangla-speaking and Urdu-speaking Muslims, can strengthen the community's collective voice and promote solidarity.

vii. Key Challenges to Navigate:

a. Misrecognition: Too often, Bengali Muslims are mistakenly labeled as "Bangladeshis," which perpetuates further misunderstanding and alienation.

b. Dualism: Many feel the tension of being perceived as "not Muslim enough" by some and "too Muslim" to be fully embraced as Bengali by others.

c. Political Targeting: Sadly, the community frequently finds itself as a target for political exploitation, which can be disheartening.

By emphasizing their integral role in both Bengali culture and language while practicing their faith, Bengali Muslims in West Bengal have the opportunity to build a more confident, multifaceted, and respected identity, one that reflects their rich heritage and aspirations.

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