

## **2006 WEST BENGAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS & MINORITIES**

*"I see clear as daylight that there is one Brahma in all; one Shakti dwells in all; the only difference is of manifestation. Unless the blood circulates over the whole body: has any country risen at any time? **If one limb is paralyzed then even with the other limbs whole not much can be done with that body: know this for certain.**"*

**Swami Vivekanand**

*"There can be no stable equilibrium in any country without fair treatment of minorities".*

**Jawaharlal Nehru**

In the context of the forthcoming legislative assembly elections in West Bengal, it is important to place before the people and the political parties the situation and aspirations of the minorities in the state.

It is hoped that all the political parties would have framed their election manifestos taking such issues into account.

It is important to emphasise that minorities in West Bengal, namely, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and Jains, are not separate from the larger human community of the state. The problems and aspirations of the common people of Bengal – are the problems and aspirations of the minorities.

The struggle for a truly secular, democratic, poverty-alleviating, human development advancing society and government – is the struggle of all the people of West Bengal and India, including the minorities. And at the conclusion of any detailed investigation on the specific problems and crises of particular communities, e.g. Muslims or Christians, the analysis emerging would only be that poverty must be overcome, quality education must be delivered, mass awareness and empowerment, participation, enfranchisement must all be furthered. These are the key issues for all Indians.

The specific need for a focus on minorities is because true equality and fairness does not yet characterise public life in India and West Bengal today. The solution is for true democracy and development to reach down to the last person of the minority community, in step with reaching the last person of any community.

Minorities and most particularly Muslims are today facing acute socio-economic and educational deprivation, institutionalised denial of equal opportunities, and are mired in poverty, illiteracy and all-round backwardness. They live in a situation lacking in any hope, with disillusionment about political parties and governance. There is a crisis of leadership, in the sense of articulation of and action on the key issues, with transparency, integrity and persistence.

For every poor Muslim, there is also a poor Dalit, or a poor Adivasi. In as much as the whole governance and development system excludes the poor Dalit and Adivasi, and is unable even after close to 60 years of freedom to reach them, so does it exclude minorities and Muslims in particular.

The vision of an India that gives equal and fair treatment to its minorities is a vision for a secular democratic India.

### **Socio-economic and human development**

The WBHDR states: "... SC, ST and Minorities together account for more than half the population, and these are also the three poorest groups in West Bengal."

Nevertheless the WBHDR fails to make any meaningful observation about the real condition of minorities and Muslims in the state.

The foremost and immediate need is for a detailed research study to be undertaken on the socio-economic and human development status of minorities in West Bengal, and in particular Muslims who form the overwhelming majority of West Bengal's minorities. The expertise of the United Nations agencies should be taken in this task.

Based on such a survey, a special task force must be constituted to prepare a comprehensive socio-economic and educational development plan that can break the poverty, isolation and backwardness of Muslims. Such a plan must seek to

integrate the development opportunities for Muslims with those for all communities in the state, and provide rapid equal means for advancement to all sections.

### **Common Civil Code**

Though the Left Front govt has been in power in West Bengal for almost 30 years now, and the state has a large population belonging to minorities and especially Muslims, nevertheless, there has been no attempt to advance the ideal of a uniform civil code through a concrete formulation or proposal. There has been only inaction, though occasional lip-service to the subject. In the absence of a concrete formulation, the forces of communalism are only strengthened, who use the issue of uniform civil code, or *purdah*, as a weapon to demonise Indian Muslims.

It is vital that the government elected must follow-up its avowed commitment to a uniform civil code in the form of a concrete draft proposal for a uniform civil code in India. The challenge of formulating a common civil code, which is non-communal, but is an expression of the constitutional provisions for equality, secularism and democracy, is a challenge that must be met and fulfilled.

### **Enfranchisement and Adequate Representation**

It is vital for minorities to effectively participate in the electoral and governance process and be adequately represented in panchayats, urban local bodies, state legislatures and parliament.

In this context, the constituency delimitation exercise has only been a means for depriving minorities and especially Muslims of fair representation among elected representatives. When constituencies are defined, this often has the result of breaking up a large location-concentrated Muslim voter population and dispersing them among a number of electoral constituencies. This then makes it further impossible for the problems and aspirations of Muslims to reach the corridors of power and find effective redress.

Just as constituencies are reserved, and rightly so, for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, so must there be a reservation of constituencies for Muslims. In several parts of India and West Bengal also, the socio-economic status of Muslims is in fact even lower than that of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

In localities where there is a large concentration of Muslims, and where the constituencies have been come to be reserved for SC/ ST, there needs to be a thorough study undertaken for ensuring that fair representation is not thwarted.

### **Rural development**

In March 2004, the Department for International Development DFID published its Country Plan CP for India. Building upon the Country Plans (CPs) State Assistance Plans (SAPs) prepared in consultation with the State Governments, Civil Society and other development partners reflected state level priorities. DFID's State Assistance Plan for West Bengal for 2004-2007 outlines an "alternative economic vision" for the state with emphasis on ensuring basic minimum needs are met for everyone. State Assistance Plan for West Bengal 2004-2007 observes that every third person in rural Bengal continues to live in poverty and four districts Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura and Purulia have poverty rates above 40 percent. There are pockets of high poverty rates in Uttar Dinajpur and West Medinipur.

The state-level figures mask significant intra-state variations. According to the West Bengal Human Development Report (HDR) 2004, the four most deprived districts on various income, gender and human development indicators are Maldah, Purulia, Murshidabad and Birbhum. These districts account for about one-fifth of the state's population (half of it being Muslims who can rightly be called the deprived social groups), and addressing their needs would push the state up the ladder among the 15 major states in the country. In terms of economic groupings, agricultural labourers (constituting about 38 percent of total households) remain the poorest section of the population, and have also experienced the lowest decline in poverty rates in the last decade. The challenge will be to use renewed political, administrative and financial measures to focus on various dimensions of inequality.

The large scale acquisition of agricultural land in rural areas inhabited by Muslims primarily around Kolkata and Howrah for private real estate development is an injustice to the poor peasants. A comprehensive formulation to include the dispossessed in the development processes in the acquired area is needed to check the demographic imbalance around the urban areas.

### **Employment, livelihood & Reservations**

Given the acute under-representation of West Bengal minorities and especially Muslims in all levels of public employment and in institutions of higher and professional education, the time has come for reservations for poor Muslims, in line with reservations for SC, ST and OBC.

*Minorities Development Finance Corporation provides loans for self-employment to the minorities and during the years (1997-1998-1999) on an average, annually about 1500 Muslims benefited from this scheme. This was supposedly to compensate for the low absorption of Minorities in Government jobs. The ratio for beneficiaries among Muslims then came to about 1:10,717. Even the figures released for the year 2003-2004 shows that the beneficiary ratio is around one person/unit in about every seven thousand (1:7033). There are 2995 number of beneficiaries out of the total 2.10 crore Minority population and the average amount per head comes to around 4000 Rupees. Alternate opportunities in the small scale and cottage industries should also be made available to people belonging to minorities.*

The example of Karnataka needs to be replicated, where reservation in govt jobs and educational institutions followed an exhaustive study on socio-economic status of Muslims by a high-powered committee. This example also proved that it is not necessary to amend the constitution to effect reservations for poor Muslims.

## **Education**

It is estimated that close to 30 lakhs children of school-going age in West Bengal are not enrolled in schools. A sizeable number of such children would belong to the Muslim minority. Only about 3% of Muslim school-going children, and especially those belonging to the most socio-economically vulnerable section, go to madrasahs. *It was observed in the State Assistance Plan for West Bengal, 2004-2007 that the recent trends show that the state will not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the Universal Primary Education by the year 2015. According to UNDP press release the first WBHDR states that “never enrolled children tend to be more concentrated among the lower income groups and the Scheduled Tribe and Minority populations”.*

The West Bengal Primary Education Act, 1973 must be amended, as recommended by the West Bengal Minorities Commission.

The West Bengal School Service Commission (Amendment) Bill, 2006 passed on 20.02.2006 withdrawing the exemptions provided to the Christian Missionary Schools from the purview of School Service Commission Act 1997 vide Section 15 of School Service Commission Act, 97 for administration of their schools in keeping with their Minority Rights should be amended so that the linguistic and religious minority schools may be allowed to appoint their staff and teachers and run their institutions in conformity with the rights guaranteed to them under Article 30 of the constitution of India.

*The Muslim community considers education to be very important for girls and boys. However, given the experience of poor Muslims of a bias in the labour market there has been a tendency for boys to become disinterested in further education after primary education. Hence initiation of appropriate vocational training which enable self-employment would significantly counter-act the disincentive to seeking education. This is an important issue for immediate action.*

*The current minimum age of marriage of Muslim girls is 14 years. In most cases, Muslim girls are married off by the age of 16. This often results in withdrawal of the girls from schooling. Besides concern for the sound health of mothers and their children, the incidence of desertion of such young married girls is not insignificant. Left alone to fend for themselves and their infants, and lacking in adequate education or marketable skills, these girls must face a harsh existence. Increasing the age of marriage of girls through legislation based on dialogue with community elders and leaders is essential.*

*Similarly, creating opportunities for Muslim women's employment and self-employment would have an immense transformative effect on the current situation.*

The need of the hour is the opening of primary schools in the localities where there are large numbers of Muslims living and working. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, whose implementation continues to be a travesty in this state, must be thoroughly overhauled and used as a powerful means to reach out basic education to all.

The educational scenario of the Urdu speaking community in West Bengal, particularly in Kolkata and Howrah, is extremely depressing. This is a revealing instance of institutionalised neglect. If this linguistic minority in this great metropolis is to be saved from total disaster it will demand formulation of an action programme in

the field of education. Establishing schools of high standard is the need of the hour. Facility for teaching in Urdu at the primary stage, and using Urdu as second language at the higher stage will be quite rational.

### **Waqf land**

The Muslim community in West Bengal is endowed with a sizeable amount of land in different parts of the state. In particular, in urban areas, where the community is languishing in regards to education and housing, it is only logical that this land resource be utilised for advancing the all-round development of this backward and poverty-ridden community. In fact, WAKF land is the only remaining resource available to the community offering some hope of a better future.

However, the situation on the ground is that owing to prolonged institutionalised neglect, WAKF land has been encroached upon, taken possession of by individuals and private promoters / real-estate developers. The conversion of mosques into private dwellings and commercial premises is symbolic of the glaring violation of the rule of law. The state cannot be a mute witness to such alienation and illegal possession of WAKF land.

A detailed survey of all WAKF land in the state must be completed immediately. The results of this survey must also be made available through the internet to all.

When the state has an explicit department for WAKF affairs, it must take the initiative in recovering alienated and illegally occupied WAKF lands. It must also take the active initiative in organising the use of such land for setting up much-needed educational institutions and low-income housing estates.

Through the wholesome use of WAKF land lying inside localities with non-Muslim people, it would be possible to break the isolation and ghettoisation that exists in urban areas. Hindus and Muslims can live together in the same neighbourhood, their children can study together in the same good schools. And together strive for a better India.

### **Healthcare**

	West Bengal		India
	1990-94	1995-00	Latest
<b>Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger</b>			
Population below \$ a day (%)	39.2% (1993-94)	34% (1999-00)	34.7% (2000)
Population below official poverty line (%)	35.7% (1993-94)	27% (2000)	26.10% (2000)
Malnutrition (% of under-weight children)	56.8% (1993)	48.7% (1998)	47% (1998)

**Source:** National Sample Survey, Census and National Family Health Survey.

While there is an acute dearth of reliable disaggregated data, existing studies suggest that there is a significant differential between the infant and maternal mortality rates of Muslims and Hindus in urban areas. The principal reason for this is that the overwhelming majority of the Muslim community live in poverty-ridden, malnourished, environmentally degraded, overcrowded slums, lacking in adequate water and sanitation, where incidence of water-borne and gastrointestinal diseases is high. The DFID's State Assistance Plan for West Bengal admits that the state is unlikely to meet the targets of net primary education or child malnourishment.

According to the Census of India, less than half of urban households have a drinking water tap within their residential premises, even less have a water closet, and just over a third have closed drainage. This has come to be simply accepted as the inevitable and immutable quality of living for millions of our fellow-citizens. And this is the reality for most Muslims. More than one in five people do not have access to safe drinking water, only about 30 percent of people in rural areas have access to sanitation facilities.

Women bear the responsibility of fetching water for their household needs. Poor women in rural areas, without easy access to water sources spend hours every day collecting water, affecting their productive potential and their health. In urban areas, women and children often need to wait in long lines to get water from municipal standpipes or hand pumps. Women play a central role in water management. Reducing the amount of time women spend collecting water allows for increased opportunities for schooling, taking care of children, employment and self-development.

The environmental conditions in towns and cities are continuing to deteriorate because the middle-class with the assistance of the state is actively participating in the exclusion of large sections of the population from access to basic services. The consequence of such monopolisation of state resources and benefits is the complete disregard of risks of epidemics and endemic diseases. Govt policies are oriented to crisis intervention rather than institutionalising through new approaches, methods and attitudes a system of maintaining infrastructure and implementing progressive policies. Until the poor are able to satisfy their daily needs for food and shelter, their own active participation in demanding that the state provide them equitable access to water, sanitation and other basic services will be severely limited.

7 of the 8 Millennium Development Goals to which the Govt of India is committed are:

Eradicate extreme poverty & hunger:

- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

Achieve universal primary education:

- Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling

Promote gender equality and empower women:

- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

Reduce child mortality:

- Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five

Improve maternal health:

- Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio

Combat HIV / AIDS, malaria and other diseases:

- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Ensure environmental sustainability:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources
- Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water
- Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020

All of the above are directly and acutely relevant to the minorities in West Bengal and especially the Muslim. Improvement in the quality of life of the Muslims would mean in specific terms the attainment of the above goals.

The next elected govt. of West Bengal must commit itself to the realisation of these Millennium Development Goals in the state, and prepare and present a concrete action plan for this.

## **Housing**

The large majority of the Muslim population of Kolkata and Howrah live in bastis. The Thika Tenancy Act which governs land tenure in bastis is a severe impediment to housing development for the low-income sections. At the same time, illegal construction is rampant in the basti areas.

An appropriate new legislation must be enacted in place of the existing Thika Tenancy Act, with the objective of facilitating large-scale housing construction. The state would be the enabling agency for such a process. The goal must be the granting of legal title to improved new dwellings to the erstwhile basti households. Just as “land to the tiller” was the slogan in villages, “house to the dweller” must become the slogan for a programme of pro-poor urban land reform.

It is incumbent upon the state to ameliorate the plight of the poor, illiterate and the under-privileged in the bastis or slums who are currently sheltered in the upper

stories of the illegally constructed buildings that have come up when the state turned a blind eye to them.

*Large scale acquisition of thousands of acres of land belonging to minorities particularly Muslims in Kolkata and Howrah suburbs and its allotment to foreign multinational companies will not only affect the demographic profile but also create landlessness, poverty and chronic unemployment among them. The need is therefore to stop any further acquisition at once and prepare a scheme wherein the displaced persons are included in the development processes in the area acquired.*

### **Women's question**

The issue of Muslim women suffers from purposeful distortion. On the one hand is the continuing illiteracy, poverty and lack livelihood of poor women in a male-dominated society; and on the other hand is the practice of “*purdah*” which is apparently frowned upon by so-called progressive leadership.

When large-scale opportunities are available to all women for education, employment and all-round empowerment, practices such as “*purdah*” would altogether cease to be of much significance.

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