

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

Dr. Sankar Sarkar¹

¹Asstant Professor
Department in History
Balurghat Mahila Mahavidyalaya
Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal, India
Email:sankarsarkar406@gmail.com

Abstract:During the colonial period, Dinajpur district was predominantly Muslim. According to Hamilton's account, the ratio of the Hindu and Muslim population was approximately 3:7, while the population belonging to other religious communities was insignificant. Over time, however, this demographic composition underwent gradual changes due to a variety of socio-economic and political factors. The demographic structure of West Dinajpur changed significantly following the Partition of India in 1947. According to the 1941 Census, Muslims constituted 38.51 per cent of the population in the area that later became West Dinajpur. However, the subsequent census recorded a decline of nearly 20,000 Muslims in absolute numbers, despite the general trend of population growth. Scholars have offered different explanations for this decline. One view attributes it to the devastating famine and epidemics of 1943–44, which caused substantial loss of life. Another explanation suggests that a considerable number of Muslims migrated to East Pakistan following Partition or were resettled in other parts of India. In the post-Partition period, the spatial distribution of the Muslim population also underwent noticeable changes. A significant proportion of the Muslim population became concentrated in specific pockets, particularly in the border areas adjoining East Pakistan.

Key words: Census, Hindu, , Migration, Population, Partition, Religion etc.

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Introduction

In colonial period the Muslim was the predominant group in the population of Dinajpur district. It is said that in the pre-British area of Dinajpur proportion of Hindus and Muslims was 3:7. Even at the time of Buchanan's visit, the number of Muslim people was 21 lakhs out of 30 lakhs population.¹ The census of 1911 showed that the total population was 1687649, among them Hindu 759309 (44.9%), Muslim 834315 (48.4%), and semi-Hinduised aboriginal tribes 102031 (6%) with few Jain and Christian.² That means within hundred years, the ratio of Muslims decreased considerably. A single cause was not responsible for it.

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

Firstly, the immigration of Santals, Oraon, Mundas, Mahali, etc from Jharkhand, Manbhum, Singbhum, etc. was a prime cause of it. This trend was started after the Santal rebellion in 1855. The oppression of the British government and the 'dikus' were compelled them to leave their homeland and they had chosen to move easterly in Bengal.³ In 1859 the Zamindars and Jotedars got extra rights over land and they tried their best to settle the immigrants on their land. Generally, the number of scheduled tribes increased considerably. In 1872 the tribes were only 3% of the total population of the district but in 1911, within forty years span the ratio raised to 6%.⁴ In between 1872 and 1891, within 20 years new 658 villages were formed in Dinajpur.⁵ Perhaps a huge number of tribal immigrants were the reason behind it. As the tribal people were settled permanently and Hinduized, the ratio of the Hindu population had been increased.

Secondly, during the Mughals and British huge number of upper-caste Hindus who came to Dinajpur also contributed to the alteration of religious demography. Thirdly, Bangladeshi scholar Md. Manintzzuman said that during the 19th-century Muslim population had decreased.⁶ The reason behind the decrease of the Muslim population was an unhealthy environment and a high death rate. The argument is not acceptable as the environment was not victimized the Muslim only. One thing is to remember here that in the 19th century a trend of emigration from the Western district to eastern district was there in Bengal. During this time, eastern Bengal districts had shown economic prosperity in the agricultural sector. Due to this, the agriculturists or the agro-labours were used to emigrant there.⁷ We know in the Dinajpur region the Muslim people were basically of this class. W.W. Hunter also said, "Most of the wealthy traders and the principal land holders are Hindus and as a rule, the collector is of opinion that throughout the agricultural population the Hindus occupy a somewhat higher social position than the Muhammadans".⁸ So it may be noted that the emigration trend was more among the Muslim people.

The fourth decade of the 20th century was no doubt important in the history of Bengal. During this time Bengal witnessed famine, epidemic and partition. These had a direct impact on the demography of the region. District Dinajpur also was under the canvas because it was affected by famine and the border of West Bengal and East Pakistan run over the district. So, demography of Dinajpur and West Dinajpur had altered much in this session.

In the census of 1941, total population of Dinajpur is shown as 1926833. Among them, 1018509 were male and 9083324 female. In accordance to religion non-muslim 959642 (49.8%) and the rest 967246 (50.2%) were Muslim.⁹ How many lives were swept and

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

affected in the district by the famine had not been recorded properly. Another important event was the partition of Dinajpur district. As the base of partition was religion and Pakistan was created on the demand of Muslims. In Dinajpur district the distribution of the non-Muslim and Muslim was as follows.

Table: 1

Distribution of non-Muslim and Muslim population in Dinajpur in 1941

Name of police station	Area in square mile	Total population	Density/mile	Non-Muslim population	Muslim population
Balurghat	181	92016	508.38	58214	33802
Kumarganj	111	46033	414.71	26881	19152
Gangarampur	127	52892	416.47	34356	18536
Tapan	170	60375	355.15	37511	22864
Raiganj	171	65553	383.35	40984	24569
Hemtabad	74	28747	388.47	14429	14318
Kaliaganj	136	61425	451.65	45464	15961
Itahar	165	73231	443.82	40212	33019
Banshihari	134	50022	373.30	29687	20335
Kushmundi	120	53190	443.25	31006	22184
Total	1389	583484	420.07	358744 (61.49%)	224740 (38.51)
Fulbari	138	76650	555.43	30548	46102
Porsha	194	71289	367.47	25690	45599
Patnitala	149	68486	459.64	31918	36568
Dhamoirhat	116	61683	531.75	32442	29241
Dinajpur	137	101918	743.93	50226	51692
Parbatipur	167	111596	668.24	34229	77367
Nawabganj	180	82542	458.57	23100	59442
Ghoraghat	57	26678	468.04	8954	17724
Chirirbandar	121	89667	741.05	31645	58022
Birol	137	67612	493.52	35970	31642

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

Thakurgaon	250	133678	534.71	63928	69750
Baliadangi	110	55652	505.93	19958	35694
Atwari	81	43218	533.56	15277	27941
Ranisankail	111	48004	432.47	21679	26325
Haripur	78	27404	351.33	13625	14183
Pirganj	151	75039	496.95	37437	37602
Bochaganj	87	45359	521.37	30498	14861
Birganj	159	68069	428.11	44743	23326
Khansama	69	49254	713.83	21288	27966
kaharail	79	39147	495.53	27688	11456
Total	2564	1343349	523.93	600805 (44.72%)	742544 (55.28%)

Source: Census of India, 1941

Above table shows that northern portion of the district comprising Thakurgaon and Sadar subdivision was more populous than southern *thanas* or police stations. Among the thirty police stations, fifteen were Hindu predominated and of which Balurghat, Dhamoirhat and Birganj the Hindu predominant police stations were having higher densities and the remaining police stations were having less than 500 square mile of densities. But the Muslim predominant *thanas* were mostly of high densities.

According to surveyor general of India in 1951, the width of the district was 1385 square miles and it lies between 25° 10' and 25° 50' north latitude and 88° 02' and 89° 01' east longitude.¹⁰ In the census of 1941, the total population of West Dinajpur was 583484 and Hindu and Muslim respectively were 358744 and 224740.¹¹ But in the next census, the number of population and ratio between Muslim and non-Muslim changed dramatically. Whereas, the non-Muslim population increased sharply, the number of Muslim population had been shown decreased.

Table: 2

Comparison of religious demography of West Dinajpur between 1941 and 1951

Census 1941			Census 1951	
Religion	population	Percentage to total population	population	Percentage to total population
Hindu	243388	41.71	499327	69.30

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

Islam	224740	38.51	215739	29.94
Sikh	33	----	18	----
Jain	59	----	249	-----
Buddhist	-----	-----	45	---
Christian	176	-----	3233	.45
Other	16	----	-----	---
Tribal	99575	17.06	1962	.27
Caste not returned	15497	2.7	-----	-----
Total	583484	99.98	720573	99.96

Source: Census of India, 1941 and 1951

The above table shows that the increase of total population was very sharp, 23.5% in the decade of partition. The religious demography also changed considerably. The ratio of the Hindu population increased from 41.70% to 69.30%. Here, one thing is to mention that in the census of 1941, the tribal people who were enumerated as tribal and a few portions enumerated as animist and included in census as caste was not mentioned. In a decade, these people were embraced Hinduism and few were baptized to Christianity.¹² But by the total population, the increase of Hindus cannot be explained by this fact. The real fact was that as the partition of India and Bengal happened based on religion and due to partition in East Pakistan, the Hindus became minority and insecure in East Pakistan. Due to harassment by the Muslims mentally and physically, the Hindus started to migrate to West Bengal and a huge number of migrants were settled in West Dinajpur district. In the census report of 1951, the number of East Pakistani migrants was 115510.¹³

Table: 3

Year-wise immigration of East Bengal's migrants in West Dinajpur

Year	Male	Female	Total
1946	162	60	222
1947	3816	3410	7226
1948	6271	8253	14524
1949	5701	7459	13160

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

1950	42585	33074	75659
1951	1096	1019	2115
Total	59631	53275	11296

Source: census handbook, West Dinajpur 1951 (Rest 2604 people before 1946 incoherently).

The Muslim population in the decade of partition, the number decreased from 224740 to 215739, whereas the number of Hindu population had increased considerably. No doubt, this reveals that the Muslims had emigrated to East Pakistan or any other places. According to Census of India, the number of emigrated Muslims recorded 14000 of them 12375 had been returned later.¹⁴ But the calculation is not matching. Suppose the rate of increase of population was same to the last decade then the Muslim population would have been 250360. If the Muslims who returned from East Pakistan were not settled in Hindu predominated West Dinajpur area, then the Muslim population would have been 235985. So, it is clear that 20000 more Muslim people had been missed. Either they fled to another district or other state or this number of people affected and died by the famine and epidemic (1943-44).

Out-migration of the Bengali Muslims from West Bengal was an important phenomenon right after the partition in 1947. Due to the riot in Calcutta, the trend was started, though all the emigrants Muslims were not riot victims. Some of them were government employees and opted to serve in Pakistan. Some moved purely by ideological consideration. In the West Dinajpur district no riot occurred but till 1951 the number of Muslims immigrated to East Bengal amounted to 14000 of whom 12375 had been returned after the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Pact.¹⁵ After that, no record of Muslim emigration from West Bengal had found. The ratio of the Muslim population in the consecutive census is enough to prove that Muslim emigration was almost zero. But considerable changes took place in the pattern of settlement of the Muslim people in the district.¹⁶

Joya Chatterjee showed that during the riot in Calcutta those Muslims who lived in the areas outnumbered by Hindus who feared and emigrated to East Pakistan or elsewhere in the district or state where their religious fellows were in majority for safety. Each exodus of Muslims resulted in the Hindu refugees grabbing their property and home also. The police report also supported this phenomenon. Generally, the loser Muslim people had to seek shelter in the Muslim populated areas and a trend of clustering and ghettoization was entertained in the state of West Bengal.¹⁷

In the memoir of revolutionary Bhabesh Bandhopadhyay of Balurghat said that from Fulgara village of Dacca area all the Muslim families had left after partition due to communal tension

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

with Hindu refugees.¹⁸ Such type of trend had been supported by the decreasing number of the Muslim population in the urban areas also. In West Dinajpur district urban Muslim population was 2858 against 10000 in 1947, but it decreased to 312 in 1951.¹⁹ As per the West Bengal administration of Evacuee Property Act of 1951, the effort was made to restore the evacuee Muslim on their property but success was too limited. In West Dinajpur till June 1965, the number of applications submitted by evacuee Muslims was 1134, but the number of cases restored to their possession was only 160. Rest 974 cases were rejected.²⁰

Another related but contrasting trend in the rural areas of the district as well as the whole of North Bengal among the Muslim people that the displaced from the outer part of the state were resettling in Muslim-dominated areas. This trend is still alive. In the decade between 1951 and 1961, the Muslim population grew 51 percent in the West Dinajpur district and in the same period in Malda, it was 63 percent.²¹ Due to such a trend, it has been found that in spite of a huge number of Hindu immigration from East Pakistan and Bangladesh, the ratio of Muslim population in West Dinajpur had not been decreased and even a gradual increase had found. Some scholars wanted to say that like other border districts, in West Dinajpur also infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims was the main reason behind such type of trend in the Muslim demography. As the religious solidarity among the Muslims is so strong, the matter of infiltration had not been explored.²² But others tried to point out about the high birthrate among the Muslims.

Table: 4

Decadal variation of different religious communities in West Dinajpur, (in %)
1951-1991.

Census Year	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Buddhist	Jain	Sikh	Other
1951	69.30	29.24	0.45	0.01	0.03	00	----
1961	69.86	29.41	0.64	0.01	0.07	00	0.01
1971	63.07	35.89	0.95	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.02
1981	63.26	35.79	0.81	0.01	0.07	0.1	0.05
1991	62.51	36.74	0.66	0.01	0.04	00	0.03

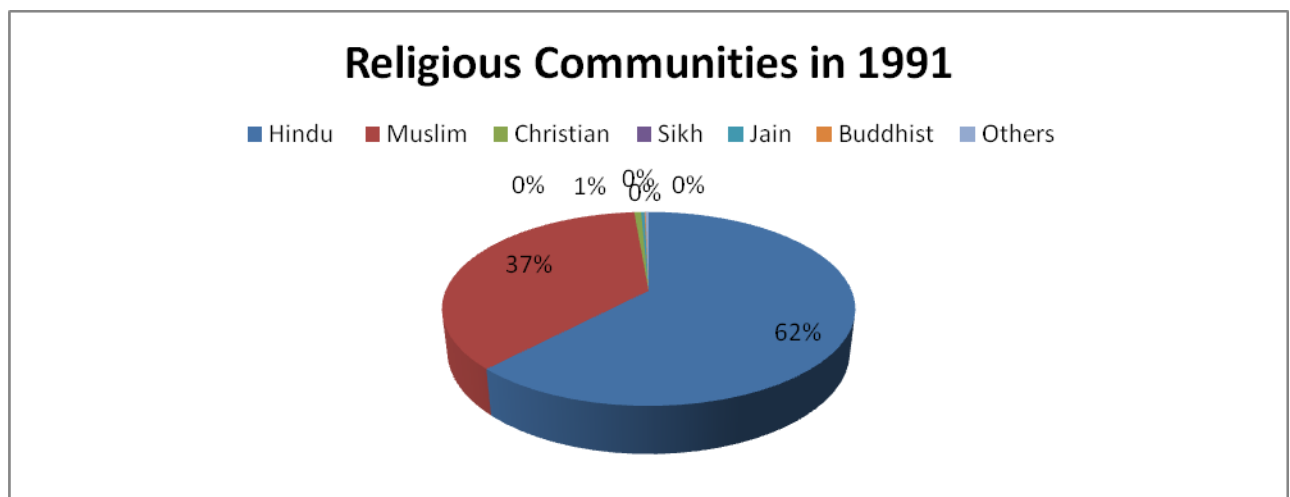
Source: District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, 1951, 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991

If we study the rate of increase of population between 1951 and 1961 by different religions, we can find that the number of Buddhists increased to the extent of 104.44%, the Christians

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

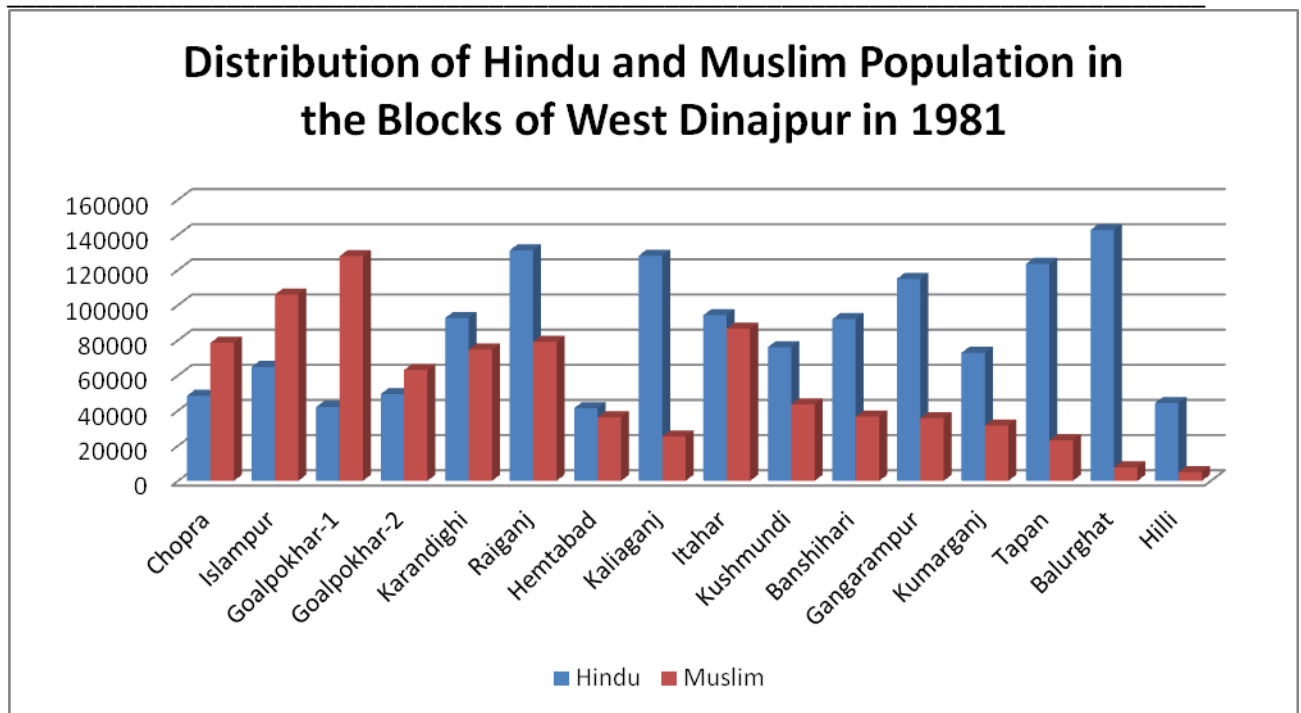
by 161.34% and the Jain by only 26.79%. But the increase of Muslims in 1951-61 had been to the extent of 50.67%.²³ And the increase among the different police stations was not the same. Bangshihari, Kushmundi and Kaliaganj had together showed the lowest decadal increase of 24.81% amongst the Muslims and police stations that came from Purnea had shown the highest rate of increase amongst the Muslims 83.29 %.²⁴

A fascinating account has been given about the Muslims of the district in F.W. Strong's Gazetteer, 1912. The Muslims of Balurghat and Raiganj subdivisions of West Dinajpur have been described as the descendants of Rajbanshis. These Rajbanshis during Muslim rule converted into Islam, sometimes by force or sometimes from a motive of expediency or policy.²⁵ The converted Muslims were known as '*nasya*' which means one whose original religion has been destroyed. A very interesting account has been served by F.W. Strong about a curious sect of fakirs residing in Balia *mouja* of Raiganj. This fakirs religious practice was a compromise between Islam and Hindu Jogism.²⁶



The first census after independence in 1951 showed that the Hindus were 69.3% and Muslims were 29.94%. But after the inclusion of the Islampur subdivision, the proportion of the Hindu population decreased to 59.87% and Muslims increased to 39.41% as the Islampur subdivision was predominant by the Muslim people. But in the consecutive decade, a huge number of Hindu immigrants from East Pakistan replaced the proportion, in 1971 Hindus had become 63.07% and the Muslims 35.89%. In the last two decades of study, a trend of Muslim infiltration from Bangladesh steadily altered the religious demography of the West Dinajpur district as well as the other border areas.²⁷ Block wise distribution of Muslim population in the district and their increase rate indicates the fact.

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study



Source: District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur 1981

The rate of increase of the Muslim population in the district was high during the last decade of study. Its main reason was infiltration from Bangladesh. Only the urban areas of Raiganj and Balurghat blocks show a low increase. In Tapan block, the Muslim population increased at the highest rate of 121 percent, whereas the Hindu population increased only by 8.13 percent. The reason was that a good number of Hindu families left the block for lack of security and caused a religious redistribution of settlement.²⁸

The foregoing discussion clearly indicates that the transformation of the Muslim demographic profile of West Dinajpur constitutes a significant dimension of the district's post-Partition history. Partition brought about a marked reconfiguration of the demographic structure of the region, with out-migration emerging as an important trend among the Muslim population in its immediate aftermath. This movement, however, did not result in a uniform spatial distribution of the Muslim population across the district. Over the subsequent decades, the Muslim population became increasingly concentrated in particular geographical pockets, especially in areas adjoining the international border with East Pakistan and, after 1971, Bangladesh. Such spatial concentration needs to be understood in relation to the historical pattern of settlement, economic opportunities, landholding structures, migration and the distinctive socio-economic conditions prevailing in the border regions.

The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

Another factor that has figured prominently in contemporary discussions of demographic change in West Dinajpur is the alleged or suspected inflow of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh. The question of cross-border migration has attracted considerable administrative, political and scholarly attention because of its possible implications for the demographic composition of the border districts. Nevertheless, the extent to which such migration contributed to changes in the Muslim population of West Dinajpur requires careful examination and cannot be established solely on the basis of demographic fluctuations. Census records, electoral rolls, administrative reports, migration statistics and other contemporary sources need to be critically examined before drawing definitive conclusions. Thus, the changing Muslim demography of West Dinajpur should be viewed as the outcome of a complex interplay of Partition-induced migration, subsequent patterns of population movement, differential natural growth, settlement concentration and cross-border mobility. A nuanced assessment of these interrelated factors is essential for understanding the long-term demographic evolution of the district.

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The Muslims of West Dinajpur: A Demographic Study

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