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## Intersectional Dimensions of Systemic Violence against Young Muslim Students in West Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersectional dimensions of systemic violence experienced by young Muslim students in West Bengal, India. It utilizes a qualitative case study approach to understand how overlapping identities contribute to discrimination in educational institutions in West Bengal. The research employs an intersectional analysis framework to understand the complex dynamics of structural forces that marginalize Muslim students. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and participant observations at selected educational institutions in West Bengal. The analysis revealed multidimensional layers of systemic violence, discriminatory practices by educators, and institutional impediments hindering academic progress. The findings highlight the vulnerabilities faced by Muslim students, particularly young women, whose educational experiences are shaped by intersecting identities.

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### Introduction:

West Bengal is India's ancient and highly populated state. West Bengal has a long history of Muslim rulers and Nawabs, with a significant Muslim population. The state was divided into East Bengal and West Bengal after India gained independence from the British Empire in 1947 on the basis of religious differences. Post-Independence, the Government of India organized the state into 23 districts under five

administrative divisions when it took over this portion of its governance. Despite having a substantial Muslim population, West Bengal evolved into a territory with a Hindu majority (Kalam, 2021). According to the 2001 census, religious minorities made up 210.19 lakhs, or almost 18%, of the nation's total population of 10286.07 lakhs. There are 1381.88 lakh Muslims in India out of the 10286.07 lakh total population, or 14.2% of the country's population. According to the 2011 census, the Muslim population in West Bengal state is approximately 24.6 million, accounting for 27.01% of the total population. Three districts have a predominantly Muslim population: Uttar Dinajpur (50%) and Maldah (51.3%). These are Murshidabad (66.2%) and Maldah (51.3%) (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2007, pp. 28--29).

Bengal Muslim populations have historically been linked to lower socioeconomic conditions, restricted educational opportunities, and underrepresentation in governmental and administrative roles. This marginalization stems from the divide and rule strategies that were used during the colonial era, which increased intergroup conflict and formalized inequality. Following independence, these systemic injustices have continued, with Muslims being marginalized in society, despite modest attempts at change. The 2001 census revealed significant disparities in literacy rates among various religious communities in India. Jains, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus had the highest literacy rates at 94.1%, followed by Christians at 80.3%, Buddhists at 72.7%, Sikhs at 69.4%, and Hindus at 65.1%. However, Muslims in West Bengal have a lower literacy rate of 59.1%, even below the national average. This indicates a concerning trend in educational attainment among Muslim communities in West Bengal, as education is a critical social indicator and a key determinant of employment opportunities. The low literacy rate reflects deeper systemic issues and calls for targeted interventions to address educational inequalities, hindering social and economic mobility within the community. After Bengal was divided in 1947, Muslims from wealthy and middle-class districts of West Bengal moved there. In spite of this, intelligentsia—27% of which are Muslims—remains vital in determining the political landscape. The TMC-Congress alliance won 95 of the 125 seats in West Bengal in 2011, a state where Muslims predominated. After the 2011 election, there were fewer Muslim MLAs and cabinet members, but the Muslim community's representation in the West Bengal legislative assembly and government remained unchanged (Roy, 2024).

The educational sector in West Bengal, particularly for Muslim students, is a stark example of societal bias and structural violence. Muslim students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, face challenges such as a lack of access to quality education, discriminatory practices by

educators, and biased curricula that do not reflect their cultural and religious heritage. These issues are further exacerbated for young Muslim women, who must navigate religious and gender-based discrimination. The intersection of identity markers—religion, gender, and socioeconomic status—creates a unique set of challenges for young Muslim students in West Bengal. There are victims of systemic violence embedded in the structures and practices of educational institutions, manifesting in various forms, from subtle biases and microaggressions to institutional barriers that prevent Muslim students from fully participating in and benefiting from the educational opportunities available to their peers. Violence is multifaceted, stemming from religious, socioeconomic, and gender-based discrimination. These intersecting forms of marginalization are deeply embedded within educational institutions, manifesting in biased curricula, discriminatory practices by educators, and institutional barriers. This study aims to fill this gap by adopting an intersectional approach that considers the full spectrum of identities and experiences that shape the lives of young Muslim students in West Bengal. This highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to educational reform that addresses individual instances of discrimination and the underlying structural and institutional factors that perpetuate inequality.

The research aims to identify and analyse the various forms of systemic violence faced by these students, explore how intersecting identities shape and exacerbate these experiences of violence, and assess the broader implications of these findings for educational policy and practice, with a focus on promoting more inclusive and equitable educational environments for marginalized communities. The research questions are as follows:

1. What forms of systemic violence do young Muslim students in West Bengal encounter in educational institutions?
2. How do intersecting identities influence these experiences?
3. What are the implications of these findings for educational policies aimed at reducing systemic violence and promoting equity?

### **Theoretical Framework:**

According to the UN Women's Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence Against Women (2012), national action plans should acknowledge that racial, ethnic, religious, political, or other opinions, national or social origin, property, marital status, sexual orientation, status as an HIV/AIDS

survivor, age, or disability are some of the factors that influence how women experience violence. (UN Women, 2012). According to Banerjee and Hwang (2023), gender must be understood in relation to other identities, such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation. There is a correlation between the membership of particular marginalized groups and the occurrence of gender-based violence. The academic milieu of universities and other research organizations reflects trends from the broader societal context. However, research has indicated that the pervasive and detrimental portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media has been ingrained in mainstream culture. It has gained acceptability not only via media representation but also through political discourse and legislative initiatives. A rhetoric that reinforces prejudices and stereotypes, as well as legislation that is portrayed as secular or intended to combat terrorism, frequently serves to validate these representations. According to Mondon & Winter (2017) and Stonebanks (2009), the normalization of negative viewpoints leads to a wider acceptance of discriminatory attitudes and policies against Muslim groups in society.

According to Syed and Özbilgin (2015), intersectionality is the concept that two or more aspects of identity, such as gender, race, and religion, may lead to several overlapping levels of disadvantage or discrimination. Stated differently, intersectionality theory studies how identity components such as gender, race, religion, and others are inextricably linked to one another and cannot be distinguished from one another. Intersectionality, coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, is a theory that posits that inequities are not the result of single factors but rather the result of intersections of different social locations, power relations, and experiences. It promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion, and connected systems and structures of power.

Intersectionality is based on several key tenets: human lives cannot be explained by single categories, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status; lived realities are multidimensional and complex; the importance of any category or structure cannot be predetermined; relationships and power dynamics between social locations and processes are linked; people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously; multilevel analyses that link individual gestures to broader structures and systems are vital for revealing how power relations are conformed and endured; scholars, experimenters, policy makers, and activists must consider their own social position, part, and power when taking an intersectional approach; and intersectionality is explicitly acquainted towards metamorphosis, erecting coalitions among different groups, and working towards social justice (Bunjun, 2010; Collins, 1990; Valdes, 1997; Van Herk, Smith, & Andrew, 2011).

Violence against women portrayed by the media, which often represents honor murders, forced veils, and assaults purportedly committed by male family members or community members, is a common way in which Muslim girls and women are portrayed as victims of violence. Through the harsh caricatures of Muslim men, this representation often frames Islam as fundamentally violent and repressive towards women and girls. These representations suggest that because of problems such as domestic abuse or debates about headscarves in sports, Muslim women are vulnerable to severe cultural injury, or "death by culture". Focusing solely on religious or cultural reasons ignores the larger context, even when religion can be exploited to justify violence (Zine, 2009).

This paper explores the concept of "violence" and its various forms, arguing that common definitions often overlook the structural and systemic aspects of violence. Jiwani (2006) suggested that traditional definitions of violence focus on physical, psychological, and discursive dimensions but fail to account for the different levels of violence and its differential treatment. Instead, she proposes a definition that encompasses coercive, physical, and institutional power, encompassing the character, instruments, and goals of domination. She defines,

*'.....violence embraces its physical, psychological, and discursive dimensions and underlines the use of force and the abuse of power inherent in all forms of violence. What they fail to capture are the levels at which violence occurs and the differential treatment of various kinds of violence. Violence occurs within intimate relationships, between peers, at the societal level, within institutions, and within and between states.'* (Jiwani, 2006, p. 7)

Understanding violence from a single lens, interpersonal violence, often undermines the broader comprehensive understanding of systemic violence against youth Muslim students.

Systemic violence often refers to forms of violence that can negatively impact individuals or groups in various ways. Systemic violence involves institutional practices that negatively impact individuals or groups psychologically, mentally, culturally, economically, spiritually, or physically. In educational settings, systemic violence disrupts students' learning experiences and their pursuit of full potential. Structural violence, on the other hand, refers to harm inflicted by social structures that may create or perpetuate inequalities within educational environments. Both forms are prevalent in colleges and universities globally. Systemic violence occurs when authorities divide minority students into less challenging majors, limiting their potential earning capacity. Structural violence occurs when university policies or social customs marginalize students, perpetuating or exacerbating existing disadvantages.

Despite claims of not intending harm, these actions can still be detrimental to students. Violence is socially constructed and can be significantly reduced or eliminated by addressing its underlying causes (Watkinson, 1997).

With the integration of different frameworks of theory, this study shows that a holistic approach is necessary to comprehend the violence encountered by young Muslim students in West Bengal. The study sheds light on how overlapping identities fuel educational inequality and emphasizes the necessity of systemic change to address these problems successfully by examining both structural and systemic violence via the intersectionality lens.

### **Research Methodology:**

This study uses qualitative methods and intersectional analysis to investigate the systemic violence faced by young Muslim students in West Bengal. The research focuses on the impact of intersecting identities, such as religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, on their experiences within educational institutions. Intersectional analysis examines how overlapping identities contribute to discrimination and disadvantage.

### **Data collection:**

Data are collected through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, providing personal narratives and insights into institutional practices. The interviews were conducted with 40 young Muslim students in select districts of West Bengal. The participants belonged to different parts of the state, and their ages ranged from 18-23 years. An analysis reveals how systemic violence intersects with and impacts students, especially young Muslim students in West Bengal. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of systemic violence, offer policy recommendations, and advocate for changes to improve support for marginalized students.

**Results:** Amartya Sen released a report titled *Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal* to highlight the disproportionate poverty and deprived living conditions faced by Muslims in the state. The report, which accounts for 27.01% of the population, is a response to the Sachar Committee report, which highlighted the exclusion and discrimination of Muslims in various fields, including livelihood and education. The report emphasized the need for state-wise updates of socioeconomic and educational data on Muslims, as the Sachar Committee report was released over a decade ago. The report aims to provide a more accurate picture of the living conditions of Muslims in West Bengal (*People's Voice*, 2016).

This study illustrates the systemic and intersectional violence that young Muslim students face in West Bengali educational institutions. The findings demonstrate the complex interplay between discriminatory behaviors and prejudiced beliefs embedded in institutional frameworks that lead to systemic violence. In addition, the LRMWB report, authored by the Association SNAP, Guidance Guild, and Pratichi Institute, provides a comprehensive analysis of the systemic violence faced by Muslim communities in West Bengal. The report, based on a survey of 325 villages and 75 urban wards across 81 community development blocks and 30 municipal bodies, highlights the complex interplay of identity factors, regional disparities, language barriers, and socioeconomic status in shaping the experiences of young Muslim students.

The report reveals that Muslim literacy rates are 69.5%, 7% lower than the state average, but the narrowing of the gender literacy gap from 11.1% to 7.8% signifies progress. This highlights the resilience and determination of Muslim students despite systemic barriers. The report also highlights the disparity between urban and rural education for Muslims, with urban literacy rates at 75.4% compared to 68.3% in rural areas. The report dispels myths about Muslim parents' preference for madrasas over secular education, highlighting the lack of adequate schooling options in Muslim-majority areas. Districts with significant Muslim populations have fewer secondary and higher secondary schools, underscoring systemic exclusions that impede educational advancement. In fact, the report highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to address the multilayered challenges faced by Muslim students in West Bengal, emphasizing the importance of addressing systemic and intersectional violence (*Kalam, 2021*).

The subtle, everyday interactions that shape these students' educational experiences are rife with violence, which is not limited to overt forms of bigotry or discrimination by educators and administrators. A substantial portion of the findings highlights the systemic nature of discrimination perpetrated by educators and administrators. Interviews and focus groups revealed that Muslim students frequently encounter derogatory remarks from faculty members, such as being labeled "dumb" or "unable to understand English," despite their academic achievements. Aisha (name changed), a Kolkata-based student who did exceptionally well at her English-medium school, talked about how, despite her excellent results, her professor called her "dumb." During an interview, she related a particular instance in which her academic adviser discouraged her from pursuing her dream of becoming a doctor because of her religious clothing, questioning her ability to manage difficult coursework. As a result, she changed her major to something less demanding. This form of systemic violence is evidenced by



instances where students were unjustly steered away from challenging academic paths, such as pre-med tracks, toward less demanding majors, such as general studies. Such practices limit their future academic and professional opportunities, reflecting a discriminatory bias that affects their educational trajectories.

Intersectional discrimination research has demonstrated a complex understanding of how intersectional discrimination amplifies the difficulties faced by Muslim students in educational institutions in West Bengal. This discrimination is not limited to a single aspect of their identity but rather operates at the intersection of various identities, such as religion, gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, Muslim female students who wear hijabs or burkhas often encounter compounded bias from teachers and administrators. Muslim student Fatima (name changed), who covers her head with a headscarf, spoke of feeling stigmatized by a professor's remarks about her appearance. She described a situation in which a teacher implied that her religious attire made her feel more isolated, hindering her ability to participate in class discussions and even preventing her from participating in sports while wearing a hijab. These visible symbols of religious identity frequently provoke explicit disapproval and derogatory remarks from some educators, perpetuating stereotypes and undermining these students' academic potential and sense of belonging.

This intersectional discrimination takes various forms. Muslim female students, in particular, confront prejudices that target both their gender and religious attire. Faculty members' negative views toward their hijabs or burkhas not only reflect broader societal biases but also create an atmosphere where these students are unfairly judged and labeled as less competent. This discrimination is often overt, with derogatory comments about their intelligence and abilities based on their appearance. This bias contributes to harmful stereotypes that impede their educational progress and other academic opportunities.

**Impact of Bias on Academic Success:** Discrimination against Muslim students affects the quality of their education. Professors undermine their abilities and discourage their participation in academic and extracurricular activities. For example, one professor convinced a student to avoid major subjects due to her academic gap, despite her previous achievements. Another professor humiliated a student, suggesting that she attend an open university because of her perceived inadequacies, further exacerbating her struggles to reintegrate into academic life. Sarah, an undergraduate student based in Kolkata, described her encounter with a lecturer who consistently diminished her ambitions for academic success. In a thorough case study, she was determined to pursue a challenging degree, but the



professor's persistent discouragement and disparaging comments about her gaps in schooling led her to consider enrolling at an open university as an alternative.

Furthermore, Zara, an undergraduate student, encountered resistance from the coach when she attempted to join the university's sports team because of her religious attire, raising doubts about her dedication. Zara discussed the wider effects of institutional prejudices, describing how her social integration and academic achievements were impacted by being excluded from sports.

**Institutional Discrimination:** The systemic bias extends to the institutional environment, where the admission of Muslim girls is negatively portrayed as harmful to the institution's quality. Such attitudes reflect broader institutional bias, where the presence of Muslim students is viewed unfavourably. This discrimination is also evident in exclusionary practices, such as discouraging Muslim students from participating in sports and cultural activities, thereby limiting their overall educational experience.

**Derogatory Behavior:** Incidents of explicit verbal abuse and derogatory remarks by professors, such as calling Muslim women "stupid," reveal severe systemic issues within institutions. These actions reflect deep-seated biases that influence how Muslim students are treated, demonstrating a systemic pattern of neglect, disrespect, and inequities. Several instances of discrimination are also encountered by Muslim students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu speakers. Their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds influence the bias they face in addition to their religious identification. This complex discrimination manifests through presumptions and disparaging comments on their intellect and academic aptitude, which feed negative stereotypes and strengthen structural obstacles.

Leila discussed how her teachers' constant criticism had a significant negative influence on her mental health. She illustrated the profound emotional toll that systematic violence can have on pupils by describing spells of anxiety and sadness resulting from being continually minimized. The prejudice faced by Muslim students serves as a stark reminder of the ways in which multiple identity issues interact to influence their educational experiences. Their general well-being and academic performance are negatively impacted by the challenging environment created by the combined effects of gender, ethnic, and religious prejudices. To address these problems, a comprehensive strategy that considers the nuanced ways in which these intersecting identities affect educational experiences and outcomes must be implemented.

This study examined the interconnected dimensions of systemic violence that young Muslim students in West Bengal encounter, with a focus on how overlapping identities contribute to prejudice within educational institutions. The findings reveal a concerning pattern of systemic violence, in which Muslim students face significant obstacles rooted in religious biases related to their attire and identity. Discriminatory behavior from educators, such as verbal abuse—e.g., comments questioning their English proficiency despite proven academic excellence—and prejudiced assumptions about their intelligence on the basis of wearing hijabs or burkas, illustrates the extent of this systemic prejudice. This verbal and institutional mistreatment not only hinders their academic potential but also affects their self-esteem and educational experience.

These findings are closely connected to the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and systemic violence. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality clarifies how multiple marginalized identities—such as religion, gender, and ethnicity—intersect to create unique and compounded forms of discrimination. The study's results support Crenshaw's theory by demonstrating how the combination of being Muslim and female amplifies the discrimination faced by these students, leading to more severe and multifaceted forms of marginalization. For example, verbal abuse targeting Muslim girls often involves a mix of gender and religious biases, reflecting how intersecting identities can intensify the impact of systemic violence.

The study's results demonstrate Johan Galtung's concept of systemic violence, which is prevalent in institutional practices and societal norms that perpetuate inequality and oppression. For example, the discouragement faced by students from pursuing challenging academic paths or participating in extracurricular activities, as well as biased teaching practices, illustrates how systemic violence manifests in educational settings. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of structural violence further explains how such practices reproduce existing social inequalities or create new forms of disadvantage, contributing to a broader cycle of marginalization. The study reveals that Muslim students not only are subjected to overt discrimination but also face institutional practices that hinder their academic and personal development. The study also highlights the insidious nature of systemic violence, which often goes unnoticed or unaddressed. The subtle forms of bias and prejudice embedded in institutional practices contribute to a hostile educational environment that impedes the progress of marginalized students. This underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how systemic violence operates beyond visible forms of discrimination. Effective interventions must address not only explicit acts of prejudice but also the underlying institutional norms and practices that perpetuate inequality. The study's findings

align with existing research on discrimination within educational contexts. Although previous studies have documented various forms of bias experienced by marginalized students, this study provides unique insights into the experiences of Muslim students in West Bengal.

This study emphasizes the need for policies to address the emotional and psychological impacts of systemic violence in educational settings. These findings suggest that support systems should be implemented to help students cope with the psychological trauma caused by discriminatory practices and foster resilience. The study also calls for comprehensive reforms to promote cultural competence among faculty and enforce antidiscrimination measures. It emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach to address individual and institutional biases. The findings suggest that intersecting identities contribute to compounded forms of discrimination and that targeted interventions are necessary to support marginalized students effectively. This requires a concerted effort to dismantle institutional biases and foster an inclusive academic culture.

### **Conclusion:**

The issue of systemic and intersectional violence faced by young Muslim students in West Bengal requires a comprehensive and strategic approach. Institutions must implement anti-discrimination policies that address both overt prejudices and subtle biases embedded in everyday practices. These policies should be crafted with input from diverse stakeholders, including students, educators, and community representatives. Regular workshops and training sessions should be conducted to educate faculty and staff on cultural sensitivity, intersectionality, and the impact of systemic violence.

Curriculum reforms are also crucial, as educational content should be reviewed and revised to include diverse perspectives, especially those of marginalized communities. Schools should incorporate literature and case studies that reflect the experiences of Muslim students and other marginalized groups, fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding. Inclusive pedagogical practices can engage students from diverse backgrounds and validate their identities.

Establishing robust support systems for students who experience systemic violence is another key component. Schools should provide access to counselling services tailored to the specific needs of marginalized students, peer support groups, and mentorship programs that connect students with mentors from similar backgrounds.

Ongoing research and monitoring are essential for evaluating the effectiveness of implemented measures and adapting strategies as needed. Institutions should collaborate with academic researchers and community organizations to conduct regular assessments of their policies and practices. Feedback from students and staff should be continuously sought to ensure that interventions remain relevant and effective.

In conclusion, the urgent need to address the systemic violence faced by young Muslim students in West Bengal's educational institutions is underscored by the intersectional nature of discrimination rooted in religion, gender, and ethnicity.

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